

# The Phycologist

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60 Years of the  
**British Phycological Society**

## BPS Jubilee Celebrations Jane Pottas

The 60th anniversary of the BPS was marked by a meeting held at the Natural History Museum in London on Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> September and with remarkable symmetry 60 delegates arrived to celebrate the occasion.

Paul Hayes, in his capacity as President of the Society, welcomed everyone to the meeting and in his opening remarks commented on similarities between 1952 and 2012. There were Olympic Games then and now and the Royal family in the news for the coronation of the Queen then and her diamond Jubilee now. He also considered major events of the time. In the world of science Alfred Hershey and Martha Chase conducted a series of experiments that helped to confirm that DNA was the genetic material and Alan Turing proposed the reaction-diffusion model to explain how complex patterns in nature might emerge during development. I think Paul must have been trawling the internet for facts to dazzle us with but the most startling one to emerge was that the founding of the BPS was not mentioned on the 1952 page on Wikipedia. A ripple of astonishment ran around the room, but before we could consider this oversight further Paul spotted Linda Irvine in the audience, one of the first members of the society. In his concluding remarks he referred to the remaining grand challenge for phycologists – to get to the stage where an internet search for phycology does return the question “Do you mean psychology?” It just goes to show what serious errors result from a single letter substitution in orthography as in genetics.

In the early days of the Society the majority interest of the founder members was in seaweed but today phycology is a broad church which encompasses the study of macroalgae and microalgae, freshwater and marine algae as well as the development and application of techniques undreamt of in 1952. The daunting task of organising a meeting which would celebrate the many and varied achievements of the past 60 years whilst at the same time looking to the challenges of the future was undertaken by Juliet Brodie and of course she pulled it off. The programme included talks which were stimulating and inspiring, a debate on the contentious subject of biofuels from algae, an exploration of the cross disciplinary links between science and art, and a look back at the history of phycology and the lives of some of the people who first ventured in to the strange world of phycology.

Professor Paul Falkowski of Rutgers University flew in from the US to give us a whistle stop tour of the major role of phytoplankton in changing the redox state of the planet on geological time scales. Before our brains had time to cool down Professor John Allen from Queen Mary, University of London stepped up to the podium to talk about the role of cytoplasmic inheritance in the evolution of the algae and the consequent changes in the composition of the atmosphere. There was little time for questions, so animated and enthusiastic were the first two speakers for their subjects, but conversation buzzed over the buffet lunch as phycologists from varied disciplines gathered round the posters, admired an exhibition of the Hilda Canter-Lund photographs, and pored over a photograph of members who attended the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary meeting. The NHM library mounted a display of historical books about algae and there was a display of phycological philately (try saying that after a couple of glasses of wine)

- stamps - depicting seaweeds collected by David Irvine and donated to the BPS by his family. The Seaweed Health Foundation brought along materials and information about their organisation which aims to promote the benefits of seaweed for human food and health. Delegates could purchase books and sign up for journals at the Taylor and Francis stand.

The afternoon session began with a thought provoking talk by Professor Joanna Verran from Manchester Metropolitan University in which she explained how art provides an opportunity for the visualisation and communication of science. This was followed by a debate about whether macroalgae or microalgae are the biofuels of the future. An initial show of hands favoured microalgae (25) to macroalgae (5) which changed to 25 to 15 after Professor Mike Cowling of the Crown Estates and Steve Skill from the Marine Biological Association had described the case for macroalgae and microalgae respectively. It seems that this debate will continue as there were quite a few abstentions. A break for tea provided another opportunity for discussion and the noise level indicated that there was plenty of talking going on. The last part of the day focused on the history of phycology. Ian Tittley gave a lively and informative talk entitled “Four Centuries of Seaweed Study in Kent” in which he described a number of people who predate the BPS who had worked on the seaweed of Kent. He really doesn't look that old. Juliet Brodie introduced the final session by summarising the foundation of the BPS at a meeting in September 1951 in Bangor. Interestingly in the first unofficial steering committee of nine, seven were women. The first annual meeting held in January 1952 was on Algal Taxonomy and Nomenclature, subjects which still exercise the lumpers and splitters who today have molecular techniques in their tool kit, unlike their predecessors who would have to wait until April 1953 for the publication of the discovery of the structure of DNA of which Crick and Watson said, with remarkable understatement, “This structure has novel features which are of considerable biological interest.” Eileen Cox, Martin Wilkinson and Barry Leadbeater gave personal reminiscences of some of the leading lights of the BPS from the early days – Kathleen Drew, Margaret Martin, Betty Percival, Elsie Burrows, Mairin de Valera, Mary Parke, Irene Manton, and Frank Round with personal contributions from the audience.

Juliet thanked everyone who had contributed to make the day a success. Paul rose to thank her for all her hard work in what was virtually a “one woman effort” and presented her with a lace scarf knitted from yarn made of silk and seaweed as a small token of our thanks.

Altogether it was a full and enjoyable day which ended with a wine reception sponsored by Taylor and Francis. An anniversary meeting is a time to look back to see how far the Society has come but is also an opportunity to look forward. The BPS was founded by a group of academics with purely academic purposes but outreach and education are increasingly on the agenda as well and there are moves afoot to reinstate field meetings again after a few years' absence. What will the secretary in 2072 be recording, I wonder?

PS: If you check the 1952 page on Wikipedia you will see that the founding of the BPS is now listed – the page having been updated during the anniversary meeting!