

REPORT

Palaeontological Association Meeting, Geology Department, University of Leicester

The 2003 meeting of the Palaeontological Association was held in the Geology Department at Leicester University between the 14th and 17th of December, and was attended by well over 200 delegates, who arrived from all parts of the world. The talks were, as usual, wide-ranging, and are summarized as a series of abstracts on the Association's website (www.palass.org). Palaeontology, like all academic pursuits and many other things, is subject to the vagaries of fashion and at any one time there are many 'hot' themes buzzing around, but perhaps this was one of the most generalised meetings for some time, when anyone with something worthwhile to say had a chance to do so. Cladistics and phylogeny, which so polarise the palaeontological community, couldn't be left out of things of course, and on the Sunday before the main meeting began, there was a seminar on stem groups. That was well attended and the six talks provoked suitably lively debate.

As for the main programme on Monday and Tuesday, variety was proved yet again to be the spice of life, as talks ranged from the usefulness of Quaternary tree rings, via Miocene frogs, to more conventional subject matter such as brachiopods and a range of molluscs, and ending with the decidedly controversial topic of Ediacaran fossils and whether some or maybe all of them are just the creations of microbes. At the close of normal talks on the first day, delegates decamped to a larger lecture theatre to hear the Annual Address by Professor Mike Benton. I hope Mike will forgive the recollection, but it doesn't seem so very long ago that one of us (AS) first encountered an earnest but shy postgraduate on a mission. The mission may yet await full realisation, but the postgraduate has now blossomed into one of the most assured palaeontologists in this country, and the audience got full value on the topic of *Palaeontology and the future of life on Earth*. Those looking for East Midlands themes in the talks at the meeting were fated to be disappointed, but the Palaeobiology Group at Leicester University kept the EM flag flying by presenting a number of talks.

The Palaeontological Association Annual Dinner is one of the highlights of the year for those of us who spend our time amongst the life of the past, but rarely can details be revealed for fear of embarrassing eminent and respected palaeontologists. However, 2003's event was another splendid 'do' and can the cleaners really have been surprised to encounter people still in the bar when they came in to do their morning stint on Tuesday?

On the final day of the meeting, Helen Boynton and John Carney led a field excursion to two of the

internationally famous Precambrian fossil localities of Charnwood Forest. Participants appreciated the weather, which was freezing but sunny, and many still savour the memory of the double-decker bus-ride through this very distinctive part of Leicestershire.

At the first stop, the 65 members of the field party warmed up with a march to the summit of Ives Head, on the fringe of Charnwood Forest just south of Shepshed. It is doubtful whether so many people had been assembled here before (see group photo), and their presence was fully justified because the Ives Head fossil impressions are the oldest to be seen in Charnwood Forest and may yet prove to be the earliest examples of organised Life on this planet. The fossils occur on a bedding plane in strata of the Ives Head Formation (Blackbrook Group), and the delegates saw several bold impressions, which were ideally highlighted in the oblique rays of the midwinter sun. Helen Boynton discovered these forms and described them in recent issues of the *Mercian Geologist* (Vol. 13, 165-183; Vol.14, 2-3 and 197-201). They include the lobed form *Ivesheadia lobata*, an impression with a combination of lobes and segments named *Blackbrookia oaksi*, and a palmate form *Shepshedia palmata*. There was much debate among the delegates concerning the affinities of these impressions – do they, like certain other Charnian fossils, represent primitive medusoids, are they microbial colonies, or are they a form of Precambrian life that has yet to be recognised and categorised? Perhaps there will always be speculation about their origins and the last word is best left to one expert from Canada, who described them as ‘beautiful and bewildering’.

After a pub lunch in Newtown Linford, the party entered Bradgate Park at Hunt’s Hill and made their

way up to the spectacularly fossiliferous exposure at the Memorial Crag. Here, the fossil impressions occur on a bedding plane just above the Sliding Stone Breccia, at the base of the Bradgate Formation, some 2 kilometres higher in the Charnian sequence than the Ives Head fossil bed. Many of these fossils (see *Mercian Geologist* Vol. 13, 165-183) are typical of the latest Precambrian Ediacaran assemblage that has been recognised worldwide, in that they contain discs and also many *Charnia* fronds, including one form, *Charnia grandis*, that may have been a metre in length. Helen also pointed out an extremely small example of *Charniodiscus concentricus*, only 15 mm long. Other impressions, consisting of complex bundles of fronds with a central disc (*Bradgatia linfordensis*), have not been recognised elsewhere in the World and they underline the uniqueness of the Charnwood Forest occurrences – and the need for them to be investigated further. The fossils at Memorial Crag are best seen in low, oblique sunlight and as the sun set, the party was treated to one of the best views ever seen of these vastly important fossils, a scene which generated real excitement.

Late in the afternoon, the group descended from the Old John Tower in the gathering gloom, over ground that was rapidly hardening. Many will have been introduced to a totally new type of palaeontology, involving species at the very start of organised life, that belong to no obvious or long-lived evolutionary tree, and which are in many cases only faintly visible under certain lighting conditions. A Field Excursion Guide on the day’s outing is available from the British Geological Survey (Boynton and Carney, 2003: BGS Occasional Publication, No.3).

John Carney and Andrew Swift



Cold day on Charnwood for the PalAss field trip