

David Harrison

Explorer, zoologist and Arabist who turned his family home into a renowned cabinet of curiosities

DAVID HARRISON, who has died aged 88, was an explorer, Arabist, palaeontologist and taxonomist who established, with his family, the Harrison Zoological Museum in Kent, later known as the Harrison Institute, it was dedicated to taxonomic research and training. A medical doctor, Harrison became a world authority on the classification of mammals, and for 44 years was the chairman of trustees and chief benefactor of the Harrison Institute.

It was originally his family home – Bowerwood House at Sevenoaks, Kent – but he turned it into a vast cabinet of curiosities, holding in excess of 39,000 recent and fossil mammal specimens and 19,000 bird specimens, collected on numerous field study trips across five continents. He himself lived in the institute from the age of four.

Most of Harrison's pioneering research was conducted in Arabia. He had, somewhat unusually, listed his three geographical preferences for National Service as "Middle East, Middle East, and Middle East", a region considered by many at the time to be a punishment station because of its inhospitable climate and harsh conditions. Harrison, however, knew that the natural history of the region offered many opportunities for a keen zoologist. So, in August 1953, at the age of 26, he arrived in Habbaniya, Iraq, to take up his post as deputy medical physician to Middle East Command.

Outside the British garrison, medical facilities were scarce and Harrison's skills were sought after, not just by the RAF but also by the wider community, as he travelled between stations in Iraq and further in peninsular Arabia. It was a time of change in the Gulf States and Harrison was fortunate to meet and treat the rulers of a number of the city states, including Abu Dhabi and Sharjah. Oil wealth was beginning to transform the lives of the Bedouin communities from a nomadic existence to one of a more developed sedentary nature. Harrison was one of the few Europeans who, as a doctor, was permitted access to the families of the sheiks. He chronicled his early days in Arabia in his book, *Footsteps in the Sand*.

Harrison used his time in the region to conduct studies of the mammal fauna and published his first paper on his Arabian field work in 1955. Ninety papers followed, based on meticulous research and field trips to Kurdistan, Oman, (South) Yemen, Syria, Jordan and Israel. The results were published between 1964 and 1972 in a three-volume monograph, *The Mammals of Arabia* (updated as a single volume in 1991).

David Lakin Harrison was born at Sevenoaks in 1926 into a wealthy family. He was the second son of Dr James Harrison, a keen ornithologist and a medical practitioner who, as a surgeon lieutenant in the Royal Navy, was awarded the DSC for his bravery in saving the life of a fellow seaman during the sinking of his ship in the Aegean. David's



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Harrison shooting black partridge in Iraq in the early 1950s; and his sketch of a sand rat

mother was Rita Sorley, whose brother Air Marshal Ralph Sorley was responsible for putting the eight guns in the Spitfire, contributing greatly to their success in the Battle of Britain.

Although David's immediate family were medics, he was directly descended from Charles Harrison, co-founder of the J & C Harrison Shipping Line. Sadly it fell to David and his brother Jeffery, also a doctor, to sell the remains of the line to the Taiwanese in the mid-1970s. His first school, Doon House at

Westgate, East Kent, was evacuated at the beginning of the Second World War to Falmouth in Cornwall and from there to Peterchurch in Herefordshire. In 1940 he attended Malvern College, which was requisitioned by the government. This time he was evacuated to Harrow; it was almost immediately bombed.

In 1946, Harrison went up to Clare College, Cambridge, to read Medicine, and combined this with an interest in the bats of the area. A fellow Clare student at the time was David



Attenborough and the pair shared the occasional bat-collecting trip to the Fens. After completing his training at St Thomas's, and National Service, in 1958 Harrison joined the family medical practice.

He worked as a GP in Sevenoaks for more than 30 years. However, despite his dedication to his patients, it is for his extensive zoological researches that Harrison will be best remembered. He described seven extant mammal species new to science, including bats from the Comoro Islands, Madagascar, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Israel, and Oman, and gerbils from the deserts of Tunisia and Iraq. Various animals were named in his honour, including a species of tube-nosed bat from Cambodia, *Murina harrisoni*, and a species of parasitoid wasp, *Encarsia harrisoni*, from Sevenoaks.

In later life, when overseas travel became more difficult for him, he described new fossil mammals from the Eocene Period based on extensive field work in southern England. These included two new genera and three new species. In all, he published 224 papers and two monographs on various aspects of mammal taxonomy and ecology.

The Harrison Institute became known within the taxonomic community for its friendliness and old-world values and Harrison, the slightly eccentric gentleman naturalist, with his keen mind but retiring manner, personified everything that was good in the world of research. He supervised students from the UK and abroad and as the principal benefactor of the Harrison Institute promoted the only private institution that is training students in practical mammal taxonomy. When not at work, either at the institute or his practice, he enjoyed fishing for trout in Kent and for salmon in Scotland. In 1990 he was awarded the Stamford Raffles prize by the Zoological Society of London and the Bloomer Award by the Linnean Society.

He never married. But he created a family of naturalists around him at the institute who shared his passion for the study of wildlife.

David Harrison, born October 1 1926, died March 19 2015