

## Recollections of the 'MabLab', Department of Plant Sciences, University of Oxford, 1977–1996

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**ABSTRACT.** Personal reflections are offered on the botanical life of David Mabberley during his time at Oxford University.

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I had the privilege to work as Professor David Mabberley's personal laboratory technician and research assistant at Oxford University between March 1977 and January 1996.

David Mabberley held the position of Claridge Druce Junior Research Fellow in Taxonomy in the Botany School and St John's College, Oxford from 1973–1976. Then in 1976 he was appointed Fellow and Tutor at Wadham College, and Joint Lecturer in The Commonwealth Forestry Institute and the Botany School, Oxford, as they were then known.

At Wadham College he held the position of Dean from 1976–1982 and 1991–1996 and was Keeper of the Gardens for many years, therefore having a big influence on College life and the College garden. He also held the prestigious position of Senior Proctor of Oxford University from 1988–1989. He sat on numerous committees in Oxford and beyond.

When I began to work for David, his 'empire' was fairly extensive as he had rooms in Wadham College, an office and a laboratory in The Commonwealth Forestry Institute building and a further office in the Botany School. He also had a large living plant collection which he kept in the Departmental greenhouses. In any of his rooms, in addition to his collection of books and journals, one was very likely to find a number of interesting artefacts such as a coco de mer seed, or pieces of *Paulownia tomentosa* branches awaiting anatomical inspection, or carved figures which he had bought overseas, and I recall seeing a skeleton in a cupboard (amphibian). One would also find his large botanical spirit collection on the shelves, before improvements in health and safety dictated that this was housed elsewhere!

Through David's lectures, tutorials and field classes, he was able to instruct and inspire generations of undergraduates. In the two University Departments, amongst other things, he taught Tropical Forest Ecology and Plant Evolution and Systematics. These lectures were always accompanied by comprehensive reading lists and, when appropriate, there was also an impressive demonstration of living plants from the

Oxford Botanic Garden. Occasionally, in his lectures, he included some jokes in Latin, but I noticed that these seemed to be appreciated less and less by the students with time, as Latin was no longer a requirement for Oxford University entrants.

He ran two memorable practical classes demonstrating the size and morphological diversity in the genera *Euphorbia* and *Senecio*. These practical classes left a life-long impression and influence on many of his undergraduate students. So too did the Algarve Field Course that he initiated and ran with the late Peter Placito (Wadham College alumnus) for many years, giving undergraduates a splendid opportunity to study plants and their communities in depth. As Peter Placito lived in the Algarve, they also gained from his unique and warm hospitality at his home and gained from his local knowledge. I remember that during one excursion in the Algarve countryside, we stopped at a café for snails and beer. There cannot be many field courses that offer that diversion!

It was my task to prepare the necessary equipment for this field course. I joined them on three occasions, and on the first of these, I realised that the increment tree borer that they had requested was to determine the age of stunted Juniper trees, no more than knee height, and with a very small diameter growing near the windy coast at Cape St Vincent, and I had supplied a tool suitable for much larger, conventional mature trees!

We also had a number of one-day field classes and one-week field courses in various parts of Britain. Perhaps one of the most memorable day field classes was run for the Forestry MSc when we visited the beautiful and peaceful arboretum at Westonbirt in the morning and went on to visit an extremely noisy papermill at Sudbury (now closed) near Montgomery for the afternoon. A seemingly incongruous mixture!

On one of our UK field courses we stayed in the vicinity of Malham Tarn in Yorkshire. We were travelling in a mini-bus marked 'Forestry Institute' but in the countryside around us there was plenty of limestone pavement, but there was not a tree in sight!

One of the more sobering fieldwork experiences for me was when we chose a particular tetrad ( $2 \times 2$  km) in Oxfordshire to record all the plant species in order to contribute towards the data published in the *Flora of Oxfordshire* (Killick et al., 1998). Our search took us through a churchyard that had been treated with weed killer, a huge agricultural crop field with almost no weeds, and a country lane whose hedgerow had been brutally flailed a day or two earlier. We really struggled to record 100 different species.

Changes in the Department meant that we moved our laboratory to the Botany building and our new laboratory became known as the 'MabLab'. We had a number of postgraduate and postdoctoral students in the Lab at any one time and I would say that in the MabLab, we worked hard, but we also had fun exchanging friendly banter and I enjoyed the camaraderie. Sometimes, if we had a non-English speaker in the Lab, I would try to explain these idiosyncratic exchanges, but of course, the humour was inevitably lost in the process!

David's research work at that time mainly involved the family Meliaceae. He was completing a monograph on the genus *Chisocheton* when I joined him in 1977 and

we subsequently worked on the genus *Dysoxylum* for *Flora Malesiana* (Mabberley et al., 1995). David also published many taxonomic papers and wrote a number of books, including the widely acclaimed *Plant-book* (Mabberley, 1987). For all of this work, David needed to access and to read lots of literature, including historical and rare works. Much of this research was done before the advent of the computer and library database catalogues. So, much of his time and mine was spent in tracking down botanical references. David's knowledge of the book collections in Oxford and in various institutes in London was phenomenal and second to none. He kept me and the various librarians on our toes!

Because journal titles may change and reference citations may be incomplete or inaccurate, and books or journals can be catalogued in different ways, finding literature is not as straightforward as one might imagine. I visited 17 different libraries in Oxford alone, on David's behalf. The smallest library that I visited was that of the Institute of Virology, which at that time was located in a building on Mansfield Road in Oxford. I must say that their library resembled a broom cupboard, but perhaps virology was a relatively new subject then. On the other hand, probably the most fascinating library that I visited in Oxford was the Old Bodleian, with its almost palpable atmosphere of antiquity and learning. In those days, their catalogues consisted of huge hard-backed books with either hand-written entries or typed entries pasted into place. These catalogues were propped on a long sloping bench, which one stood against. Of course, this system has been superseded now.

I recall one instance in which I tried to procure a particularly rare reference that seemed only to be held in Havana, Cuba. I requested this on interlibrary loan and one page arrived two years later. I was thrilled, but on presenting this to David, he said: "That's great, but where is the next page....?" We gave up on that one!

On another memorable occasion, I made an appointment with Dr Stocker, the head Librarian of the Radcliffe Science Library in Oxford, who was kindly helping me to locate a problematic reference. During our meeting, Dr Stocker spent some time climbing up and down ladders from one reference catalogue book to another to show me the trail of the detective work that he had done to find mention of the reference in question.

The accomplishment of writing the first edition of David's *Plant-book* (Mabberley, 1987), which was compiled by human endeavour and typewriter rather than by computer, is truly remarkable, and many people have commented upon this. It involved David consulting huge amounts of taxonomic literature, and myself and others filing and cross-referencing his notes and information using filing cards. From my point of view, a keen proof-reading eye was necessary to organise accurately the long botanical names and the precise entries.

David travelled widely in connection with his work and spent two sabbaticals and some of his vacations working at various institutes and herbaria around the world. All of these periods away occurred before the advent of e-mail, and so he directed my work and kept me busy in the Lab by reciprocal overseas correspondence. For most of the time, this system worked surprisingly well. I also improved my ability to decipher his handwriting, which can be a little abstract, and to translate his sometimes rather cryptic notes for others in the Department!

I guess that it would be fair to describe David as a ‘workaholic’. He is a man with seemingly endless energy and enthusiasm for life, teaching and for his work. His was one of the few signatures in the Plant Sciences Department diary that appeared on Christmas Day. He seems to be a master at doing many major projects simultaneously. In the past, when I thought that we were working at full capacity to finish something, I discovered on its completion, after perhaps an hour’s lull, that an entirely ‘new’ (to me) project would appear, and somehow, it was already well advanced!

So, although I have spoken about past times and I congratulate him on all his achievements so far, I suspect that David will currently be thinking about the present and the future and what his next project will be, and I wish him well with that! I also thank him for providing me with interesting and fulfilling work during my many years with him. I greatly enjoyed the many opportunities that he gave to me, and I certainly learnt a lot along the way.

### References

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