



Oligomerus ptilinoides, the discovery of a new Anobid woodborer in the UK.

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An alien trespasser

In 2015 Hampton Court Palace became the home to the first confirmed population of the woodborer *Oligomerus ptilinoides* (identified by Wollaston in 1854) in the UK. Previously found mainly in the south of France and in countries around the Mediterranean Sea, this insect had made its way across the Channel and into a third floor newly-designated storeroom for wooden objects. Increasing numbers of adults were found over the next two years. It appeared that the *Oligomerus* were emerging from the flooring, and investigations revealed that the larvae were feeding on the alder plywood sub-layer of a European Oak parquet floor. The beetles had neither penetrated the floorboards below, nor were they feeding on the parquet above (only biting through during emergence).

How this Mediterranean beetle came to be on the third floor of Hampton Court Palace is a mystery. It is almost certain that the flooring is from the period when the apartment was occupied by Grace and Favour resident Lady Gough between 1934 and 1954. There are detailed records from the archives where the flooring is mentioned: She had her apartment completely redecorated at her own expense, including having “Wren type panels” inserted into the Drawing Room and a new oak parquet floor’. Could the beetle have been living in the room unchecked since the 1930s? Or could it have come in on a hazel branch that was found in the room and had 23 beetles emerge from it in 2017 alone?

The time line



Discovery

May 2015: Nine adult woodborers were discovered in the object store.



Identification

July 2015: The woodborers were identified as *Oligomerus ptilinoides* by consultants D Pinniger and D Mann.



We have a problem!

July 2016: Thirty adult *Oligomerus*, many alive, were found during spot checks of the store room.



The investigation

November 2016: Two sections of the oak parquet floor and its sublayer were lifted from different areas of the room. Evidence was found of the *Oligomerus* only living in the alder plywood! All objects in the room were inspected – no flight holes of corresponding size were found.

April 2017: For conclusive proof of the presence of *Oligomerus* in the flooring, tissue was applied over two areas of the parquet flooring using wheat starch paste.

June 2017: A hazel branch with flight holes was found in the room, but we do not know where it came from. It was bagged up and isolated for later investigation.

July 2017: Fifteen emergence holes were found in the tissue layer, proving the presence of *Oligomerus* in the flooring.

August 2017: The numbers found were steadily increasing year on year. Seventy-nine adults were found in the room, with a further 23 emerging from the hazel branch.



The project gets under way

September 2017: Historic England gave consent for the parquet and plywood flooring to be removed under Standing Clearance before the beetle had the opportunity to spread into the structure of the building.



Recording

March 2018: The curators took a photographic record and documented the flooring.



Treatment

April 2018: The flooring was removed prior to the emergence period of June - August. All boards were sealed and taken to the freezer. They were frozen at -23°C for 4 weeks before being destroyed.



The result

August 2018: No beetles were found this year. The monitoring continues.....

What next?

By removing what we believe to be the food source of the *Oligomerus*, the alder plywood, we hope to have solved the problem. We will continue to be vigilant and make regular spot checks in the room, and more importantly we will spread the word! With the very real threat of global warming, alien intruders may no longer be a pesky uninvited guest but could become our new nemesis! Our advice to others is to be vigilant in those seldom visited or disused spaces.

Acknowledgments

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