

Eileen Harris – Obituary

Dermod Malley & Andrew Cunningham

Born on 19 January 1949 in Carlshalton, Surrey, Eileen Harris attended Wimbledon High School where she was a diligent pupil, particularly in natural history. Outside school hours she assisted her father in his delicatessen where she apparently excelled in carving processed meats.

Leaving secondary education with good marks in advanced biology, she applied for a position at the Natural History Museum, London (NHM) in 1967 and was offered a choice between *Bryzoa* and parasitic worms. It was our profession's gain that Eileen chose the latter. In 2007, in an interview with *New Scientist* magazine, she revealed that she found it rewarding to assist vets "worried because an animal has died and they want me to identify any parasites present". She encouraged the submission of samples for identification and to help her to build a much-needed reference collection. She also welcomed vet students to the NHM for unofficial behind-the-scenes tours.

Eileen's contribution to science began shortly after her arrival at the NHM. She published many scientific papers, including the identification and description of a new genus of nematode, *Teporingonema cerropeladoensis*, in 1985, from a Mexican volcano rabbit. At the time of her death, she was concentrating on the identification of parasites in British wildlife, and she was particularly enthusiastic about her discovery of a new species of parasite obtained from a toad found in someone's washing machine!

Eileen was a diligent editorial assistant of *Systematic Parasitology* from 1985 to 2012, often taking work home so that she could read proofs uninterrupted. She made several television appearances, representing the museum whenever an expert was required to demonstrate parasitic worms.

Her work was varied. She received specimens from many veterinary sources, including private and zoological practitioners, the Wildlife Veterinary Investigation Centre in Cornwall and the Zoological Society of London's zoos and research projects. She also fielded queries from the general public concerned about worms in mains drinking water (often Gordian worms, apparently) and was involved in counselling people with delusional parasitosis ("a mental disorder in which the patient is convinced they have parasites coming out of every orifice").

On one occasion she identified a worm from a chameleon alleged to be a pet. As the parasite could not have completed its life cycle in captivity, she helped the authorities prove the chameleon had been taken from the wild illegally and the sellers were convicted. Her identification of the source of a worm burden in the critically endangered Rothschild's mynah in Jersey Zoo contributed to the reintroduction of the species into its native habitat.

When asked if she had a favourite among her specimens at the NHM she always referred to a giant tapeworm, *Diphyllobothrium polyrugosum*, from the intestine of a killer whale. She kept a particularly well-preserved example of this species for demonstration purposes (see picture). With typical humour, Eileen had christened the specimen "Eric" and stated in her *New Scientist* interview that "We've grown close over the years". On the occasion of the Queen's 80th birthday, members of staff of the NHM were invited to a reception at Buckingham Palace. Eileen took Eric along as a specimen and introduced him to the Royal Family.

An enigmatic character, in that she was a very private person, yet friendly and gregarious, Eileen lived for the NHM. She nevertheless found time for her beloved house cats and pet guinea pigs, all of which figured predominantly in her conversations, especially over lunch, afternoon tea or dinner at

the Goring Hotel – Eileen knew how to push the boat out. Her cats, shopping and gardening comprised her main out-of-hours pursuits.

Her friends always thought that she would have difficulty accepting retirement and the coronavirus lockdown must have been particularly difficult for her. She retired at the end of May 2021 and died from a pre-existing heart condition on 9th June.

As vets, we are fortunate to work with a wide range of experts, but we seldom receive help delivered with such dedication, generosity and good humour as by Eileen. We send our condolences and best wishes to her adopted family and many friends.