

## Professor Phil Evans

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I've been a member of the IRG since 1986, with a three year hiatus from 2013 to 2016. I



am a professor at UBC in Vancouver where I teach wood protection and coatings technology and scientific writing. My academic career has been quite conventional, but I've led an unusually itinerant life. I was born in 1958 Chelsea in the centre of London. My father was a [Welsh Guard](#), and my



mother (also an Evans) was a nurse. The family including my two brothers and two sisters followed my father on various postings around the world; wherever the Welsh guards went, we followed (to various bases in Cyprus and Germany).



As a result of moving around the world, by the time I was 10 years old I had attended 10 different schools and my education had suffered as a result (although the British army had taught me other useful skills (?)

such as how to strip down a reassemble guns, and run over assault courses)! My lucky break, which diverted me away from the military and on to a career in academia, came in 1970 when I was fortunate to be offered a place at Woolverstone Hall in Suffolk;



Britain's only state run boarding school that aimed to give boys from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds the kind of education that is only available to the rich (in Britain).

I thrived academically and on the sports field at [Woolverstone Hall](#) as did many boys who ended up there

(<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/22/race-academies>). I

obtained good school grades specialising in sciences and in 1977 (almost 40 years ago to the day) swapped the beautiful grounds of Woolverstone Hall for the equally beautiful countryside of Snowdonia in North Wales. I was

attracted to North Wales by the opportunity to climb, play rugby and pursue a degree in Forestry and Wood Science at [University College of North Wales](#). Forestry did not excite me, but I found wood fascinating particularly wood



anatomy and wood protection. Wood anatomy was taught by Pat Denne who appeared before the class in a 'cool' yellow hand-knitted jumper showing the structure of tracheids and bordered pits. Pat is still going strong today although she must be in her late 80's. Unfortunately my lecturer in wood protection, Bart Banks, died this year. Bart encouraged me to do a Ph.D after I obtained a first class honours degree. I decided to take up his offer of a Science and Engineering Research Council Scholarship, and spend another 3 years in North Wales. My Ph.D looked at the hydrolysis of wood surfaces, foreshadowing a lifetime of work on the physico-chemical degradation and protection of wood surfaces. During my Ph.D I spent time at the UK's Building Research Establishment and received training and encouragement from Roy Miller, Janice Carey and Tony Bravery. Tony was President of the IRG from 1992 to 1995, and Janice attended quite a few meetings in the 1980's. I obtained my Ph.D in 1984 and moved to Dundee Institute of Technology in Scotland to post-doc on the high pressure sap-displacement of UK grown spruce. My supervisor in Dundee was Bernard King, another IRG member, who eventually became Vice Chancellor of the Institute (now Abertay University). Bernard and colleagues, Alan Bruce and John Palfryman and their graduate students (Albin Becker, Greg Mowe amongst others) were a force in the wood protection field in the late 70's and 80's despite having limited resources at their disposal. My experience in Dundee taught me an important lesson, namely that you can have an impact in our field without a large amount of funding. The 1980s were troubled times in the UK. Margaret Thatcher was enthusiastically dismantling Britain's manufacturing base and weakening the power of organized labour. The process she



began continues to this day and the dismal end results are plain to see. I decided to leave the UK in 1985 and applied for lecturing positions overseas in Australia and New Zealand. In early December 1985, after I received a telegram inviting me to interview for a position as a lecturer in wood science at the [Australian National University](#) in

Canberra.

Three months later I emigrated from the UK to Australia to teach wood science and wood processing to forestry students - another lucky break. The Australian National University was established after WWII to attract back to Australia the many distinguished expat Australian academics in overseas universities. It was well funded and equipped, and people were welcoming and collegial. I decided to focus my research on the weathering and protection of wood as it seemed to be an important



and uncrowded field. I started productive research collaborations with colleagues at the ANU (statistician Ross Cunningham), CSIRO (chemists Karl Schmalzl and Tony Michell-



encouraged by Harry Greaves) and later on Japanese Forestry and Forest Products Research Institute (Makoto Kiguchi, Yutaka Katoaka and Hiroshi Matsunaga). Highlights of these collaborations were

discovery of rapid surface delignification of wood exposed outdoors, and increased understanding of how to protect wood from photodegradation using various chemical approaches (transition metal compounds, UVA/HALS and grafting/chemical modification systems). A few years later I also began to work on surface checking of wood, encouraged by Alan Preston. This work continues to this day. Many graduate students have been involved in my research, and their education as well as that of the many undergraduate students I have taught has always been my biggest priority. I taught at the ANU for 17 happy years, but declining student interest in forestry in Australia led to the demise of forestry as a degree subject at the ANU.

Before this happened I reluctantly moved to the University of British Columbia where I



judged that forestry would be on safer ground. I moved to UBC in 2001 with my wife Katrina and three young children (then aged 14, 10 and 8). My first 5 years at UBC were spent running their centre for advanced wood processing. During this time I attended few IRG meetings and only ran a small research group. I stepped down from my position as Director of Centre for Advanced

Wood Processing in 2007 and built up my research group. I started a whole series of new productive collaborations with colleagues around the world (Tratek, Sweden; University of Bordeaux; NIBIO),



as well as resuming collaborations with The ANU and FFPRI in Japan. I also took a more active role in the IRG. During this period I started to use new powerful tools to visualise the microstructure of treated wood including TEM with atomic level resolution, X-ray



micro-CT and DART-TOFMS. These tools and the computational capacity now available to process the data they produce is truly astounding. In addition there's increasing interest in wood as a building materials.

It's an exciting time to be a wood scientist notwithstanding the challenges of working in academia. I hope to continue working in the field for many years to come, perhaps returning to Australia where there is new found enthusiasm for



*Click on thumbnails to see enlarged images with captions*



wood protection, as a result of the development of a national centre for wood durability and design life. Wherever I end up I'll always continue my association with the International Research Group on Wood Protection because of the forum it provides for those of us working in the field of wood protection, and the priority it gives to nurturing the careers of young scientists.

Apart from work what else do I get up to? I am a thematic collector of stamps specialising in trees; I swim for the UBC Masters swimming club; I renovate houses and I spend time with my family.

