

## C. PHILLIP PALMER (1927–2016)

Charles Phillip Palmer, known to all his friends as Phil, was a much-loved member of the Department of Palaeontology at the Natural History Museum whose passing late 2016 will be mourned by all those who had the very good fortune to work with him.

Born in London in 1927, he did his National Service in the British Army (First Battalion, Cheshire Regiment) from 1945–1948. He mostly served abroad in various hot spots across the Near East, including Suez, Transjordan, and the British Mandate of Palestine.

At one point shot at by an Arab guerrilla, the history of the Near East, and in particular the history of modern Israel, forever held his interest. We all have opinions, but Phil was never satisfied to simply accept what he'd heard or seen at face value — when his curiosity was aroused, he had to see everything he could lay his hands on, talk with all those who passed through his world, and write (often at great length) analyses of his own, which he'd often return to, decades after he'd first drafted them.

After demobilisation Phil took on a variety of jobs in factories and on the railways, while finishing his O-level education by correspondence course. An appreciation for skilled craftsmanship alongside a deep belief in the value of self-education would remain hallmarks of Phil's life.

The key turning point was in 1958, when he joined the Natural History Museum, then still known as the British Museum (Natural History). Having spent the past few years working in factory workshops making things, the Museum authorities decided to send Phil into theirs, something he didn't want to do! Having made a bit of a fuss, he ended up in the Fossil Mollusca section, and as Phil himself would put it years later, 'a better decision could not have been made'.

Phil always bristled at the social divide between the Museum's Oxbridge-educated scientists and the rather more working class technical support staff such as curators and preparators. Phil himself noted that there was often an age divide here, too, between the older scientists who had mostly been appointed before the War, and the younger technical staff who had joined the Museum after demobilisation. These young men felt that geology was to be found out in the field, not in the



library, and Phil noted, with no small degree of pride, that there was consternation among the 'officer ranks' when the junior grades were not only getting their curatorial work done, but also running field trips and writing up their reports for the scientific literature.

Of course this excellent state of affairs couldn't be allowed to continue indefinitely, and management made it very clear to the curators that while field reports for society newsletters and amateur geology magazines was fine, they were absolutely forbidden to write palaeontological papers or taxonomic monographs for the major journals!

In time this ban was loosened a bit, and then eventually lifted completely, and regardless of Museum tradition Phil eventually cranked out a publication list that most researchers would envy. With something over ninety credits to his name, Phil's papers include ones on stratigraphy, taxonomy and functional morphology. It should be remembered that most of these articles and papers were written alongside his curatorial workload — it was not until his retirement that he had the freedom to simply spend the day writing that the Museum's scientist class enjoyed from day one!

Even more remarkable was the way Phil managed to continue his education alongside his job and his family. A-levels were followed by a philosophy degree, and this was an interest that he held onto for the rest of his life. A conversation with Phil might well start off with Jurassic bivalves but could very easily end up with the criticism of Popper or an application of

Aristotelian epistemology to the thornier problems in cephalopod evolution!

Nothing Phil ever did was half-baked. If it was worth doing at all, he did it well, even if purely for his own private enjoyment. As a keen cyclist, he was always proud of having been stopped by the police for exceeding the 30 mph speed limit in a built-up area. His photography skills were exceptional, both behind the camera and in the dark room. Phil's geological analysis of Tolkien's Middle-Earth is just one example of the way he thought deeply and carefully about everything he read. While enjoying *The Lord of the Rings* as fiction, Phil appreciated the subtle geographical hints the author had scattered about the book, from the types of wildflowers through to the descriptions of the mud beneath the characters' feet, he created an extraordinary and utterly convincing example of what today would be called fan fiction.

I did not meet Phil until well after his retirement in 1987, but it should be noted that he remained a Palaeontology Department fixture for most of the next twenty years. Coming into the Museum three or four days a week, Phil would park himself in a corner of the Department and quietly get on with his research and those curatorial jobs he still felt obliged to finish off — a never-ending task perhaps, as he'd wryly observe that just when he had sorted out one tray of specimens some clumsy scientist would come along and jumble them all up again!

When we met in 1994, I was hoping to be one of those scientists, but never think for a moment that Phil was prejudiced towards those he'd never met. Strong opinions he had of some people, yes, but those were generally well earned — if you came to the man with an open mind and a willingness to learn, there were few more gentlemanly scholars at the Museum then or now.

Finding out that we shared a love for marine biology, for Aristotle, and for the finer aspects

of Victorian engineering, it wasn't long before we ended up working together on what eventually became the Natural History Museum's *Ammonites* book (part of their *Living Past* series and published in the US under the Smithsonian banner).

While our paths drifted apart not long afterwards, my warm memories of the man remain strong. With his mischievous eyes and carefully trimmed moustache, it would be easy to overlook Phil as simply a good chap and pleasant company. But there was more to Phil than that. An autodidact in the best possible way, this was a man who loved learning for its own sake. As a curator he believed strongly that the specimens he collected and organised would ultimately speak more directly to future generations than any number of brief and superficial papers. Finally, as a human being he cared about all those trying to better themselves through hard work and education, and in his own way raged against the English class system.

Whatever his thoughts at the time when he joined it, Phil was lucky in some ways to be part of a Museum that was then still at the peak of its importance as a scientific institution, and the sort of work Phil enjoyed — stratigraphy and primary taxonomy — were still recognised as being valuable activities. Even if those things are perhaps now seen as old-fashioned, his legacy lives on in those he inspired and, most crucially, in those fine collections of fossils he helped to collect and organise.

Charles Philip Palmer, 23/03/1927–06/09/2016; survived by his daughter, Liz, and his granddaughter, Amy. Liz would be happy to communicate with any of Phil's former friends or colleagues via her email at [caroline@palaceofvariety.co.uk](mailto:caroline@palaceofvariety.co.uk).

Neale Monks