

I. Editorial

Welcome to the first volume of the *BHA* for 2009. In this issue we have two significant biographies of British archaeologist one (R. G. Collingwood) who was famous in his own time and another (John Robert Mortimer) whose fame was rather more local. These contributions help remind us that there is still much to learn about the 'great' archaeologists and those whose work (frequently unfairly) has faded from view.

We have our usual contributions from subscribers alerting the readership either to their own work or to recent publications of others, and our regular book review section. In this issue we also have a substantial contribution related to the important AREA Project into the history of European archaeology, a timely discussion of the value of oral history to the history of archaeology, and a report on the activities of the HARN (History of Archaeology Network) that really seems to be taking off.

Let me remind you that the *BHA* website is an excellent place to put material (advertising for upcoming meetings and the like) that won't wait for regular publication in the *BHA*. Our bulletin board is freely accessible. You can also make subscription payments on-line now – in fact we would prefer that you do so from now on. This helps keep our costs (and hence the price of subscriptions) down. Even in these days of financial turmoil the *BHA* remains remarkably good value. So visit our website (www.archaeologybulletin.org) and encourage others to do so as well. We are always keen to sign-up new subscribers and are keener to publish your work.

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Tim Murray

II. Papers

A Local Hero: John Robert Mortimer and the Birth of Archaeology in East Yorkshire

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John Robert Mortimer (1825–1911) dominated archaeological activity in the East Riding of Yorkshire during the second half of the nineteenth century, devoting much of his adult life to the systematic and careful examination of large numbers of prehistoric barrows on the chalklands of the Yorkshire Wolds (Harrison 1996a). So thoroughly was this objective pursued that he was later able to write that it would not be possible ‘to make another collection from the barrows of this district ... as they are practically exhausted’ (Mortimer 1898:141). He can, with justification, be described as the last of the great barrow-diggers.

While his overall contribution to the development of modern British archaeology is well established, he is, paradoxically, the least understood of all those figures associated with the discipline’s birth. Vulnerable, volatile and insecure, Mortimer’s personality and life was a web of contradictions, confusions, frustrations and unresolved, and ultimately un-resolvable, tensions. From whatever perspective, whether personal or professional, he was an outsider, prevented by the



John Robert Mortimer, 1825–1911. (Stephen Harrison Collection)

circumstances of his birth and education from transcending the rigid boundaries, which structured nineteenth century English society. Throughout his life, he inhabited a ‘border country’ within the social, economic and cultural framework of nineteenth century England. And yet, in other ways, he was a typical, if not very successful, product of Victorian capitalism.

To trace out the life and work of Mortimer is to understand better the roots of contemporary British archaeology. Indeed, any appreciation of the value of modern archaeology is impossible without looking back at figures such as Mortimer. As Ashbee has written:

For an archaeologist the need to understand the development of his discipline is an imperative ... All too often shallow and simplistic assertions have done considerable injustice to earlier scholars and have trivialised the complicated issues (Ashbee 1988:4).

Seen as an introduction to his later self-defined career, Mortimer’s early life seems fraught with improbabilities. His humble birth, upbringing and education were not an obvious preparation for his adult life as one of those seminal figures responsible for the birth of modern British archaeology.

Gaining the acceptance of, and recognition from, that small group of upper and upper-middle class professionals who formed the national archaeological elite of the time was to become a central concern throughout much of Mortimer's adult life, albeit an ambition doomed to failure. Despite his undoubted talent, achievements and unrivalled local knowledge, he was accused of 'not knowing his place' in the grand scheme of things, held at arms length, and marginalized – on occasion described as deceitful, distrusting, conniving and secretive. This antagonism, largely the result of his ambiguous class position, would later spill over into a very public altercation, involving Canon William Greenwell, leaving Mortimer further alienated from the interest group to which he so desperately sought affiliation. In large measure, Mortimer himself was responsible for this situation, his exclusion self-created, deriving from many of his own actions, and proceeding in turn from his whole personality.

John Robert Mortimer was born on 15 June 1825 at Fimber, in the East Riding of Yorkshire, the eldest child of James and Hannah Mortimer. Although born into a farming family, he was of peasant ancestry, his parents only one generation removed from the rural poor. Both James' and Hannah's parents had, as a result of small legacies, managed to enter the lower ranks of the local farming community. Hannah's father, John Welburn, had bought a 120-acre farm at Fimber in 1801, whilst James' father, Robert, became a respected tenant farmer at Mount Ferrant, on the Birdsall estate of Lord Middleton, some half a dozen miles west of Fimber. James was eventually to take over the 60-acre Mount Ferrant tenancy in 1828.

John, his sister Mary (1827–1891) and brother Robert (1829–1892) were all born and grew up on the Fimber farm of their maternal grandparents. From his memoirs, written in 1903 but not published until 1978, he appears to have had an unremarkable childhood, with nothing to indicate an interest in archaeology.

His education was confined to attending schools in Fimber and nearby Fridaythorpe, where he received nothing more than 'the crude and scanty instruction afforded by these primitive seats of learning' (Mortimer 1905:ix). And even this was disrupted by frequent asthma attacks and having to work on the family farm at busy times in the agricultural cycle. Largely uneducated, then, his later achievements are all the more remarkable.



The birthplace of John Robert Mortimer. (Stephen Harrison Collection, ex-John Hicks archive)

John left school in 1843 and began working on the Fimber farm, which had, following the death of his grandfather, eventually been taken over by James Mortimer. It was expected that, as the elder son, he would follow in his father's footsteps and become a farmer. It was a sound, commonsense action plan, ensuring that the ageing father would have an assistant and eventually someone to take over the farm, providing John with a full, rounded experience of mixed farming.

By and large he passively followed the course his parents had plotted for him. By dint of spending years working in the fields under the supervision of experienced farmers, he acquired a full knowledge of every aspect of the agricultural cycle. His later recollections of his youth were dominated by the agrarian setting, by 'fustian jackets and long frock-smocks', by 'driving sheep to various grass fields', and by 'carting manure and thrashing corn with a flail', as much as by the 'plain' bread, cheese, bacon and salted beef which formed the staple country diet of the time. Like other country boys, he graduated from the general routine of farm work, from hoeing and acting as a living scarecrow, to 'the advanced labours, such as stacking the corn in harvest time, following the corn and turnip drills during seed-time, and serving the horse thrashing-machine' (Mortimer 1978:25–26). By his late teens, there was no branch of farming he had not tried his hand at, from delivering calves and foals to clearing the matted straw from the drains and driving livestock to market at Malton or Driffild. In particular, he responded to the one-to-one tuition offered by the owners of small, subsistence farms who worked alongside him and enlivened instruction and backbreaking toil by passing on local lore, stories and gossip.

Unlike his workaholic father, who seldom left home except for business reasons, John was always on the look out for whatever entertainment the village and surrounding countryside had to offer. He spent much time outdoors in exploration, becoming very knowledgeable about, and intimate with, his part of the Yorkshire Wolds. His particular passions were wildlife and geology, in part laying the unconscious foundations for his later life in archaeology.

If the long view is taken, the development of Mortimer's career as an archaeologist evolved through a number of clearly defined, but overlapping, incremental stages. The last phase, that of excavation, was the culmination of a progression of activities, each building on and consolidating previously accumulated knowledge and experience, which began in 1851. This is not to imply any predetermined conscious course. His archaeological career developed organically, each stage representing the logical, but, at the time, unintended extension of his widening interests.

Although John had occasionally come into contact with antiquities during his early years, it was not until 1851 that his interest in archaeology was first seriously aroused. In that year, during a two-week stay in London, he visited the Great Exhibition and the British Museum, both of which proved formative:

The marvellous treasures in the Exhibition [Crystal Palace], and the unrivalled geological and archaeological collections in the British Museum, were of the greatest pleasure and interest to me, and I can truly say originated and stimulated my future scientific tastes through life ... I can truly say that my visits ... were a great stimulus to me, affording advanced ideas and additional pleasure in the pursuit of knowledge (Mortimer 1978:28–29).

The cumulative outcome was the diversion of his 'scientific tastes from astronomy to geology and archaeology' (Mortimer 1978:28). Thus began a journey in search of the past, which, from the early 1850s onwards, came to all but take over his life. His commitment was total and all consuming. Archaeology gave him an identity, liberating him from his class.

Following the London visit, his new-found enthusiasm was clearly infectious and, before long, both he and his brother Robert were combing the fields around their home village for geological specimens and prehistoric artefacts. This work proceeded fairly systematically over the next few years, and involved the training of local farmworkers 'to distinguish and keep for us any geological and archaeological specimens they could find' (Mortimer 1898:135). Of these years, Thomas Sheppard, first curator of