

A LONG RUN-UP TO THE SHROPSHIRE FUNGUS GROUP

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Various loosely-related strands can be traced that in the fullness of time converged in the formation of the Shropshire Fungus Group.

From a certain perspective the first stirrings of a national fungus interest may be seen to have started hereabouts. In 1868 the birth of "the Fungus Foray" occurred in neighbouring Herefordshire when Dr. Bull of the Woolhope Club launched a special field-meeting of a '**Foray amongst the Funguses**'. This immediately took-off as an annual Hereford event attended by enthusiasts from far and wide that burgeoned into the foraying movement we rather take for granted today. Several Shropshire-based 'fungologists' were regular attenders at the Woolhope Club forays amongst which were the Rev. William Houghton, William Phillips, Rev. Edward J. Vize, and W.B. Leighton, and their names became renowned in the annals of British mycological history.

Other Shropshire fungus interest of Victorian times arose through the former Caradoc and Severn Valley Field Club and joint forays with the Woolhope Club at such Shropshire sites as Oakly Park and Whitcliffe.

In a detailed article researched by Tom Preece [Records from the Past](#), now available on the 'Resources' page of our SFG website, a concise vivid history is given of the evolution of the early Shropshire workers. Thereafter, although residential forays of the British Mycological Society (BMS) were held in Shropshire in 1917, 1932, and 1937 from which records survive, what has been called a 'dark age' of Shropshire fungus interest then set in until the 1960s.

Today it may seem surprising that the emergence of a distinct Fungus Group in nearly every UK county only began less than 30 years ago. In 1992, the BMS Council appointed Dr. Jack Marriott to set-up an national fungus groups network to assist UK amateur mycologists. It had been realised that scattered throughout the UK

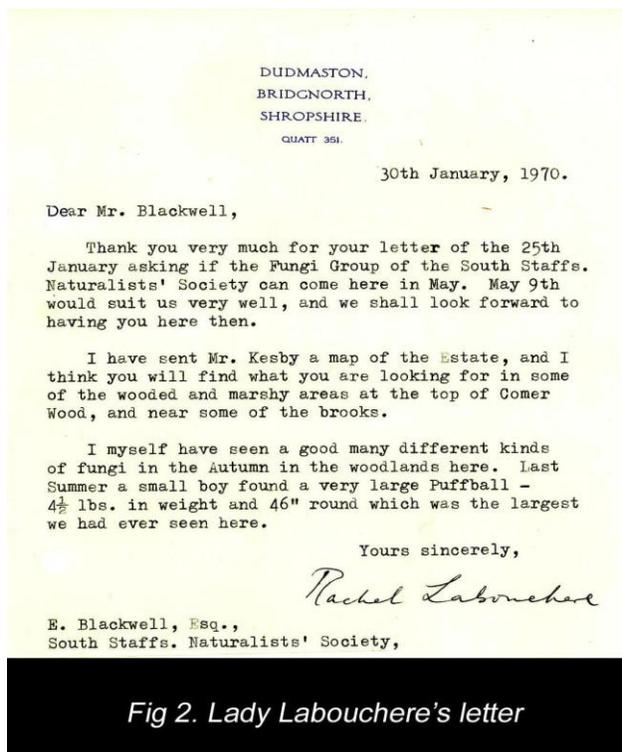


Fig. 1 Earls Hill, Pontesbury. 27 August 1972. (1) Ted Blackwell
(2) Malcolm Clark, (3) Professor Bruce Ing

various levels of useful fungus recording was largely being 'lost to science' through lack of national co-ordination. Furthermore, isolated workers often lacked the know-how to summon expert assistance (the internet was then far less developed), which a co-operative national network could begin to provide.

In 1989 Tom and Shirley Preece had returned to their native Shropshire after Tom's retirement. Soon afterwards Tom had written to me about the status of Shropshire mycology. He was keen to take part in Shropshire-based fungus activity and wondered about the possible compilation of a "Shropshire Fungus Flora". I had to break the sad news to him that to my knowledge there wasn't much active interest in fungi by the Shropshire-based wildlife organisations. However, on the plus side, I was able to report a lively interest in the fungi of Shropshire that had sprung-up in neighbouring Staffordshire and had been pursued for the past twenty or so years. In Wolverhampton the South Staffordshire Naturalists' Society (SSNS) was very active and included fungus recording among its various interests. The SSNS often spread its activities beyond its home base and was not averse to exploring neighbouring counties. It had held forays in Shropshire (Fig. 1) and sometimes had joined field meetings of Roy Mantle's Bridgnorth Naturalists' Society, and I recall on one occasion, even an evening Nature Quiz get-together at Worfield.

Also in Wolverhampton about twenty years earlier in the 1970s the Birmingham University Extra-mural Department had been running evening classes on fungi, and drawing support from SSNS membership. Some of us who later-on helped to swell the SFG membership, Roy Mantle, Bryan Lack and I, had participated in those classes.



About 1968, the SSNS had been invited by the owners of the Dudmaston Estate, near Bridgnorth, Sir George and Lady Rachel Labouchere, to carry-out a series of wild-life 'bio-blitz' surveys on their Estate. Lady Rachel had trained as a botanical artist and had created a significant collection of paintings and drawings of plants at Dudmaston Hall. These SSNS Dudmaston surveys had covered a wide range of wild-life such as birds, plants and trees, animals and snakes, insects and particularly butterflies, and not least, mushrooms and toadstools. I was at that time organising the SSNS's Fungus Section, and when the wider-ranging Dudmaston survey came to an end, I wrote to Lady Rachel to ask if the Fungus Section might continue visiting, to which she readily agreed

Fig 2. Lady Labouchere's letter

(Fig. 2). So Dudmaston forays became a more-or-less annual autumn event, even supplemented in some years by the addition of a Spring foray.

A little earlier in 1965, a major fungus project had been launched by the Birmingham Natural History Society in collaboration with Birmingham University's School of Botany to carry out an extensive survey of fungi in Warwickshire. I had been contacted along with several others about helping with this survey, and as it offered a unique opportunity to learn from experts, I had joined in the Warwickshire Survey foraying. It was fortunate that some of the Warwickshire activists often looked for a change of scene and were ready to foray beyond their Warwickshire territory, and were happy to try foraying in Shropshire. I was able to enlist the assistance of such experts as the Survey's Chairman, Malcolm Clark and several British Mycological Society luminaries such as Reg Evans, Stanley Porter, and Dr. (later, Professor) Bruce Ing at a number of SSNS and Dudmaston forays (Fig. 1). This greatly swelled the number of fungi recorded and for the lesser beings among the forayers a huge bonus of expert tuition and a steep learning curve.

Sir George and Lady Labouchere arranged for the Dudmaston Estate to be passed in due course to the care of the National Trust, which occurred in 1978. Happily, the SSNS was permitted to continue regular foraying there. By the time thoughts began to stir about a possible Shropshire Fungus Group, the accumulated Dudmaston and other Shropshire records not only provided a foundation on which to build but also the incentive to consolidate this history by the formation of a county-based Group.

The start of the Shropshire Fungus Group was formally discussed at a meeting at Roy's house on 6th December 1992. The founding members at that meeting were Roy and Annette Mantle, Dr. Tom and Shirley Preece, Dr Sylvia Kingsbury, John and Denise Bingham (English Nature) Dr. Jane Mee (Ludlow Biological Records Centre) and myself and my wife. This marked the start of SFG forays (Fig. 3).



Tom's early thoughts about a Fungus Flora were eventually refined to the less ambitious goal of a Shropshire Fungus Checklist. Roy took-on the considerable task of entering paper records into a computer database, and the first Shropshire Checklist was published as hard-copy in 1997.