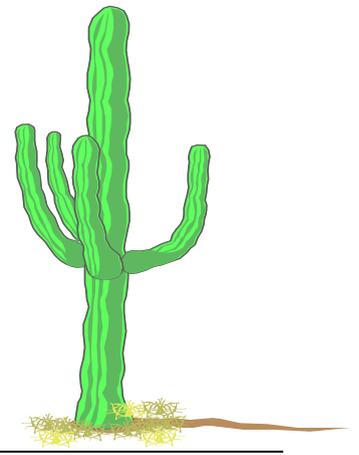


Oxotica

The Newsletter of the Oxford Branch of the
British Cactus and Succulent Society

June 2009

Volume 14, Number 1



AWARD OF MERIT

Congratulations to our very own Steve Williams who has received a well deserved Award of Merit from the Society for his services to the Branch. In a carefully orchestrated exercise in subterfuge, David Kirkbright, ostensibly at the Oxford Branch Auction to pick up a few bargains, took to the stage during the tea break to hand over the award. Steve helps out in so many ways and his calm approach to any crisis the Branch may throw at him is legendary. His citation (below) gives some idea of the myriad, often unglamorous jobs, that Steve cheerfully undertakes to help keep the Branch ticking over.



Steve Williams

Steve Williams joined the Society in January 1992 as a member of Swindon Branch. Some of their members attended Oxford on a regular basis and as Steve has always been a willing helper, he was elected onto the Branch Committee. The following year he took on the job of librarian, which he still holds today. He was elected Treasurer in 1996 a position in which he served for 10 years, during the last three of which he was also Vice Chairman. He took over the Chair in November 2005 for three years and has now returned to the committee still with the librarians' job.

For the last eight years he has helped with the table layout at our shows and has also housed all the bits and pieces involved with that job, including the raffle tumbler. Steve has always made himself available for any jobs that were needed including setting up the auction, manning display stands and photographer at the last National Show.

We have always found him more than willing to work in promoting the Society and the Branch and accordingly commend him to you for an Award of Merit.

Many thanks Steve!

Gillian Evison
Chair, Oxford Branch

ADDITIONS TO THE LIBRARY (donations by David Greenaway)

Cacti and Succulets for the Amateur by Charles Glass & Robert Foster,
Abbey Gardens Press 1976

Cacti & Succuents of El Paso by Clarke Champie, Abbey Gardens Press

Haseltonia (Yearbook of the Cactus and Succulent Society of America) Number 1, 1993

1975 Yearbook (Supplemental Volume of the Cactus & Succulent Journal of the CSSA)
supplemental to vol. XLVII

BRANCH AUCTION 2009 (pictures by Gillian Evison)



No surprise that this Aztekium ritteri fetched one of the highest prices of the day



A perfect Astrophytum 'Super Kabuto'



A lovely multi-headed Euphorbia obesa



Bill is aided and abetted by Gareth Darbon who here tempts the punters with a well grown Crassula

**BRANCH MEETINGS
JANUARY - JUNE 2009**

(4th Thursday in month, 7:30 pm for 8:00 pm)
*Please bring plants for Table Show if you can -
June to October only.*

27 July – Derek Castle “ My Life with Cactus”

Derek is an old friend of the branch and is chairman of Birmingham Branch and has been growing Cacti for over 40 years. He has been persuaded to come and talk about his experiences. I am sure that we will be in for a fascinating evening as he has many anecdotes about the hobby

27 August – John Betteley – Smaller Opuntias

This is a change to the original programme John is well known as an exhibitor at our shows and is also a member of the Society’s Show Committee. He is one of the leading members of the Tephrocactus Study Group and his talk will extol the virtues of the smaller SPIKEY ones.

24 September – David Kirkbright – South Africa 2008

There are not many members that will not know David. As The Society’s treasurer with his “hands on the purse strings” grabbing every bit he can out of the taxman with *Gift Aid* to keep the Membership Fees low. His talk will relate his latest holiday excursion to South Africa with other members of our Society. This will be a chance to see plants in habitat for those of us that have not been there and would have loved to be in his knapsack.

22 October - David Neville – Continental Excursion

David was the previous editor of the journal and did lots of good work in promotion the society, has more recently assisted John Pilbeam in the publication books on Ariocarpus and Echeverias. His talk will guide us on a tour of some of the continental nurseries. A chance to see the plants you always wished to have perhaps.

**26 November – Branch AGM followed by a talk by Curt Lambeth
“Headington Hills Springs and their Ecology”**

Curt is an old friend and member of the branch, but has more recently been involved in a conservation project and has agreed to come and give us an insight in to a different side of flora of our county side and of a local area in particular.

Cathy Darbon, Branch Secretary

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The Branch meets 7.30pm for 8pm on the 4th Thursday of each month (except December) at the Rose Hill Methodist Church, Rose Hill, Oxford OX4 4JP.

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CSSA CONVENTION 2009

by Gillian Evison

Unlike David, a hardened CSSA veteran, I was definitely a newbie when it came to the American Convention. The other half had not been at all sure about becoming an official cactus WAG, but seduced by the pictures of the La Paloma hotel and comforted by the thought he could escape to do some work at the Tucson office, he agreed to take his first ever cactus themed break.

Acting on the theory that jetlag and darkened lecture theatres would be a recipe for sleeping through most of the Convention, we flew in a couple of days early, with the intention of driving from Phoenix to Tucson and taking in the Phoenix Botanic Gardens and the Boyce Thompson Arboretum on the way. The plan looked about to unravel when we picked a Botanic Garden leaflet at our hotel, which said that due to the exhibition *Chihuly: The Nature of Glass* there would be no general admission without reservations .

Feeling less than charitable towards Mr. Chihuly and his glass, we decided to try for some of the limited walk-up tickets that the brochure said might be available. In the event, as the show was near the end of its run, we had no difficulty getting tickets at all. I started to feel more warmly towards Mr. Chihuly's glass and was particularly struck by the green spiky towers of glass amongst the Agaves at the entrance.



The red bulgy jobs nestling under the cristate Saguaro were pretty eye-catching as well.



The spring sun was getting pretty hot by the time we reached the Boyce-Thompson Arboretum but, equipped with sun screen, hats and water, we set off on the loop trail. As a State Park the Arboretum has a wilder look and feel than the Botanic Gardens, but the plants are still all helpfully labelled, particularly useful when it came to the vast array of very similar looking Agaves.

The Tucson venue for the Convention was every bit as palatial as the CSSA publicity pictures had suggested, though the notice on the balcony door warning us to keep the gauze door shut to stop scorpions getting in gave pause for thought. We later heard that one guest had run across a Bobcat on their way back to their room one night so the hotel grounds definitely offered an up-close and personal experience of the local wildlife. In a further attempt to get acclimatized, I had opted for a pre-convention tour of local collections and headed off in a tour bus on

the day before registration to see what conditions were like for local growers.

The first stop was a house that had appeared in the *Arizona Home and Garden* magazine and was up for sale at a cool million dollars. The owners were not members of the Tucson Cactus Society and I think the hope was that one of the conventioners might put in an offer. Sadly for the owners, cactophiles, even the American ones, don't really belong to that sort of price bracket though we all enjoyed looking at the million dollar lifestyle. The gardens had the perfection of a Chelsea show garden but most of us felt we would soon ruin the effect if we moved in, as the urge to buy and cram more plants into the space would just get the better of us.



The second collection belonged to a local Tucson member and the huge collection of plants crammed into the every available

space was far more familiar territory. It was interesting to learn that profusion of bowls and planters were a necessity as the Tucson winters are simply too cold to allow many cactus and succulent species to be planted out.



The last house on the tour had a driveway to die for and a huge shade house with raised

beds packed with goodies, my favourite being the *Obregonia denegrii* metamorphosing into a three-headed plant.



The Convention programme was packed, with parallel sessions going for most of the day, and it was often hard to choose between equally tempting talk titles. The prize for the raffle on the first day allowed the lucky winner into the sales area an hour or so ahead of the crazed masses of buyers.

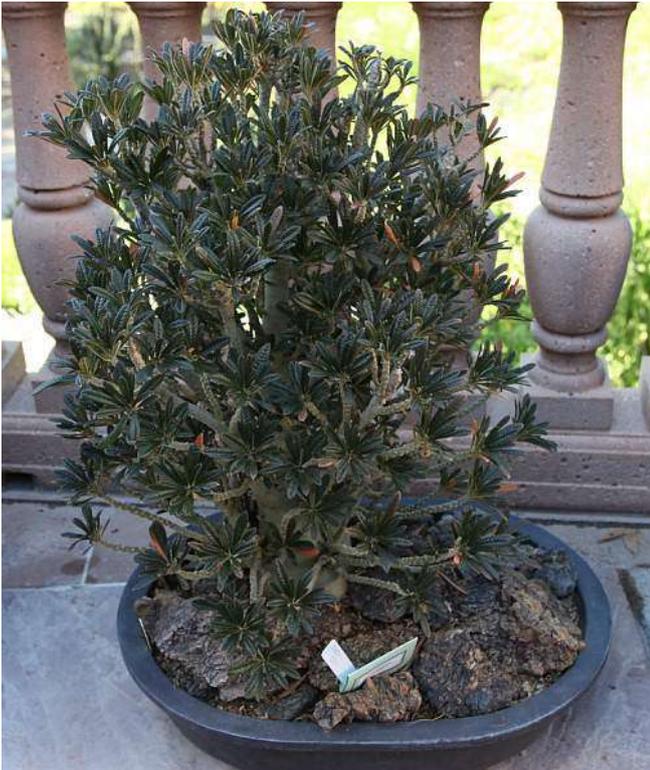


For the Brits, it was just a question of looking and talking about the plants we most dreamed about getting past Homeland Security but it was quite comforting to see that many of the choice other succulents are cheaper in Europe. The opening Convention dinner offered all diners a free golden spined version of the local *Ferocactus wislizenii*.



There was no way these were going to make it past Homeland Security, so the other half took them into the Tucson office for re-homing. In between Convention talks we could admire the massive specimen plants out on the balcony and particular favourites for me were the venerable *Euphorbia bupleurifolia*, in a pot which echoed its distinctive stem, and a huge *Dorstenia gigas*.





I fantasised about substituting husband for plant and giving the other half's plane seat to the Dorstenia on the way home...

Having been unable to interest the WAG in the post-convention tour to Mexico, we headed off to Las Vegas by way of Yucca. My travel agent had persuaded me that a break at a ranch might be fun but considering I hadn't sat on a horse since the age of six and had never got beyond the trot, this was a rash experiment to say the least. Luckily the owners were shrewd judges of horsemanship and fitted me up with something one step short of the knacker's yard. The other half had got as far as attempting to change legs at the canter at the age of seven, so was given a more demanding beast that could get lively once it was pointed for home. The extra height from being on horseback had its advantages when scanning for plant life and, on the very first ride, I uttered what the WAG calls the "cactus squeak", as I spotted an interesting group of small cacti with pinkish spines, which turned out to be a very handsome colony of *Echinomastus johnsonii*.



The local *Ferocactus* was *anacanthodes* and I was glad to be a digital photographer and not have to worry about wasting film as I took nine million shots of all the different spine colour variations.



Suitably seized into the bandy-legged cowboy gait, we made our way to Vegas. Just before we crossed the Hoover Dam, I saw some interesting clumps of a large plant by the road but was firmly told we couldn't stop on a major highway for me to investigate; mini-sulk ensued... A number of conventioners had recommended Red Rock Canyon as an antidote to the madness Vegas, so we escaped the endless ker-ching of the one-armed bandits and headed out into the desert. After a scenic drive that took in a lot of handsome but unidentifiable *Opuntias*, it was a tremendous thrill to see colonies of *Agave utahensis* at the base of the hills. This is one I grow at home, so it was fascinating to see the way it grows in habitat; instantly recognisable just a lot more of it!



Our guide book recommended the Valley of Fire, and reckoned it was even more spectacular than Red Rock so we just had to check it out. The guide book wasn't lying and even more tantalising, there was a clump of the mystery plant I had seen on the way to the Hoover Dam just outside the Visitor Centre. It was *Echinocactus polycephalus*. Of course the hunt was now on to see if I could find it somewhere other than a car park and, though not super abundant, we found a couple of plants growing in front of the spectacular back drop of the hills of the Valley of Fire.



Sadly it was then time to take the flight back home and plan the next trip. The WAG didn't seem to find the experience too distressing so there is just a chance I might make it to the next CSSA convention in San Diego.

GE

**THE ELEVENTH WALTHAM
FOREST CONTINENTAL CACTUS
CRAWL
March 26th – 29th 2009**

by John Watmough

THURSDAY 5:30 a.m. your correspondent plus Paul White (Bath) and John Sewell (Southport!) assemble at Green Road Roundabout, Oxford. We are glad that Ricky, our inestimable coach driver, has not been delayed. Pick up Nicky, our invaluable guide, at the usual lay-by. Usual route to Chingford. Usual people board. Best wishes passed on for Brian Conway, who is absent this year. Very pleased to see Jean Ellis (Henfield) looking well.

Joyce (Chingford) confesses that allocating bodies to seats has been her most difficult task. Eddy Harris (Hornchurch) is put near the back. Eddy is not the kind of person to bawl obscenities or hurl refuse. Perhaps he is there to set a good example. Ricky and Nicky confess to reading accounts of previous trips on the Oxford Branch website. Nicky agrees that the obese and the crippled can outspurt Usain Bolt when put in front of a cactus nursery. At Ashford Stirling Baker (Redbridge) calls out “Are we there yet?” for the first time. He will do this every half hour for the rest of the Tour.

In Belgium your correspondent is the only person with the foresight to have brought small change for the toilet. He makes friends rapidly if transiently and becomes the first of the big penny spenders. Drive

straight to the Succulent Tissue Cultivation nursery. They too seem to have been reading accounts of previous trips, because the dung-camouflaged caravan has been taken away and the path to the greenhouses has had fresh gravel laid. Now they are 1 cm above sea level. The Disease of the Tour starts here: Compulsive Spending Disorder, or CSD.

Exhausted but not satisfied, we arrive at the Golden Tulip at Oosterhoud. Food limited, but beer not. Some members of the party are drinking to forget the exchange rate.

FRIDAY Front of coach: symphonic movements; rear of coach: bowel movements. But all goes quiet on the way to Germany. No silly walks or Sieg-Heiling. Saving energy for invading Piltz. New members astonished at Piltz’s private collection. Old members have seen it before – but still astonished. As usual John has to round us all up and herd us back on to the coach.

Next stop Ernst and Marita Specks at Golfcart. Unbelievable outbreak of CSD. Some cunning spenders pay Ernst’s 3% credit card surcharge in order to conserve cash for future extravagances. Many plants are purchased that the purchasers have never even heard of. Ernst and Marita grin from ear to ear. “See you next year!”

Finally head northwards again to Katze at Wankum. Tremendous smell of something that the British government says is banned by EC regulations. Lots of specimen plants going for low prices (in Euros). We buy most of his stock. Secondary disease of Tour sets in on journey back to hotel:

Buyer's Remorse. "I don't really need this plant". "My wife mustn't see this." "John, tell me I haven't wasted my money." Your correspondent falls down the coach steps and lands on a Ferocactus.

SATURDAY Arrive at Westeijn's to find access blocked by parked cars. Wait for guide to lead us round the back way. Joke of the Tour is disseminated: "What question elicits the answer '9W'?" John Betteley (Anagram) explains it to your correspondent, but it must be rude because he does not understand. One Westeijn brother has departed. He must be the eccentric one with the beehive in the greenhouse and the interesting plants. The remaining brother is single-mindedly pursuing the wholesale trade.

Next stop Van der Linden's. Lithoparians keep an eye on Eddy. A man who can find a single Lithops in Namaqualand can surely find 200,000 Lithops in a tiny four-hectare greenhouse. David Traish (Wallington) spots a cereoid about three feet high wielding six-inch black spines like daggers. He calls to James Gold (Enfield): "Here, James! You'll love this!" It is instant infatuation. The lovely cereoid is packed into a reinforced box and stowed in the hold. After ten minutes the spines slash through the reinforced box, so that the package resembles a danger to shipping.

Arrive at Cok's to find Coventry Trip already in possession. Prepare for hostilities, but Warren Withers is very friendly. He is glad not to have John

Betteley on his Tour, because John never has lids for his boxes. But guess what! Len Evans is on Warren's Tour and Len has borrowed John's lidless boxes. Cok very busy sorting out plants for customers, and Ine even more busy making big heaps of Euro notes.

Press on to Two Shovels at Lexmond. Usual sprint by the halt and lame to be first at the "Special Corner". Last chance to buy plants, so many plants bought whether wanted or not. However, no mature trees smuggled on to the coach. Hooray. No mature *Eriosyce auratas* for Doug Donaldson. Hooray. Nothing to complain about on the short journey back to the hotel. Boo. You can't have everything.

SUNDAY Coach is packed much quicker than usual owing to a complete lack of willing helpers. Ricky is obviously a secret cactus grower even though he says we are all mad. Only a cactus grower could get so much in such a small space. CSD is replaced entirely by BR. Have first decent meal in four days in Belgian transport café. Compulsory visit to chocolate factory. John Betteley buys bottle of "Vanilla-flavoured Genevers". Immediate taste is of toilet duck, but aftertaste not so pleasant.

Catch earlier train at Calais. Usual tearful goodbyes at Chingford. Everybody stays well clear of James Gold's lethal object of worship. "See you next year", says John Jackson. Funny, he's never said that before. It must be our unprecedentedly sedate and civilised behaviour.

JW

2008 National Show pictures by Steve Williams:

Gillian gets one of her awards



Birthday Boy Gareth Darbon

DROOLING SPINES

Years ago, there used to be a lady member of the Society who kept tortoises. Some people regarded her as a trifle eccentric because she lived in the upper storey of her house while her hundreds of tortoises occupied the ground floor. I was reminded of this when I met a charming lady at Bury Knowle Park, Headington. While buying a considerable number of cacti from our Branch stall, she commented that she grew lots and lots of *Pereskia*. Not for grafting, she said, but for feeding to her tortoises.

It was at Bury Knowle Park a few years ago that we met an American palaeontologist. In the course of a discursive conversation he happened to mention that *Mammillaria tetrancistra* grew “like weeds in mah Maw’s back yard”. He added that his Maw lived in South California. This gave me the idea

that perhaps this notorious plant should be grown like a *Dudleya*. So far I have nursed four seedlings to the critical three-year-old stage, but no plant is showing any signs of producing buds.

Does anybody still have any *Mammillarias* bearing LAU collection numbers? Mark Masterson on the Isle of Bute is assembling a list of all those that are still in cultivation in this country.

I now have an unheated greenhouse but not much experience of growing plants in it. We hit -10°C here in Cowley last winter, and I lost many *Conophytums*, a number of *Agaves* (which surprised me) and a beautiful *Lophophora diffusa* which is from the southern end of the distribution of the genus. However, my *Pediocactus* and *Navajoas* gave me some wonderful flowers. *Gymnocalycium* were unmarked. An *Echinocereus triglochidiatus* responded to the cold by an abundance of spring flowers.

We all wish Cathy Darbon a speedy recovery from her illness. She has really done us proud this year with a galaxy of speakers at our Branch meetings.

It would be really good to see more members (and non-members) at our meetings.

John Watmough

Pictures, by Gillian, of the Whichford Pottery event, 12-13 June.



Activity at our plant sales stall.



Mary and Bill are kept busy



**John gets down to it!
(Packing a customer's plants)**



(In the floral hat) - Elizabeth, the Whichford commercial manager.