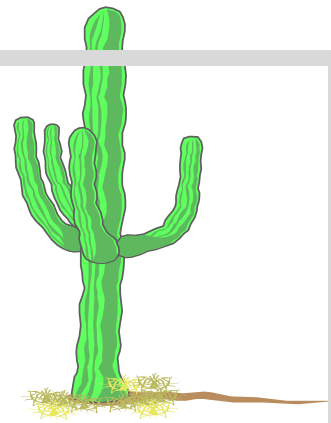


Oxotica

The bi-annual newsletter of the Oxford Branch of the
British Cactus and Succulent Society

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SILVER ANNIVERSARY EDITION

As David's footnote in the last edition of **Oxotica** mentioned this edition **will begin the 26th year of its publication.** So where to begin? Although looking back brings some lovely memories it is also tinged with sadness as so many of our Branch members are no longer with us and many of the nurseries where we bought our plants have closed. Days of branch outings, weekends away and trips abroad a distant memory, but in many ways it is still the same. We all have the love of our plants to share however many we have, the format of our gathering may have changed slightly, but we still enjoy each other's company and the talks and activities that we do.

David has archived all the editions of our newsletter on our web site www.oxford.bcss.org.uk so those of you who are new to the Branch or the hobby can read all the old news and articles they contain.

Over the years the Branch has established a reputation of arranging a wonderful annual show and over the last 4 years of advertising the hobby to a wider audience at the Headington festival and Blenheim Palace Flower Show. For me one of the highlights of my time as chair was to be able to celebrate 60 years of the formation of the Branch in October 2018 with the Convention.

I should record that without the help of a good committee and the support of members from other branches this and other Branch events would not have been possible.

SO NOW as we move forward, although our civilization has had to deal with a global pandemic and everyone has been affected in some way there is light at the end of the tunnel. With the rollout of vaccine and with advances in medical science we move into a new decade with different views of the future. Hopefully we will be able to rekindle our social activities and will be able to meet up again in the not too distant future.

Bill Darbon

OXFORD BRANCH – HISTORY

by Bill Darbon

In Vols 15(1) and 18(2) I recalled events from our Branch's past activities, so as we enter a new decade I thought that I would look back again to bring some memories from what we did then. I left you at the end of 1965, with Branch meetings being held at Oriol College.

I note that Herman Jacobsen's UK trip included a visit to the branch in May 1966 and that JWP Mullard had been elected to the Finance & General Purposes Committee and took over the role of Secretary of the Society at the 1967 AGM.

Although I know that the Branch continued to meet regularly there is sadly little written about their activities in the Journal, which did however feature regular articles on Mammillarias from John Mullard.

The National Cactus & Succulent Society celebrated its 25th year in 1970.

For myself along with Cathy (my late wife) who had been growing plants acquired from a friend of her father (Sid King - Berkhamsted Branch) for sometime we joined the BCSS after attending the Hillingdon Show in 1974. We were allocated to Oxford Branch and duly attended our first meeting. Cathy was immediately taken under John Mullard's wing and once he knew of her background in banking was soon elected onto the committee as the Branch treasurer. Meetings were then being held at The John Bunyan Church Hall.

In June 1975 I note that members of the Branch joined up with Coventry Branch and others on a 3 day trip to the Continent, I recall that this was arranged by the late Warren Withers and became a regular trip across The Channel. Recent articles have been written about the subsequent Cactus Crawl and the Scottish biennial excursion. More recently folk have ventured to the ELK weekend in Blankenberge.

In 1980 the Branch took a major step in arranging a Two-day Show at the then Mattocks establishment, which is now Notcutts Garden Centre. This continued for 3 - 4 years and in 1984 saw the first totally open show to other branch members, which established the Branch as a major venue of the showing calendar and was held in their packing shed. Some may remember the arrangements with fondness. It is also reported that members opened their collections for visitors in June and July.

January 1983 saw the amalgamation of the two Societies forming the new British Cactus and Succulent Society.

During 1984 the Swindon branch had been formed and members joined those from Oxford on a trip to two nurseries in Lincolnshire.

In June 1985 the Branch took another step forward in organizing two shows at Exeter Hall: the Branch show in June and ZONE 8 Show in September.

During 1986 Branch members held a number of Open days at their homes.

1987 saw the retirement of John Mullard after 20 years service as the Secretary of the Society.

The National Show and Convention was held at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology over 3 days and featured lectures in addition to the exhibition of plants.

The June journal of 1988 reported the sad death in February of John Mullard after a short illness; both the Branch and The Society lost a 'pillar of his time' in the hobby.

On a brighter subject the venue for the 1989 National Show had been chosen and YES this was being arranged by Oxford Branch on 19th August at the Exeter Hall. The December Journal featured a report on the show with the mention of several members of the Branch. The Branch was particularly congratulated on the arrangements and that all classes were sponsored.

Sadly there are now few of our current members who possibly can remember some of what went on in past years, but I feel that Oxford Branch has made its mark within the Society in particularly with the annual show, which has now become regarded as a major event in the Society's calendar.

I would like to mention that this and many other of our activities could not have been possible without dedicated members both from our own Branch and other Branches who have given their time and support to further interest in our plants and the hobby.

I trust that I have been able to bring a flavour of our activities from past years. The Society is going through a transition period with the retirement of some of the longer serving officers. I trust that it will continue for many years and that Oxford Branch can look forward to more celebrations in the future.

CHARLIE GLASS AT CANTE

by David Greenaway

The Canadian son, Mark, of my late cousin moved from Toronto to Mexico with his partner some time ago. They chose to live in San Miguel de Allende.

Just out of town is the botanical garden and now cultural conservation area of El Charco del Ingenio, started in 1989 by Cante A.C., a Mexican non-profit organization with diverse ecological and cultural interests. It had been shut, but opened in the summer of 2019 to the pleasure of Mark, and this is one of his photographs taken there:



I sent a copy to John Watmough and he pointed out that these are the gardens where Charlie Glass worked.

For people newer to the hobby, Charlie was the charismatic editor of the American Association's Cactus and Succulent Journal for 26 years. He made numerous trips to Mexico from his home in California and discovered and/or described many species of cacti. He also wrote five books on cacti and succulents; you may be familiar with *Cacti*, which he wrote with Clive Innes.

After he moved to San Miguel de Allende in 1991 he threw himself into creating new activities at the garden, until it all went pear-shaped when Cante separated contact with him in 1997. He died in 1998.

Jean and I met Charlie at the 1995 CSSA convention in Tucson, along with a party of young people who came with him. My last memory of him was singing Mexican songs along with a band on the last evening of the meeting.

DROOLING SPINES

by John Watmough

The Greenhouse

This year marks the quatercentenary (400 years) of the erection of the first ever greenhouse in the British Isles. And it was here in Oxford! How should we celebrate this earth-shaking advance in human capacity? Perhaps if we are pagan we might pour a libation to Flora. If Christian, there must be some patron saint to whom we can offer a candle. A procession through Oxford with each participant carrying a cactus might be difficult to organise; and, moreover, its intention might be construed as political, especially if its route were to take it past the County Council offices.

Yet consider. Glass was expensive in those days. To make window glass they used to spin molten glass until it formed a large disc. Small panels were cut out of the disc. The residue was returned to the furnace. The central boss could be sold off cheap to poorer people so that they could decorate their Ye Olde Tea Shoppes. Heating was equally expensive. Essentially one needed a stove that fed hot air through a system of pipes. A servant had to be employed to tend the stove through the night. If he died of carbon monoxide poisoning, another one would have to be found at very short notice.

And what of pesticides? The most effective would have been nicotine; and the best place to have grown tobacco would have been in the greenhouse. How circular! Besides, James VI and I, who was King at the time, had recently written his famous counterblast against that pernicious weed. Was that the first case of an effective insecticide being made illegal?

'Adolf Hitler'

During the third week of June my Epiphyllum 'Adolf Hitler' came into flower for the first time. The blooms are gaudy and red; I had half expected them to be small and brown with a bad smell. I had been looking for this Epiphyllum for a long time in order to pad out my "Succulent Humour" lecture. I will not name the very generous donor, so as to save him the embarrassment of being pestered by hordes of enthusiasts all wanting a piece.

My plant is being grown in Levington compost. It is kept in a plain white chamber pot that has been painted with a commemorative moustache and drooping lock of hair. I had better not go overboard with this or readers may start getting the wrong impression. I also have a bust of the Great Dictator on my mantelpiece. It is cast in zinc alloy and suitably painted. His right arm is projected outwards. When you raise it to the "Sieg Heil" position, the mouth opens most realistically, wide enough to insert a walnut for

cracking. I guess this delightful objet d'art was made in a wartime factory that should have been fabricating parts for Spitfires.

By the way, when I was in Namibia in 2018, looking at Lithops, I learnt that the German for “septic tank” is *Sichergrube*. This sounds close enough to *Schicklgruber* to have suggested obvious jokes to Austrian comedians. Before the *Anschluss*, of course. There are, or were, Epiphyllums named in honour of other distinguished mass murderers, but I am not especially anxious to acquire specimens, thanks all the same.

Conservatory

My beloved wife was not fond of my plants. She caused to be erected a small conservatory on the north side of Watmough Towers, with the strict proviso that “no plant must ever find its way into my conservatory”. She kitted it out with two small sofas and a coffee table, and regarded it as her personal space. When, alas, she died, I threw out the furniture and replaced it with staging, in due course supplemented with steel racking. It probably contains about a thousand plants now.

Principally the conservatory contains my *Pelargonium* and *Conophytum* collections. Before it became available, I just could not grow Conos, but nowadays I think I can. Conspicuously it also houses a rampant *Selenicereus macdonaldiae* that has five large buds as I write (June 2021). In addition, any plant that I do not understand goes into the conservatory. Some I have bought in ignorance, of which I am well supplied, and some have been foisted on me by friends in inverted commas. (Make finger gestures at this point).

There are even a few plants that I would not recommend to any friends unless I disliked them a lot. Among these are *Pelargonium caylae*, which eventually becomes a kind of thin telegraph pole with a bit of green salad on top. It grows like that because it has to struggle for light among the Madagascan thorn forest. Even more unsightly is *Senecio antandroi*, also from Madagascar. It is just about as scruffy as any plant can get and it has nothing in its favour whatsoever. On the other hand, the rare and fabulous mesemb *Muiria hortenseae* has thrived over a period of years. The conservatory is a good environment for seed raising, since the roof is made of translucent plastic and the light is accordingly filtered. In the winter it is heated by a small oil-filled electric heater that supplements heat leakage from the house and provides a slightly higher temperature than the 5 degrees Celsius that I prefer to maintain in the greenhouse.

THREE GOLDEN OLDIES

by Gillian Evison

As the Oxotica celebrates its Silver Anniversary, I have been wondering how many of our long-time members have plants that have been with them since they first joined the branch. Many plants from the days when I first joined as a junior in the 1970's have long gone to that great desert in the sky, but some golden oldies survive and along with them, some treasured memories.

One such survivor is a gargantuan clump of *Mammillaria supertexta*. The branch Chairman, the late John Mullard, was famed for his Mamillarias and ever hopeful of converting me to the cause. I remember him picking this plant out for me from a bunch of sales plants brought by a visiting speaker. It was, he promised me, a really slow-growing, single-headed gem that my greenhouse should not be without. For many years it was a single head but with passing time it has, like many of us, succumbed to middle age spread and now its many heads sprawl comfortably across a 50cm pan. I dutifully follow John Pilbeam's recommendations of soil with high grit content and care with watering and every year it rewards me with rings of disappointingly tiny dark pink flowers. Having been my companion for so long, however, I don't begrudge it all the greenhouse bench real estate that it takes up. I am sure John Mullard would have taken great delight in knowing it occupies space that would otherwise be taken up by the succulent weeds that he so despised.



Much to John's disappointment my interests early on strayed towards the succulent side of the hobby and my second golden oldie dates from a branch trip to a small nursery in Rugby. In those days many of the mature plants for sale were imports; brutally dug up from habitat and shorn of their roots on phytosanitary grounds, before being shipped to the UK. Nurserymen and their customers would then anxiously wait, sometimes for years, to see which plants would recover from the shock, and which would spectacularly rot away or quietly fossilise. I remember, much to John Mullard's disgust, being mesmerised by large caudiciform *Ibervillea sonorae* in the hot bed and my bitter disappointment on being told that it was not yet rooted and so not for sale. As a consolation purchase opportunity, the enterprising nursery owner produced what he described as a new and choice small-growing *Aloe* from Somalia, *Aloe jucunda*, which had rooted and was ready to be sold on to a new home.



It proved to be a handsome and slow growing plant with a lovely shine to the spotted, toothy leaves. After some years it was no longer small and in fact had become so massively splendid that, with the encouragement of the Branch, I entered it into a National Show. We didn't have a proper cactophile's hatchback, so the plant was manoeuvred, with much parental cursing, into the boot of the family's Morris Marina. My parents dutifully drove me up to the show at Luton, only for us to be interrogated at the entrance by an agitated show steward. This was the entrance for people with show plants he said and, as we clearly had no plants, we should drive to the proper entrance for visitors and not clutter up the car parking space reserved for competitors. He peered disbelievingly into the car as we explained that I was a competitor and we had to open the car boot to prove that we had really brought a plant for the show. Extracting it from the car boot took precision heavy lifting, with much more parental cursing, and drew a small crowd of fascinated onlookers all willing for some dramatic disaster to make their day interesting.

The plant is now a pale shadow of its former National Show worthy self. It eventually became so massive it had to be tipped sideways to get it through the single greenhouse door: one sideways tip too many and it fell out. The plant was drastically pruned in its violent passage to the floor, making a whole heap of cuttings for the branch sales table. Even in its much-reduced state, it is a handsome Aloe, which brings back happy memories of that trip to the National. It grows in my normal loam-based, gritty cactus soil and, as a high-altitude plant, will tolerate winter on the floor of the heated greenhouse at temperatures down to 4°C, though it will throw its roots off in protest at particularly harsh winters, such as we endured this year.

My third golden oldie will most certainly have John Mullard turning in his grave, as it is one of the succulents that he most despised, those he dismissively described as TCPs (turnips, carrots and potatoes). The *Cyphostemma juttae* was my very first caudiciform plant, bought on a branch trip to Jumanery's nursery in Lincolnshire and I remember several unflattering comments about my prize purchase from branch members on the way home in the coach. Even though it must have been an imported plant, it has been remarkably tolerant of its unasked-for relocation from Namibia to the chilly, damp climate of Oxfordshire and all the beginner's cultivation mistakes that I made along the way. It is now in a very gritty loam-based soil, which keeps the root loss at bay, and is wonderfully tactile with papery bark and the classic 'fat plant' shape that invites a pat every time I walk past it. The caudiciform books tell you that once your curvaceous pet has reached the size that is comfortable for your greenhouse, you should not encourage it further by potting it on, but while I was at college, my Mum operated on the same principle that she had when buying clothes for us as children.



The *Cyphostemma* was generously potted on into containers that it would 'grow into' and it grew into them with a vengeance. When I finally came to move it to my new greenhouse, it was obvious that it was now too tall even for the generous headroom of my Fiat Doblo. As with many of the 'fat plants', its stem at the top is slender and all too snappable, so we rigged up a large cushion from a garden waste bag stuffed with bubble plastic for it to lie on. The road to my house is rich in speed bumps but, thankfully, the plant and I survived the nerve shattering drive to its new home, though I did need a stiff G&T after the trip. It has settled in happily, putting out its huge sail-like leaves in the summer with its girth expanding a little more every year. I need to check for fungus on the large fresh scars that are left when the leaves drop in the autumn and its huge size means it has to sit on the floor, but it seems to tolerate winter temperatures of 3-4°C, as long as it is kept dry. Most importantly it makes a living prop for the exuberant winter growth of the *Dioscorea elephantipes* that sits next to it. Despite my Mum's unsubtle hints about how lovely it would look in a new, bigger pot, it is more than big enough for me and from now on I will be strictly following the advice in the caudiciform books.

HOW OXOTICA GOT STARTED.

As I mentioned above, Jean and I attended the 1995 convention of the Cactus and Succulent Association of America in Tucson. During the convention there was a meeting of representatives of many of the American societies. (Over there a cactophile would join the local society; membership of the national CSSA is optional).

I was intrigued by the local society journals that some reps had brought along for others to see, and I wondered if Oxford would benefit from producing something similar. I had recently had to create a new newsletter at work, and had persuaded the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory to let me go on a newsletter course.

I mentioned the Tucson meeting to some committee members when we were back home, and was invited to attend the next committee meeting to make out a case for a newsletter of our own. Before I knew what was happening I was on the committee and given the job!

David Greenaway.