

# The provenance of the lectotype of *Delma tinctoria* De Vis 1888 (Pygopodidae)

Glenn M. SHEA

Sydney School of Veterinary Science B01, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia.

Australian Museum Research Institute, Australian Museum, 1 William St, Sydney, NSW 2010, Australia.

glenn.shea@sydney.edu.au

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## ABSTRACT

The collector of the lectotype of the pygopod lizard *Delma tinctoria* De Vis 1888 is identified as Richard William Comley, a pharmacist living in Normanton. Comley, baptised in Wiltshire England in 1844, arrived in Australia in 1865. He is first recorded as living in Dalby in 1881, had moved to Normanton by 1882 and died there in 1904. He was a trustee, committee and council member of several local bodies and also leased a block of land on Walker's Creek, north of Normanton. It is likely that he collected the lectotype in the vicinity of Normanton itself, or from his property on Walker's Creek, rather than Normanton representing only a shipping point.

A recent taxonomic revision of the pygopod lizard *Delma tincta* De Vis 1888 identified four cryptic species, two of which were widely sympatric in the interior of Australia and that were unable to be distinguished on morphological characters (Pepper et al. 2025). Allocating names to these species required consideration of the type localities, particularly *Delma tincta*, with genetic sampling of the two sympatric species including a specimen of one species located about 50 km away from Normanton (the lectotype locality), and a specimen of the other species 200 km away. Pepper et al. (2025) chose to allocate the name *tincta* to the species that was known from closer to the lectotype locality, describing the second species as *Delma hades* Pepper, Doughty, Fletcher & Keogh. This application of names requires two assumptions: that the available genetic sampling accurately reflects the distribution of the two species in proximity to the type locality, and that the type locality is accurate. That would mean the collector was based there rather than the type locality referencing a shipping point for specimens obtained by a collector who was residing some distance away or who travelled widely in the region. This paper addresses the second of these assumptions.

The description of *Delma tincta* by De Vis (1888) mentions two localities: Normanton (Gulf of Carpentaria) and Springsure (central Queensland). Only the Normanton specimen (J241, registered 27 August 1912) is now able to be located (Covacevich 1971, Amey & Couper 2022) and there is no collector or additional information recorded. This is not unusual — the modern Queensland Museum registration system only began in 1911, preceded by ‘a complex and barely workable system of donor, purchase, exchange and collection registers’, with the backlog of older material having to be registered into the new system (Covacevich 1971). Kluge (1974) designated this only surviving syntype (QM J241) as the lectotype.

De Vis’ description does not indicate the collectors. Normally, this would suggest that the specimens were collected by Queensland Museum staff rather than being donated from members of the public, who were usually credited by De Vis as the source of donated specimens in his descriptions. The major museum collector was Kendall Broadbent, who

was employed by the museum as Taxidermist and Zoological Collector from 1881. Broadbent was sent to collect specimens around Barcaldine and Springsure in central Queensland in 1887 (Broadbent 1888, Whittell 1954), meaning the Springsure specimen/s are likely to have been collected by him and would have been received by the museum shortly before De Vis’ description. Broadbent also collected in Cape York in 1884 and during that time also made ‘a short visit’ to Kimberley in the Gulf of Carpentaria, returning via the Torres Strait Islands (Anon. 1884). Kimberley is now Karumba, a coastal town near Normanton. However, Broadbent is not recorded as having collected a *Delma* from there, with his only lizards being a monitor and the type for the gecko *Oedura fracticolor* (De Vis 1884).

More likely, De Vis (1888) described *Delma tincta* once Broadbent’s Springsure collection was received in 1887, and at the time also noted the existence of a *Delma* from Normanton among past donations to the Queensland Museum.

Early donations to the collection were reported by the Brisbane press in monthly reports of museum activities. Searching through these for the period up to when De Vis described *Delma tincta*, there are very few donations to the collection from Normanton. However, among these is a specimen identified as *Delma* from Normanton, donated by a Mr R.W. Comley in March 1885 (Anon. 1885a), and it is likely that this is the lectotype of *Delma tincta*.

Mr R.W. Comley is Richard William Comley, a former Normanton pharmacist and one of the founders of the local School of Arts and the hospital. He died on 22 March 1904 (Anon. 1904a) and is buried in an unmarked grave in the Normanton cemetery (Find a Grave 2021). Death records give his parents as William and Mary (Queensland Government (Births, Deaths and Marriages)) and he died intestate (Anon. 1904b). He is listed on Queensland electoral rolls in 1896, 1900, 1901 and 1903 as a chemist residing at Landsborough St, Normanton. Curiously, the first three give his age as 52, despite the five year period covered — this may have been his age when he first registered as a voter, which is listed in the first three electoral rolls as 26 August 1895. If true, this would mean he was born around 1843, making it likely that he came to Queensland from elsewhere. He is likely the Mr R.W. Comley who emigrated from

England in 1865 aged about 25 (giving a birth year around 1840), arriving in Brisbane aboard the *Sunda* on 29 May 1865. That person was described as a labourer (Ancestry 2022), and the details closely match a Richard William Comley, parents William (a carpenter) and Mary-Ann (very similar to the reported names of his parents on his death notice), baptised on 6 March 1844 at St Mary the Virgin, Marlborough, Wiltshire (Ancestry 2017). Some historical details of Comley's career and activities are available through the newspapers and government gazettes of the era.

In 1881, he was in Dalby and donated some *Diprotodon* bones to the Queensland Museum (Anon. 1881). He had moved to Normanton by November 1882, where he is reported to have been working as a chemist on cases such as a child with severe burns (Anon. 1882) and a person who was stabbed in the wrist (Anon. 1885b).

He held several positions in Normanton during his time there. In February 1883, he was appointed a member of the committee for the Normanton State School (Archer 1883), in April 1884, a member of the council for the Division of Carpentaria (Dickson 1884), in April 1886 and a member of the council for the Borough of Normanton (Moreton 1886). Four months later (Dutton 1886), Comley and a Major Colles were appointed trustees for the cemetery reserve (replacing 'James Sutherland, deceased, and F. Comley, who has left the district'). The relationship between Richard Comley and F. Comley is unknown.

Comley also owned a parcel of land at Walker's Creek, which sometimes appeared in the newspapers as 'Comley's selection'. This is most likely to be a 640-acre block, which in 1885 was in its third year of being held by Comley under the Crown Lands

Alienation Act 1876, with a smaller 160-acre block added on its southern boundary two years into owning the first block (Dutton 1885).

Based on reports, Comley did not reside at the property but was instead an absentee landlord. In November 1885, an old man named Patrick Byrne, the bailiff for the property, was killed by a First Nations employee Billy during a drunken dispute (Anon. 1885c). The property was described as being about 'twenty miles' (32 km) from Karumba/Kimberley (Anon. 1885d). The location of the two blocks is identified on maps in the Queensland State Archives (files PR54306 and PR54324, Portion 52, 640 acres, and Portion 70, 160 acres, respectively). They are located at 17°29'48"S 141°04'13"E, 20.3 km due north of Landsborough St at the western edge of Normanton and 24.8 km nearly due east of Karumba.

The same files note that these blocks were forfeited by Comley in 1890 due to unpaid rent (Cowley 1891). At the time, it was noted that Comley had left the district and was working back in Dalby as a pharmacist under the employ of a Mr Merrett. Frankum Martin Merrett, who died in 1894, had been the Dalby pharmacist since 1870 (Anon. 1894), suggesting that Comley may have previously been apprenticed to him before moving to Normanton. Though he moved back to Dalby in the 1890s, he later returned to Normanton. I have been unable to locate an image of Comley, but his signature is on the documentation he signed to lease the two blocks of land (Fig. 1).

By the time the *Delma* was collected in 1885, Comley would have been living in Normanton township, working as a pharmacist, and operating a small property at Walker's Creek. There is no evidence

**Figure 1.** Signature of Richard William Comley, PR54306, Queensland State Archives, p. 20.

that he collected more widely in the Normanton region. Therefore, the lectotype is likely to have been collected from near Normanton itself or between Normanton and Walker's Creek.

Pepper et al. (2025) reported a genotyped specimen of *D. hades* (SAMA R54465) from the Burke & Wills Roadhouse dump (19°13'35"S, 140°20'53"E), 203 km SSW of Normanton, and a genotyped specimen of *D. tincta* (SAMA R25851) from a road junction at Inverness Station (18°S, 140°33'E), 67 km SW of Normanton. If these two localities represent the relative distributions of each species in the direction of Normanton then it is likely that Pepper et al. were correct in assigning the name *D. tincta* to the species from Inverness Station. However, as the species in the complex are only distinguishable genetically and no tissues are available from the lectotype for sequencing, additional genetic sampling of *Delma* specimens from the vicinity of Normanton itself will be needed to confirm that only one species reaches Normanton and the identity of that species.

Modern specimens of species in the *Delma tincta* species complex are known from the vicinity of Normanton airport (AMS R63574) and on the north-east border of Karumba (AMS R63431), both collected in 1977. This confirms that the species complex occurs near the lectotype locality, but no tissues are available yet for genetic typing from this area to determine the lineage/s present. If more than one lineage is present and sequences from the lectotype are unable to be generated using ancient DNA technology, it may be necessary to apply to the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature to replace the lectotype with a neotype from Normanton for which sequence data are available.

Pepper et al. (2025) stated that both the lectotype and paralectotypes were collected by 'M. Comley', in error.

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