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## Borne in the wagon of a travelling show: the BMS Roadshow rides on

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### ABSTRACT

The British Mycological Society (BMS) has created a Roadshow exhibition of over 20 square metres of mobile display boards, educational models, posters, booklets, leaflets, and a staff of enthusiastic volunteers that travels around the UK. The aim is to make the general public aware of the science of fungal biology in food, pharmaceuticals, environment – and every-day life. In the past four years or so, we've contributed events to National Science Week, several Excellence in Cities programmes, and Science Fairs and Festivals. The backbone of the Roadshow calendar, though, is the Royal Horticultural Society's Flower Show programme. The BMS has contributed displays to the RHS Chelsea Flower Show for several years. Now the BMS Roadshow goes to RHS shows around the country, appearing at the Tatton Park Flower Show in July, the Malvern Spring Gardening Show in May, and Malvern Autumn Garden and Country Show towards the end of September. Our displays always attract enormous public interest. In July 2004 (the first time it was submitted for judging) the BMS Roadshow was awarded a Silver-Gilt Lindley Medal at the RHS Tatton Park Flower Show, and success has continued with a Gold Medal at the Malvern Autumn Garden and Country Show in 2004, a Silver-Gilt at the Malvern Spring Gardening Show 2005, Gold at both Tatton Park 2005 and the Malvern Autumn Show 2005, and Silver at the Chelsea Flower Show 2006. The total "through the turnstile" audience of all these shows totals something like one million people and even if only a small fraction of that total stops at our display, then we are communicating awareness of fungal biology to a crowd that would fill a Premiership football stadium! That's an audience that few others can claim.

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## 1. Introduction

During the past four years the British Mycological Society has been reacting to the decline in teaching of its science (and, incidentally, the absence of any mention of fungi in the UK National Curriculum for schools) by engaging with the public directly to advance awareness of the role of fungi in everyday life. So the BMS Roadshow has been developed as a mobile display that travels around the country to promote mycology to

the general public. Fungus models and live fungi (as the season permits) attract the public to the display. Once snared by this attraction the visitor is shown the whole range of fungal science, supermarket biotechnology, garden biodiversity, impact on health, and all the rest. The content of the Roadshow addresses the entire span of human existence, from breakfast to supper; from food to pharmaceutical; from habitat to household. By showing how much we depend on fungi, the BMS Roadshow makes the links between science,

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its practical application and its relevance to daily life. By showing that the people who know about these things – the “mycologists” – are friendly, approachable, interesting people, the Roadshow presents established knowledge in an accessible way to a general audience and makes that audience feel included in the scientific understanding, rather than marginalised from it.

Although the general message “science is interesting” certainly underlies what we have to say, the specific reason we have the Roadshow is to promote recognition of the value of fungi and raise awareness of them amongst the general public. Biology teaching in UK schools does insufficient to reflect the important role of fungi in the environment or the way in which we harness their products and biotechnology; and this has been true for more than a generation. Fungi are ignored by the UK National Curriculum, so it falls to UK mycologists to redress the balance by communicating directly to young people, their families and the public in general.

## 2. What is the Roadshow?

The full-size display that’s taken to the main venues is a set of three 2.5 metre wide by 2 metre high, royal blue ‘pop-up’ exhibition stands onto which posters and other information can be fixed using Velcro tape (Fig. 1). The BMS Roadshow depends heavily on display posters and the ‘pop-up’ display modules allow the flexibility to adapt the display according to how much, or little, space we have at a venue. We also

have a good collection of life-like resin models of fungi (Fig. 2), so we can present a ‘biodiversity’ theme at any time of year, together with a giant mushroom, which is sectioned up to show, much larger than life, the different morphological features used to identify mushrooms. These models were made by a German company (Somso Modelle - the models are illustrated on their website at [www.somso.de](http://www.somso.de)), and are commonly used in Europe for teaching (and advertising) the pharmacists who are responsible for identifying edible fungi. The models are startlingly realistic, but robust and replaceable.

We put the models on the central table, along with two 19-inch video screens to tempt people into the display area. Two further tables, one on each side at the front of the pitch, are used for literature and displays of fresh material and a third 19-inch video screen. The digital video displays provide attractive moving images by showing a mixture of educational videos and PowerPoint presentations. The Roadshow philosophy is to spark people’s interest - in the belief that if we raise their interest level, they’ll want to learn more about fungi for themselves. To encourage this, the display is open, welcoming and friendly. We want to share our science, so we personalise it, and make it relevant to our visitors.

Although the models (Fig. 2) allow us to exhibit fungal biodiversity at any time of year, we like to include displays of live fungi when we can. The shows we attend are not all at the best time of year for this, but there’s nothing wrong with cultivated mushrooms. In 2005, Ann Miller, who produces kits for growing exotic mushrooms, drove down from Scotland with a selection of logs she assembled into a wonderful display of

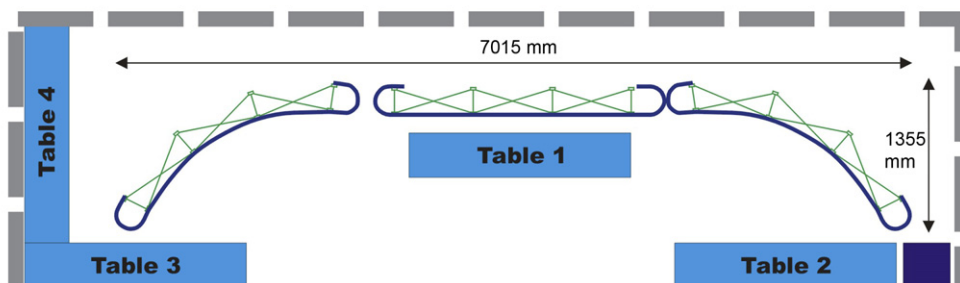


Fig. 1 – The British Mycological Society’s Roadshow. The photograph at top shows the complete Roadshow as it appeared at the RHS Tatton Park Flower Show in July 2005. A diagrammatic plan of the complete Roadshow display with dimensions is shown at bottom.





**Fig. 2 – The BMS Roadshow models and the main message for 2005 and 2006 – ‘Thank Fungus for That!’**



**Fig. 4 – Mushrooms from Tesco - with recipe leaflets from the Mushroom Bureau.**

growing shiitake (*Lentinula edodes*) (Fig. 3) alongside a basket of the different mushrooms available at our local supermarket (Fig. 4). Together, these generated lots of interest from the crowds. For the Chelsea Flower Show in 2006 the Livesey Brothers Mushroom Farm (see [www.themushroombasket.com](http://www.themushroombasket.com)) delivered regular fresh supplies of an impressive collection of exotic mushrooms for us to collect from New Covent Garden market (Figs 5 & 6).

Add to the posters, models and live fungi a large range of leaflets for people to take away (as well as field guides, cards,

display posters and other items for sale) and a very wide variety of items in the Roadshow contributes to a lively and vibrant display (illustrated in Fig. 7). It all reveals our general dependence on fungi.

Communication is paramount, of course, so even more important than a wide collection of posters, leaflets, and video is a team of display staff, who work their hearts out explaining, chatting, advising, and generally sharing their own enthusiasm for fungi and become the greatest asset on the Roadshow by putting the fun into fungi. The material displayed on the Roadshow begins the conversation, but there is such a wide range of material (covering matters from food to health, from the environment to the home) that the conversation can be developed in many different directions. It’s important, too, that we have managed to keep a balance of academic and field mycologists by involving members of Local Fungus Groups. This is important because it makes it clear to the general public that our science is not exclusive. By having “amateurs” in the display team we are saying to the public “you



**Fig. 3 – Shiitake logs provided by Ann Miller for the Tatton Park 2005 display.**



**Fig. 5 – Liz Moore making some final adjustments to the Roadshow display at the Chelsea Flower Show 2006.**





**Fig. 6 – Just a few of the exotic mushrooms provided by Livesey Brothers for the Chelsea Flower Show 2006.**

don't have to be a University academic to understand this, you could learn about this science, too." In addition, development of support materials involves undergraduates doing projects in association with Manchester schools and museums – so the effort serves as a vehicle to bring young university students into the effort to improve public understanding of fungal science.



**Fig. 7 – Display literature. Top: Leaflets, booklets and books. Bottom: A few more leaflets alongside the ever-popular 'Supermarket Challenge'.**

### 3. The yearly programme of events

BMS Roadshow programme starts in the first week of January with the ASE Annual Conference, which was in Leeds in 2005, Reading in 2006 and will be in Birmingham in 2007; exotic locations for early January! This is the Association for Science Education, which describes itself as the professional body for those involved in science education at all levels from pre-school to higher education. A lot of interest in using fungi in teaching can be generated at ASE Conferences and we are beginning to assemble a useful set of resources for teachers to use (Fig. 8). Each display we mount is better than the last, and we do a better job of promoting mycology at each successive exhibition so this event will stay in our programme.

The first RHS show on our programme has usually been the Malvern Three Counties Spring Gardening Show across the weekend at the end of the second week in May. It's hard work finding fresh material so early in the year, so the Society owes its special thanks to Local Fungus Groups for collecting the wild fungi that make the display eye-catching and prize-worthy – a Silver-Gilt Lindley Medal in 2005.

In 2006 the Roadshow displayed at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show instead of Malvern, and was awarded a Silver Medal by the Chelsea judges. The display also attracted the attention of Prince Philip and Princess Anne, during the Royal visit. Both spent some time on the stand discussing the wild fungi that can be found on the Royal estates. These would evidently be good foray venues!



**Fig. 8 – The BMS Roadshow at ASE 2005: Leeds in January. Showing the BMS literature and models displayed in a marquee during a raging storm!**



The RHS Tatton Park Flower Show in Cheshire is held across the third week in July. July 2005 was the third time the BMS Roadshow had appeared at this show. Bigger, brighter and with even more quality information now available, we succeeded in winning a Gold Medal in 2005.

After the summer comes the **Malvern Three Counties Autumn Garden and Country Show** around the last weekend in September. Being timetabled in autumn, our helpers (particularly Sheila and George Spence, Di and Tim Bateman and Dave Shorten) have usually provided a superb collection of wild fungi that have contributed greatly to the gold medal tally of this display (Fig. 9). But don't underestimate supermarket fungi; it's a continuing surprise to find that so few members of the general public appreciate the wide range of fungi (fresh and dried) that are available in most supermarkets. This means that a basket of supermarket fungi can be just as fascinating to the visitor as a basket of wild specimens.

Displays at RHS Shows always attract enormous public interest. More than 150,000 people visit the two Malvern Shows, and 250,000 to 300,000 visit the Chelsea and Tatton Park shows, so even if only a small fraction of the total stop at our display, in the course of a year we are dealing with an audience that would fill a Premiership football stadium - and we are communicating fungal biology! That's an audience worth going out to meet.

There's a smaller audience for the **Mid-Yorkshire Fungus Group's Mushroom Day** at the RHS Harlow Carr Garden (a Sunday near October 10) but it's going from strength to strength (Fig. 10). Now in its third year, there has been a noticeable increase in attendance, and in level of interest among the visitors. Indeed, people seem to come for repeat visits, bringing specimens for identification and treating the foray and exhibition organisers as old friends. Its success is a tribute to the organisers and results from the wide range of activities offered to the public. This is a good model for other Local Fungus Groups to follow. MYFG members lead fungal forays around the garden, and offer an advice and identification service. Such is the level of interest that both of these activities are always over-subscribed. There is a display of freshly collected specimens, which is started off by material collected previously by MYFG members, but is soon greatly expanded as the forays around Harlow Carr get under way and as visitors bring in specimens for identification. Other displays include cooking, "grow your own" edible fungi, photography, and, of course the BMS Roadshow's educational displays. A range of activities are arranged for



**Fig. 9 – Roadshow display at the Malvern Autumn Show, 2005.**



**Fig. 10 – BMS Roadshow adapted and adjusted for the MYFG Mushroom Day at Harlow Carr Garden Study Centre, October 2005. Bottom: visitor activity and interest around the display of foray finds in the Harlow Carr Garden Study Centre.**

children during the day, and both the RHS shop and the Gardens Restaurant put "Mushroom Day-themed" products on sale. We had 1157 visitors in 2005 (a 36% increase over 2004). Interestingly, RHS increased their membership on the day by 20, so everybody's satisfied and this year's date (October 8, 2006) is firmly in the diary!

The **Herefordshire Festival of Fungi** (October 22–30, 2005) was a unique event in 2005 that deserves a full report in its own right. The BMS Roadshow contribution was to appear at the opening exhibition (at Bodenham Parish Hall on October 22) and at the closing exhibition at Gwynne Studios, Left Bank Village in Hereford on October 29 & 30. These two events attracted a large number of interested visitors and were a remarkable tribute to the Festival organisers, George and Sheila Spence.

#### 4. Evaluation

As you can see from the above the BMS Roadshow travels around the country and visits events large and small. Any

sort of display like this must be evaluated. Roadshow displays are open to the general public so we engage with our audience face-to-face and get instant response. We can evaluate audience satisfaction on the basis of their reaction to what we have to offer and regular complimentary feedback from visitors is very encouraging. However, objective evaluation is done by the Science and Education Judging Panel of the Royal Horticultural Society. The RHS shows remain the backbone of our program and we enter our Roadshow displays for judging at each RHS Show in which we participate. RHS medals are not awarded for competition between exhibitors, rather they are awarded for competition against an objective set of criteria for excellence within the range of the medal being judged. Our displays fall within the range of the RHS Lindley Medals -awarded for "...excellence of exhibits of special scientific or educational interest". Our RHS Medal award record is Tatton Park 2004, Silver-Gilt; Malvern Autumn 2004, Gold; Malvern Spring 2005, Silver Gilt; Tatton Park 2005, Gold; Malvern Autumn 2005, Gold. That's THREE Gold and TWO Silver-Gilt Lindley Medals between July 2004 and September 2005, followed by the Silver at Chelsea 2006. Not a bad tally.

The fact that we are regularly awarded RHS Medals suggests that in the eyes of educational and exhibition professionals alike, the British Mycological Society is at the forefront in communicating science to the public. Indeed, at a recent show our display was being used as an exemplar by the RHS judges as they advised other exhibitors awarded Silver and Silver-Gilt medals to see how we did it to improve their displays for the future!

## 5. Face to the future

The Society plans to continue this programme of Roadshow activities in the future. We need help with all this. It's reassuring that people who have helped previously are so willing, even eager, to help again. It's especially pleasing to record the help we have received at these Roadshows from members of the Cotswold FG, Essex FG, Herefordshire FG, Mid-Yorkshire FG, North West FG, Staffordshire FG and Worcestershire Fungus Group (Table 1). Academic mycologists have so far proved to be rather thin on the ground when it comes to helping with the Roadshow, so special thanks to Lynne Boddy, David

**Table 1 – The Roadshow Helpers Roll of Honour 2005/2006**

Sincere thanks to our 'warm and welcoming' helpers who gave their free time or took leave from work to work even harder on the BMS Roadshow display stand for one, two and even three days:

Diana and Tim Bateman  
Lynne Boddy  
Tony Boniface  
Denise Carter  
Rita Cook  
Rita and Paul Hamlyn  
David Hawksworth  
Roger Hewitt  
Mary Hunt  
Dot and Peter Knowles  
Camilla Lovatt  
Elizabeth and David Moore  
Duncan Needham  
Irene Ridge  
Carey and Thresa Saunders  
Geoff Robson  
Dave Shorten  
Sheila and George Spence  
Peter Spencer-Phillips  
Neville Walters  
Margaret and Tony Whalley

Hawksworth, Geoff Robson, Peter Spencer-Phillips, and Margaret and Tony Whalley. The phrase "public engagement in science" is bandied about in academic scientific circles and most scientists seem to subscribe to the view that it's in their own interests to explain their science, to increase public awareness, and, indeed, to increase public involvement. Sadly, our experience has been that although the majority of academics might agree that promoting public engagement in science is a "good thing" in theory, few actually do anything in practice. Maybe it's time for a change?

We hope the number of people volunteering to do a shift on the stand will continue to increase; how about YOU? If you WOULD like to get involved in any aspect of the BMS Roadshow activity then please contact us at the postal address shown at the top of this article or by e-mail to [david.moore@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:david.moore@manchester.ac.uk). Your help would be very welcome, and you will certainly enjoy the experience.