

PETER ROBINS 1924–2015

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News of Peter Robins' death will be met with much sadness by all those who knew him, but his contribution to Norfolk's archaeology is assured. A gentleman of the old school, and one of the last true sons of colonial empire, Peter was active for many years in the Norfolk Archaeological Rescue Group and its successor organisation NAHRG, and of the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society, serving on its Council 1993–1999. He will also be remembered for his longstanding contribution to the Archaeology Department at Norwich Castle Museum in which he worked for many years, officially as a volunteer but in reality often as an extra member of staff for which his title of Research Associate did not adequately cover. Peter was also very proud to serve on the Council of the Prehistoric Society, and was at that time the only amateur member.

Born 17 September 1924, Peter Alan Robins trained as a chemist; he was awarded his PhD in 1946 by The Royal College of Science (Imperial College, London). He continued as a Senior Research Fellow there, and then at the Colonial Insecticide Research Unit before moving to the National Institute for Medical Research. A lifelong love of Africa began in 1957 when he became a lecturer in Organic Chemistry at University College, Southern Rhodesia. Five years later he was appointed Professor in Chemistry at Royal College, Nairobi (subsequently the University of Nairobi) in Kenya. He held this position for twenty years before finally becoming Professor of Chemistry at the University of Botswana 1982–1985.

On retiring, Peter and wife Nell moved back to the UK and settled in Norfolk where, in what amounted to a second career, Peter worked on the county's prehistoric archaeology. Although a chemist, Peter had worked in Africa with the famous Leakey family of archaeologists and palaeoanthropologists, an experience that had



Figure 1. Peter Robins at Happisburgh.

fired his interest in stone tools especially of the Palaeolithic. Armed with this interest and knowledge, Peter soon became a recognised expert in the county, recording (and often illustrating) lithic finds for the Norfolk Historic Environment Record, as well as ordering the county collection of lithics held in Norwich Castle (often aided by Nell, who was drafted as his assistant). He also contributed notes and articles to various journals. While all this could have provided an ample monument to his efforts, Peter's most valuable contribution was fittingly international in significance.

Peter recognised the true interest of a perfectly fresh handaxe found on Happisburgh beach in 2000 by an eagle-eyed beachcomber (and swiftly ensured it was donated to the county collections): it had been stratified in its embedding clay, leading to the discovery of the site of Britain's, and northern Europe's, oldest hominin activity. Perhaps as important as his recognition of the handaxe's significance was that Peter's knowledge had earned him the respect of, and contact with, other Palaeolithic

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specialists and membership of the Ancient Human Occupation of Britain project (AHOB). The discovery led to seasonal work at Happisburgh by the British Museum and Natural History Museum, furthering our understanding of human evolution by pushing back occupation at this latitude some 200,000 years to 700,000 BP. It also led to the discovery of lithic assemblages elsewhere along this stretch of coast and even the recognition of early hominin footprints preserved in the clay below Happisburgh beach. The Happisburgh Handaxe has thus become a celebrated, indeed iconic, object and was selected as the most important British archaeological find of recent years by one television series.

Through it all, Peter was a modest figure, unassuming about his role in the story, but eager to participate in the subsequent excavations.

Despite being well into his eighties, all who participated remember that spirit of the colonies living on as Peter withstood the more temperate climate of the east coast wearing shorts and a safari jacket, yet putting in a shift the envy of many much younger than him. Inevitably, his final years in Norfolk saw both him and Nell suffer bouts of ill-health. With this in mind, they moved to Australia to live with their daughter Jane, where Peter was still active, 'working on the property', weeding and clearing up branches. A sudden illness overtook him, resulting in two heart attacks; he died on 17 February 2015. He leaves his widow Nell, two children, three grandchildren and the heartfelt gratitude of archaeologists not only in Norfolk but internationally.