

III. Conference reports

Canon William Greenwell and His Contemporaries: The History of British Archaeology in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Pam Graves

Director, Leverhulme Trust Greenwell Project
Department of Archaeology, University of Durham, UK

A conference was held at Durham University on 16th and 17th April, 2005, on the subject of Canon William Greenwell, antiquarian in the North of England, author of *British Barrows* (1877) and the originator of the Greenwell Collection in the British Museum. The conference was hosted jointly by the Leverhulme Trust Greenwell Project, based in Durham University; the AHRB Centre for North-East England History; and the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland, of which Greenwell had been the celebrated president for over 40 years. The conference was sponsored by a grant from the Awards for All Lottery grants programme. Speakers came from far afield as did members of the Greenwell family, including representatives from Hawaii and California as well as Greenwell Ford, Lanchester, County Durham.

The conference was intended to be a celebration of the Canon and his polymath activities; and to put him in the context of his contemporary collectors and antiquarians. The keynote address was delivered by Professor Tim Murray from La Trobe University, Australia, on the present status of the discipline of History of Archaeology; and of the context in which Greenwell operated. In respect of the latter, he pointed out the increase in the sheer mass of information accumulated in the nineteenth century; the sharing of information amongst antiquarians and the awareness of what others were doing in the field; and, consequently, the increase in the scales of comparison antiquarians were able to make. He identified the subject of cranial analysis, and the interpretations put on this, as a central facet of antiquarian and archaeological research in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This topic, in particular, recurred in questions at the end of the conference.

The first four papers explored aspects of antiquarianism in Northern England. Rosemary Sweet, of the Department of Economics and Social History, University of Leicester placed Greenwell's range of interests within the context of antiquarianism, and traditions of enquiry, growing out of the eighteenth century. A disproportionate number of antiquarians were Anglican clergy, and the North-East of England in particular had a strong representation in urban historians of the period. Greenwell was entirely typical of this group in that his concerns included the histories of the social elite, the descent of property, ecclesiastical architecture and landholdings. The clergy were accustomed to gathering information, and had the social connections which gave them access to the local elite, and their private papers. To this established tradition, Sweet noted that the Northern antiquarians had a specific interest in, and respect for, the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria which gave their work a strong perceptual coherence and identity.

The two following papers looked at antiquarianism in geographical areas bordering Greenwell's Durham and Northumberland. Both considered the tensions between antiquarian preoccupations and the rapid industrialisation of these parts of England, formerly predominantly agricultural. In "Stones and Starfish – Greenwell and the rise of the antiquary in nineteenth century Cumbria", Steve Dickinson, an Archaeology Consultant, placed Greenwell's work in the context of late nineteenth century Cumbria and Victorian social reform, looking at how antiquarian activities and classification acted both as a motivation towards, and restriction of, the development of archaeological science. Blaise Vyner, also an Archaeological Consultant, but working in the Tees Valley, considered antiquarianism in nineteenth-century Cleveland and north-east Yorkshire. Pre-eminent amongst these antiquaries, was Canon Atkinson of Danby, who assisted Greenwell in the excavation of several Bronze Age burial mounds. Three groups of antiquaries were identified – churchmen; a group who called themselves the "Cleveland Bards"; and men from the new industrial town of Middlesbrough. Their interests focused particularly in the excavation of Bronze Age barrows and were justified variously in the identification of a pagan, barbaric and uncivilised past. Vyner juxtaposed these ideas with the context of the new iron and steel industries along the lower Tees.

The contribution of other regionally important antiquarians, contemporary with Greenwell, was discussed by Rob Young, Archaeologist with the Northumberland National Park Authority. He argued that the work of George Tate, William Hilton-Dyer Longstaffe, David Dippie Dixon and Henry Maclaughlin, in particular deserved resurrection and reassessment. In his opinion, all of these made contributions that were equally as important as Greenwell's yet their work has not received the recognition that it should have. Longstaffe, especially, had a range of interests, depth of knowledge and erudition to equal Greenwell. Young returned to the theme of the hold that Saxon Northumbria seemed to have maintained over the imaginations of these men, providing a geographical and historical framework for much of their activity.

Two papers dealt with the adoption of The Three Age system in Britain and Ireland, both arguing that the process was neither immediate nor straightforward. C. Stephen Briggs (Llanrhystud, Ceredigion, Wales) argued that, despite milestones like Daniel Wilson's *Prehistoric Scotland* (1851) resistance to the Three Age System persisted in Britain until well after the publication of Lubbock's *Prehistoric Times* in 1865. Briggs discussed some of the personalities, institutions and motives which underpinned the transmission and acceptance of the Three Age System, including the identity of the old antiquaries and the new archaeologists; their collecting activities and scholarship; and the contexts of nationalism and politics. Peter Rowley-Conwy, of the Department of Archaeology, University of Durham, considered that The Three Age System gained partial acceptance in 1860–65 amongst those proposing the new "deep time" palaeolithic, for whom intervening periods provided a link between their period and historical periods. Evenso, many English barrow-diggers remained confirmed opponents of the System. Rowley-Conwy argued that Greenwell's use of the Three Age System in his 1877 book was the main thing that finally led to its general adoption among barrow-diggers.

The first day closed with two papers that looked at aspects of Greenwell's antiquarianism involving the medieval period. Pam Graves, of the Department of Archaeology, University of Durham provided a resume of Greenwell's involvement with the Surtees Society, dedicated to the publication of manuscripts from the region which formerly constituted the ancient kingdom of Northumbria. Greenwell, himself, edited five volumes, including the Boldon Buke, as important to the North as Domesday Book is to the rest of England. Whilst Librarian to Durham Cathedral, Greenwell ordered and analysed the numerous charters and

muniments of the historically important Priory. Greenwell's passionate opprobrium of the nineteenth century destruction of church architecture and fittings in the name of Gothic Revival "restoration" was examined through a case study. Finally, the Canon's role in the opening and recording of St Cuthbert's grave in Durham Cathedral was touched on as a limited exercise in excavation of a medieval subject. Interestingly, in the light of Tim Murray's identification of the significance of craniology in British antiquarianism, the skulls uncovered within the grave were published with a discussion of their possible racial and historical implications.

Greenwell's role as an architectural historian, and in particular his important study of Durham Cathedral, was analysed by Alexandrina Buchanan, Archivist to The Clothworkers' Company, London. His interpretation of the different types of evidence (textual, structural and comparative) were compared and contrasted with that of Robert Willis, the foremost exponent of the emerging modern discipline, amongst others. By the 1870s, Willis's method was universally accepted. Whilst Greenwell used a significantly large number of Willis's technical terms (mostly Willis's innovations), he did not draw the distinctions in method and interpretation that Willis did. In fact, much of Greenwell's work would have seemed already old-fashioned in the context. Similarly, whereas dating and identification of sources of architectural forms and mouldings by comparison with a range of examples was well-established by Willis, Greenwell made few comparisons at all. There is no doubt that Greenwell was passionate about the Cathedral, but he failed to demonstrate any awareness of Durham's overall function as an evolving set of spaces for religious practice: a point that seems strangely at odds with his published opinions elsewhere on the evidence for the worship of past communities lost through over-zealous restoration. That Greenwell was in correspondence with leading figures in the field like Bilson in the late 1890s is attested by unpublished archive uncovered by Anne O'Connor, of the Greenwell Project, Durham University.

The second day of the conference opened with a well-illustrated biography of Greenwell, his immediate family, and his career as a fisherman. Jim Bennett described how, in May 1854 in partnership with James Wright, the celebrated Tweedside fly-tier, Greenwell created the Greenwell's Glory trout fly, which has become world-renowned. Besides Greenwell's collecting and excavating concerns, the conference was reminded of his active interest in civic affairs and the many public offices that he held. One office that Greenwell held for 46 years was that of President of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland, and the present incumbent, Niall Hammond, spoke on the Canon's role in this and other archaeological institutions. He focused on Greenwell's active role in promoting the conservation of historic buildings; and the attitude and position of Greenwell and his contemporaries to the purpose and social membership of North-East archaeological societies.

Having grounded the man in his regional context, the remaining papers looked towards Greenwell's wider activities, connections and contemporaries. In "The Canon and the General", Mark Bowden, Senior Investigator, English Heritage, and the biographer of General Augustus Lane Fox Pitt Rivers, assessed the relationship between the two men. Pitt Rivers, the man who has been called "the father of scientific archaeology" claimed that his "very first lessons as an excavator were derived from Canon Greenwell". Bowden tried to pin down exactly where, when and for how long the two men would have worked together, and how this might affect our view of the development of archaeological thought and technique in the later nineteenth century. Such correspondence as survives suggests a rivalry between the two, particularly where collecting was concerned.

A group of papers allowed a modern assessment of sites originally excavated by Greenwell.

Alistair Carty, of Archaeoptics Ltd., and Catherine Tuck, of English Heritage, presented a cutting-edge modern survey and interpretation of Greenwell's Pit, Grimes Graves, Norfolk. Greenwell's pioneering excavation at Grimes Graves advanced understanding of the Neolithic era in many ways. He organised and directed the excavation of the flint mine shaft now known as Greenwell's Pit. His dating of the mine and its surrounding landscape forced considerable changes in thinking about the technologies and knowledge available to Neolithic communities. This talk placed Greenwell's excavation within its historical context and demonstrated the exciting new ways in which the site will be presented to the public using thermal survey techniques and enhanced computer graphics.

The site of the Seven Sisters round barrow, on Copt Hill, County Durham was excavated by Greenwell and T. W. U. Robinson in September 1877, and published by C. T. Trechmann in 1914. It was re-excavated by the Friends of Copt Hill, directed by Jacqui Hutton, (now Cambridge Archaeology Unit), in 2003. A paper recounting this re-excavation was presented to the conference. Besides elucidating, in modern terms, the sequence of activity on the site from the Mesolithic to Iron Age, the re-excavation identified Greenwell's method of digging. From the start, lines of stones began to appear within the barrow, and these have been interpreted as Greenwell's revetment walls. His team excavated vertically through the mound from the south towards the centre, constructing walls behind them as they moved forward. A cist was also found, but the absence of artefacts suggested that it had been opened by Greenwell, and the 1877 trench had been widened to investigate it. Small flints were recovered from areas disturbed by Greenwell's trench, and the majority of bones were small, evidently missed by Greenwell. It was not possible to locate the eastern and northern extents of the 1877 trench in the 2003 season.

Greenwell's exploration of Heathery Burn Cave, and the implication of his work in the development of our understanding of metalwork hoards and deposits was discussed by Anthony Harding, of the Department of Archaeology, Exeter University. A further contribution from Harding considered Greenwell's annotations to his copy of Bateman's *Ten Years Digging* (1861).

Greenwell was responsible for collecting a large number of important fragments of Anglo-Saxon and Viking-period sculpture from the north of England, and this formed the basis of the modern British Academy / AHRC Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture. (Conference delegates were able to view these stones at the evening reception held in the Monks' Dormitory of Durham Cathedral). Derek Craig, who is a Researcher for the Corpus based in the University of Durham, discussed the Canon's collecting strategy as part of his commitment to rescuing aspects of the Christian heritage of Northumbria which were threatened with destruction by the restorations of the Gothic Revival. An example of historical "buck-passing" was exposed in discussion earlier in the day. Greenwell's supposedly cavalier treatment of the Bewcastle Cross had been identified in Mark Bowden's paper as a bone of contention between the General, the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments for England, and Canon. Derek Craig was able to correct the impression that Greenwell had been the culprit; the circumstantial evidence was that a third party must have been trying to deflect blame from himself.

Two papers towards the end of the conference allowed participants to compare Greenwell with two of his contemporaries in Oxford. Megan Price, of Wolfson College, Oxford, spoke on George Rolleston (1829–1881), who like Canon Greenwell, could be called a polymath. During the 1860s and 70s Rolleston became involved in a number of archaeological excavations, amongst them the continuation of J. Y. Akerman's work at a local quarry, eventually published as *Researches and Excavations Carried on in an Ancient Cemetery at Frilford*. In July

1877 he worked on the Bronze Age site at Sigwells near South Cadbury in Somerset, and Pitt Rivers provided the topographical report. Rolleston compiled *British Barrows* with Greenwell in 1877, and it was published in 1879. Greenwell contributed the work on the archaeological finds whilst Rolleston contributed the analysis of the human remains and conclusions concerning their ethnic origins.

Megan argued that George Rolleston had played a prominent role in both the public and academic life of Oxford between 1850–1881. He attended the public debate between Thomas Huxley and Samuel Wilberforce on human origins in 1860, which Megan described as a seminal event in the evolution of a new breed of scientist. Indeed, Rolleston was intimately associated with the transformation of the teaching of human sciences at Oxford, and hence helped to shape how they were to be taught in a wider context.

The Rev. Greville John Chester was the subject of a paper by Gertrud Seidmann, also of Wolfson College, Oxford. She described Chester as “no mean controversialist” and a pamphlet published by him in 1890 on the state of archaeological collections at Oxford provoked controversy. Chester studied at Balliol College from 1849, and graduated with a BA in 1853. He subsequently entered the Church and held the benefice of a parish in Sheffield, amongst other posts. His clerical career was cut short by poor health, but it also caused him to seek kinder climates, spending each winter, from the age of forty, in Egypt and elsewhere in the Near East. These annual migrations gave him the opportunity to develop a considerable knowledge and expertise as a collector and eventually donor of archaeological artefacts. Significant amongst his donations were those to the Bodleian Library of the earliest Geniza fragments to reach Europe; a dozen early Oriental manuscripts which were given to Balliol College; a very large number of donations and a bequest of several hundred ancient gems which were made to the Ashmolean. A “Chester Room” was designated in the Museum in recognition of his benevolence and scholarship.

The final paper was given by Anne O’Connor, Department of Archaeology, University of Durham, on the collecting strategies of William Greenwell. By using Greenwell’s unpublished correspondence to identify the strategies and aims which drove Greenwell and his contacts to collect, this paper challenged the notoriety he has gained in certain quarters as an unscrupulous collector and barrow-robber. O’Connor discussed how Greenwell acquired artefacts through excavation or by purchase from auctions or dealers. The most interesting negotiations, however, took place between fellow collectors. She revealed an intricate network of exchange within which collectors shared information, exchanged artefacts and created mutual obligations. They helped and sometimes hindered the efforts of their colleagues in this highly competitive field. They also exchanged opinions about the aims and benefits of collecting which add a philanthropic glow to the usual accounts of an avaricious and wily Canon Greenwell.

Discussion throughout the conference ranged from the recurrent theme of craniology, its uses and abuses, to the role of women in the antiquarian societies and the extent of their involvement in antiquarian pursuits. Further consideration was given to Greenwell’s achievements in the world of palaeography and diplomatic, where he exposed many of the Cathedral charters as medieval forgeries. Many speakers identified the importance of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria as a perceptual unit for the antiquarians of the north of England. Key things to have come out of the conference were: the range of Greenwell’s activities and erudition; the importance Greenwell paid to stratigraphic excavation at Cissbury and Grimes Graves; his influence on other practitioners. The Greenwell Project continues until the end of 2006, and we welcome information, and news of archive relating to Greenwell (please email: Anne.O’Connor@durham.ac.uk).