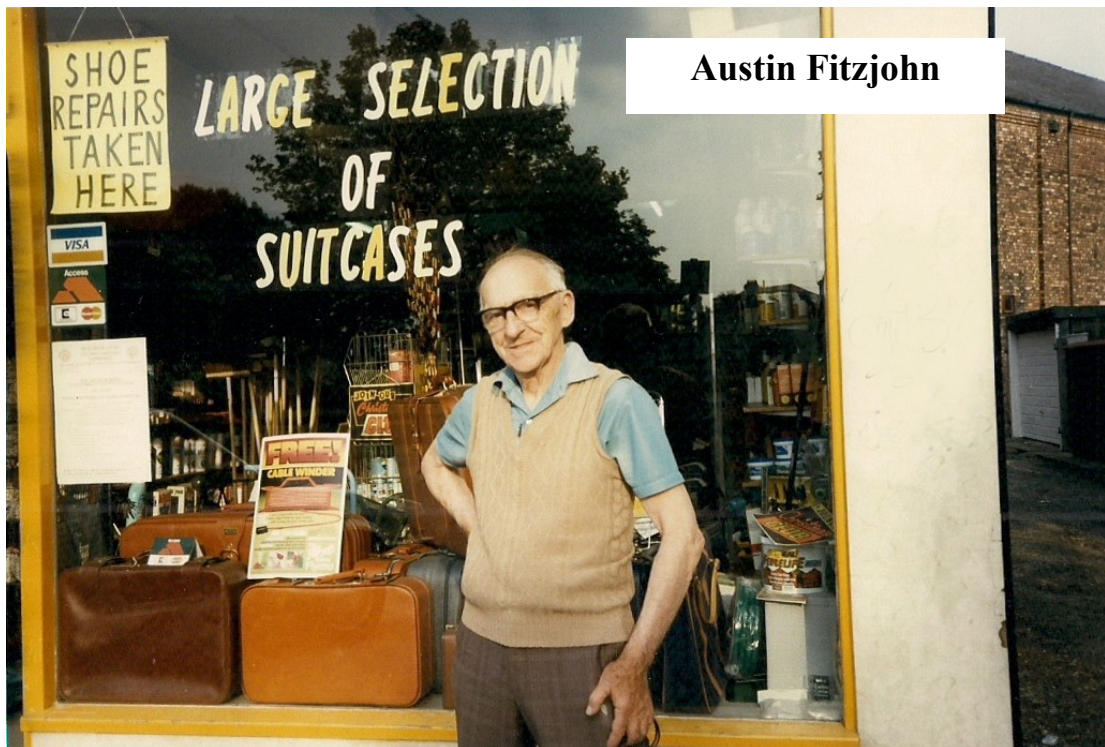




**MANCHESTER
BRANCH
NEWSLETTER**

WINTER 2015



**Biography of Austin Fitzjohn – adapted from material supplied by Geoff Fitzjohn.
(from website).**

Over the years Austin had many interests, as a young man he used to make and fly gliders. During the war he bought a coal merchant business from a colleague who was called up on war duties. Helping to "keep the home fires burning" he built the business up, added more lorries and did very nicely, but it was hard work carrying heavy bags of coal up ten or more flights of stairs in the flats around Ardwick, Gorton and surrounding areas. With the black-outs, no TV etc people had to entertain themselves, so Austin started buying secondhand train sets and Meccano bits and pieces which he made up into sets. A very lucrative period for him. After the war he sold the much bigger coal business back to the guy he bought it off at the beginning of the war.

Looking for something else to do he decided to buy The Handy Shop, a local hardware business in south Manchester in 1952 with his wife Rennie. One of customers was called Reg Coleman, who introduced Austin to Frank Otway-Smith. Frank and Reg both lived very close to the Handy Shop. Austin's decided to start his own collection after seeing Reg Coleman's greenhouse full of cacti.

Austin joined the Manchester Branch eventually becoming the Branch Secretary from 1963 to 1966, taking over from Frank who had been Secretary since 1959.

Over the years his two sons, Graham and Geoff, continued to expand The Handy Shop whilst Austin started to build his Cactus nursery, having bought Frank's collection before he relocated to Bristol. When Austin eventually decided to sell the Cactus Nursery Harold Gaulton bought the plants.

The Cactus Nursery had many visitors from far and wide including Cyril Parr, Editor of the African Succulent Plant Society Journal, and Curt Backeberg.

He enjoyed several other hobbies including photography, and there is a large selection of photographs on the branch website.



Left to Right: Frank and Barbara Otway-Smith. Pauline, Rennie, Geoff and Graham Fitzjohn.

Taken on a trip to a nursery in Holland.

Special Thanks to Geoff and Graham for all the material supplied and for their time and efforts over the past few months.

An update on the quest to find more of our Branch History and the story behind the Cine Film shown at the AGM.

Those of you who were at the AGM will have seen some rather interesting Cine Film. I thought it might be interesting to set down how we came to be able to see it after all these years.

It is probably best to back track a bit first. Many of you will have read the History Booklet that we put together to celebrate the 65th Anniversary of the Branch. I had decided to compile that booklet because I had realised that I'd been going to meetings for 20 years. Quite a few questions came to mind. What meetings had I been to? How many? What were the meetings about before I started attending? Where did the meetings take place? Who had been to speak and when? Where and when did the Branch Shows take place?

The first thing to do was to find all my programme cards and put them in some sort of order. Then it was a case of asking Peter, Brian and Philip if they could help out with the gaps. Brian came to the rescue and kindly let me borrow all the cards he had, which got us back to 1975, but with gaps. Those cards also gave new names to ponder over.

To find out about meeting prior to 1975 I searched through all the NCSS and BCSS journals for information in the Branch Activities sections. That gave further information and in particular a reference to Mr and Mrs Harper and their newsletters from 1964. Wouldn't it be a wonder to see those newsletters.

So I put together the booklet in late 2011 to get it finished in time for the 2012 Anniversary. Most of you bought one (if not, we can soon order one for you).

Early in 2012 I took over the Admin of the branch website. Dear me, those first few weeks gave me a headache! I only had one piece of software, when I needed two and nothing seemed to be very user friendly. I like to think I am OK with computers (I studied Computer Programming at college a long time ago) but this was nearly impossible to make sense of. Thankfully Pete Arthurs came to the rescue and set me on the right road. After a lot of email messages between us we slowly started to get a useable website.

Whilst this was going on and the cogs in my brain settled somewhat I remembered seeing that Pete had something to do with the history of the society and I also remembered seeing a picture of Gordon Rowley's library. I also had something in my mind that Gordon's Library and Pete were connected in some way. Well it couldn't harm asking Pete if by some slim chance Gordon might have got something (*anything*) connected with Manchester in his archive? As it turned out he did! Very soon I had 4 PDFs of newsletters from 1965 edited by Les Nyman. These were soon added to the website, along with the newsletters from the 1980s, thanks to Les Percy, and the 1990s from my own files. Sadly there was no reference to Harper in Gordon's library. Oh, well. Perhaps it was not to be.

Those newsletters did give us a precious few details about meetings in the 1960s. One key reference was a visit to the Branch by Herman Jacobsen. More of this later. Another was about a branch outing to Jolley's Nursery near Coventry.

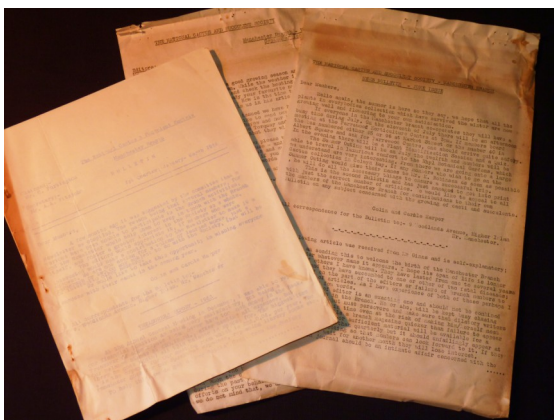
A few more nuggets of information came from John Cox and John Collins, but for a time we had to be happy with what we'd got. I also put together the Newsletter Booklet.

Putting that booklet together I became very used to reading badly faded type writer print which I was trying to convert using OCR. *Th- r~ 3sU7ks w£3~r3 s0m3#ha7 mi\$ed*. Most of it needed re-typing and I was really lucky to get John Pilbeam to proof read the text for me! Two more newsletters came to light via Brendan Burke in 2013 and I thought that would be the lot. They were added to the website with the intention to add them to the newsletter booklet.

Then we had our meeting in September 2014. Peter had given out some papers listing a lot of old books and journals. A gentleman called Geoff Fitzjohn was trying to find a new home for material owned by his late father, Austin. The name Fitzjohn got my attention straight away, having seen it whilst researching the other booklets, as did the reference to the signed Herman Jacobsen books (see above). What really caught my eye was a reference to copies of Mancunian Cactivities and above it on the list “3 x tatty Manchester Branch Journals”. No. It couldn’t be. It would be too much to hope for. Could they really be the Harper Newsletters? Mentioned on the list were 1960’s programme cards, which were an added bonus.

After a lot of exchanges of emails between Geoff, Peter and myself, we eventually agreed to go and visit Geoff and his brother Graham in Stockport. I met up with Peter at his house and then together we went to see Geoff. The journey there was interesting in itself. I’d got it worked out that the house was easy enough to find having travelled around the M60 from Peter’s. Admittedly we’d have to back track to junction 19, but everyone has to do that because of the lack of the full junction at 20. Peter took me a different way. I’m not going to detail the route mainly because I was lost within about 5 minutes of setting off..... and for 3 of those we’d been stuck in traffic. Many place names were familiar, but all were places I’d never been to before.

So we got there eventually and met Geoff and Graham. Geoff told us a lot about his father and his nursery, which seemed to be quite a large operation. Looking through the books and journals I soon found what I was looking for. There on the top of the pile of journals were three tatty looking newsletters. Who wrote them – who wrote them could it be? Ah ah! HARPER – result! Given they are 50 years old they had been kept in remarkable condition.



The three Harper newsletters from 1964.



Three copies of Mancunian Cactivities

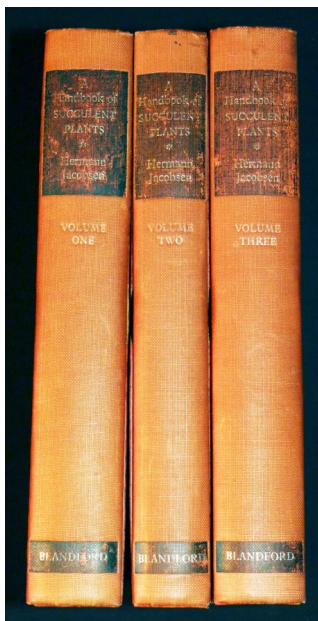
Geoff didn’t want any money for the material himself but rather he wanted money donating to Parkinson’s UK, due to suffering from the condition himself. Those of you who have bought plants from my trays will know that I already donate money to Parkinson’s UK as my late Grandfather had, and a close friend has, Parkinson’s.

I won't go into all the details here, but it took a lot of thinking and puzzling on my part as to how we could raise the money to buy the material, and yet not use any branch money. One obvious idea was to Gift-Aid the amount and by doing it online I could use my credit card. The other idea was to split the money between a few people and also the branch. Effectively I was going to loan the branch the money, with the hope of getting most of it back, having set some of the total as money I was paying so that I could keep the Jacobsen books, an autographed Curt Backeberg programme, plus the newsletters, cards and one or two other items. The rest would be for Sheffield branch members and our own branch members, then the Cactus World forum members. My thoughts were – what ever material is left, if divided into small enough piles, will only need to sell for a few pounds each to get most of the money back, and hopefully make a small profit.

So that is what we did, and Geoff and Graham kindly brought the material with them to the Mesemb Show. Hopefully they liked the show, as like me, they much prefer Cacti.

Now something that wasn't mentioned on the list, but we'd talked about in the email exchanges, was a lot of 35mm slides. It had been in my mind as soon as I knew about them to scan them, and if any were any good, put them on the website. After all these were the sort of pictures I'd been hoping for since taking over the website. With a bit of luck there might be one or two showing Manchester Branch members. At the Mesemb Show Geoff asked me if it was perhaps possible to make a page on the website to show the slides. Little did he know that the idea had been in my mind all along. Scanning the slides revealed a lot of very nice photographs of cacti and succulents, many of Austin's greenhouses, a few from overseas trips and three of Cyril Parr and Curt Backeberg, but sadly none of branch members.

Then a few days after the Mesemb Show Geoff emailed to say they had found some more slides and Graham had found their old family Cine Films on three DVDs which included a branch outing. A parcel arrived a few days later containing the DVDs and several more slides. One slide was of particular interest as it was a photo of a coach outing with 29 people stood in front of the coach. Another result! The cine film was soon watched and that was also very interesting to see. As the AGM was coming up I hoped we might be able to watch it on the big screen. So between Ivor and myself we put together a little presentation. Hopefully those who saw it enjoyed it.



The three volumes of the Hermann Jacobsen books and a signed book plate. Herman Jacobsen visited the branch twice. The first time was in 1949 and he visited again in 1966. The 1949 talk was printed in a booklet and copy of this is held in the archives. A report of the 1966 visit is recorded in the newsletters.

The cine film was shown after we had treated everyone to a number of Austin's slides. Many of them are around 50 years old. Despite their age they are clear and bright with plenty of definition to the petals and leaves, reminding us once again that film does have advantages over digital in certain cases. The cine film followed and was of a trip to Mrs Coombes Nursery near Coventry. The film starts off showing members getting on the coach, before briefly going through Kenilworth and surrounding villages. Once at the nursery there is about six or seven minutes of footage showing plants and people. Many fine plants are to be seen and every one is very smartly turned out. If anyone wasn't at the meeting and would like to see the cine film please let me know.

One other bonus from the Mesemb Show was meeting Alan Hart. I asked him if he could help out with the history of the Mesemb Show and also mentioned about my interest in the history of the branch. A week or so later an envelope arrived containing details about the Mesemb Show and also several missing programme cards.

To sum up what information we have gained. We now have meeting information about the following years – 1960, 1961, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1970, 1974, 1986 and 1987. We have, as far as I know, all the newsletters that Colin and Carole Harper did, plus seven consecutive issues of Mancunian Cactivities. Sheffield Branch has also gained six newsletters. All these items contain little bits of information which will appear in due course. We have about 20 minutes of Branch related cine film footage, plus a few short films made by Austin relating to his cactus nursery. All the newsletters and 35mm slides can be found on the branch website.

Eventually I plan to update both the newsletter book and the history booklet to include the new information we have uncovered. An extra special thank you must be given to Geoff and Graham for letting us have this material. It is also good that we have been able to raise £208.50 for Parkinson's UK, which after Gift-Aid will amount to around £260.

When I started looking into the branch history I began to wish it was possible to go back in time to be at those early meetings. Now? Well it would still be a great idea – but I now wish even more that those early members could come forward in time to our meetings.



A Branch Outing sometime in the 1960's. This photo is also on the web-site with numbers to identify people. Austin and Rennie are shown along with Colin Partington, Frank and Barbara Otway-Smith and Keith Robinson



Austin's Slides:

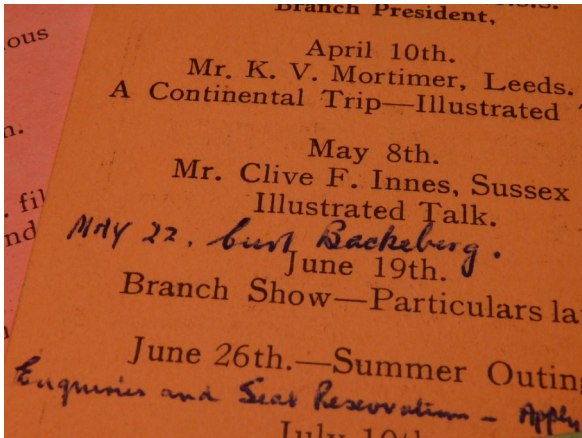
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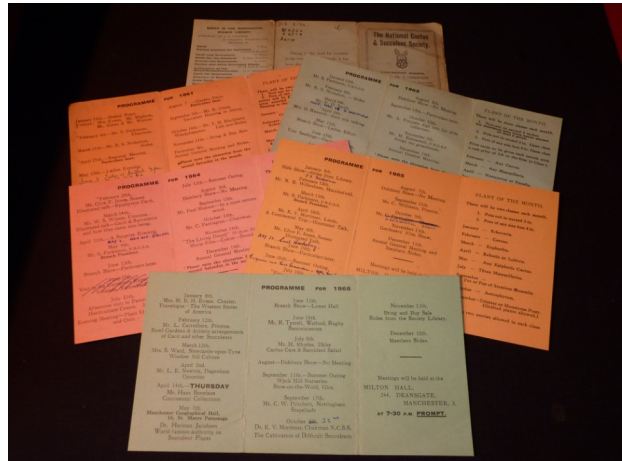
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An *Echinocereus sp.*



The 1960's Programme Cards. Close up shows visit of Curt Backeberg to Branch.



JUNE 6TH

BRANCH OUTING

Rob Stevenson's National Collection of Turbinicarpus

plus two nurseries

NORTH WEST SATURDAY CACTUS MART

OPEN FROM

10.30AM TO
2.30PM

MAY 2ND

loads of plants
plenty of food

All the usual attractions

Zone 19 Symposium

JUNE 20TH

Cost of the day including the buffet
dinner and tea/coffee is £15 payable
by cash or cheque made out to
BCSS Zone 19. Finish time is 5pm

SATURDAY

Doors open at 9am. First Talk: 10.15am

Small Andean Opuntias & Thelocactus - Graham Charles
Stapeliads in captivity and in the wild - Wiebe Bosma
Succulents from the extensive Horn Of Africa - Giuseppe Orlando

*Plant sales by Graham Charles,
Wiebe Bosma and Craig Barber*