JOHN JAMES WYMER, 1928–2006

Nick Ashton

Department of Prehistory and Europe, British Museum, Franks House, 38–56 Orsman Road, London, N1 5QJ, UK. Contact email: nashton@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the remarkable career of John Wymer, in particular the transition from a young, avid amateur of prehistory to an internationally renowned specialist in Palaeolithic studies. The launch into a professional world came from the discovery of the third piece of the Swanscombe skull in 1954, eventually leading to a curatorship at Reading Museum. Greater things were to come with his appointment as field officer for the University of Chicago, directing extensive excavations in South Africa and then Britain. There followed an outstanding series of books from detailed site reports and gazetteers to a global overview of the Palaeolithic. These culminated in the comprehensive survey of British Palaeolithic sites (The English Rivers Palaeolithic Survey) funded by English Heritage during the 1990s. ‘Retirement’ merely led to more fieldwork and new discoveries, none more astonishing than the finding of artefacts in the Cromer Forest-bed at Pakefield. He was co-author of the paper on this discovery published in Nature in 2005, a short time before his death.


Keywords: Palaeolithic, Swanscombe, Klasies River Mouth, Pakefield

INTRODUCTION

John Wymer would have been a remarkable man in any century, but none more so than in the 20th and early 21st, until his death in 2006. He was born into an amateur tradition, embraced professionalism in every sense of the word and left an unparalleled legacy for future generations. It is right and proper that his biography should be the final account of a long list of giants. He would have dismissed such accolades, but his contribution was one of the most important to Palaeolithic studies for several generations. Much has been written about his character, in particular his generosity of spirit and his zest for life (e.g. Lawson & Rogerson 1998); however, this account will concentrate on his contribution to Palaeolithic archaeology in the context of the second half of the 20th century.

EARLY YEARS

John James Wymer was born in Richmond on the 5th March 1928. His father, Bertram Wymer, was an accomplished artist and illustrated many of the Tiger Tim comics, while his French mother, Leah Wymer, was a professional pianist and played in the silent movie palaces of the 1920s. Illustration and playing blues piano were two skills that John inherited from his parents, but from an early age he was also introduced to their passion for Palaeolithic archaeology. It is clear from John’s immaculately kept notebooks (now in the British Museum) that the Wymers spent
most weekends visiting and collecting from
the gravel pits of the Thames Valley, Kent,
East Anglia and beyond, from sites such as
Caversham, Fordwich and Brandon. His first
flint illustrations are also recorded with a
collection of fine ink drawings of scrapers
from Santon Downham and Icklingham. On
the reverse of the card he has noted ‘These
are the first drawings of flint I attempted,
some time in 1949. J. Wymer’. A typical
entry from these years is that of Saturday
August 21st 1954, where he describes a visit
to Fordwich, Kent (Figure 1).

Through these endeavours the Wymers
mingled with other well known amateurs of
the time, such as J.C. Draper in Hampshire
and Alvan T Marston in the Lower Thames
Valley. Many of the trips were made with the
Shoreditch Training College Archaeological
Society, who travelled significant distances
from their base in east London to sites such
as Burnham and Furze Platt in Berkshire for
section cleaning, recording and collecting.

It was from within this context of amateur
exploration that the Wymers initiated more
formal excavations at Barnfield Pit in
Swanscombe. The site was already renowned
as one of the flagships of the British
Palaeolithic through the early work of Smith
& Dewey (1913, 1914), with the
identification of a long sequence of
archaeological horizons, starting with a core
and flake industry in the lower beds (later to
be termed the Clactonian) followed by a
series of handaxe industries. The discovery
of two pieces of skull in the Upper Middle
Gravel by Marston in 1935 and 1936 further
promoted Swanscombe as the most
important British site for the Lower
Palaeolithic (Marston 1937). Wymer first
visited the site in early 1950 in the belief that
most of the Upper Middle Gravel had been
worked out. However, in 1953 after frequent
visits to the site an area of the skull-bearing
gravel was located. By this time the site was
owned by the Nature Conservancy and
licenses had to be obtained for more formal
evacuation by John and his father.
Excavations began on July 29th 1955, and
remarkably on the second day, a right
parietal of a human skull was discovered.
The bone was sent to the British Museum
(Natural History) and on August 4th it was
confirmed by letter that this piece of skull
refitted to those discovered by Marston in
1935 and 1936. As was typical of John, his
notebook understates the discovery in a
rather sober record:

“Saturday 30th July 1955. Discovery of right
parietal”

It is hoped that the lack of an entry for
Sunday 31st July reflects the less sober
celebrations of the night before. Five days
later The Daily Telegraph was a little more
exuberant:

“While excavating in the gravels at
Swanscombe, Kent, Mr. and Mrs. B.O.
Wymer, their son, Mr J. Wymer, and Mr.
Adrian Gibson have discovered the major
portions of a human skull bone. This is
stated by Sir Gavin de Beer, Director of the
Natural History Museum.”

Brief reports on this discovery appeared the
same year by both John (J.J. Wymer 1955)
and his father (B.O. Wymer 1955) in Nature
and Man respectively. Over the following
five years excavations continued, primarily
at weekends, with the co-operation of the
British Museum (Natural History) and
Nature Conservancy, and by November 1960
virtually all of the remaining accessible
deposits of Upper Middle Gravel had been
examined. The full monograph of this work
appeared four years later (Ovey 1964), where
the name Wymer appeared alongside the
great professionals of the day, such as
Hinton, Kennard and Oakley.
FROM AMATEUR TO PROFESSIONAL

The Swanscombe discovery must undoubtedly have helped in the launch of Wymer’s professional career. After leaving East Sheen county school and Shoreditch Training College he had a series of short-lived jobs, starting as a railway clerk with Great Western Railways and finishing with a teaching post at Wokingham. However, in 1956 he was offered the post of curator at Reading Museum. Here he devoted his energies to a range of exhibitions and fieldwork in the Kennet Valley, including significant fieldwork on Mesolithic sites at
Thatcham (Figure 2; Wymer & Churchill 1962), but perhaps more importantly this gave him the opportunity to undertake frequent visits and small-scale fieldwork at the gravel pits of the Middle Thames Valley, including Furze Platt and Remenham.

Much of this work led to his first monumental tome, *Lower Palaeolithic Archaeology in Britain as Represented by the Thames Valley* (Wymer 1968). The book (often nick-named the ‘Old Testament’, for more was to come) set a new standard and a new formula for the recording of the British Palaeolithic. Its importance cannot be over-estimated for it provided the first gazetteer of all the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic occurrences in the Thames catchment, systematically detailing the history of discovery, geological context along with a summary of the lithic assemblages, recording the condition and types of handaxes for each location. The excellent artefact drawings and the accompanying maps would become a familiar sight in subsequent publications.

**INTERNATIONAL CAREER**

In 1965 his career was set to take a different course. Under the recommendation of Louis Leakey he was offered a position by Ronald Singer, recently appointed to the Chair of Anatomy at Chicago University, to undertake fieldwork in his native South Africa. Excavations ensued at Elandsfontein and Langebaanweg, but both were overshadowed by the major work undertaken at Klasies River Mouth 400 km east of Cape Town on the Tzitzikama coast. Late Pleistocene sediments partially filling two adjacent coastal caves were excavated in two six-month seasons in 1967 and 1968; these contained a wealth of evidence that documented human physical and cultural change over the last 125,000 years. The most startling result was the discovery of hominin remains with anatomically modern features dating back to 100,000 years ago and associated with Middle Stone Age artefacts, including bone tools. This discovery formed one of the main pillars of what has since become known as the ‘Out of Africa’ hypothesis, arguing for an African origin for *Homo sapiens* (Stringer 1988).

The Wymer notebooks faithfully record the day to day activities at the site. However, what they don’t reveal are the difficulties of excavating in such a remote location. A flavour of the daily routine is summarised by Andy Lawson (Lawson & Rogerson 1998). A total of 255,244 artefacts were recorded from the 20m thick sequence. Such massive undertakings were achieved with only a small team of eight. Sieving was cunningly undertaken by harnessing the natural motion of the sea with a Heath-Robinson style construction of mesh boxes, ropes and pulleys. Supplies arrived only weekly and had to be carried the last mile and a half, and then down the steep cliff to site. On these occasions the nightly allowance of a small can of lager was supplemented by gallon jars of cheap white wine and these days became known as *wyndaag*. An expansive monograph on the site was published in 1982 by Chicago University Press, illustrated throughout by John’s characteristic ink and line drawings (Singer & Wymer 1982). To this day Klasies River Mouth remains one of the key sites for understanding the origins of anatomically modern humans and the succession from the Middle to the Late Stone Age in Africa.

Wymer returned to Britain in late 1968 still employed by the University of Chicago. The first major endeavours were at Clacton from 1969 to 1970, where excavations recovered the first large, well-excavated assemblage from the site (Singer *et al.* 1973). This was soon followed by a major campaign at Hoxne from 1971 to 1974 and in 1978. Hoxne was renowned from the paper presented to the Society of Antiquaries by Sir John Frere in 1797. Here he described the now-famous handaxes as ‘…evidently weapons of war, fabricated and used by a people who had not the use of metals’ (Frere
Despite John’s previous endeavours at Swanscombe and his international reputation, achieved through the work in South Africa, there were mixed reactions in some quarters of the establishment to his new work at Hoxne. Although attempts were made to stop the work, decrying his lack of professional qualifications, excavations went ahead as scheduled. As ever, the project was meticulously planned and executed, producing two of the most important archaeological assemblages for the period, and in direct association with cut-marked animal bone. The work also embraced other new methods of investigation, from micro-wear analysis of the flint tools to new forms of dating, such as Uranium-Series and Thermoluminescence.

The monograph on this work was published in 1993, displaying yet again John’s skills as an organiser of archaeological data and his artistic ability with the pen (Singer et al. 1993). However, his high standards were not reflected by some of the other illustrations and he was frustrated by the delay in publication, although these concerns were rarely voiced.

In what had already been a rich and varied career, Wymer’s life was to take yet another turn. The funds from the University of Chicago had dried up, so from 1979 to 1980 he was employed as a Senior Research Associate in the Department of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia. From here, he went on to employment with the Essex and subsequently with the Norfolk archaeological field units. As a skilled excavator, he was much-valued by these organisations, although often the lack of research-orientated fieldwork, the formulaic methods of excavation and the proliferation of rules and regulations were less to John’s taste.

These years, however, were fruitfully spent. From his early years he had made frequent visits to France, often leading fieldtrips for the Slough and Reading Workers Educational Association (Figure 3). While in South Africa, Wymer had also taken the opportunity to visit many of the other sites in that and neighbouring countries, including the Olduvai Gorge and the rock-art site of Botsabelo Rockshelter, Lesotho (Figure 4). In the following years he travelled to such diverse places as Iran, Hungary and the USA. By the early 1970s he had acquired an international reputation and it was these experiences and his extensive knowledge of sites across Africa and Eurasia that eventually led to the publication of *The Palaeolithic Age* (Wymer 1982). On its publication there were a few raised eyebrows.
about some of the chapter headings, such as ‘Chapter 5. The transition from savagery to barbarism: Mousterian and other industries’. However, the headings belied the contents within, which were up-to-date, detailed, clearly presented and included all the new techniques of investigation. Nearly three decades later this book still contains a wealth of information that is relevant today.

One of the overlooked facts about the book is that Wymer was the first archaeologist to embrace and publish on the longer chronology for the European Palaeolithic. A shorter chronology with the three interglacials of the Cromerian, Hoxnian and Ipswichian was widely accepted and thought to place the Hoxnian, for example, at perhaps 250,000 years ago (e.g. Mellars 1974; Roe 1981). Wymer, however, attempted to use the new Oxygen Isotope chronology and apply it to the European terrestrial record. In doing so, he argued that the Anglian was the most extensive of the British ice-sheets and therefore ought to equate with the most pronounced of the cold events recorded in the Oxygen Isotope curves. Stage 8 and Stage 10 were somewhat muted and therefore he proposed that the Anglian correlated with Stage 12 and thus the
BOTSABELO, Nr. Maseru, Lesotho

Thursday 18th July 1968

Visited the rock shelter known as Botsabelo by myself having first obtained directions from Mr. Lucas Smith at Roma University.

This shelter has the paintings of fish traps as published in the S. Afr. Arch. Bull. I could only discern the main one and could not make anything of the other two. There is a clear ladder, some good triple running figures and many others in a small area. Took several photographs. Could find no trace of other paintings on the rocks nearby, or any artifacts.

Mr. Smith showed me briefly his large collection of artifacts, of a great variety of

Figure 4: Visit to Botsabelo, Lesotho (1968)
Hoxnian with Stage 11 at about 400,000 years ago. Over the last 28 years new dating work has proved him to be correct and few would argue with these correlations.

As if a book on the world Palaeolithic was not enough, Wymer was also compiling yet another monumental volume on the British Palaeolithic. This time ‘The New Testament’ was The Palaeolithic Sites of East Anglia (Wymer 1985). Like its predecessor on the Thames Valley, this gazetteer documented all the occurrences of Lower and Middle Palaeolithic archaeology in East Anglia. Twenty five years later, it is still as valuable a record of the East Anglian sites as when it was first published, and it is garnished throughout with the inimitable illustrations that mark all of Wymer’s work.

In combination these books illustrate his attention to detail, but set within a global framework. They also reflect his ability to take on board new methods, ideas and interpretations. His open-minded approach was clearly illustrated when he fully accepted, after a critical review of the evidence, the startling new discoveries at Boxgrove. In 1983 the excavations by Mark Roberts had revealed well-made ovate handaxes that were apparently pre-Anglian in age (Roberts 1986). Others verbally dismissed the revelations, preferring to stick with the traditional interpretation that if there were pre-Anglian handaxes (which in itself was doubtful) then they should be primitive in form. Although Wymer used typology as a means of description and sometimes interpretation, he was always cautious in using it as a means of dating, particularly when it was outweighed by the scientific evidence. Again, he was the first to state clearly that in a British context handaxe typology could not be used to date sites (Wymer 1988).

There was one final chapter left in Wymer’s career. In 1986 English Heritage had been caught off-guard by large-scale quarrying at a known location for Lower Palaeolithic archaeology at Dunbridge in Hampshire. A vociferous archaeological pressure group, backed by famous local residents, such as David Frost, called for quarrying to end and archaeology to begin. The resulting public enquiry came to a compromise, but the long-term result was the Southern Rivers Palaeolithic Project with the subsequent The English Rivers Palaeolithic Survey and The Welsh Lower Palaeolithic Project. These back-to-back projects funded by English Heritage and Cadw through Wessex Archaeology set out to provide a complete survey of the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic record in England and Wales to better inform local planning authorities about the risk to Palaeolithic archaeology. This monumental task was given in 1990 to John Wymer with assistance in the field from Phil Harding. By now at the age of 62 most people would have been thinking of retiring, but John devoted the next eight years with vigour and enthusiasm to the job in hand.

The results are a series of catalogues with colour location maps relating to the surface geology with details of every known Lower and Middle Palaeolithic occurrence across England and Wales. The entries include summaries of artefact assemblages, collectors, museum locations, geological context and related publications, together with an assessment of the site’s importance. As well as being an invaluable tool for local planning authorities they have also been an important source of data for other Palaeolithic researchers (e.g. Bridgland 2001; Ashton & Lewis 2002). The surveys are the envy of our European colleagues who are lumbered with much more dispersed archives and records, and the surveys, condensed for publication into the two-volume set The Lower Palaeolithic Occupation of Britain (Wymer 1999), will continue to be an unparalleled research tool for generations to come.
THE FINAL YEARS

John Wymer finally retired from a paid career in 1998. Never one to sit back, he still visited many of the old sites and new excavations alike. He also found more time for many of the other pleasures he enjoyed: steam locomotion; wildlife; good food, wine and beer; trips to France; and playing blues piano. However, on a Quaternary Research Association trip in 2000 at Pakefield in Suffolk he was involved in the discovery of a flake apparently from the Cromer Forest-bed Formation, a deposit on the East Anglian coast that had defied archaeologists, geologists and palaeontologists alike in providing evidence of humans. Subsequent excavations proved the initial findings and the paper, including Wymer’s flint report and illustrations, was published in *Nature* in December 2005 (Parfitt *et al.* 2005). This paper demonstrated that humans were in northern Europe at 700,000 years ago, an astonishing 200,000 years earlier than previously thought. Just as Wymer had started his career with a paper in *Nature* in 1955, so it was to be completed 50 years later with a paper in the same international journal.

John died only three months later in February 2006 at the age of 75 through the rapid onset of Alzheimer’s disease. He left behind an unparalleled legacy that forms a rock-solid foundation for future research in Britain and abroad. He also left behind many enduring memories. Despite his remarkable achievements he remained one of the most human of men with a generosity of spirit that should be an example to us all.

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