



David Harrison - Taxonomist, Arabist, palaeontologist and a founder of the Harrison Institute who was also a medical practitioner

If there is such a thing as a 'quintessential gentleman naturalist' it was David Harrison. Born to a wealthy Kentish family, he was a medical doctor by profession but an explorer, Arabist, palaeontologist, and distinguished classical taxonomist by inclination. A world authority on the classification of mammals, recent and fossil, for 44 years he was also the Chairman of Trustees and principal benefactor of the Harrison Institute (formerly the Harrison Zoological Museum). This charitable foundation, established by the Harrison family, was dedicated to promoting a greater understanding of the world's biodiversity and particularly to training a new generation of young, enthusiastic and talented zoologists in the developing world. Based at the family home, Bowerwood House in Sevenoaks, at the time of his death, the Institute held in excess of 39,000 recent and fossil mammal specimens and 19000 bird specimens, collected on numerous field study trips in five continents.

Harrison's pioneering taxonomic research was conducted in Arabia. He had somewhat unusually listed his three geographical preferences for National Service as 'Middle East, Middle East, and Middle East', which was considered by many at the time to be a punishment station because of its inhospitable climate and harsh conditions. Harrison however was made of sterner stuff since he knew that the natural history of the region offered many opportunities for a keen zoologist. So in August, 1953, at the age of 26, he arrived as a newly qualified doctor in Habbaniya, Iraq to take up his post as 'Deputy medical physician to Middle East Command'.

Outside the British garrison, medical facilities were in short supply and Harrison's skills as a physician were in great demand, not just for the RAF but also for the wider community, as he travelled between various stations in Iraq and further afield in peninsular Arabia. It was a time of great change in the Gulf States and Harrison was fortunate to meet and treat the rulers of a number of the city states including Abu Dhabi and Sharjah. Oil wealth was just beginning to transform the lives of the Bedouin communities from a traditional, essentially nomadic existence to one of a more developed sedentary nature. Harrison, with his basic grasp of classical Arabic, was one of the few Europeans who as a doctor, was permitted access to the families of the local sheiks in order to treat their ailments. He included many of the more interesting and amusing stories of his early days in Arabia in his autobiographical travel book 'Footsteps in the Sand' (1959). He also recorded his travels on cine film.

Harrison used his time in Arabia to conduct numerous studies of the mammal fauna and published his first paper on his Arabian field work in 1955. Ninety papers followed based on meticulous

research and extensive field trips to Kurdistan, Oman, (South) Yemen, Syria, Jordan, and Israel. The results were summarized and published between 1964 and 1972 in a three volume monograph entitled '*The Mammals of Arabia*'. For this research, he was awarded a PhD by the University of Cambridge. Subsequently it was updated and published as a single volume in 1991. Despite the passage of time, this still remains the authoritative text on the subject.

David Lakin Harrison was born in 1926 in Sevenoaks, Kent. He was the second son of Dr James Harrison, a keen ornithologist and a medical practitioner who, as a Surgeon Lieutenant in the Royal Navy, was awarded the DSC for his bravery in saving the life of a fellow seaman during the sinking of his ship in the Aegean. David's mother was Rita Sorley whose brother Air Vice Marshall Ralph Sorley was responsible for putting the eight guns in the Spitfire and thereby contributed greatly to their success in the Battle of Britain. Although all of David's immediate family was medics, he was directly descended from Charles Harrison who co-founded the J & C Harrison Shipping Line. Ironically it fell to David and his brother Jeffery, also a medical doctor, to sell the remains of the Line to a Taiwanese company in the mid-1970s.

His first school, Doon House at Westgate, East Kent, was evacuated at the beginning of the Second World War to Falmouth in Cornwall and thence to Peterchurch in Herefordshire. Subsequently in 1940 he attended Malvern College, Worcestershire. When the College was requisitioned by the Government, he was evacuated to Harrow and was almost immediately bombed.

In 1946, Harrison went up to Clare College, Cambridge to read medicine and combined this with an ongoing interest in the bats of the area. David Attenborough was a fellow Clare student and they shared the occasional bat collecting trip to the near-by Fens. In 1958, after completing his training at St Thomas's and National Service, Harrison joined the family medical practice. Together with his father and brother, he worked as a general practitioner in Sevenoaks for over 30 years, where he performed minor surgery in the local hospital. Later, he took great pride in showing visitors to the family house the instruments he used for the purpose. However, despite his dedication to his patients, it is for his extensive zoological researches that David made his mark for which in 1990 he was awarded the Stamford Raffles prize by the Zoological Society of London and previously the Bloomer Award by The Linnean Society. He described seven extant mammal species new to science including bats from the Comoro Islands, Madagascar, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Israel, and Oman and gerbils from the deserts of Tunisia and Iraq. Various animals were named in his honour, including a species of tube-nosed bat from Cambodia, *Murina harrisoni* and a species of parasitoid wasp, *Encarsia harrisoni*, from Sevenoaks. In later life, when overseas travel became

more difficult for him, he described new fossil mammals from the Eocene Period based on extensive field work in southern England. These included two new genera and three new species. In all, he published 224 papers and 2 monographs on various aspects of mammal taxonomy and ecology.

Although he never married, Harrison was the epitome of the 'family man' and was never happier than when surrounded by young and old, especially those that shared his passion for the study of wildlife, living and fossil. The Harrison Institute became known worldwide within the taxonomic community for its inclusiveness, friendliness and sense of old world values and David, the archetypal, slightly eccentric gentleman, with his keen mind but retiring manner, personified everything that was good in the academic world of research.

In 1985, shortly before retiring from general practice, Harrison developed a new interest in the fossils faunas of Britain and continental Europe. His first in-depth study was of the mammals of a Late Pleistocene site in Kent. Subsequently, he researched other earlier Pleistocene sites on the north Norfolk coastline before pushing his researches back in time at two Late Eocene sites, in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. Most recently he had been working on an Early Eocene site in Suffolk, where the fossil mammals originated some 55 million years before present.

Harrison supervised, encouraged and supported numerous students from the UK and abroad. As the principal benefactor of the Harrison Institute, he promoted the only private institution that is actively training students in practical mammal taxonomy. He was a keen and talented fisherman, who when not working as a medical doctor, conducting zoological studies or entertaining or being entertained by his many friends, could be found fishing for trout in Kent or for salmon in Scotland. Through his generosity of time, care, and interest, he helped all who knew him. He was one of the last of the gentleman naturalists.

David Harrison, taxonomist and physician, was born on 1st October 1926. He died peacefully in his sleep on 19 March, 2015 at the age of 88.

Paul Bates, 25 March, 2015. (Obituary submitted to The Daily Telegraph)