



The triumph of the Dawsonian method

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ABSTRACT

Piltdown Man was the most notable forgery in 20th Century science. It was published in 1913 and the falsification was not uncovered until 1953. The forger was the amateur archaeologist Charles Dawson (1864–1916). Dawson 'found' or was present at the discovery of every fragment of Piltdown Man. Few have appreciated Dawson's skill; he did much more than merely provide material that fitted with prevalent theories of human evolution. He chose the type locality on private land, not generally accessible. Dawson was ostracized from the local amateur archaeological community, the group most likely to collect the Piltdown site without supervision. Finds were described by the leading palaeontologist in Britain, A.S. Woodward, whose expertise was in lower vertebrates. The leading palaeoanthropologists in Britain, Arthur Keith and G.E. Smith, mainly worked with casts and wasted energies debating theoretical issues. Yet Dawson's true genius was in presenting British palaeoanthropology with just what it wanted, a large-brained, Pliocene 'missing link'.

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1. Introduction

"Digging, I lay my hand on things. I discover an immediacy which disappears when the find becomes official and is displayed behind glass" (Golding, 1965, p. 66).

In August 1916, one hundred years ago, Charles Dawson (1864–1916), a successful solicitor in Sussex, died. At the time of his death he was the leading light among amateur palaeontologists and archaeologists in the British Isles, a fellow of both the Geological Society and the Society of Antiquaries, and discoverer of Piltdown Man, then the oldest fossil man known. He merited obituaries in the *Geological Magazine* (Woodward, 1916) and *Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society* (Harker, 1917). He had been nominated for Fellowship of the Royal Society (Walsh, 1996; Russell, 2003, 2012), but had not been elected at the time of his death. Arthur Smith Woodward, Keeper of Geology at the British Museum (Natural History), paid tribute to his friend: "Charles Dawson was one of those restless people, of inquiring mind, who take a curious interest in everything around them" (Woodward, 1948, p. 5); "To a capacity for taking pains, with endless patience, he added a sharpness of sight that never overlooked anything of importance ... [he was] in constant friendly communication with a wide circle

of professional scientific men who helped him make the best use of his material" (Woodward, 1916, p. 477).

Piltdown Man (Figs. 1–3), *Eoanthropus dawsoni*, unveiled at a meeting of the Geological Society in London on 18 December, 1912, and described and published the following year (Dawson and Woodward, 1913), was the jewel in the crown of British palaeoanthropology for 40 years, until exposed as a forgery in the early 1950s (Weiner et al., 1953, 1955; Weiner, 1955). Instead of being a Late Pliocene or Early Pleistocene 'missing link' (Gee, 2013), Piltdown Man was shown to be a palaeoanthropological Irish Stew, mixing parts of a thick-skulled, modern *Homo sapiens* with an orang-utan. Yet even as a known forgery, Piltdown Man continues to exert a tremendous fascination for many. Books continue to be published on the hoax or, at least, discussing its implications for science (some 21st Century titles include Gribbin and Chervas, 2001; Russell, 2003, 2012; Gundling, 2005; Stringer, 2006, 2011; Falk, 2011; Reader, 2011; Gee, 2013), including a 50th anniversary reprint of Weiner (2003). There are two Piltdown forgery bibliographies current online (Turrittin, 2006; Bate, 2014).

It now seems an incontrovertible fact that the perpetrator of the forgery was Piltdown Man's 'discoverer', Charles Dawson, most probably working alone, who died almost 100 years ago. Dawson found all the sites that yielded Piltdown Man and associated fossils, never divulged the location of the so-called Piltdown II site near Sheffield Park in Sussex, and was the only person present when all the remains were collected. After Dawson's death, no further remains were discovered despite Woodward's continuing efforts. Numerous accounts for the past 60+ years have speculated on

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