JOHN WYMER: AN APPRECIATION

John Wymer was born on 5th March 1928 in Richmond-upon-Thames, Surrey. His childhood was spent in southwest London near Kew. Growing up in the war years was difficult for John and his family. John’s mother used to play piano for silent films, and he inherited his musical ability from her. His artistic ability came from his father who was an illustrator, who used to draw the comic strip Tiger Tim. As a teenager John recalled walking with his mother down their street when a V1 rocket-bomb (doodlebug) announced itself when its engine cut out. He and his mother looked up and to their horror saw the bomb coming straight toward them. Suddenly there was a freak gust of wind, strong enough to flip the flying bomb over; it landed a few streets away to devastating effect.

He gained his love of prehistoric archaeology from his parents. As a youngster he accompanied them on weekend trips searching for prehistoric sites. He well remembered being deeply inspired by a public lecture on human origins given by Kenneth Oakley that he attended as a teenager. John was impressed by his clear mind. John studied at Richmond and East Sheen County School, and at Shoreditch Training College. He explored a number of career options after leaving school; journalism, and a short spell as a railway clerk, a profession he stated with great pride he was utterly unsuited for. He even tried his hand at teaching woodwork, reflecting his life-long interests in crafts and practical work. In 1948 John married Paula, and they had two sons and three daughters.

Although he had no formal training in archaeology, his youthful experiences with his parents gave him an excellent grounding in practical field archaeology. While only in his middle 20s, his personal site records for this period reveal a meticulous and careful field worker, with a mature approach to his subject. Even at this early stage in his career he was already a prolific worker. His records for 1954 show him excavating at Little Thurrock in Essex in early September, Burnham and Aldermaston in middle September, and Little Thurrock again in late October. These were weekend and holiday excavations with friends and family. This last site was an important one for John. It had been discovered in 1911 by his father Bertram Wymer, who had been puzzled by its lack of handaxes. When John published the site in the late 1950s he identified it as Clactonian, the first new Clactonian site to be identified since Barnham St. Gregory which had been published just before the war (Wymer 1957). It began a long association with the Clactonian, a stone tool assemblage type, that will be, for many, forever synonymous with the name of Wymer.

He was also excavating on and off at another Clactonian site, the Barnfield Pit, Swanscombe — a note in his site records for 4th January 1955 ruefully notes it snowed all day! This type of dedication was typical of John. His parents held the permit for excavating at the site. On the 30th July, while working on a section in the Upper Middle Gravels, John and a colleague, Adrian Gibson, discovered a third fragment of the Swanscombe skull. The other two fragments had been discovered in 1935 and 1936. When discovered it was in poor condition. They sent it to the Natural History Museum. John received a post-card not long after which he kept with great pride. With admirable professional reserve there were only two words — "IT FITS!". The site was published in the early 1960s (Wymer 1964).

John was appointed as archaeologist to Reading Museum the following year, where he stayed for the next nine years. His duties were varied. He was involved in designing displays, describing a range of later prehistoric artefacts, as well as excavating. His digs were equally varied. He pursued excavations in the Kennet Valley, concentrating on Mesolithic sites,
including the important site of Thatcham. But he was not neglecting the Lower Palaeolithic. In 1961 he published the results of his researches into the Caversham Ancient Channel and the site of Highlands Farm (Wymer 1961). Although largely superseded by later works, this was a critical paper for its time. It was the first viable British chrono-stratigraphic framework to be published in the post-Breuil era. It made reference only to local sequences, and did not attempt to force data into broader European frameworks. It also displayed the seeds of Wymer’s highly individualistic methodology, and foreshadowed the approach he would take in his monumental work ‘Lower Palaeolithic of Britain as represented by the Thames Valley’ (Wymer 1968). John was a prodigious publisher, between 1956 and 1997 he published every year, usually more than one paper per year (see bibliography in Ashton et al. 1998). He only missed 1967 and 1969. He was elected a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1963.

In 1965 John was offered a position as field officer for an ambitious project to investigate hominin origins on a global scale. The offer came from Professor Ronald Singer of Chicago University. John would work for Chicago for the next fifteen years. The first phase of the project involved work in South Africa. John excavated at Elandsfontein, but his most famous African site was Klasies River Mouth. This huge cave complex contained more than 25m of deposits, and an astonishing quarter of a million stone tools. Once more, human remains were present, and the site was critical in pushing back the date of the emergence of modern humans in Africa to nearly 100,000 years ago. This was a date greeted with much scepticism at the time, but subsequent research has vindicated it. The excavation was also important for discovering a Howiesons Poort assemblage in a deeply stratified context. This was an enigmatic stone tool assemblage type characterised by backed pieces, especially medium-sized lunate segments. When shown the first one, John was frankly sceptical. He went over with the digger who found it, towelled around for a few moments and promptly found another. ‘It wasn’t that I doubted his word, it was just that it was so incredible to find these pieces in Middle Stone Age assemblages’ he later commented. The site was fully published, and the report remains a critical lynchpin within South African Middle Stone Age research agendas (Singer and Wymer 1982).

Africa was a place where John felt spiritually at home, his stories and reminiscences of his time there were told with great passion. Sadly, in 1968 Singer moved John back to Britain to embark on the next stage of the project. In 1969 and 1970 he and Singer were excavating at the Golf Course site, Clacton-on-Sea. Between 1971 and 1974, and again in 1978, they were excavating at Hoxne. Both of these were landmark excavations whose results underpin much of modern scholarship in British Lower Palaeolithic archaeology today (Singer et al. 1993; Singer et al. 1973). There were a number of other shorter excavations — cutting sections at critical sites, for instance at Barnham in 1979 (Wymer 1985).

John was never one to let trifles get in the way. When the newly arrived site caravan at the Golf Course became stuck on one of the fairways, he promptly marched the whole excavation off for a cooked breakfast. On their return was a curt note, the club secretary would like to see Mr Wymer at his earliest convenience. John would smile ruefully when recounting the dressing down he received from the secretary — but his revenge was practical and very characteristic. They used the centre of the secretary’s window frame as a TBM for levelling; every now and again they would see the secretary turn around as if he had a strange feeling of being watched! John used the results from Clacton and Hoxne in his Stopes memorial lecture to the Geologists’ Association in 1974 on receipt of their prestigious Stopes Medal. His subject was the Lower Palaeolithic and the relationship between the Clactonian and the Acheulean (Wymer 1974). His framework would set the agenda for Lower Palaeolithic
studies for the next two decades. During the Hoxne years John married his second wife Mollie.

All good things come to an end, and by the late 1970s Chicago’s programme of research was complete. To John’s immense delight he was able to keep the long wheelbase Landrover that the project had bought for his use. It was his pride and joy — he never accepted my view that it had whiplash steering. Between 1979 and 1980 he was a Senior Research Associate at the University of East Anglia, and then a Field Officer for the Essex Archaeological Unit between 1981 and 1982. It was during this period that John joined the Lithic Studies Society, he was one of its first members joining in 1980. To him goes the credit of the very first Lower Palaeolithic lecture given to the society on the 11th February 1981. His text was the Clactonian. John was by now Britain’s foremost expert on this subject. By 1982 John was serving as an officer on the Lithic Studies Society committee. John joined the Norfolk Archaeological Unit as a Field Officer in 1983, where he remained until 1990, moving with Mollie to live at Great Cressingham in Norfolk. These were productive years for John. In 1982 he published ‘The Palaeolithic Age’, an overview of the Old Stone Age from a global perspective, and in 1985 his third book, ‘The Palaeolithic Sites of East Anglia’, was published (Wymer 1985). This book remains one of the most important contributions to regional understanding ever published in Palaeolithic archaeology. Between 1984 and 1990 he was Vice-Chairperson for the Lithic Studies Society. Members will recall the enthusiasm with which he carried out his duties, and his simple, no-nonsense approach to committee work.

In 1991, John embarked on a new and exceptionally busy phase of his career, just when most people are thinking of winding down to retirement. English Heritage commissioned through Wessex Archaeology an ambitious survey. The Southern Rivers Palaeolithic Project was designed to inform quarry managers and County Councils of the potential for Palaeolithic archaeology in the sands and gravels of ancient river valleys. The project’s aim was to visit and assess every known Lower and Earlier Middle Palaeolithic site in the south of England, supported by site and museum visits to assess the resources from those sites. The project was so successful, it was expanded to take on all of the known Lower and Middle Palaeolithic sites in England, and was renamed the English Rivers Palaeolithic Survey. A parallel project was mounted by Cadw in Wales. John was assisted by the redoubtable Phil Harding, and, as one obituary writer put it, they visited almost every known site in the country, an achievement unlikely to be repeated ever again. This was a ‘State of the Nation Address’ for the arrival of the new century. Its timely publication provided the discipline with a clear statement about the extent, and character of the British Palaeolithic resource.

During this period John was Chairman of the Lithic Studies Society (1990–1994) and he is remembered as one of our most able and inspiring Chairmen. He was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1993 by the University of Reading. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1996 to great acclaim. In 1998 the Lithic Studies Society honoured John with a festschrift. He was genuinely taken aback at the gesture. John was a modest man and could never really understand the high regard others held him in. He was also President of the Quaternary Research Association, and of the Prehistoric Society. John was a deeply humane man with a strong sense of justice. This was never more evident than when he resigned his presidency of the Prehistoric Society on a point of moral principle. Southampton University’s Archaeology Department led a boycott of South African academics. John was angered by this as he felt it alienated academics, the very people who were working hardest to effect genuine change in South Africa from within. Some of these academics were resisting the apartheid government at great risk to their own lives. He robustly defended his decision all his life.
John never really retired. After the English Rivers Palaeolithic Survey was completed, he sat down to write an academic summary of the project’s results — this was published in 1999, as ‘The Lower Palaeolithic Occupation of Britain’; a very fitting testament to a long and distinguished career (Wymer 1999). He was awarded the Grahame Clark Medal in 2002. One cloud on the horizon was Mollie’s unexpected death in 1999, which affected John deeply. But he continued to work. His last project concerned Pakefield, currently the oldest site in Britain. It is fitting that what must be his last publication during his life time, was in the journal Nature, where with other colleagues, he described the Pakefield site (Parfitt et al. 2005). It included a number of his illustrations. It was this same journal that had launched his career in 1955 when he announced the discovery of the Swanscombe skull fragment.

It is impossible in such a short space to do justice to John’s approach to life and work. He was a gentleman to the core of his being. I have mentioned his commitment to fair play, but he also had a very refined sense of proportion. You could have a heated conference debate with John, yet he was always the first at the bar to buy you a drink and compliment you on an excellent afternoon’s archaeology. I well remember after one such session I arrived at the bar still frothing at the mouth. A smiling John was waiting there with a pint for me. Before I could even open my mouth to continue ranting he stuck his index finger in my shirt collar. This stopped me cold. He smiled. “I had an old chemistry teacher in school,” he said, “he used to say if you got hot under the collar, you’d already lost the argument. Now drink your beer!”

That sense of perspective, fun, and enthusiasm for the subject is no better illustrated than in a cartoon John drew characterising his view of Nick Ashton’s and my opinion of the Clactonian debate which we pursued with John for many years. We reproduce this for LSS members to appreciate once more (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: John's cartoon (the speech bubble reads: “The Clactonians made hand-axes!”)](image)
John died in Southampton hospital after a brief illness. With his passing our subject has lost one of its most able ambassadors, and a great champion. We will not see his like again for a long time. John’s son-in-law, Glenn L. Cooper, who read the eulogy at the funeral, summed him up nicely. “John was not a man of the twenty first century, nor was he a man of the twentieth century either.” As I sit and finish this appreciation, I have a postcard on my shelves that John wrote many years ago to thank me for bringing him some biltong back from South Africa — who nowadays sends thank you notes? On it is a quotation by Gerard Manley Hopkins, which I think epitomises John’s outlook on his world.

“What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wilderness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.”

John James Wymer, born 5th March 1928, died 10th February 2006.

Palaeolithic Archaeologist.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


