

Michael Charles Day (1942–2020)

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Abstract

This article, in memoriam, provides details of the professional life of Michael Charles Day, researcher at the Natural History Museum, London and specialist in the taxonomy of aculeate Hymenoptera especially Pompilidae. It also includes a short account of his lifelong interest in caving.

Keywords

Caving, Obituary, Pompilidae, Taxonomy

Michael (“Mick”) Charles Day died on 13 September 2020. He is survived by his wife Judy and two daughters, Caitlin and Cainwen.

Mick was born on 1 July 1942 in Coulsdon, Surrey. He was educated at Reigate Grammar School and developed an early interest in collecting Lepidoptera and stamps. After working for a year at Legal and General Insurance Society he returned to education and took his first degree in Zoology at Cardiff, University of Wales, from 1962 to 1965. During the following three years he remained at Cardiff where he studied for a PhD under the supervision of Michael Claridge and John Edington. His topic was the parasitoid complex of Cecidomyiidae (Diptera) galling stems of common reed (*Phragmites australis*) on nearby coastal areas. Unfortunately, this study was never completed.



Figure 1. Hymenoptera researchers at the British Museum (Natural History) (c.1977). Left to right: John Noyes, Ian Gauld, Mike Fitton, Mick Day, Barry Bolton (Photo Kyaw Than).

Mick joined the British Museum (Natural History) (now Natural History Museum, London, UK) in September 1969 as a curator and researcher on aculeate Hymenoptera. Initially he dressed in a smart, dark suit and wore a tie, but soon converted to the informal dress of a museum taxonomist. Mick joined an amazing team of Hymenopterists that included Owain Richards (retired), John Perkins (Ichneumonidae), Ian Yarrow (bees, retired), Colin Vardy (lower aculeates), John Quinlan (Cynipoidea) and George Else (bees) and Commonwealth Institute of Entomology (CIE) taxonomists Ron Eady (parasitoid Hymenoptera), Gilbert Nixon (parasitoid Hymenoptera), Geoffrey Kerrich (parasitoid Hymenoptera) and B.R. Subba Rao (parasitoid Hymenoptera). This team was very soon to be joined by museum researcher Barry Bolton (Formicidae) and CIE researcher Zdenek Bouček (Chalcidoidea). A few years later the group was joined by museum researcher Michael Fitton (Ichneumonidae) and CIE researcher Ian Gauld (Icheumonidae), and then by museum researcher John Noyes (Chalcidoidea) when John Perkins, Gilbert Nixon, Geoffrey Kerrich and Ron Eady retired. Early on, Mick decided to concentrate his attention on lower aculeates and especially the spider-hunting wasps Pompilidae, and soon became one of the World's authorities on the group. He also acquired a very impressive general knowledge of Hymenoptera. Unfortunately Mick was also a bit of perfectionist when it came to publishing and consequently his publications were, by current standards, relatively few and far between. He always regretted this but seemed unable to rectify it.



Figure 2. Participants of the southwestern-Africa expedition. Left to right: Brian Cogan, Dave Hollis, Peter Hammond, Mick Day, Dick Vane-Wright (Photo by permission of the Trustees of the Natural History Museum).

During 1971 and 1972 Mick joined four other members of entomology department (Dave Hollis, Brian Cogan, Dick Vane-Wright and Peter Hammond) in planning and undertaking a five-month expedition to Namibia and adjacent parts of South Africa, Botswana and Angola, including the Namib and Kalahari deserts. This was a huge undertaking and as usual, the expedition was undertaken on a shoe-string budget. Mick and his colleagues decided that the expedition needed a mobile laboratory that was capable of handling the terrain and variable weather. For this they bought an ex-army, four-wheel drive, Bedford “gun tractor” and fitted it with the cab of an army fire engine (“green goddess”) for less than £350. During evenings and weekends, over a period of several months, the team designed and built a laboratory on the back of the truck. This space provided for research as well as storage space for collecting and personal equipment, food and living quarters. The truck was shipped from England to Cape Town South Africa. The expedition travelled 7,500 miles through south western Africa and material was collected at over 150 sites resulting in millions of specimens being obtained. At that time it had probably been the most productive entomological expedition in any tropical or subtropical environment. This material is now housed

in the Natural History Museum, London, and includes at least 20 species of insects bearing the specific epithet '*dayi*' in Mick's honour. The total cost of the expedition in 1971–1972 was £3,000 and when the truck returned to the UK it was used for a while as a training vehicle and then later for two trans-Sahara expeditions by the museum's Palaeontology Department. It finally gave up the ghost after crossing the Sahara for the fourth time.

In 1979 Mick, George Else and Dave Morgan travelled overland to Olympia in Greece in the hope of collecting fresh specimens of *Proscolia* (Hymenoptera: Scoliidæ). This genus of primitive scoliid wasps was known from only a single male collected in Armenia in 1961 and described later by Rasnitsyn in 1977 as *Proscolia archaica*. At that time, the species was the only known representative of the subfamily Proscoliinae. However, in 1976 a single male of a second species had been collected by Piers Baker in the Olympia archaeological site and donated to the Natural History Museum by his father, Donald Baker, a frequent visitor to the Hymenoptera section. Mick, George and Dave set out for Greece in Mick's old Rover car but nearly had to terminate the trip when Mick, who was driving, nodded off whilst descending a steep road in the Austrian mountains. The car veered off the road, down a culvert and blew out the nearside front tyre, badly bending the rim of the wheel in the process. Amazingly, Mick produced a sledgehammer from the boot of the car and this was used to straighten the wheel rim. The burst tyre was replaced by the spare and a replacement was purchased in Belgrade. The trip was successful with more than 80 specimens of both sexes of a new species (*Proscolia spectator*) being collected. The first specimen was found by Mick amongst the ruins at Olympia and his resulting shriek attracted the attention of several puzzled tourists. The observations of the three entomologists and descriptions of both sexes of this primitive wasp were published two years later (Day et al. 1981).

Mick visited Brunei in February and March 1982 with Ian Gauld. They joined up with the Gurkhas and were lucky enough to be flown to several collecting localities in a Puma helicopter.

In 1983 Mick and John Noyes visited Madagascar to collect Hymenoptera. The trip was initially planned to last nine weeks from the beginning of February but, because of problems obtaining science visas, it was curtailed to four weeks from mid-April. The British Embassy did offer some help, but only after a Telex was sent to the Embassy from the Department of Education (the museum did not possess a Telex machine) a day or two before departure, thus proving they were not merely students trying their luck but serious scientists undertaking a research project. As a result, Mick and John were met at Tananarive airport by the deputy British Ambassador and were invited later to the Ambassador's house for lunch. During the first few days Mick and John organised research permits with the Department de l'Eaux et Forêts and met up with John Williams, a British microclimatologist based in Madagascar. He was a great help by obtaining a small supply of alcohol (for preserving insects) and ferrying them to and from Andasibe. Mick, John and Jean-Pierre, a member of the Académie Malgache, then travelled to Jean de Heaulme's famous, private reserve at Berenty, about 3 hours drive from Fort Dauphin. Here they lived off a diet of potato and lobster for

a week. Mick nearly gave Jean de Heaulme a heart attack when he made a move to pass Jean's prized *Aepyornis* egg to John rugby style, pulling out of the pass at the last second. From Berenty they travelled to another of Jean de Heaulme's reserves, Bereboka, about 60 km northwest of Morondava. For security reasons, they had to retain accommodation at the Hotel Bougainvillea in Morondava, with Mick and John taking it in turn to travel to the reserve and spend the night there with Jean-Pierre. John and Jean-Pierre had one scary night at Bereboka when it was rumoured that cattle-rustlers were in the area stealing cattle and killing anyone who got in the way.

During the trip to Madagascar Mick collected several specimens of three strange species of wasp which he later decided belonged to *Heterogyna*. This enigmatic hymenopteran genus had been described by Nagy in 1969 but Mick was unable to examine the unique holotype of the type species, *Heterogyna protea* Nagy, collected in Rhodes and which was held in Nagy's collection. In 1984 Mick published a revision of five species of this genus confident that he had identified it correctly. The revision included the three new species collected in Madagascar and one from Botswana. A year later, one of the new species was designated type species of *Daycatinca* in Mick's honour. Sadly, this name is now regarded as a synonym of *Heterogyna* and no longer valid.

Soon after the revision was published, Mick managed to borrow the unique male holotype of *Heterogyna protea* and was able to confirm that his interpretation of the genus was correct. Unfortunately, the specimen was destroyed in a freak accident in the environmental chamber of a scanning electron microscope. Luckily, Mick had managed to capture several images and make notes on the specimen before it was destroyed and was able to publish these in 1985. In the hope of rediscovering the species and perhaps collect some females, Mick managed to convince his family to take several holidays on Rhodes, the type locality of *Heterogyna protea*. He was extremely successful and collected about 150 males and two females of the species at Ixia in August 1984 and August 1989. He subsequently distributed specimens to most major collections in the world including several to Nagy, the discoverer of the species. Unfortunately, Mick never managed to publish descriptions of the brachypterous females, but passed on his unfinished manuscript and notes to Michael Ohl for use in a forthcoming revision of the genus. Mick's suspicion that the species occurs on the mainland was confirmed in 2019 when the Russian hymenopterist Mikhail Mokrousov found a female in Turkey.

In July and August 1987, Mick joined Operation Raleigh in Seram, Indonesia, in order to collect insects for the museum. The trip was beset by several problems, not least his equipment and clothing being delayed on the way to Seram. This resulted in him having to walk several kilometers to base camp through streams and along trails carrying only what was contained in his cabin bag. On the way, one of the porters who was working for Operation Raleigh died of a heart attack. Mick and a few companions carried the body back to the deceased's home village where they joined in the ensuing wake. Otherwise, the trip was extremely successful and Mick made an excellent collection of Hymenoptera, including many new genera and species.

In 1988 Mick completed a major work on the 41 species of British Pompilidae. This was published as a Royal Entomological Society Handbook for the Identification

of British Insects. In this work there is a short discussion with regards Day's Organ which was named in honour of Mick by Arnold Menke (1982, see *Sphecos* 6:5). The function of this structure is unknown, but it is an exocrine gland found near the base of the metasoma and is likely to produce a sex pheromone. The handbook is a major work for anyone interested in this group of insects in Britain and Europe. The only recently published work on this group of insects elsewhere in Europe is clearly based on it, even occasionally using direct extracts.

In the late 1980s Mick realised that computing was becoming increasingly important in storing information useful to our work and decided to spend a greater proportion of his time and effort becoming the Entomology Department's computer expert. Mick thought that by doing this he could make himself indispensable and therefore safe from any possibility of losing his post. This decision was a mistake and he paid the price for this when, in 1990, he was made redundant during the museum's reorganisation. He was poorly treated in the process and never really recovered his confidence in the years that followed.

For a few years after his redundancy Mick continued to spend some time in the museum. He hoped to use some of his redundancy compensation to build a machine that would automatically cut data labels to size, but the technological challenge was too great and the project was put on hold indefinitely. In 1993 Mick was invited to work with Ian Naumann and Andrew Austin as senior collaborator on a two-year project to write a guide to the genera of Australian Pompilidae. The project was funded by the Australian Biological Resources Study. He accepted and during that time he visited Australia for several weeks to study material of this group held in the major museums. On his return to London most of the material was sent to Mick in London for further investigation. Unfortunately, the project ground to a halt when Ian Naumann left CSIRO in 1997–1998. It was revived by Andrew Austin in 2005 who was awarded ABRS funding to hire a postdoc. Lars Krogmann was appointed and visited Mick in London for some initial training and in 2007 Mick visited Australia for two weeks to advise further on the project. Regrettably, Mick was unable to carry the borrowed material to Australia with him and this was posted back to Adelaide in 2008 with the help of Mike Wilson at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff. At about this time, Mick lost interest in the project, possibly because he and Judy had moved in 2006 from their home in Harrow not far from the Natural History Museum to Pen y Cae about 15 miles southwest of Brecon in Wales, more than one hundred miles away. It was left to Lars Krogmann to complete the project some years later.

During his career Mick became very good friends with Raymond Wahis, a Belgian entomologist and specialist on Pompilidae taxonomy. The two families spent many holidays together, in Harrow and Liege, where Mick and Raymond lived respectively. Judy and Josaine and girls would holiday together. The families remained close over the years and Mick considered the Wahis as family.

Mick spent most of his later life as an active member of the South Wales Caving club based at Penwyllt near Pen y Cae and only a short distance from his final home. Mick had been a gifted climber and caver from an early life and as a student he had



Figure 3. Mick outside his home in Pen y Cae, April 2015 (Photo George Else).

been active with Cardiff University Climbing and Caving Club. He and his wife Judy joined the South Wales Caving Club in October 1966. Mick was a central figure in the South Wales Caving Club and also nationally. He had helped in the exploration of the Dan yr Ogof and Ogof Ffynnon Ddu cave systems in South Wales and discovered several new large passages. It was here that he introduced willing museum colleagues to the delights of these cave systems, ensuring the survival of several total novices. He had also been part of an expedition that had discovered new passages and a huge

chamber in Grotta di Monte Cucco in Italy in 1969. Mick was chairman of the South Wales Climbing Club from 1970–1976 and from 1976–1984 was Biological Recorder of the British Cave Research Association. Then, for 20 years, he was Chairman of the National Caving Association until he oversaw its transformation into the British Caving Association, continuing as its Chairman for five years until he stood down in 2009. From 2011 until his death he was Honorary President of the British Caving Association. Mick contributed a huge amount to caving and to the organisation of caving UK wide, and is assured of a prominent place in caving history.

Mick will be remembered fondly by those who knew him at the Natural History Museum, as well as those in the South Wales Caving Club and British Caving Association. Above all he was a gentle, approachable, amusing person, and extremely good company with a love for debate. He also had a love of old Rover cars with a prowess for converting, dismantling and reassembling them. His knowledge and understanding of motor vehicles was fundamental to the success of the 1972 south-western Africa expedition which could not have happened without him. His caving associates will remember him for his bizarre caving garb of long johns, Aran sweater and cardboard helmet that became soft when wet!

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