JOHN WYMER *Jim Rose*

John James Wymer
1928–2006

On a wet June day in 1997 a party of archaeologists met at the Swan in the small Suffolk village of Hoxne to celebrate a short letter that changed the way we understand our origins. Two hundred years before, the Suffolk landowner John Frere had written to the Society of Antiquaries of London about flint 'weapons' that had been dug up in the local brickyard. He noted the depth of the strata in which they lay alongside the bones of unknown animals of enormous size. He concluded with great prescience that 'the situation in which these weapons were found may tempt us to refer them to a very remote period indeed; even beyond that of the present world'.[1]

Frere's letter is now recognised as the starting point for Palaeolithic, old stone age, archaeology. In two short pages he identified stone tools as objects of curiosity in their own right. But he also reasoned that because of their geological position they were 'fabricated and used by a people who had not the use of metals'.[2]

The bi-centenary gathering was organised by John Wymer who devoted his professional life to the study of the Palaeolithic and whose importance to the subject extended far beyond a brickpit in Suffolk. Wymer was the greatest field naturalist of the Palaeolithic. He had acute gifts of observation and an attention to detail for both artefacts and geology that was unsurpassed. He provided a typology and a chronology for the earliest artefacts of Britain and used these same skills to establish

[1] R. Singer, B. G. Gladfelter and J. J. Wymer, *The Lower Palaeolithic Site at Hoxne, England* (London, 1993), p. 1.
[2] Singer, Gladfelter and Wymer, *The Lower Palaeolithic Site at Hoxne, England*.

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major sequences in South Africa. In doing so he ordered and energised what was a neglected and demoralised subject so that now it is one of the most vibrant communities in British archaeology.

The Palaeolithic tradition

Wymer belonged to the tradition of field observation begun by Frere with his provocative letter. The collection of flint artefacts gathered pace during the nineteenth century driven by the scientific investigation of human antiquity. These activities culminated in the landmark work of Sir John Evans, *The ancient stone implements, weapons and ornaments, of Great Britain*, first published in 1872. This remarkable volume drew together all that was then known about stone tools into a national archive. It was based on Evans's many visits to sites as well as his extensive correspondence with collectors from around Britain. Indeed his work inspired collecting on a massive scale by enthusiasts such as Dr Allen Sturge and Henry Stopes whose stone archives passed respectively to the British Museum and the National Museum of Wales in the early years of the twentieth century. Neither were they isolated examples. Members of The Prehistoric Society of East Anglia, founded in 1908, had under its dynamic President J. Reid Moir, a fanatical zeal to collect stone tools. A trend that continued until 1935 when, in a skilfully managed coup, Sir Grahame Clark, FBA, transformed them into The Prehistoric Society with an international agenda.

Evans was however much more than a flint collector. Along with Sir John Lubbock and assisted by Sir Charles Lyell, he propelled Palaeolithic archaeology into a lead role in the evolutionary synthesis that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was the young Evans who in 1859 on his visit to the Somme with geologist Joseph Prestwich had confirmed the observations of Boucher de Perthes that stone artefacts and extinct animals were indeed associated. Thus the high antiquity of humans was proved in the same year as the publication of *On the origin of species* where Darwin set out the mechanism of natural selection to account for biological variation. Prior to *Ancient stone implements*, Sir John Lubbock had in his 1865 *Pre-historic times* divided the stone age into Palaeolithic and Neolithic, a division that Evans followed. The majority of his chapters are devoted to Neolithic stone types; perforated axes, grinding-stones, scrapers etc. However, it was the final section on implements of the Palaeolithic periods that set the framework which

Wymer was to spend his life refining. In the second edition of 1897, Evans divided the material into those from caves and river deposits. He established a geographical approach to the archive and directed attention to the stratigraphical position and faunal associations of the material.

Evans died in 1908 and Lubbock, by then Lord Avebury, five years later. With them went a good deal of the common sense behind Palaeolithic archaeology and the subject quickly lost its pole position in the scientific pantheon. The quest for the oldest stone tools came to dominate the activities of flint enthusiasts and East Anglia proved a particularly happy hunting ground. However, not everything that was found proved to be humanly made. Reid Moir believed passionately in eoliths, or dawn stones, from the Cromer Forest Bed on the Norfolk coast, while others such as Hazeldine Warren pointed to mechanical explanations such as wave action to account for the patterns of fracture.

While the eolith debate grew ever more acrimonious with claims and counter-claims of artefact and geofact, one enthusiast who remained untouched by the invective was John Wymer's father. Indeed, his parents had been visiting gravel pits along the Thames near the family home in Kew for some years. They had a launch moored at Staines which provided an agreeable way to visit pits and appreciate the riverscape.

They had a passion to understand more about the geological setting for the abundant flint tools that came from Britain's major river. Their visits coincided with some of the last days of digging the sand and gravel pits by hand. Sections would be exposed slowly and stand for some time while the quarrymen also supplemented their income by selling-on the handaxes and other stone tools that they found, and in some cases made! The young John Wymer, born on 5 March 1928, therefore learned about Palaeolithic archaeology and Pleistocene geology as a result of family expeditions to a world of small-scale diggings for a necessary but poorly rewarded industry. He came to know the local landscape, and then England, through cycling expeditions with his brother. Fifty miles a day was their target, a 10 shilling note sewn into their jackets in case of emergencies.[3] A devotee of public transport and walking, his advice in later years was always to take the bus if you wanted to count the number of river terraces; going uphill in a city like Bournemouth or Southampton the driver would change gear with each new terrace step.

[3] A. Lawson and A. Rogerson, 'Bifaces, booze and the blues: Anecdotes from the life and times of a Palaeolithic archaeologist', *Stone Age Archaeology: essays in honour of John Wymer*, ed. N. Ashton, F. Healy and P. Pettitt (Oxford, 1998), p. 1.

Early years

Wymer received no formal training in archaeology. He never attended university. He wrote in his diary that the first archaeological book he read was in 1948 when he was in the RAF. It was Jacquetta Hawkes's *Prehistoric Britain* and it stirred his curiosity. After National Service he took a job as an audit clerk with British Rail and worked for Amalgamated Press as a screen printer. All three occupations were to fashion his thoroughness and attention to detail. He did not settle and in 1955 completed a certificate in teacher training, followed by a brief period spent teaching. However, in the same year, at the age of 27, those long searches in the gravel pits of the Thames had taken a remarkable turn. During work with his father in the disused gravel pit at Swanscombe, North Kent, Wymer found on 30 July, a Saturday, an *in-situ* piece of human skull in the Upper Middle Gravels. The Barnfield Pit at Swanscombe had been known for many years and had produced thousands of stone tools, in particular pointed handaxes. The long sequence also had evidence for an older non-handaxe occupation, named Clactonian after the Essex type site. But what was remarkable about Wymer's discovery, the result of patient, systematic searching and observation, was that the skull fragment (a right parietal) fitted perfectly with two other pieces from the same skull that had been found elsewhere in the same gravels in 1935 and 1936 by A. T. Marston. Wymer recalled that his skull fragment had the consistency of wet soap, but it fitted together with the other pieces, the stratigraphic context was precise and a paper in *Nature*, his first published work, quickly followed.[4] Such attention to detail was Wymer's trademark. However, it was also very necessary as this was only two years after the Piltdown hoax was unmasked and the edifice of human evolutionary anatomy laid out by Sir Arthur Keith and others had finally collapsed.[5] The Lower Palaeolithic Swanscombe find was much needed coming as it did at a moment when Palaeolithic and palaeontological studies were demoralised by the fallout from Piltdown. Swanscombe remains the only Middle Pleistocene skull from Britain and is now dated to about 400,000 years old.

This discovery, but above all his systematic approach to recording, led to the end of his teaching career when he accepted a post at Reading

[4] J. J. Wymer, 'A further fragment of the Swanscombe skull', *Nature*, 176 (1955), 426–7.
[5] J. S. Weiner, K. P. Oakley and W. E. L. G. Clark, 'The solution to the Piltdown problem', *Bulletin of the British Museum of Natural History*, 2 (1953), 141–6.

Museum in 1956. This was the perfect base for his continued study of the Thames terraces and with his first wife Paula he raised not only a family in Wokingham but also the profile of Palaeolithic studies in its post-eolith, post-Piltdown days.

In 1956 there were very few professional archaeologists and even fewer studying the Palaeolithic. Dorothy Garrod, the first female professor at Cambridge, and Grahame Clark, then a lecturer in her department, were rare examples. In addition there was Frederick Zeuner at London University who brought a European perspective to issues of chronology and glacial sequences. In the national museums only Kenneth Oakley at the British Museum of Natural History had any sustained impact on the subject through his scientific approach to dating and environmental reconstruction. By contrast, the Palaeolithic tradition in France was a much stronger national enterprise. It was led by its doyen Abbé Henri Breuil and backed by substantial funding in the Institut de Palaéontologie Humaine, while a new regional centre for Quaternary studies, headed by François Bordes at Bordeaux, now concentrated on the rich caves of the Dordogne.

Interest in the British Palaeolithic was further diminished by the work of the Leakeys at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania. In 1959 their excavations of stone tools and early campsites were supplemented with the first of many fossil skulls. Crucially, in 1961, the volcanic tuffs that interleave the Olduvai stratigraphy were first dated by Potassium-Argon methods to almost 2 million years old.[6] By contrast the British ancient lake fills such as Hoxne and the gravel terraces of the Thames could not be dated by any scientific methods. Moreover, excavations were small, often casual and for the most part the artefacts that were recovered had been moved about by the rivers. It seemed that Continental Europe and Africa promised not only dateable material but also much better preserved evidence for the reconstruction of the lifeways of our earliest ancestors.

Four decades, four syntheses

The Swanscombe skull fragment was therefore welcome news indeed. Wymer, however, was never one to be discouraged by what others thought was unimportant. He set his own goal and that was to understand the

[6] L. S. B. Leakey, J. F. Evernden and G. H. Curtis, 'Age of Bed I, Olduvai Gorge, Tanganyika', *Nature*, 191 (1961), 478–9.

English river sequences which contained so many hundreds of thousands of stone tools. With the determination, but not the resources, of a Breuil or Bordes he set out to draw together all the available evidence to construct a reliable sequence. His archive was a 6 ins. × 4 ins. card index that fills 6 m of drawers and records every Lower and Middle Palaeolithic artefact from Britain. He was still adding to it a few months before he died. He will be the last person who saw nearly every Palaeolithic stone tool and noted it.

The many visits he made were meticulously recorded in his field notebooks and now represent an archive for Palaeolithic archaeologists as well as a photographic record of the social changes in the subject over the last half century. Through them we see not only his intellectual development but also his transformation into one of the great field archaeologists, as shown for example by his growing skills as a draughtsman and the development of his distinctive calligraphy. The draughtsmanship was applied to section drawings as well as to his exquisite drawings of the many flint artefacts. A Wymer drawing is instantly recognisable and they remain a benchmark of accuracy as well as interpretation.

Doing the homework; Lower Palaeolithic Britain

So, in 1956 equipped with a job, a purpose and the skills to reach his goal he began work on the first of his four major synthetic books, *Lower Palaeolithic Archaeology in Britain: as represented by the Thames Valley*.[7] He did not set out to entertain since it was 'full of what might be described as weighty archaeological and geological matters. It is, perhaps, the homework which, once done, allows us to indulge in unbounded flights of fanciful ideas about our ancestors, confident that it at least has some basis.'[8] The book is a description, site by site, river valley by river valley, of the Thames. It has the appearance of a gazetteer but to treat it as only that would be like calling Pevsner's *Buildings of England* an estate agent's catalogue. With every entry there is judgement as to significance and potential of the finds, based on their geological context and quantity; immaculately illustrated and structured by the chronological framework of the time.

[7] J. J. Wymer, *Lower Palaeolithic Archaeology in Britain, as represented by the Thames Valley* (London, 1968).
[8] Ibid., p. 4.

Wymer was working to the well-established model of four major glaciations and three intervening interglacials. This system had been proposed on the basis of Alpine glaciations and their associated river terraces in 1909.[9] Wymer followed the lead of Zeuner and tied the British system, with its local names, into the Continental system. He was able to identify the key sections containing interglacial and glacial deposits[10] and made the critical distinction between the sequences and deposits in the Upper, Middle and Lower Thames. The recent geomorphological and climatic forces that shaped the English landscape provided a relative chronological framework and he 'guessed' that the Clactonian, the earliest evidence for humans in Britain, was about 400,000 years old.[11]

This was homework indeed. In the same year Derek Roe published his gazetteer of the handaxe industries in Britain as well as a synthesis of the industries based on an innovative approach to quantification.[12] Wymer did not follow such a route. His approach to the distinctive handaxes that dominate the collections was a typology of forms rather than a metrical description.[13] He was a skilled flint knapper concerned with the technology of artefact manufacture. In particular he was interested in the distribution of material either at the scale of terraces and findspots in particular reaches of the rivers[14] or for the entire country.[15] However, Roe and Wymer had demonstrated the potential of the British sequence and pointed the way forward for the next generation of Palaeolithic archaeologists.

Mapping the muddle; Mesolithic Britain

Another decade and another significant project. Wymer's second major synthesis was a self-styled gazetteer that forms a companion to Roe's

[9] A. Penck and E. Brückner, *Die Alpen in Eiszeitalter* (Leipzig, 1909).
[10] Wymer, *Lower Palaeolithic Archaeology in Britain, as represented by the Thames Valley*, pp. 368, 371.
[11] Wymer, *Lower Palaeolithic Archaeology in Britain, as represented by the Thames Valley*, p. 388.
[12] D. Roe, 'British Lower and Middle Palaeolithic handaxe groups', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 34 (1968), 1–82; *A Gazetteer of British Lower and Middle Palaeolithic Sites* (London, 1968).
[13] Wymer, *Lower Palaeolithic Archaeology in Britain, as represented by the Thames Valley*, fig. 27.
[14] Ibid., fig. 60.
[15] Ibid., fig. 109.

work on the Lower Palaeolithic.[16] It was also sponsored by the Council for British Archaeology and covered the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods in England and Wales. Wymer was the coordinator for all the regional groups supplying data and where there were gaps in coverage he plugged them. The task was equally massive in that Mesolithic stone tools are not only more abundant but also, due to the lack of subsequent glaciation, pretty much ubiquitous. The pace of Palaeolithic discovery has always been slower whereas field-walking and excavation habitually turn up Mesolithic material. He had known this since 1949 on trips with his parents to the Brecklands where they had picked up Mesolithic material. However, what has not kept pace is the discovery of sites worth excavating. Grahame Clark led the way with his investigations at Star Carr in the Vale of Pickering, Yorkshire.[17] He combined environmental and artefactual evidence, in a site where organic preservation was good, and used them to present an economic interpretation of a band of Early Mesolithic hunters and gatherers camping on the shores of a small lake. In doing so he raised the bar very high indeed since few other Mesolithic sites have such a combination of evidence. In fact it could be argued that Star Carr was the worst thing to happen to British Mesolithic studies since it was so unrepresentative of the vast majority of finds such as those recorded in Wymer's Mesolithic gazetteer. Ever since Clark's excavation, the hunt has been on for the next Star Carr, and with little success. Wymer understood the anomalous nature of Star Carr and was not going to suffer any inferiority complex. While at the Reading Museum, and starting in 1957, he excavated the Early Mesolithic site of Thatcham in Berkshire that for evidence and age closely matches Star Carr.[18] Today the brilliance of Clark's interpretation still shines, but it is Wymer in his Thatcham report who understood more clearly how excavation could assist us to understand those flint scatters that needed to be tied into the larger geographical picture. His excavations are now remembered for the coffer dam he built so that excavation could proceed and the hazelnuts and pig bones he found. Huts were reconstructed from the patterns of flints plotted by excavated square. The result was a picture of floodplain archaeology for hunters and gatherers that is indeed of more

[16] Wymer, *Gazetteer of Mesolithic sites in England and Wales* (London, 1977).
[17] J. G. D. Clark, *Excavations at Star Carr* (Cambridge: 1954).
[18] J. J. Wymer, 'Excavations on the Mesolithic site at Thatcham: interim report', *Berkshire Archaeological Journal*, 57 (1959), p. 1–24; 'Excavations at the Maglemosian sites at Thatcham, Berkshire, England', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 28 (1962), 329–61.

relevance to the vast quantities of material collected from the surface of the fields of England, and so patiently recorded in his Mesolithic gazetteer.

Rivers and coasts: East Anglia and South Africa

In 1965 Wymer left Reading Museum and for the next fifteen years worked as research field director for Ronald Singer, a South African who specialised in Plio-Pleistocene mammals at the University of Chicago. Their plan was to return to key sites in Britain and South Africa to acquire environmental information, stratigraphic controls and absolute dates. Finding human fossils was also part of the plan especially as the 1970s saw the rise of a new debate in Palaeoanthropology concerning the origins of modern humans.

In Britain Wymer's two principal excavations were at Clacton, from 1969–70[19] and Hoxne, from 1971–8,[20] with some delay to the appearance in print of the latter which irritated Wymer considerably. These well-known localities had both been excavated many times before but what Wymer brought to them, along with Bruce Gladfelter his collaborator on geomorphology and dating, was a new scale of methodology and intellectual enquiry. For almost the first time in British Lower Palaeolithic excavations individual finds were carefully plotted and their association with faunal remains and other sedimentary features noted. At both sites Lawrence Keeley, then a research student at Oxford, examined selected specimens for traces of use wear on their edges. Such studies were possible because of the excavation strategy as well as the demonstration that much of the material had been gently deposited in fine-grained sediments and was in primary context. Through these two excavations the credentials of the British Lower Palaeolithic were re-established: well-preserved sites with a wide range of artefactual and palaeoecological data dating to the Middle Pleistocene. By the time Hoxne was published in 1993 there had been a critical revision of African sites such as Olduvai where more agents than early humans were now seen as responsible for the patterns among the bones and stones. The British Palaeolithic was beginning to

[19] R. Singer, J. J. Wymer, B. G. Gladfelter and R. G. Wolff, 'Excavation of the Clactonian industry at the golf course, Clacton-on-Sea, Essex', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 39 (1973), 6–74.

[20] Singer, Gladfelter and Wymer, *The Lower Palaeolithic Site at Hoxne*.

shake off its inferiority complex and the way was prepared for major excavations, starting in the 1980s, at Boxgrove,[21] High Lodge[22] and Barnham.[23]

Between the two site publications came Wymer's third synthesis *The Palaeolithic sites of East Anglia*.[24] Many regard this as his most important since the entries for sites are even more infused with information and interpretation than those from the earlier *Lower Palaeolithic archaeology in Britain*. Here he concentrated on the counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex and parts of Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and London. The lost rivers of the region formed his main focus and in particular the ancient Bytham River that had been discovered and described by Quaternary geologist Jim Rose who worked closely with him.[25] East Anglia is a happy hunting ground for Palaeolithic archaeology precisely because the successive ice sheets that extended across the area have buried much of the landscape and re-designed the drainage system. This process affected in particular the Bytham River that once rose in the West Midlands and South Pennines. The Bytham was the largest river in England until it was overwhelmed by the Anglian ice sheet that also resulted in diverting the river Thames to its present course through London.[26]

In his synthesis Wymer also incorporated the revolution in Pleistocene stratigraphy that resulted from the oxygen isotope record of climate change recovered from the deep sea cores. Sir Nick Shackleton, FRS, and others had shown from the isotopic analysis of microscopic foraminifera, incorporated into the sediments that accumulate on the ocean floors, that glaciations were far more frequent than the four based on the Alpine sequence.[27] In the last 780,000 years there had been no less than eight full

[21] M. B. Roberts and S. A. Parfitt, *Boxgrove: a Middle Pleistocene hominid site at Eartham Quarry, Boxgrove, West Sussex* (London, 1999).
[22] N. Ashton, J. Cook, S. G. Lewis and J. Rose, *High Lodge: Excavations by G. de G. Sieveking 1962–68 and J. Cook 1988* (London, 1992).
[23] N. M. Ashton, D. Q. Bowen, J. A. Holman, C. O. Hunt. B. G. Irving, R. A. Kemp, S. G. Lewis, J. McNabb, S. A. Parfitt and M. B. Sneddon, 'Excavation at the Lower Palaeolithic site at East Farm Barnham, Suffolk: 1989–1992', *Journal of the Geological Society*, 151 (1994), 599–605.
[24] J. J. Wymer, *The Palaeolithic Sites of East Anglia* (Norwich, 1985).
[25] J. Rose, 'Status of the Wolstonian glaciation in the British Quaternary', *Quaternary Newsletter*, 53 (1987), 1–9; 'Major river systems of central and southern Britain in the Early and Middle Pleistocene', *Terra Nova*, 6 (1994), 435–43.
[26] J. R. Lee, J. Rose, R. J. O. Hamblin and B. S. P. Moorlock, 'Dating the earliest lowland glaciation of eastern England: a pre-MIS 12 early Middle Pleistocene glaciation', *Quaternary Science Reviews*, 23 (2004), 1551–66.
[27] N. J. Shackleton and N. D. Opdyke, 'Oxygen isotope and palaeomagnetic stratigraphy of Equatorial Pacific core V28–238', *Quaternary Research*, 3 (1973), 39–55.

glacial–interglacial cycles. The timing and duration of these were known from palaeomagnetic dating in ocean and ice cores and in long sedimentary sequences on land; for example, lake basins in Southern Europe and the massive loess profiles in Central Europe and China. The challenge for all archaeologists was now to determine to which of the many interglacial stages sites such as Hoxne and Clacton belonged. Obtaining absolute dates was still problematic and the answer was through their stratigraphic relationship to such events as the Anglian ice advance and via biostratigraphy, that uses the rich faunal and floral records in these sedimentary archives, to refine the picture. Ahead of most of his contemporaries, Wymer now started to make this transition to the new Quaternary timescale and patterns of climate change. He was happiest with the old terms of Anglian, Wolstonian and Devensian for the glaciations but in *The Palaeolithic sites of East Anglia* he established, through an insightful series of sketch maps, how the rivers and their archaeology had changed as a result of the more fluid and complex picture of climate change that had now emerged. His summary maps stand as one of the break-throughs in Palaeolithic geography, turning the obscure science of river-terrace stratigraphy into a regional, changing landscape. It would be these insights and the homework he provided that in 2001 would lead to the *Ancient Human Occupation of Britain* project funded by the Leverhulme Trust and led by Chris Stringer, FRS, at the Natural History Museum.[28] Among the rewards for this project was the discovery in traditional eolith territory of a handaxe, found on the beach at Happisburgh by Mike Chambers, a local resident, and then through excavations the recovery of indisputably worked flints from Pakefield at the mouth of the pre-Anglian Bytham River.[29] Their age of around 800,000 marks the currently oldest traces of humans in Britain.

The second strand of Singer's Chicago based project had international ambitions and again Wymer delivered important results. This led them eventually to the coast of South Africa and the excavation between 1966 and 1968 of a massive cave at Klasies River Mouth, 400 miles east of Cape Town. In two long excavation seasons Wymer uncovered a sequence

[28] C. Stringer, *Homo britannicus: the incredible story of human life in Britain* (London, 2006).

[29] S. Parfitt, R. W. Barendregt, M. Breda, I. Candy, M. J. Collins, G. R. Coope, P. Durbridge, M. H. Field, J. R. Lee, A. M. Lister, R. Mutch, K. E. H. Penkman, R. Preece, J. Rose, C. Stringer, R. Symmons, J. E. Whittaker, J. J. Wymer and A. J. Stuart, 'The earliest record of human activity in northern Europe', *Nature*, 438 (2005), 1008–12.

25 metres in height through a vast midden of shells, animal bones and stone tools.[30] The site proved remarkably rich in traces of fireplaces, indicating repeated visits, and over a quarter of a million Middle Stone Age (MSA) artefacts were excavated. The size of these assemblages would have daunted many, but not Wymer, who divided them on the basis of typology and technology into four main phases with the distinctive Howiesons Poort industry stratified between the second and third phases. Singer was also rewarded with some human remains that had a distinctive modern appearance.

The work that Wymer undertook has been re-analysed on a number of occasions but these results are poorly published compared to Wymer's towering achievement. As a result, the primary archive has been repeatedly quarried and helped set an agenda for the study of modern human origins. With good timing the site was excavated as the debate in palaeonthropology that was to dominate the 1980s and early 1990s started. This involved proponents of an origin for modern humans in Africa and its opponents who argued for multi-regional evolution in distinct geographical regions.[31] This debate between a human revolution and human continuity provided the wider framework into which the Klasies River Mouth discoveries were placed. The development of science-based dating pushed the age of the Klasies human remains back in time. Moreover, their association with MSA tools, that in Europe would be regarded as the handiwork of Neanderthals, challenged the orthodox view of how culture and anatomy went together. Today it is Wymer's sequence at Klasies River Mouth, supplemented by other excavations along the same coast, as at Blombos Cave,[32] that has set the standard. While South Africa may be a continental size cul-de-sac for the wider issues of human evolution its status is comparable to that for another peripheral region, Britain. In both cases, as Wymer showed, the archaeology from these regions serves us well in pointing to the timing and direction of trends in human evolution that elsewhere are blurred by too much data because they lie at the centre

[30] R. Singer and J. J. Wymer, *The Middle Stone Age at Klasies River Mouth in South Africa* (Chicago, 1982).

[31] P. A. Mellars and C. Stringer (eds.), *The Human Revolution: behavioural and biological perspectives on the origins of modern humans* (Edinburgh, 1989).

[32] C. S. Henshilwood, J. C. Sealy, R. Yates, K. Cruz-Uribe, P. Goldberg, F. E. Grine, R. G. Klein, C. Poggenpoel, K. van Niekerk and I. Watts, 'Blombos Cave, Southern Cape, South Africa: preliminary report on the 1992–1999 excavations of the Middle Stone Age levels', *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 28 (2001), 421–48.

of such developments. This aspect of the record and the importance of both regions to the wider issues of human development were set out in his global survey of the period.[33] *The Palaeolithic Age* presented his first-hand experiences of stone age data in an uncomplicated narrative of technological progress and achievement.

Father of the British Acheulean, and FBA

In the acknowledgements to his last synthesis *The Lower Palaeolithic Occupation of Britain*, John Wymer characteristically recalled, 'I am very conscious of the statement I once heard in my youth from a wise man (actually a tramp with a philosophical and poetic frame of mind, on a 65 bus between Kingston and Richmond) that "the idea is more important than the execution". I think he was right.'[34] This was also the case when it came to employment. The Chicago grant ended in 1980 and after a year's Research Fellowship at East Anglia, Wymer was again looking for a job. His search coincided with the rise of regional archaeological field units funded at first through English Heritage and later by the developers themselves under the policy of 'the polluter pays'. The purpose of these field units was to record archaeological evidence before it was destroyed. The pace of destruction was unparalleled with deep ploughing destroying monuments that were last ploughed in the Bronze Age while infrastructure and building projects were making increasing demands for aggregates with new pits being opened on a mechanised scale in which archaeological remains were simply lost, and old pits were abandoned, overgrown or backfilled and restored.

But what archaeological unit would employ a Palaeolithic archaeologist? The subject in 1980 was still regarded as a warm-up to the main show; those standing-stone monuments of later prehistory, Roman towns, walls and roads, and the urban centres of medieval England. However, Wymer's previous career at Reading Museum now stood him in good stead. While he will be remembered for his time there by his excavations at Thatcham and the publication of his book on the Lower Palaeolithic of the Thames, he had also dug the Lambourn Neolithic long

[33] J. J. Wymer, *The Palaeolithic Age* (London, 1982).
[34] J. J. Wymer, *The Lower Palaeolithic Occupation of Britain* (Salisbury, 1999), p. xiv.

barrow,[35] drawn and described the Moulsford gold torc[36] and carried out a series of other excavations on a wide range of prehistoric sites.[37] Over the years he had flown in a Cessna to photograph and identify new sites from the air. These of course were not deeply buried Palaeolithic ones. Based now in Norfolk with his second wife Mollie, whom he married in 1976, his first position was with Essex County Council in 1981 and then in 1983 a job as a Field Officer came up at the Norfolk Archaeology Unit. Living at Great Cressingham, he was well placed to complete his 1985 *Palaeolithic sites of East Anglia* while being conscientious about, if not devoted to, the demands of rescue archaeology and the more commercially minded direction it was taking. He worked there until 1990 when he wrote in his archaeological diary, 'Resigned from the Norfolk Archaeological Unit in response to its organisation evolving along the lines of entrepreneurial management.' These pressures on units to become competent businesses did not fit with Wymer's view of what made a professional archaeologist.

Then the opportunity to put his skills to their best use arose when a dispute among Palaeolithic specialists as to the correct approach to a planning application at the old gravel pit of Dunbridge, Hampshire, highlighted the lack of reliable information on Palaeolithic archaeology to aid the planning process. Geoffrey Wainwright, Chief Archaeologist at English Heritage, was already supporting the long-term excavations at Boxgrove in Sussex but it was the gravel sites with less-well-preserved material, such as Dunbridge, that needed to be reviewed on a national scale. Andrew Lawson, who had dug at Klasies River Mouth in the 1960s, and was by now Director of Wessex Archaeology in Salisbury, put forward a proposal to English Heritage for a *Southern Rivers Palaeolithic Project* with Wymer as the principal investigator. Wymer jumped at the opportunity, writing in his diary, 'In the summer [of 1990] I am approached by Andrew Lawson as to whether I would consider conducting a survey of the Lower Palaeolithic . . . I am exhilarated at the prospect and assent.' The details were quickly sorted out and the survey, which involved visiting, along with Phil Harding, every gravel pit in southern England, was funded for three years. Now Wymer's 6 m of card index records came into its own. The 1968 survey of the Thames was updated

[35] J. J. Wymer, 'Excavations of the Lambourn long barrow', *Berkshire Archaeological Journal*, 62 (1968), 1–10.
[36] J. J. Wymer, 'The discovery of a gold torc at Moulsford', *Berkshire Archaeological Journal*, 59 (1961), 36–7.
[37] Ashton, Healy and Pettitt (eds.), *Stone Age Archaeology: essays in honour of John Wymer*.

and many new sites added to the archive. The audience for this ambitious work were the County Archaeologists charged with advising on the planning process. So successful was the project that it was extended for a further three years to become *The English Rivers Palaeolithic survey* in which Wales was also included. A key to its success was the involvement of David Bridgland as part of the advisory team and who to Wymer's general satisfaction had married up the process by which different terrace deposits were formed to the isotope record from the deep sea cores and its continuous chronology for climate change.[38] Combined with the work of Danielle Schreve on the bio-stratigraphy of the mammals contained in these deposits,[39] sites such as Swanscombe could now be confidently placed in Marine Isotope Stage 11, an interglacial period that spanned from 427,000 to 364,000 years ago.

Wymer's survey is one of the great achievements of British archaeology. Almost one hundred years after the second edition of John Evans's *Ancient stone implements* and two hundred years since John Frere's perceptive letter to the Society of Antiquaries, the work of one archaeologist presented a conspectus of 500,000 years of human prehistory that was simultaneously of professional, managerial, academic and public interest. The survey produced six large regional reports that went back to the County curators and where Wymer helped them by selecting sites of future importance. The results were distilled into the two volumes of *The Lower Palaeolithic Occupation of Britain*,[40] richly illustrated by the author, with the formation of terraces explained so that all could understand. But above all the book returns a sense of geography to the period, ordered by five landscapes; rivers, coasts, lakes, downland and caves. The long tradition started by Frere and archived by Evans had culminated in Wymer's great achievement.

Now the recognition flowed. He received an honorary doctorate from Reading University in 1993 and was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1996. In 2002 he received the British Academy's Grahame Clark medal for outstanding distinction in the study of prehistory. These awards were in addition to earlier acknowledgements of his contribution; an honorary MA from Durham University in 1969 and the Geologists' Association highest honour, the Stopes Medal, in 1973.

[38] D. R. Bridgland, *Quaternary of the Thames* (London, 1994).
[39] D. C. Schreve, 'Differentiation of the British Late Middle Pleistocene interglacials: the evidence from mammalian biostratigraphy', *Quaternary Science Reviews*, 20 (2001).
[40] Wymer, *The Lower Palaeolithic Occupation of Britain*.

What gave him equal satisfaction, and undoubted pleasure, was the stimulus he provided for the next generation of Palaeolithic archaeologists. Many passed through John and Mollie's front door at the aptly named The Vines, their home at Great Cressingham. Even more went with him to the pubs of East Anglia as they joined Wymer on a visit to a new site or to re-visit an old one. When Nick Ashton from the British Museum was digging the East Anglian sites of Barnham and Elveden, the barbecues thrown for his team by John and Mollie became legendary events. Good food, beer and fine wine were central to Wymer's interests because they provided the setting to meet those who would carry on the good work of Palaeolithic exploration; an opportunity to share his knowledge and learn from others. But the talk would eventually stop as the evening wore on and John would start playing his Blues guitar and his accomplished boogie-woogie piano.

This exuberant exterior disguised a modest man of strong principles. He would say that all he hoped to achieve was a bit of the homework for others to build on, and then argue passionately and decisively about the true status of the Clactonian or the age of the Caversham Channel. He held many positions in learned societies. He was President of the Quaternary Research Association and Chair of the Lithics Study Society. He was a Vice-President of the Prehistoric Society and could have been President but his principles would not allow him to accept after the Society supported a ban on South African archaeologists attending an international conference in 1986.

For a generation of archaeologists he was a father figure to their chosen profession. This position and his achievements were celebrated in a festschrift presented to him in 1998.[41] Following his death in February 2006 a special edition of the *Journal of Quaternary Science*[42] and a two-day conference held in September of that year at the British Museum marked his memory. Central to the memorial volume was work undertaken by members of the *Ancient Human Occupation of Britain Project*. Wymer had been closely involved and after Mollie's death in 1999 he moved back to Bildeston, near Ipswich, to the house where they had lived before Great Cressingham. He began searching the foreshore for palaeoliths because he thought they should be there and he was proved right. As a result, the publication of the Pakefield finds, illustrated by Wymer's

[41] Ashton, Healy and Pettitt (eds.), *Stone Age Archaeology: essays in honour of John Wymer*.
[42] S. G. Lewis and N. Ashton (eds.), 'The Palaeolithic Occupation of Europe: in memory of John Wymer, 1928–2006', *Journal of Quaternary Science*, 21 (2006).

drawings of the oldest artefacts in Britain and Northern Europe, has a symmetry to it.[43] His first and last papers were published in *Nature*, and in the intervening fifty years he had helped transform the Palaeolithic while keeping its heart intact. He died on 14 February 2006.

Our photograph shows him in his familiar trilby hat, holding aloft a small handaxe during a visit to Swanscombe in 2004. The professionals from Quaternary science, archaeology and human palaeontology, as well as a large number of independent archaeologists who surround him are there because of him. He once wrote of his hope that his work 'may inspire some to search for palaeoliths themselves, and it would be a dull person who could not enjoy the thrill of finding a handaxe and considering who held it last'.[44]

CLIVE GAMBLE
Fellow of the Academy

Note. I am very grateful to Andrew Lawson who supplied many details of John Wymer's rich and varied life, and to Jim Rose for his advice and permission to use his photograph. Nick Ashton and Paul Mellars, FBA, also commented on and corrected earlier drafts.

[43] S. Parfitt *et al.*, 'The earliest record of human activity in northern Europe'.
[44] Wymer, *Lower Palaeolithic Archaeology in Britain, as represented by the Thames Valley*, p. 5.