



Biography of a Waspologist



[Top] Complete with school cap and tie, leaning over a freshly-excavated wasp nest, with a school chum 1955

[Above] Working with wasps during PhD studies in Bee Department at Rothamsted 1960

[Right] Still working with wasps, Canberra 2009

MY PERSONAL introduction to wasps from a science viewpoint was as a schoolboy in my mid-teens at the Grove Park Grammar School for Boys in Wrexham, North Wales. Physics teacher Joe Ashmore, who ran the Meteorological Station at school, found a wasp nest on the edge of the met station one year and began counting the numbers of sorties and returns by the foraging workers.

After tiring of the counting he invited me to take over the duties of wasp-counter leaving him to his met duties and trying to relate wasp activity with weather factors such as temperature, rainfall and the like.

It was an introduction not only to wasps but to the scientific method. While at school I did further studies on wasps while in VI form and wrote a thesis, *Wasps, their social life and natural peculiarities* which helped earn me a scholarship to Jesus College, Oxford (which I later declined).

While on a Field Studies Council field trip to Flatford Mill in 1957 I did some work on colour vision in social wasps during a course run by a young lecturer from Imperial College, Dr Dick Southwood. Dick later became Professor and then Vice Chancellor of Oxford University, and Entomologist to HM The Queen. He was honoured by the Palace and was officially known as Sir Richard Southwood. We remained friends throughout his life.

While at Flatford Mill, I was billeted in Willy Lot's cottage that features in Constable's painting 'The Haywain'.

After getting my Zoology degree at Queen Mary College, University of London (1956-59),

I studied for a PhD under the supervision of Dr Colin Butler, Head of bee research at Rothamsted Experimental Station, as well as interacting with the likes of John Free (Bumblebees), Bill Bailey (Bee diseases), RL (Roy) Taylor (mentor) and Fisher & Yates (Statistics Department).

My thesis title was *'A study of the biology of British vespine wasps with reference to the problems of caste differentiation'*. My years at Rothamsted stood me in good stead for writing the WASP book which was published in 1973.

After finishing my PhD, I joined the CSIRO Division of Entomology in 1963 when they set up a UK-based project for the biological control of the Sirex Woodwasp, a serious pest of conifers in Tasmania and Victoria.

So, my first professional job was with wasps, albeit a non-social wasp species. The Sirex project in Europe continued for 8 years and then a further 2 years in Tasmania.

One of the social wasp species I studied at Rothamsted, *Vespula germanica*, had become established in Tasmania in 1959, the year I graduated in London and was becoming very widespread in the island State by the time of my arrival in Hobart in 1971.

This wasp was called the European wasp for obvious reasons but had most likely come to Australia via New Zealand, not directly from Europe.

I left Tasmania and began working in Papua New Guinea in 1973, studying the Screw-worm fly, a serious pest of warm-blooded animals and a threat to Australia's livestock industries.

While in PNG I had the opportunity to study the primitive Stenogastrine wasps and also the local Hornet species, *Vespa affinis*. I also wrote popular articles on Paper wasps and Potter wasps for Air Niugini's in-flight magazine, 'Paradise'.

In 1985 I left PNG and came to work and live in Canberra where the European wasp had just become established with the first nests reported in 1984.

I embarked on studies of queen control of worker reproduction in the European wasp and now, more than 20 years later, I am still very much involved in this endeavor and hoping to find the answers to what chemicals the queen produces that sterilize her workers, in the not too distant future.

Through my company, XCS Consulting, I currently provide the European wasp awareness program for the ACT Government. ■

