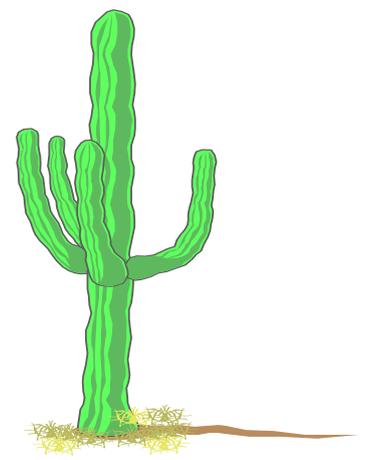


Oxotica

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

June 2014

Volume 19, Number 1



SUNNY DAYS AT BLENHEIM



Day 1 - Ready to go

David Greenaway

Branch members braved the hot and sunny weather to put on a stand at the Blenheim Palace Flower Show between Friday 20th & Sunday 22nd June 2014. We had been located by the organisers, a new company called Aztec Events, within the NAFAS (National Association of Flower Arrangers) marquee which was adjacent to the Grand Floral Marquee. They had kindly put up a large green sign to advise people we were there (I am not sure that made any difference) as most folks just wandered in and out of the various tents to see what was there.

The public who attended in their thousands over the three days (175 coaches plus all the cars) could enter the show and also visit the Palace & Grounds for an extra charge.

There were a large range of stalls selling a variety of items and some very good Floral Displays in the Grand Marquee. To gauge the attendance, the flower ladies in our tent had a competition to be voted for by the public and they had over 2,000 votes cast over the three days. Not everyone who came in voted of course, but at least we had

a good footfall through the entrance. This was the second event arranged by the current company, and was larger than last year. Some members may remember that we last attended this show in 2004, but that was run by a different organisation. Anyway, a good promotion for The Society and Branch, and we hope that we may have

persuaded some folk to come to the show or perhaps even the branch meetings. Thanks to all the plants providers, the sales of which provided some useful pennies for the coffers which were gratefully accepted by Hon Treasurer.

Bill Darbon



Blenheim Show, Day 3

Gareth Darbon



Gareth Darbon



Gareth Darbon

DROOLING SPINES

by John Watmough

Nosey Parkering

This year the Branch has been raking in the funds as a result of selling vast numbers of plants at talks, cactus events, and especially at public functions. Bury Knowle Park and Blenheim Flower Show proved especially lucrative. We need to do this, though, because we want to attract the very best speakers to our meetings and inevitably some of these will incur large travel expenses.

Behind the scenes, therefore, there is a lot of propagation going on. Let us poke our noses into other people's leisure activities and see what they are doing. Mary Stone is busy dividing *Sempervivums* and chopping up *Aeoniums* (about which she knows an awful lot.) Bill Darbon is touring nurseries and auctions buying up job lots of plants to bring into saleable condition. Next year his *Haworthias* from Joyce Coccozza should be back to their best. Gillian Evison, as ever, is secretly forcing plants to thrive that lesser mortals can't even grow at all. She has just trickled out a few *Lophophora alberto-vojtechii* seedlings that could well be the first to be grown in this country. Martin Doorbar's aircraft hangar seems to be so productive that we shall have to find new places to sell plants. John Watmough, like Billy Bunter, gets parcels of goodies from foreign parts. He has, he says, sown 157 packets of seed already this year.

So, action please, with dibbers, choppers and widgers, for the Branch's future!

The Show 2015

The difficulty with regularly putting on the best Show in the year is maintaining standards. Next year, as local readers will know, it is likely that Witney's Langdale Hall will have been knocked down for flats to pay for shoring up the Corn Exchange. So we shall need somewhere else to stage the Show. At

present Bill knows of two places that might prove suitable, but other suggestions would be most welcome.

What we need is a large enough hall to hold at least 600 exhibits, plus a large car park, at a price that we can reasonably hope to recover from show income. There must be adequate refreshment facilities. Also, and this is vital, there must be enough tables on the premises, because the cost of hiring tables and the labour involved is prohibitive. These conditions are most likely to be met in a large village or small town.

Non Compost Mentis

Growers everywhere are struggling to locate sources of good compost and suitable grit, so would welcome information on the subject. Some of the "reduced peat" compost in garden centres contains as much as 60% peat! Stores that cater for poultry-keepers often stock useful grit at a reasonable price. Jondo crushed flint in its various grades is particularly recommended. Also, the best top dressing, Dorset Gravel, is no longer available because the authorities are afraid that if any more of Chesil Beach is quarried there won't be much left of the Dorset coastline. Your local aquarium shop might be a good place to start looking.

In The Red Jersey

Our June meeting turned out to be one of the best for years. It would be kind and decent to attribute this to our guest speaker, Ian Robinson, who did indeed give us an enthralling presentation about the propagation and maintenance of the plants in his own collection. We had visitors from High Wycombe and Reading & Basingstoke, and a most welcome collection of recent members, non-members and interested parties. There were dozens of plants on the table show; Ian had brought several trays of sales plants; and Richard Bush's tea was of exceptional quality. Well done everybody!

JW

**BRANCH MEETINGS
JULY - NOVEMBER 2014**

4th Thursday in month, 7:30 pm for 8:00 pm

*Please bring plants for the Table Show if you can -
each of these meetings except November*

We have tried to include a good varied programme again this year and hope that there is something for YOUR specific interest. We are always open to suggestions for the programme so if there is someone or something that you would like us to arrange please speak to one of the committee.

24th July JOHN WATMOUGH

John will bring plants and talk about the unusual things he grows - or tries to!

3 August

**BRANCH SHOW
WITH THE MAMMILLARIA SOCIETY
Langdale Hall, Witney, 10.30 – 15.30**

**Lecture at 4.30 by John Miller on
"Turbinicarpus"**

**28 August ROGER FERRYMAN
Texas**

Roger has not spoken to the branch for a very long time as he has been out of the country on business in South Africa and more recently America. Tonight we are very fortunate that he has agreed to talk on his explorations into this Plant rich environment. **A must for the diary.**

**25th September STUART RILEY
Echeveria, Aloe, Gasteria
Variegates and hybrids**

Stuart is always a popular speaker and well known around the hobby with his Plant Life nursery, his recent visits to America and connections with recent succulent plant propagations will make this evening a fascinating experience.

**23rd October DR TONY ROBERTS
The smaller opuntoides**

Tony is treasurer of the Haworthia Society and well known in the Gasteria world, tonight he will present those prickly friends that may have put you off in the past, perhaps he can re kindle our interest in these plants. I am sure we have got at least one somewhere in our greenhouse.

**27th November
Branch AGM and Christmas Social
Anyone for a Fish & Chip Supper?**

Bill Darbon

Oxotica

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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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FIRST FOOTING ABROAD A Newbie's Story

by Bill Darbon

I know that it is normally a New Year tradition but it all started with a passing remark after The National Show 2012 in the hotel, by our north of the border contingent. *Och wee laddie we're awa again you kin to join us:* they were talking about the Scottish Trip to the Continent in March 2014. Further conversations with a certain long tall gentleman from Milton Keynes persuaded me that this was a great experience and any misconceptions I may have should be put to one side, so I duly contacted Mairi & John Frew and booked my place and started saving my baubles.

Mairi & John have organised this trip biennially now for some time, so are old hands at the job and thank goodness that they are. As you will learn, it does not always run smoothly no matter how well planned you are.

Thursday 27th so the great day had come as a Newbie I had arranged to join the coach at Hull with other folk from *South of the border*. I met up with David and Ian at the M18 services to ensure that I got to the right terminal, the first challenge was to keep up with the Jag, but we made it in plenty of time and joined up with the rest of the party boarding at Hull, some familiar faces and some new ones. The car parking fees were a little of a surprise but **not** as much as Oxford.

The Coach arrived and we duly packed our cases away and said our hallos and och ayes and took our allocated seats. No sooner were we on than we were off again to go through passport control and on to the ferry. The cost of the trip included meals on board, so we soon all gathered in the restaurant for our evening meal and after a pleasant evening on board

discussing what goodies we may find and a restful night we docked at Rotterdam.

Friday 28th after a sumptuous breakfast on to the coach for the 92 km drive to Robert Wellens Succulent Tissue Culture at Sint Maartinsdijk - as other correspondents have reported this is rather off the beaten track and requires a skilful driver to negotiate the small approach roads but is a must for Succulent collectors (Haworthias especially), there is now even the odd cactus.

Mairi had divided the group into teams and over the trip produced fun quizzes to complete (to stop you from snoring on the coach) any such behaviour resulted in a BLACK SPOT, I am not sure how or why but I ended up with two before we had gone any distance at all. Mairi word is law and woe betide you if you query any decision. (I finished up with three and have still not worked out how).

The sweetie jar circulated up and down the bus during the journey (but as you will hear this was discontinued). We knew before we started the trip that we were in the slipstream of another party on which I suspect another correspondent will report, but there was plenty for everyone, but not enough time to explore the vast array of material. Fortunately I had pre-ordered off the web site so only picked up a few extra interesting plants.

Back on board for a 154 km drive to Tongeren and Houbrechts Cactus nursery specializing in Astrophytums. The party had been here before, but the nursery had changed direction since the last visit and although his own collection had some outstanding plants, the choice was limited and they may be missed off next time.

So onward 178km drive to the hotel at Andernach on the banks of the Rhine where we were to stay 3 nights. The group was split between two adjacent hotels.

Some members reconnoitred some of the local establishments after dinner, other retired early after a long day.

Saturday 29th early breakfast for all but NO FOOD to be taken away so after a short walk to the local bakery and shops to stock up for lunch we set off for the 118 km drive to Erkelenz (Specks Exotica). We eventually arrived and the expectant stampede ensued. This was my first encounter with the nursery (although I had heard lots of stories). YES there were lovely succulents, some bigger than perhaps my boxes could manage or even feasibly that the coach boot could take, but buyer beware: not many roots on some. We had no restriction on what we bought so long as it fitted in a box in the boot for the homeward journey - again more of that later. Anyway Ernst beaming and till ringing; thank goodness he takes credit cards.

Travel back 42km to Piltz Nursery at Duren. Again, my first visit; you never quite know what to expect, although others have reported previously. I was able to find some nice unusual plants and again what a collection, but not enough time to really appreciate it before we were back on the coach for the trip back to the hotels.

Arriving back some of the party who had not come on the trip informed us that some had been taken ill with a stomach bug which apparently was believed to have originated locally, one even had been hospitalised but they were believed to be unrelated to the bug. The owner of the hotel who was a cross between Max Wall and Basil Fawlty had a very convenient cellar where we could store our purchases for the duration of the trip, to save mess in the rooms etc. A crocodile of plants and trays were taken down and a pleasant evening spent meeting new acquaintances and discussing the relevant holes in wallets.

Sunday 30th early breakfast as this was our planned pilgrimage of 213km to Kakteenland at Steinfeld. Some more of the party had sadly contracted the bug so the mood was a little low, but Mairi soon had the rest of the party scratching their heads on another quiz. However, the Sweetie jar was quarantined, in case that was spreading the bug.

Kakteenland is a vast nursery (more of a plant supermarket) with lots of choice from the wee to the magnificent. Shopping trolleys are provided and mein host supplies wine and there is a nice café.

The return journey was via the scenic Rhine valley. We had planned to stop off in Boppard but time was of the essence so sadly no nostalgia (I was there many years ago and would have loved to have wandered around). We went back to the hotel to check up on the infirm and to the cellar for the meticulous packing of plants in boxes. I was warned that plants need to be packed well, as boxes may have to be manipulated into spaces. The rest of the evening after dinner was taken up with packing boxes, which were duly labelled and taken up to the lounge to be sorted, ready to be packed in the bus in the morning.

Monday 31st fortunately most of the party who had succumbed to THE BUG had recovered sufficiently to travel. Hand gel to the fore on today's journey back to the ferry of 347 km. We were due to stop off at three nurseries, but we had to pack the bus. Mairi and Dave Briggs obviously have expertise in jigsaws, as one by one each box was placed in its spot with Mairi poking her head out every so often for the next one; degree in logistics definitely required. Anything bought today had to sit on your lap or a spare seat **nothing was allowed in the aisles**, so with grateful thanks to Freddie and Frau Muller, Auf Wiedersehen.

Our driver Kevin was well versed in continental travel and knew a nice place to stop off on the way back, so with another quiz to mull over on the way we travelled to Van der Linden's nursery at Honselersdijk. Much has been written about this vast nursery, but we all left with something, some even had a free Ficus.

On to Cok Grootscholten - some will know that this is home from home for this reporter so a big hug and kiss from Ina and exchange of plants with Cok. On to Aad Vijverberh just round the corner. Very tidy and well grown plants and another very interesting collection. Oh! for more time but we must not miss the boat so on 43km to the ferry.

Different system than at Hull: you book yourself in, and we all boarded the ferry. No sooner than on board: ***** Important announcement for the Frew Cactus party please all assemble in the reception area ***** We were greeted by the second officer and all taken to a quiet area to be advised that as some of our party had been reported as having THE BUG, we would have to complete medical information forms. After careful consideration the Captain had decided that we could all travel, but please could we keep together as much as possible and avoid too much

contact with other passengers. Any further outbreaks were to be reported.

Shortly after 6.30: *'Further important announcement would the Frew Cactus party please all assemble in the Irish Bar as soon as possible'*. During the night's sailing some more of the party had been stricken with THE BUG and were confined to their cabins. The rest of us gathered to be advised that a decision had been made, that we would all be held together until all other passengers had disembarked. We all had to give details of our cabins so that they could be specially disinfected before the next night's sailing.

We considered ourselves lucky to get home, but thankfully we did. We unpacked our boxes and loaded the cars and said our goodbyes. Throughout all the trials and tribulations of such an adventure Mairi and John remained very stoic. They are to be congratulated on organizing such an enjoyable holiday despite the dramas that unfolded. As a Newbie I was made very welcome and I was advised that we south of the border would still be welcome even if Scotland became independent.

Bill Darbon

BCSS Convention



Bill Darbon helps at the auction

BCSS Convention



John Watmough's plant sales

MEXICO 2000 (continued)

by Brian Thomson



[It was with pleasure that we welcomed Brian back to talk to us at a recent Oxford Branch meeting, and I have taken this as a cue to include another episode of his Mexican odyssey.

I expect you remember (Oxotica, June 2008) that our explorers had just run out of petrol on the road to Torreyon. Now read on... Ed.]

...Just before the end of the toll road, we run out of petrol. However, we are heading down a reasonable slope, and are able to coast downhill onto the free road, where we limp into the yard of the local vulcanizador. After hearing our tale of woe, he climbs beneath his pickup truck and uncouples his petrol tank to pour a couple of litres into a can. This allows us to reach the local Pemex station some 10kms further on, where we fill the tank and have breakfast.

As we continue, the land is very flat and featureless; hardly any *Yuccas* now, and even the creeping *Opuntias* appear to be dying. Many thousands of small *Agaves* are either dead or dying and everywhere is dust. It appears to be turning into true desert. It is that bad, that we have not even seen goats. From km 90, (we are back on the free road) not even UFOs, just a few low shrubs, even they don't look to be in growth. As we approach the mountain chain on the right, UFOs begin to re-appear which suggests that run-off from the mountains is providing at least some

available water. Here and there, land is under cultivation, if that is what you call it. We head from Torreyon to Gomez Palacio and then left on the toll road, heading towards Durango, where we will look for *Mammillaria theresae*. On this toll road, they have emergency 'phones and agua stops, a new innovation that is most welcome when you are in the middle of nowhere. On the Mex 40, everything seems to be suffering the same slow death as before. Here, we see what looks to be *Opuntia basilaris* or something similar, as it is a lovely reddish purple in colour, we will investigate on the way back.

On the Mex 39, heading towards Rodeo, the valleys are much greener and there are many trees. The rock strata are composed mainly of red, pink and grey. We turn off at km108 and pass through a couple of nondescript villages, at ca. km30, just before a sharp right hand bend, we take the white, limestone dirt road. At ca. 2km we stop to look for our goal. After an hour or so of brushing away the small stones and dust, we eventually find one small plant of *Mammillaria theresae* about 1cm in diameter. Also growing? there are a few *Echinocereus rigidissimus*, *Krainzia longiflora*, *Stenocactus sp*, and another *Mammillaria sp*. On the way back, where the road cuts through the side of a mountain, we explore the rocky outcrop on the left, finding little of interest.

On the way back to the car, we are passed by a Mexican family in a pickup truck. As is the custom in Mexico, there are smiles and waves from the occupants. On reaching the car, we follow them at about ½.km distance. Having just crossed a bridge on a sharp right hand bend, we noticed that the family had entered a large, wide arroyo and were offloading water carriers from the back of the vehicle. Realising that water meant plants, we decided to investigate and reversed to the arroyo and drove in. The arroyo was fairly wide and forbidding, with a sheer cliff of brown rock on the left and a slightly less sheer cliff of limestone rock on the right. We decided to tackle the limestone. Leo opted to search from ca. 20 metres upward, I searched from ca. 20 metres

down to floor level. We found a few *Echinocereus rigidissimus* *Ferocactus* sp, *Mammillaria* sp and UFOs, including the yellow form of *Opuntia microdasys*. While waiting for Leo to get back to ground level, I crossed the arroyo and searched along the foot of the brown cliff, finding nothing, until about half way back to the mouth of the arroyo, where there must be a section of porous rock that allows some seepage of water which trickles down the lower face of the cliff, for here there was a small section of desiccated mosses and lichens (about 20 to 30 feet square). BINGO, growing amongst the mosses and lichens where dozens of small *Mammillarias*? Looking like squashed *M. magalanii*. They had gingerish, feathery central spines and white radial spines. Rather pretty, and who knows? maybe a new species. The largest plants were about an inch across and there is evidence of regeneration. Hearing all the whoopin' and hollerin' and issuing forth of expletives, Leo came arunnin'. This section of little treasures is about 300 metres from the mouth of the arroyo. On the way back to the junction with the main highway, we measured the distance from the arroyo to be 20km.

Turning right, towards Torreyon, we searched both sides of the road at km64, finding *Glandulicactus uncinatus*, *Echinomastus durangensis*, (beneath a large dead one, there were seedlings) *Mammillaria leonae* and *Opuntia microdasys*. It is now 6-55pm, the temperature is 40 degrees, and as we travel, the air blowing into the car is so hot, that it is discomforting. Still on the Mex 30, we pass through Mapimi. After 2kms, the road cuts through a low hill. We find a *Microopuntia* sp, *Echinomastus durangensis*, *Thelocactus bicolor* var *tricolor* and the usual bunch of UFOs. We head for Bermejillo and book into the Hotel Maribell.

Day 8. Fri. 12th. May. Having had little sleep, due to the constant noise of the heavy traffic that thunders through the town, we had an early start. 6-00 am sees us on the Mex 40 again heading towards Viesca. Near Viesca, ca. km220 the area is very flat and very arid although judging by the cracks in the mud, they have had rain recently.

There seem to be very few cacti. On reaching the mountains in the East, we opt for the free road this time, so as to get as near to the foot hills of the Sierra Madre Orientale as possible. At km204, we attack the steep slope to our right, finding hundreds of a large growing *Mammillaria* sp, only two of which are showing seed pods. There are many large clumps of an *Echinocereus* sp. and many *Echinocactus horizontalonius*, *Hamatocactus hamatacanthus* and a beautiful white spined *Thelocactus*. On the way down, we followed one of the spines of the mountain, finding a beautiful *Epithelantha micromeris* with pinkish spination. Nearby, was a superb cristate of the same species, that was some 5-6 inches in length. Not much further, growing under what was left of a low bush, was a many-headed plant with several cristate heads. Unfortunately, all of these plants were really desiccated.

At km 171, we stopped again, to find *Echinocereus englemannii*, *Echinocactus horizontalonius*, *Epithelantha micromeris rufispina* (a lovely 10 headed specimen), light spined, red flowered *Echinocereus* sp. and another large growing *Mammillaria* sp. (one of which was in fruit). All of this was before breakfast. Following "brunch" we stop again, this time at Piedra Blanca, km ca. 103, a low hill of much broken rock. Best find here is *Astrophytum senilis* and *Mammillaria leonae* in fruit.

To be continued.

