

'THE FOXHALL JAW'

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One day in 1855 a human lower jaw was tipped out at Edward Packard's Bramford factory with phosphate ('coprolite') from Frederick Law's farm at Foxhall, east of Ipswich. A labourer then sold it to John Taylor, druggist of 97 Fore Street, Ipswich, for 2s 6d.. John Taylor showed it to a Dr Robert Hanham Collyer, who then visited the Foxhall pit, which had been open for about a year, and reported that the jaw probably came from 16 feet below the surface, the then depth of the pit. So who was Robert Collyer, then resident in London, and what was his connection with Ipswich? He had studied at Berkshire Medical College, Pittsfield, Massachusetts, USA, 'graduating' about 1839. About 1851, after going to California to look for gold, he invented a new method of pulverising gold-bearing quartz (San Francisco patent no. 10388) and The Times of 13 April 1854 (Money Market & City Intelligence page) reported that he had arranged for machines to be built by Ransomes & Sims, engineers of Ipswich, England.

Robert Collyer became the owner of the Foxhall jaw in March 1857, but not before John Taylor had given it to Sir Thomas Beavor of Attleborough, Norfolk, who had expressed an interest in the jaw (his son was then staying at John Taylor's). Robert Collyer proceeded to show the jaw to leading scientists. In 1857 he showed it to John Queckett, Professor of Histology at the Royal

College of Surgeons'. It was then shown to Professor Richard Owen, anatomist, and superintendent of the Natural History Department of the British Museum, who kept it for two years without expressing an opinion. In 1859 it was shown to Joseph Prestwich.

The publication of Sir Charles Lyell's *The Antiquity of Man* in 1863 was the spur to further interest. In April 1863 the Foxhall jaw was shown at a meeting of the Ethnographic Society. Professor George Busk, surgeon, considered it to be the jaw of 'an old woman, probably Roman.' The next day Thomas Henry Huxley, lecturer in natural history at the Royal School of Mines, collected the jaw for study; he reported that the Foxhall jaw did not indicate an extinct or aberrant race of mankind, but it had 'some peculiar features.' The jaw was then given to George Busk, who took it to Paris, where there was a meeting investigating a human jaw from Moulin Quignon near Abbeville. The Foxhall jaw was then reported (in *Natural History Review*, July 1863) as being infiltrated through and through with iron oxide, that a section of fang showed ivory iron-stained in part, and that it contained about 8% organic matter (gelatin), compared with a dry fresh specimen recorded with 30% (gelatin is a breakdown product of the protein collagen which is the organic matrix on which phosphate mineral matter is deposited to form bone). George Busk then made a statement to the Ethnographic Society that he 'wished to considerably modify' his opinion of the

Foschall jaw which he now considered to be of 'very great antiquity.'

Interestingly, a party of members of the Geologists'

Association of London availed themselves of a cheap excursion train

to Ipswich on Monday 20th July 1863, to visit Edward Packard's

coprolite works at Bramford followed by the crag and coprolite pit

worked by Mr Everitt at Foschall. The Foschall jaw was not

mentioned in the publicity for the trip.

In 1864 Robert Collyer married Emily Clements in London

and then lived on the Continent from 1865 to 1867. He was living in

Boulogne-sur-Mer, France, in 1866, from where he wrote to John

Taylor in 1866 stating that he still had possession of the jaw. In 1867

Robert Collyer wrote an article on the Foschall jaw, including a drawing

of it, in the Anthropological Review; it was stated to have the sheen

of coprolite and that there was a slight odour of burnt gelatin on application

of heat.

In 1868 Robert Collyer registered to practice medicine in

England. In 1873 his marriage to Emily Clements was annulled, due

to his bigamy. Robert Collyer's name lapsed from the Medical Register

in 1877 and he apparently left London about 1878-1879. With

Robert Collyer no longer in England and the Foschall jaw seemingly

not mentioned since 1866-1867 the subject appeared to be closed by

Alfred Bell writing in the Geological Magazine in 1886 that 'the jaw

is repudiated by nearly all scientific men as of preglacial age.'

In his 1915 book *The Antiquity of Man*, (Sir) Arthur Keith, curator of the Hunterian Museum, Royal College of Surgeons, included a copy of the drawing of the Foschall jaw, referring to it as of 'modern type.' It was at the time of publication of this book that James Reid Moir of Ipswich was investigating the phosphate nodule-rich Red Clay stone bed for flint implements. James Reid Moir read the book and the account of the Foschall jaw-bone, and then consulted the 1885 Geological Survey Memoir *The Geology of the country around Ipswich, Hadleigh and Felixstow*, where he found reference to a pit south of Foschall Hall in 1876 and with a coprolite bed 16 feet from the surface. He soon ascertained that Foschall Hall was formerly Frederick Law's farm, and then carried out an excavation to the 16 feet level, finding bone fragments which analysis showed to contain about 5½-6½% organic matter. This led James Reid Moir in a search for the Foschall jaw-bone, starting with an advertisement placed in the personal column of *The Times* of 11 March 1919. He then wrote (13 March 1919) to Dr

Bertram J. Collyer of Brighton, Devon, Dr Brice Collyer of South Troydon, Surrey, and Dr James Collyer (retired) of Platydene, Sussex, but none were able to help him. S. A. Notcutt, of Notcutt, Solicitors of Museum Street, Ipswich

searched the Register of Wills between 1878 and 1917 but found no reference to the Will of Dr R. H. Collyer.

With the possibility that Robert Collyer had returned to America,

taking the Foschall jaw with him, the search moved to the United States. Henry Fairfield Osborn, curator of the vertebrate palaeontology department of the American Museum of Natural History wrote of 'The Pliocene Man of Foschall in East Anglia' in Natural History, the journal of the American Museum, in 1921, and he also advertised for the Foschall jaw in Scientific American. As in England, not a trace of the jaw was found in the searches in America, but interest had been raised. Aleš Hrdlicka wrote 'Critical Notes on the Foschall Jaw' in the American Journal of Physical Anthropology in 1924, concluding (from measurements from the drawing of the Foschall jaw) that it was of a 'recent white male'. In 1943 Loren Eiseley, Benjamin Franklin Professor of Anthropology and History of Science at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, wrote an article about the Foschall jaw in the Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science (he had first taught at the University of Kansas). He noticed what he took to be one of the peculiar features mentioned by Thomas Henry Huxley; the contemporary drawing (of the left side) of the jaw showed triple mental foraminal openings, a feature rare in *Homo sapiens* but common in extinct species of humans.

The subject of the Foschall jaw continued to surface from time to time in post Second World War years, even though Marcellin Boule wrote of it in his 1947 book Fossil Man that 'it requires a total lack of critical sense to pay any heed to such a piece of evidence as that.' However,

Dr T. T. Paterson of Cambridge, when investigating Crag at Sheringham in 1948, was reported in the Daily Mail of 25 February that he was going to try to locate a bone found over 100 years ago and taken to America "by a doctor"; did he mean the Foxhall jaw? At the International Geological Congress in London 1948 prehistorian Hallam Movius told Harold Spencer of Ipswich Museum that he had tried to find the Foxhall jaw. At the June 1964 meeting of the Geological Society of London, Harold Spencer asked Louis Leakey, former curator of the Coryndon Memorial Museum in Nairobi, Kenya, about the Foxhall jaw. Louis Leakey replied that he had tried to discover the whereabouts of the jaw and had advertised to see if it could be found. In more recent times a number of authors have confused the Foxhall crag site with the Foxhall Road 'interglacial' site in Ipswich and of very different age.

It has been said that to continue to invest in a hopeless project is irrational, but I couldn't resist. So what happened to Robert Collyer? There was a piece about him in The Times 21 February 1922 ('The Progress of Science') that he was not an American, but had been born in St Helier, Jersey, in 1814. He studied medicine in London 1833-1835, the family moving to Philadelphia, USA, in 1836, where he studied at Berkshire Medical College. As Jersey Museum was founded in 1873, the decade Robert Collyer apparently left England, it seemed promising to contact them. I thus wrote, in 1984, to Jersey Museum, but they had no knowledge of

of Robert Collyer or of the Foxhall jaw. More recently the 'World Wide Web' ('Geoff's Genealogy' and other sources) records Robert Collyer as residing in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA, in February 1889 and dying there about 1890-1891. A quick look at information on Tulane University Museum of Natural History in New Orleans didn't look too promising.

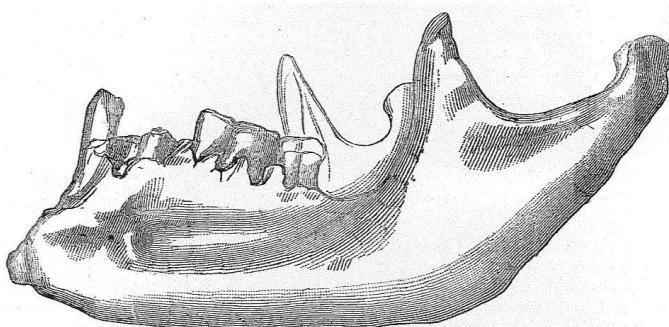
And what of the Foxhall jaw? My favourite suggestion for its disappearance comes from Caroline Markham. When Robert Collyer married Emily Clements in 1864, she was 16 years old, he 50. When did Emily learn of his bigamy? why was the Foxhall jaw seemingly not mentioned after 1866-1867? was the jaw destroyed by a young woman deceived in love?

R. Markham.

Further lines of enquiry could include! -

- New Orleans area re Robert Collyer.
- Thomas Henry Huxley MSS c.1863.

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