

## FUNGI IN SCHOOLS

for  
CHILDREN  
TEACHERS  
PARENTS

and other  
interested parties



### NIGHT LIGHTS

There is an intriguing picture in a paper on luminous agarics by E J H Corner, in the *Transactions* of the Society (TBMS 37: 270, pl 9, 1954), of a clump of fruitbodies of *Mycena lux-coeli* collected on Hachijo Island, Japan. The plate shows two photographs, one is from nature, the other shows the same fruitbodies photographed in their own light in a dark room (F 3.5, exposure 50 min). *The Mycologist* (Jan 1987, p 37) gives an enthusiastic account of the drastic steps taken on the BMS Miniforay in Catalonia, Spain to study the luminosity of an agaric. Are there such excitements to record in Britain? A search of available literature suggests there are not. However, there is another source of light which may sometimes be seen glowing from old logs or decaying wood. This luminescence is due to the infection of the wood by mycelium or rhizomorphs (compacted mycelium looking like black leather bootlaces) of the Honey Fungus (*Armillaria mellea*).

Luminous wood has been known for a long time and Olaus Magnus (1652) relates how in countries in the far north luminous pieces of rotten oak bark would be collected and placed at intervals in the woods to mark the way at night. Similar pieces of wood were also used as a 'safe light' to enter barns full of hay when the usual burning torch would be too dangerous. In 1872, Berkeley recorded, in the *Gardeners' Chronicle*, that small pieces of luminous wood taken from a coniferous log, could still shine as brightly even when wrapped in five folds of paper. Nearly seventy years later, in World War II, pieces of luminous wood found on the roadside were thought to have a more sinister connotation and sent to the British Museum by the anxious finders who thought they had discovered apparatus used by spies to signal the enemy. In a wood at Oosterbeek near Arnhem, Holland — also in the last war — troops digging trenches about 5ft (1.5m) deep found to their horror the sides glowing brightly. The cause was luminous tree roots and a sample sent at a later date to the Museum was found to be heavily infected with *A. mellea*.

Luminosity in fungi has been known since classical times and is referred to by both Aristotle and Pliny. The latter described a fungus 'which grows upon the top of the tree and gives out a brilliant light at night; this is indeed the sign by which its presence is known and by the aid of this light it may be gathered during the night'. The fungus was probably *Omphalotus olearius*; the same species that was occupying the attention of the BMS in 1985.

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Further information: Ramsbottom, J (1953). *Mushrooms and Toadstools*, Collins. Kew Information Sheet M 19, which lists the fungi reported as luminescent.