

Prehistoric Times
The Life of Sir John Lubbock
(1834 – 1913)

WAHNS Talk

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Lubbock was the son of Sir John Lubbock, 3rd Baronet, and was brought up in the family home of High Elms, near Downe.

In 1842 his father brought home a "great piece of news", and while young John Lubbock initially thought that it might be a new pony and was disappointed that the news was just that Charles Darwin was moving to Down House in the village, he was soon a frequent visitor to Down House, and became the closest of Darwin's younger friends.

His archaeological collection is largely held in Bromley in a dedicated gallery. He was an archaeologist, natural historian, biologist, social reformer etc etc. He was a banker – that is where he got his money from. He was very much a Victorian polymath.

He studied at Eton College – 1845 – 1848 after prep school in Abingdon. He had been born in Eaton Place, London – the son of John William Lubbock (also a banker). His father decided that Eton wasn't the educational institution for him and therefore he was removed from Eton when he was only 15 and put into the family bank to learn about business at first hand. The family bank was Lubbock, Forster and Co. of Lombard Street, London.

1882 he took a step back from the business – having quickly risen to the position of partner. The Lubbock family home was at High Elms, Farnborough, Kent. This is now in the London Borough of Bromley – hence the reason for his archaeological collection being held in Bromley Museum.

He had a very strict regime when it came to learning and studying. He got up at 6.15 a.m. and then had his day very strictly demarcated so that he covered all he wanted to. He went to bed at 12.00 midnight after prayers interspersed during the day with study and learning. He was a very driven personality. He had a collection in the house and used it as his base for study. He invited in the local villagers – had a golf course and racing track. The golf course still exists although not the house.

He was the one who introduced Bank Holidays. Sadly one Bank Holiday the house burned down.

Charles Darwin became a neighbour of Lubbock in 1842 when Lubbock was 8 years old. Lubbock has been described as "Darwin's only student" – Darwin had a considerable influence on him particularly as regards his study of natural history. He was allowed to work on Darwin's collections.

He had a very large network of friends – making contact with some of the country's leading scientists:

Charles Lyell, Thomas Huxley, Joseph Hooker, John Tyndall

He was a member of the famous X Club founded by T.H. Huxley to promote the growth of science in Britain. He discovered that ants were sensitive to the ultraviolet range of the spectrum.

Lubbock's geological interests were great. In 1855 he made discoveries of mammoth and musk ox with Charles Kingsley (The Water Babies"). He found a musk ox tusk in the gravel pits at Green St Green.

In 1860, he visited Abbeville in the Somme Valley where Boucher de Perthes had identified prehistoric hand axes. Another key site in the 1860s was Lake Lucerne where the lake dwellings there were being excavated by Colonel Suter and so Lubbock went there as well. This was very cutting edge stuff and was transforming the way that people were thinking in these fields.

Hallstatt, Vienna was a very important site and Lubbock visited the site in 1866 and helped to fund George Ramsauer's excavations there.



The New Prehistory

In the 1860s Lubbock was part of a hierarchy who all sought to gain key positions in the archaeological establishment. They consisted of himself:

Sir John Lubbock

Augustus Wollaston Franks

Augustus Henry Lane Fox (Pitt Rivers)

Sir John Evans.

Together they were responsibly for “inventing” Archaeology as we know it. They applied Darwin’s Theory of Evolution to items they found. They were all interested in Typology. They promoted themselves and helped each other get into positions of influence in Societies – such as the Ethnological Society.

Prehistoric Times, 1865, introduced the terms “Palaeolithic” and “Neolithic”.

This was a book for the everyday person.

Lubbock was the David Attenborough of his time. “Prehistoric Times” went through seven editions in his life time. Lubbock could see the distinctions in stone axes etc.

Sitting beneath all this scholarly research was a collection which he kept in his house in Farnborough. He produced a “Catalogue of My Collection” for the “who’s who” of the scientific world.

They all swapped items from their collections with each other and with museums.

His archaeological collection was built on the collection of Danish archaeologist Vilhelm Boye – Lubbock bought the collection from Vilhelme Boye to enable him, a poor hard-up student, to fund the rest of his studies. It must have been a very hard thing for him to part with.

He had flint tools from Grand Pressigny – Neolithic blades and core. He also had Palaeolithic hand axes from Stoke Newington, East London and Axminster in Devon.

Lubbock was really on top of what was going on in the archaeological world of the time.

He had Palaeolithic tools such as a Levallois Flake from Baker’s Hole, Kent, and a refit group from Crayford.

He had a hafted axehead from Schaffis, Lake Bienne, Switzerland – which he purchased from an auction house. There was a lot of ethnography in the collection also as a backup to his work on “modern savages” – aborigines etc. He and his collaborators believed they could look at so called modern savages and project what they learned as being representative of what European Stone Age Man etc would have been like.

He also had a series of 19 paintings commissioned by Ernest Griset, c 1870 – reconstructions of Prehistoric Life (but these were never published). Indeed there are those who have contended until very recently that there were no reconstructions made by the archaeologists of the time. These can be seen via the London Borough of Bromley’s website.



There is a painting of a mammoth on an ice flow and also the interior of a megalithic tomb. There are 18 of these paintings and another in Australia as a member of the Lubbock family gave one away to another member of the family.

The Wiltshire Connection.

Lubbock got involved in debates including the one to date Silbury Hill.

Did the Roman road go round it or under it? He funded the excavation in 1867 that proved it pre-dated the Roman road..

Bryan King, the vicar of Avebury, contacted Lubbock to say that a developer wanted to buy the Avebury site to build houses on. Lubbock then purchased the area in 1871. He also bought Silbury Hill and in fact the Lubbock family still own it. Eric Lubbock is the grandson of Lord Avebury.

He was also the President of WANHS from 1876 to 1879 and attended the General Meeting at Salisbury in 1876. He was a Liberal Member of Parliament for Maidstone from 1870 – introducing the Bank Holidays Act in 1871. One of his key objectives was to make life better for the workers and to lighten their load. He was a social reformer. He believed that people needed to have more leisure time. He was saddened that people didn't go off and study books etc.

He was responsible for the Ancient Monuments Act in 1882 – Lubbock helped to secure the first piece of legislation that protected archaeological sites which paved the way for English Heritage. A schedule was drawn up of all these sites – ancient sites such as Stonehenge etc. Pitt Rivers was the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments.

Lubbock's first wife died and he then married Pitt River's daughter when she was 22 and Lubbock was 50 plus. They went on to have 5 children.

His other political interests included proportional representation, Home Rule and the London County Council.

He was fascinated by ants, bees and wasps –He had ant colonies in his house and a "tame wasp".

He carried out extensive correspondence with Charles Darwin, who lived nearby in Downe. Lubbock stayed in Downe except for a brief period from 1861–1865, when he moved to Chislehurst.

Both men were active advocates of English spelling reform, and members of the Spelling reform Association, precursor to the (Simplified) Spelling Society Darwin rented ground, originally from Lubbock's father, for the Sandwalk wood where he took his daily exercise, and in 1874 reached agreement with Lubbock to exchange the land for a piece of pasture in Darwin's property. When Darwin died in 1882, Lubbock suggested the honour of burial in Westminster Abbey, organising a letter to the Dean to arrange this, and was one of the pallbearers.

John Lubbock was raised to the peerage in 1900 and took the title "Lord Avebury".

His grave is at High Elms in Farnborough Kent.

PUNCH'S FANCY PORTRAITS.—No. 97.



SIR JOHN LUBBOCK, M.P., F.R.S.

HOW DO THY BANKING BUSY BEE
IMPROVE HIS SHINING HOURS
BY STUDYING ON BANK HOLIDAYS
STRANGE INSECTS AND WILD FLOWERS!