

# Voice from the Dead Names New Suspect for Piltdown Hoax

*Jealous jokester played prank that went too far*

The tape-recorded reminiscences of a man now dead have suggested a motive and identity for the forger of the Piltdown fossils, one of the most successful scientific hoaxes ever perpetrated. Played publicly for the first time at a recent meeting of paleontologists in Reading, England, the tape recording suggests that the hoaxer wished to fool and discredit a scientific rival, but finding that he had fooled everyone else as well, decided matters had gone too far for the joke to be revealed.

The Piltdown fossils were a series of carefully contrived artifacts that emerged from a Sussex gravel pit in the early 1910's. The climax of the collection was a human skull that so perfectly fit contemporary preconceptions of what an early man should look like that it was immediately accepted as genuine by the community of English physical anthropologists.

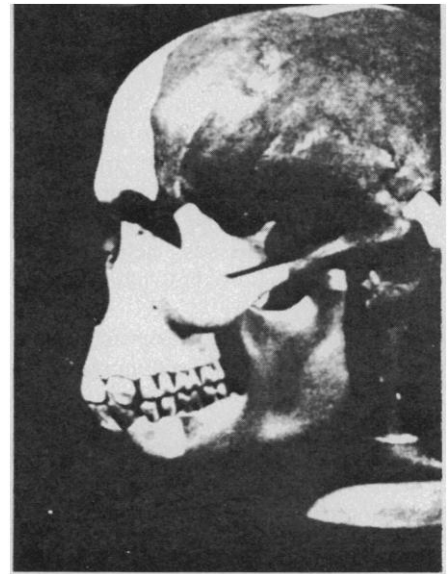
Another possible reason for their enthusiasm was that relics of early man were being discovered in profusion in France and Germany but not, so far then, in Britain. The "Dawn Man of Piltdown" satisfied British national pride, and even the later discovery of an artifact bearing a remarkable resemblance to a fossilized cricket bat failed to stir the seeds of skepticism.

Dawn Man, supposedly poised between ape and human, had a human cranium and an ape-like jaw. Unfortunately,

when true fossil skulls began to be discovered in Africa in the 1920's, the likenesses were reversed, the jaws being more human and the crania simian. The Piltdown skull became an anomaly, then an embarrassment. Critically examined by modern methods in 1953, the skull proved to consist of a modern cranium and an ape's jaw, both suitably stained to resemble fossils. Not only the skull but the entire mammalian fauna of the gravels turned out to be fraudulent.

Circumstantial evidence pointed to the skull's discoverer, Charles Dawson, a solicitor and part-time geologist. But it always seemed unlikely that Dawson could have been the prime perpetrator. He may have been best placed to salt the gravel pit, but he probably lacked access to collections from which the fossils came as well as knowledge of how to design the total paleontological assemblage. J. S. Weiner, one of the three experts who unmasked the hoax in 1953, suggested in his book *The Piltdown Forgery* (1955) that another might be involved. In a concluding passage that suggests he knew more than he was prepared to say, Weiner writes that Dawson "might, after all, have been implicated in a 'joke,' perhaps not even his own, which went too far. Would it not be fairer to one who cannot speak for himself to let it go at that?"

The new tape recording was made shortly before his death this year by J. A.



Douglas, professor of geology at Oxford from 1937 to 1950. An account in the 2 November issue of *Nature* by J. A. Malstead of Reading University, quotes Douglas as laying out his suspicions that the real Piltdown hoaxer was his predecessor as professor of geology at Oxford, W. J. Sollas.

Douglas's argument is that Sollas harbored a bitter dislike for Arthur Smith Woodward, the anthropologist who assisted Dawson with identifying the finds. Smith Woodward, who frequently annoyed his colleagues by pretending to expertise he did not possess, had most to lose from being taken in by the hoax. Douglas recalls an earlier occasion when Smith Woodward had been deceived by a schoolboy hoax and Sollas, who was in the know, deliberately failed to warn him.

Sollas would have been well positioned to procure the various fossils placed in the gravel pit. Indeed Douglas remembers sending some mastodon bones to Sollas from Bolivia in 1910; mastodon fragments were discovered at Piltdown by a young priest whom Dawson allowed to work there, Teilhard de Chardin.

Discovery of the Piltdown skull evoked particular public interest because it seemed to be the "missing link," the transitional form between ape and man that was postulated by Darwin's still controversial theory of evolution. A painting done in 1915 by John Cooke depicts the Piltdown skull being examined by Smith Woodward, Dawson, and the other leading experts of the day, while Darwin looks down from a portrait on the wall. Perhaps conspicuous by his absence is the Oxford professor of geology, W. J. Sollas.—NICHOLAS WADE

*Piltdown discovery (from the portrait by John Cooke, R.A., in 1915).*

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