

## Tony Edison Phelps (1941 - 2021)

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## **Editorial**

As many of you will already know, sadly Dr Tony Phelps passed away in November 2021. The first half of the Herptile is a piece dedicated to him and his life's work, as well as the front cover of this edition. Tony is a sadly missed founding members of the IHS.

I am **URGENTLY** needing articles for this years Herptiles. See deadlines below;

June Edition - Deadline: End of April

September Edition - Deadline: End of July

December Edition - Deadline: End of October

Please submit to [editor@ihs-web.org.uk](mailto:editor@ihs-web.org.uk) and attach clear photos separately. Don't forget these can be any length and on any reptile or amphibian related subject. You'll receive a FREE membership for the following year if published.

**Laura-Ashley Huckerby**  
**IHS Editor**

## **Tony Edison Phelps (1941 - 2021)**

- Mark O'Shea, Tell Hicks, Steven Spawls, Wolfgang Wüster and Johannes Els

*"It is also important to encourage young herpetologists, be they professional or amateur. I have never been empirical about my work; there is no point of gaining experience if you do not pass it on to the herpetologists of tomorrow."*

Tony Phelps, Old World Vipers, 2010.

Tony Edison Phelps was born on 28 June 1941, in Bedford, England. His birth mother was Brenda Burns, but he was adopted by Daniel Charles and Margaret Evelyn Phelps. Tony grew up in London and mid-Wales, and had one sister who passed away in 2016.

Tony's fascination with reptiles, especially snakes, goes back to his earliest years, to the time when as an eight-year-old he observed two male adders (*Vipera berus*) in combat in the UK. In this respect Tony's initiation into herpetology mirrors that of many British herpetologists, Mark O'Shea (MOS) included.

MOS: And another similarity was that Tony also suffered an adder bite. It is known that during the entire 20th Century only twelve persons died of adder bite in the UK, the last being in 1975 (Reid 1975), but Reid also includes the account of a boy who died at Poole Hospital in 1957, as a result of an allergic reaction to the Pasteur Institute antivenom. Tony told me that the boy was him, and that he was not dead, as was fairly obvious at the time. But could this have been one of Tony's stories because Reid reports that the boy was thirteen and Tony would have been about sixteen in 1957. We will never know.

### Military career

After school Tony joined the Welsh Guards and trained at the Pirbright Barracks in Surrey, southern England. He served in Kenya at the end of the Mau Mau Uprising (1952–1960) and completed a tour in Yemen.

Steven Spawls (SS): Whilst in Kenya in those early years (1962–1964) Tony and his fellow soldiers rescued the African herpetologist James (Jimmy) Ashe (1925–2004) from his car which had been swept away in a flash flood (Spawls 2004).

At that time James Ashe lived on the Athi River where he maintained a large collection of snakes at his home, while Tony and his comrades were based on the Athi Plains. Clearly Tony and James Ashe became friends because some time in 1963 they had a discussion about the right and wrong ways to handle venomous snakes. James challenged Tony to pick up a puff adder (*Bitis arietans*), Tony got bitten, and that settled the argument.

## Life in Kenya

SS: In 1964 James Ashe would take over the running of the Nairobi Snake Park following the sudden death of curator Cecil Webb, and sometime later Tony and his fellow British soldiers almost arrested their friend when they were sent to investigate poacher gunfire at night and found James with a rifle and flashlight, but he had a licence to shoot antelope to feed the Snake Park's pythons.

## Back in the UK

Tell Hicks (TH): I first met Tony in around 1965/66, when I was about 14 years old (Tony was ten years older and married) on an area of heathland in Berkshire. Unbeknownst to each other we had been studying reptiles in the area but had never met. I was sketching a female adder when Tony arrived on the scene with a pet mongoose on a lead. We introduced ourselves and became close friends thereafter. Tony became a great friend and mentor and a huge influence on my life and career. We worked together on the conservation and legal protection of our most endangered British species, this included relocating reptiles from areas where habitat had been lost due to overdevelopment and fires. It was on one of these occasions I was bitten by an extremely large female adder. Tony convinced me that it would be an interesting experiment not to seek medical treatment. I spent an incredibly painful night, suffering the effects of the venom while Tony monitored my temperature and pulse. I blacked out and woke next day with a painful swollen arm, I think Tony had fallen asleep. In 1969 we formed the International Herpetological Society (IHS) in collaboration with the late John Foden (1948–2000) and David Turnbull.

David Turnbull remembers that he first met Tony in 1967, when he (Tony) responded to an advertisement in the *Exchange and Mart*, a weekly publication “selling everything from tractors to turtles”, effectively the eBay of his day. David was Curator of Drayton Manor Park Zoo and he had a surplus Indian python (*Python molurus*) and Tony, who was living in Slough, purchased it. Shipped by British Rail the python should have gone directly from Tamworth to Slough, but instead it went the scenic route, via Birmingham, Bristol and London, but nevertheless arrived safely. Tony and David became friends and they decided to start importing reptiles from Kenya.

David, Tony, John and Tell used to meet to discuss reptiles and at one of their gatherings they decided to form a group to bring other British reptile enthusiasts together. They called it the International Herpetological Society and placed a membership advertisement in the *Exchange and Mart*. Tony proposed James Ashe as the first President, David got permission to hold the meetings at Drayton Manor, and Tell designed the stylishly distinctive black viper on yellow background that remains the society logo today, over half a century later.



*The founders of the International Herpetological Society in 1969 at Drayton Manor Park and Zoo (L-R Tony Phelps, the late John Foden, Tell Hicks and Dave Turnbull). Press photo.*

By 1971 Tony was living in Bedford and working as a Green Line bus driver whilst he finished his research on adders and grass snakes, assisted by Steven Gorzula and Robert Ashe (James' son) who he taught how to handle snakes (Steven Gorzula pers. comm.).

TH: After my travels through Asia and Australia I returned to the UK and settled in Dorset with my wife Eileen. Shortly after, Tony came down to Dorset to live with us and work on conservation projects. Eileen remembers that when they were living in Swanage, Tony was driving the buses and got Tell an evening job cleaning them by telling everyone that Tell was his brother. His clock card had Tell Phelps on it. Eileen and I moved back to Windsor shortly after and with work and family commitments we gradually lost touch, being updated throughout the years on Tony's exploits by mutual friends. In the early 1970s Tony spent a couple of years working at Chessington Zoo as senior keeper under curator Eddie Orbell (Bob Wingate pers.comm).



*Tony scale-clipping a grass snake (Natrix helvetica), assisted by Robert Ashe (son of James Ashe) in 1971. Photo: Steven Gorzula*

## Purbeck Reptile Field Course, Dorset

During 1972 Tony started a mark-and-recapture study on smooth snakes in Dorset together with Ian Spellerberg, who then was a lecturer at Southampton University. For a few years Tony was based at the Furzebrook Research Station while collecting data on smooth snakes. In 1974 Tony expanded his field studies to include the adder and grass snake and it's around this time he established the Reptile Institute GB.

MOS: I first got to know Tony when he ran his very popular British reptile field courses on the Isle of Purbeck, Dorset in the late 1970s. Tony would troop everyone down to the Corfe railway line, him leading the way in a safari shirt with a Reptile Institute GB patch on the left breast (I still have one of those patches). "Just beyond those sleepers" Tony would say "is a very pale male adder and two females" and sure enough, there they were. It was almost as if he had been out seeding the area with snakes earlier in the morning, but in reality, Tony just knew his adders and he knew where any given individual was likely to be found. When a few years later I breathlessly reported seeing a particularly stunning male adder he was able to tell me exactly where I had seen it.

MOS: After attending these courses, a trip to Dorset, in the company of long-time IHS members Roger Butler and Don Reid was an annual pilgrimage, Roger and I coming down from the Midlands to help Don get the reptile house at the Cotswold Wildlife Park ready to open, before he too jumped into the car and we three headed south to meet up with Tony. It was on one of these trips that we found all six native mainland British reptiles in a single morning: over 100 each slow worms (*Anguis fragilis*) and viviparous lizards (*Zootoca vivipara*), 18 sand lizards (*Lacerta agilis*), two grass snakes (*Natrix helvetica*), three smooth snakes (*Coronella austriaca*) and 36 adders. We adjourned to the pub for celebratory Cornish pasties and a pint.



*Tony examining a adder (Vipera berus) on the first Purbeck Reptile Field Course in 1978. Photo: Mark O'Shea*



*Tony milking a puff adder (Bitis arietans) at Poole Serpentarium in the early 1980s. Photo: Phillip T. Smith*

## Poole Serpentarium

MOS: Tony then established the Poole Serpentarium inside the existing Poole Aquarium in a tall building on the attractive dock frontage at Poole, on the south coast of England. In a very short time Poole Serpentarium gained a reputation for the largest collection of venomous snakes on view to the public in the UK, and I would travel down on my motorbike to help out, learn how to handle venomous snakes and photograph reptiles.

I will never forget the huge Ottoman vipers (*Montivipera xanthina*), the first ones I had seen, they looked like British adders on body-building steroids. Tony would often leave me photographing snakes or decorating a cage while he was upstairs in the lecture room entertaining and educating the public. When I had some free moments, I would go up and listen to his lectures from the back of the crowded room. When it came to questions he would take them all in his stride including the one “Have you ever seen a king cobra eating a rattlesnake?” to which he answered “Yes” because at that very moment his large king was off-show swallowing a dead rattlesnake.

Around this time Tony began wearing a small gilt snake pin on his lapel and I asked about its significance, he did not strike me as a jewellery sort of guy. He told me it was the badge of the “Hundred-Pace Snake Club”\*, a select group of international herpetologists who had survived the bite of a highly venomous species. He declined to tell which species had earned him membership of this exclusive club, or whether the club really existed, but it left me disappointed not to receive my own pin following a serious canebrake rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*) bite in 1993. Looking back, I rather think Tony was pulling my leg, that was the style, he could be very poker-faced and he had a dry sense of humour.

In 1981 Tony’s first book was published by Blandford Press, but the publishers insisted on calling it *Poisonous Snakes*, a title that really rankled Tony. Dave Bird recalls visiting Poole Serpentarium during June 1981 with the South Western Herpetological Society. Tony led the tour through the Serpentarium and showed them the crocodile exhibit which was under constructions at the time.

Tony left Poole Serpentarium when he came in to find many of his prized venomous snakes had died, gassed by smoke or fumes carried by the ventilation system from the pottery manufacturer in the basement. Gary Lilley become the curator at the Serpentarium in the early 1980’s followed by Dave Bird in June 1986.

\*The hundred-pace snake is the Chinese copperhead (*Deinagkistrodon acutus*), which occurs in Taiwan, China and northern Vietnam. Its alternative name originates from the distance you are supposed to be able to walk before dropping dead. This is of course just another exaggerated snake myth.

## South Africa

After Poole Serpentarium Tony moved to South Africa to work at the famous Fitzsimons Snake Park in Durban from 1982–1984. At the same time, he was working on Nile crocodiles (*Crocodylus niloticus*) in the St. Lucia Reserve, KwaZulu Natal, alongside the famous crocodile biologist Tony Pooley, and it was also during this when he began his fieldwork on black mambas (*Dendroaspis polylepis*) and gaboon vipers (*Bitis gabonica*).

Tony's study on black mambas confirmed that the species have a pronounced attachment to a permanent refuge and if not disturbed they will remain at their refuge. This study also provided insight into the diurnal activities of black mambas and Mozambique spitting cobra's (*Naja mossambica*).

## Television career

Sometime in the late 1980s Tony returned to the UK and became a television natural history cameraman. One of his early Dorset homes was especially memorable. Roger Butler of the IHS recalls: "Don and myself visited Tony whilst we were in Dorset at his rented cottage known as "Contentment Cottage" near the Blue Pool entrance and Green Pool, a rubbish tip supporting all British reptiles and amphibians except the natterjack toad (*Epidalea calamita*). Tony was not the tidiest or most domesticated person and the interior was just full of all sorts of equipment and his wildlife film cameras. When our visit concluded, Tony invited us to wipe our feet before we left the cottage. Typical Tony humour."

MOS: Tony was working on a documentary for National Geographic and by that time I was based at West Midland Safari Park which now hosted a large and varied



Tony the natural history cameraman, with green mamba (*Dendroaspis angusticeps*) in his studio in the late 1980s. Photo: Unknown

collection of venomous snakes. He asked me to bring down 2–3 species he needed to film in a studio he'd hired on the outskirts of Bournemouth, while I stayed with him at his little cottage on the reptile-rich Purbeck heathlands. I remember him calling me up on one occasion and he casually dropped into the conversation that he had been tagged by a male adder that morning. He was totally unconcerned about the bite but I told him to call me back if he became ill. He didn't call.

Tony would go on to write a second book, *Old World Vipers* (Chimaira 2010) which he dedicated to James Ashe “to whom I owe so much”. *Old World Vipers* was Tony’s big book project and he travelled widely to photograph various species. His quest included several visits between late 1990s and early 2000s to Rome, Italy, photographing a subspecies of asp viper (*Vipera aspis francisciredi*) in the Tolfa Mountains at the long-term study site of Luca Luiselli and Lorenzo Rugiero. Luca recalled great memories with Tony in the field, while discussing and comparing the lifestyles of adders in Italy and UK (Luca Luiselli pers. comm). Tony was also in northern Limpopo, South Africa during 2001 when he encountered his first horned adder (*Bitis caudalis*) which later triggered his interest in the African dwarf adders (Babocsay 2007). He also wrote a number of scientific papers on British and African reptiles (see bibliography).

In the early years of the 21st Century Tony was living in Swanage, Dorset, in a house called Woolloomooloo, and it was here he had established “Reptile Research and Imagery” to promote both the filming of and the research into reptiles.

MOS: By now I had moved from behind the camera, wrangling venomous snakes for television companies in the UK and overseas, to front of camera as a presenter. In 1997 I was asked to make a film entitled *Black Mamba* in South Africa for Channel 4 and Discovery Channel’s second season of *To the Ends of the Earth*. We needed a cameraman familiar with venomous snakes to pick up close-up shots of black mamba activity so I suggested Tony for the job, but not only was he a cameraman on the shoot, he was a man with a great deal of mamba-lore so the director added a sequence of Tony sitting around the campfire with myself and Donald Strydom discussing venomous snakes. On one occasion when Donald, myself and the main film crew were filming snake removals from houses, Tony and snake handler Neels Bothma, were in a different location picking up some shots of black mambas moving across the ground. Neels was putting a bagged mamba back into a box when it bit him through the bag, a classic snakeman’s snakebite. Knowing time was of the essence Tony got Neels into the vehicle and drove like the wind to the military hospital at Hoedspruit. He got Neels there in 15 minutes, and then he called us, and when we arrived the doctor told us another 10 minutes and Neels would probably not have survived, Tony had saved his life.

## Quitting the UK

When Tony came back to Dorset in the late 1980s he continued his long-term studies of the local snake populations and did contractual work for English Nature. He came to know some of his adders extremely well over the following decades, but then one winter he discovered one of his favourite hibernacula had been destroyed by a bulldozer doing heathland management at the behest of the authorities.

There were dead smooth snakes and adders scattered about and Tony was distraught at the loss of his snakes, friends that he had known personally and followed the lives of for so long. He spoke out to the press and as a result the work contracts dried up. In disgust Tony quit the UK for the final time.



Tony studying his beloved adders in Dorset during the 1990s. Photo: Nature Picture Library

## Back in SA

Tony moved back to South Africa in 2003 and settled in Oudtshoorn, Western Cape, in an apartment at the family residence of herpetologist Johannes Els, who would become his protégé. During this time Tony was still working on his book, *Old World Vipers*.

He visited the National Zoological Gardens in Pretoria in early October 2003 to photograph a captive lowland swamp viper (*Proatheris superciliaris*) which originated from Lake Chilwa in Malawi. While photographing the specimen on a table top studio, Tony switched to a handheld digital camera and while focusing on the viewing screen, the viper struck and bit him on the right-hand middle finger. To Tony's great luck, six hours later it proven to be a dry bite. Tony later published a note describing the effects of this bite in the 2004 *Herpetological Bulletin* number 87, in which he also mentioned his three serious envenomings from an adder, puff adder and western diamondback rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*).

Tony noticed a significant lack of ecological data for the dwarf adders (*Bitis* spp.), in particular the southern adder (*Bitis armata*) which subsequently inspired his pursuit for more information. He presented the preliminary results of this study at the 2005 World Congress of Herpetology. In 2004 Tony established the Cape Reptile Institute, a non-profit research organisation which also ran field study and snake handling courses. Tony expanded his study focus to include the puff adder and Cape cobra (*Naja nivea*).

Johannes Els (JE): I met Tony in 2003 during the time he was photographing captive specimens for his book at Cango Wildlife Ranch.



*Tony and Mark O'Shea in the De Hoop Reserve, Western Cape Province, South Africa, in 2005.*

*Photo: Johannes Els*

A friend, Garth de Jong, curator of reptiles at the time and who later continued his career with reptiles at Dublin Zoo, contacted me asking if I could do a field trip to find red adders (*Bitis rubida*) with a visiting herpetologist working on a book. Garth had within the collection a few berg adders (*Bitis atropos*) which included a spectacular xanthic specimen, a species from the Western Cape Tony was also interested in photographing for his book. I had Tony's first book *Poisonous Snakes*, which I received as a gift from the late Richard

Newbery in 1998, and this was the basis of our first conversations which developed into a friendship that lasted until the end of his days.

A few days later Tony and I drove to one of the sites in the Swartberg Mountains where I regularly encountered red adders. A few hours into our search on the Swartberg massif I had lost sight of Tony when I found a mature red adder basking on a rock outcrop. With excitement that I found the snake Tony was keen to photograph, I shouted out to Tony but heard no response and he was nowhere in sight. I had no snake bags with me as the intention was to photograph *in situ*, which left me in a bit of a predicament. I removed my sock and kept it open with a small stick while guiding the adder inside and then secure it with a knot tied to my snake hook. Snake in sock, I made my way back to the vehicle where Tony was waiting in the shade of a tree with a bedazzled look, and that was the day I learned about Tony's tinnitus.



*The pre- World Congress Namaqualand expedition team at Goegap Nature Reserve, Northern Cape Province, South Africa (L-R Mark O'Shea, Bina Mistry, Maik Dobiey, Ryno Bezuidenhout, Tony Phelps, Johannes Els, Cathy Wüster (nee Pook), Wolfgang Wüster.*

*Photo: Mark O'Shea*

In 2005, prior to the 5th World Congress of Herpetology to be held at Stellenbosch, MOS visited Tony to see his southern adder site at the De Hoop Nature Reserve on the south coast, where JE also joined them, as they unsuccessfully sought the elusive species. Tony was very protective of his reptiles and he was incensed when he witnessed a speeding SUV run over a large puff adder making its way slowly across the reserve's dirt road. This was the route taken by eco-tourists to the whale watching site at journey's end. Tony scooped up the dead snake and followed in his own vehicle, arriving in the carpark where he dumped the bloody snake on the hood of the family's bright shiny SUV. "You did this!" he said, and strode off.

Shortly after the De Hoop trip a group of pre-conference herpers gathered together and drove up to Namaqualand, Northern Cape, to find and photograph reptiles and amphibians. Apart from Tony, JE and MOS, the group included Wolfgang Wüster, Cathy Pook (later Wüster) Maik Dobiey, MOS's partner Bina Mistry, and Ryno Bezuidenhout. It was a successful trip incorporating visits to Goegap, Port Nolloth and Springbok rubbish dump where everyone embarked on the search for "Tony's woodi!".

MOS: Tony swore he had seen a black spitting cobra (*Naja nigricincta woodi*) disappear under a huge pile of pieces of road. These were literally great chunks of the road, white-lines and all, which had been dumped in a massive pile, and there would be no way to move them, so we all circled the pile with flashlights and heliographs, poking snake hooks into the interior hoping for a hiss or a spray of venom, but eventually we were forced to conclude that "Tony's woodi" was a myth. One of the things Bina remembers most about that trip was Tony's belt buckle hugs. He would grab her and hug her close so that his belt buckle pressed hard against her. Whenever Tony and I spoke on the phone Tony would ask me to give Bina a belt buckle hug from him.

JE: Tony visited the UK in late 2005 to finalise his personal affairs and to bring Daniel the Spaniel, over to South Africa. Dan was trained to help point out snakes for Tony while working in the UK. A few months after arriving in South Africa, Tony took Dan out into a nearby field where he (Dan not Tony) pointed out his first snake on African soil, a puff adder hidden between the fynbos.



*Tony with his Spaniel, Daniel, and a smooth snake (Coronella austriaca). Photo: Unknown*



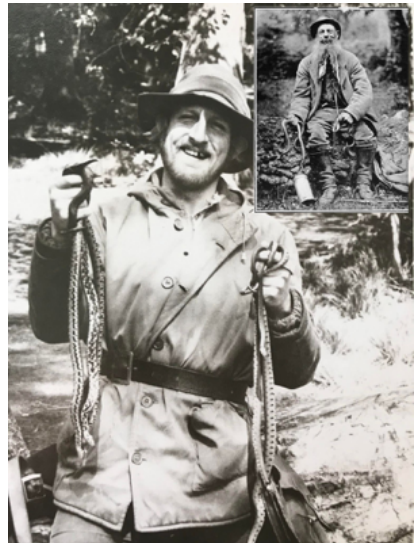
*Tony introducing Johannes Els to a adder (Vipera berus). Photo: Tony Phelps*

Later that morning Dan also encountered his first tortoise, an angulate tortoise (*Chersina angulata*) and he had mixed reactions to this strange creature he had never encountered before. Tony was delighted that his companion settled into his new surroundings. Dan was by Tony's side until his death at the age of 16.

accepted the position as curator of reptiles at Cango Wildlife Ranch. During my position as curator, we had a film shoot with Marius Burger for his television show *Groen*. One late afternoon when the park was closed we shot a sequence with Marius and myself and the large king cobra male on the lawn in front of the snake house. Among the staff observing the film shoot was Tony enjoying the moment and glancing back at his own memories of king cobras. After the film shoot Tony shared several stories about king cobras both in the wild and in captivity and these stories came back to me when I saw my first wild king cobra in India.

JE: Over time I went on numerous field trips with Tony while studying nature conservation and later

JE: In 2008 Tony and I embarked on a journey from South Africa through the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where we visit Damien Egan on route to the UK. We arrived as the last remains of the winter snow was still visible and he showed me my first adder in Chobham, Surrey. We later visited one of Tony's old study sites in Dorset and he pointed out the location of a smooth snake by memory and to my amazement it was there, just as predicated. Tony concluded my introductory trip to UK herps as it should end, with a pint of ale at the famous Snakecatcher pub in Brockenhurst.



*Tony doing a Brusher Mills snake catcher impression with the real Brusher Mills (1840–1905). Photo: Tell Hicks*

As part of Axel Barlow's PhD research project (Barlow et al. 2013) we often travelled to different localities to collect puff adder samples. In 2009 Axel Barlow and Wolfgang Wüster visited us at De Hoop shortly before my departure for the UAE where I had accepted the position of curator of herpetology and freshwater fishes at the Arabian Wildlife Centre.

Wolfgang Wüster (WW): A return visit in 2010 saw Axel and Wolfgang visit the West Coast National Park with Tony, resulting in the sampling of two stunning Cape cobras, multiple puff adders and several mole snakes (*Pseudaspis cana*) – still the absolute highlight of WW's field herping career! An attempted road cruise that ended with Axel and Wolfgang shining their torches out of the windows to supplement fading headlights as we limped home with a defunct alternator completed a memorable field trip!

In 2010 Tony received South African citizenship and around this time he discovered a love that rivalled his love for snakes – that for chacma baboons (*Papio ursinus*). He spent many hours, days, weeks and months studying the behaviour of these social and inquisitive primates and was working on a documentary with Ian Scammel.

JE: I visited Tony in South Africa during 2011 for the Herpetological Association of Africa's symposium in Cape Town. Wolfgang and Cathy Wüster arrived the week before the symposium and we headed to Noup, Northern Cape, in search of Namaqua dwarf adders (*Bitis schneideri*) on the study site of Bryan Maritz who provided Tony with valuable information during the final stages of his book *Old World Vipers*. The trip was fruitful because we found two specimens towards the end of our stay.

MOS: Tony could sometimes be forgetful and on one occasion this cost him dearly. He was driving along the coast when he saw a Cape cobra crossing the road. He stopped his bakkie (the Afrikaans name for a pick-up or ute) and jumped out in pursuit of the fleeing cobra, which he managed to overhual and capture, only then looking behind him, just in time to see his bakkie disappear over the edge of the cliff – he had forgotten to pull on the handbrake.

JE: Living in Oudtshoorn, the ostrich capital of the world, Tony often joined my family for Christmas dinners. During one of my visits back home at Christmas, Tony burst out in laughter and told us he spoke to his sister the day before and she asked him what we cooked for Christmas dinner. Tony with all seriousness explained to his sister, that we roast an entire ostrich in a large oven and she believed him without a second thought and shared the news with her friends, thus causing great amusement for Tony.

Over the years Tony's snake handling courses gained popularity in the Western Cape to the extent that he required help. Over several years Marcel Witberg from Cape Town become Tony's administrator and later the facilitator of the courses. Marcel became a great friend to Tony and ensured arrangements for courses continued while Tony was out in the field.

WW: Tony's snake handling courses at Driftsands in Cape Town were truly memorable. Tony's confident, booming Welsh voice, his methodical approach to teaching snake handling, and his calm demeanour with the snakes built up the confidence of even the most reticent attendees, who soon found themselves sprinting across the field behind the centre in hot pursuit of fleeing boomslangs (*Dispholidus typus*) and Cape cobras. A special feature of the course were the "scenarios" at the end, where branches, sticks, rubbish and assorted household objects were piled up outside, and one or several snakes released into the pile. Course participants were led to the pile in pairs and tasked with finding and "rescuing" the snakes in the pile, under Tony's watchful eyes. On one memorable occasion, a participant casually grabbed an old wellington boot with his hand and carelessly tossed it behind him, between some of the onlookers. The Cape cobra he was looking for was coiled up inside that boot.

JE: While in the UAE during 2011, I received a frantic call from Rian Stander, a teenage reptile enthusiast in Oudtshoorn who joined Tony on several field trips, announcing that Tony got bitten by a Cape cobra. The snake bit him on the hand

while he was transferring it into a transport box in preparation for an educational talk. Tony drove himself to the hospital in the company of Rian, a 15-minute journey reaching the Medi-Clinic just in time before serious symptoms manifested. Tony was denied further treatment until payment or medical insurance were provided. Knowing the medical staff at the clinic, I spoke to the administration providing a payment guarantee, upon which Tony was admitted for treatment. Despite complications due to his kidney functions, he recovered after antivenom therapy with a blister on the side of the hand as a reminder of the ordeal.



*Tony with a Cape cobra (Naja nivea) bite in 2011, with Cape cobra inset. Photos: Rian Stander and Johannes Els*

## Illness and passing

JE: I visited South Africa during 2017 and met up with Tony and Marcel Witberg during one of the snake training courses at Driftsands in Cape Town. Prior to my visit, Marcel expressed his concerns about Tony's health, which was evident when I met Tony because he responded with surprise when he noticed me a second time a few hours later. At that time, Tony was a mere observer and courses were conducted by the facilitators. The last courses of the Cape Reptile Institute were in 2019 and this heralded the end of all related activities.

Tony last visited De Hoop in June 2019 but his memory was failing by this time and he was diagnosed with dementia. It was suspected that he might have suffered a stroke prior to his diagnoses which led to speech impairment. A fundraiser was launched in 2020 to aid funding Tony's health care which received international support, despite the pandemic, from herpetologists, reptile enthusiasts and naturalists which allowed providing essential comforts until his final days. Thank you to everybody who contributed. In March 2021 he was also diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer.

Tony passed away in the frail care centre of the Oudtshoorn Retirement Home in the Western Cape, on 5 November 2021. Tony was married four times and leaves three former wives, his first wife Val preceded him in 2020, two sons, a daughter, and a grandson. He will be greatly missed by the herpetological community, especially in Southern Africa and the UK.

## **Acknowledgments**

Apart from the authors, a number of people have contributed memories and stories about Tony, several of which could not be published. We would like to thank Gergely Babocsay, Dave Bird, Roger Butler, Steven Gorzula, Eileen Hicks, David Turnbull, Luca Luiselli, Johan Marais, Diane Maxfield, Bina Mistry, Don Reid, Rian Stander, Ian Spellerberg, Bob Wingate, Marcel Witberg and Cathy Wüster. Thank you to Nature Picture Library who provided photographs and permission to use them in this article.



*Tony with a grass snake (Natrix helvetica). Photo: Unknown*

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