

PROFESSOR JOHN GWYNNE EVANS, 1941~2005 AKA 'SNAILS' EVANS



John 'snails' Evans, developed a whole new sub-discipline of palaeo-environmental enquiry for archaeology, advancing both the understanding of past landscapes and human activity, and that of palaeo-molluscan ecology. He was an influential figure both as an environmental archaeologist and prehistorian, and as an old-fashioned field naturalist. Although others before him (Zeuner, Dimbleby) had set the course, it was John who almost single-handedly developed the discipline of environmental archaeology and, in 1970, was appointed as lecturer of environmental archaeology at Cardiff, the first post of its kind outside London. He became a Reader in 1982, a Professor in 1994 and retired in 2002, donating his extensive snail collection to the national Museum of Wales, Cardiff.

John was widely known in the British archaeology community and the conchology world, and made a great impact upon archaeologists, students of snails and conchology alike in his own inimitable style and maverick way. He was a colleague, friend and mentor to many of us, and made an immense contribution to palaeo-environmental research and largely introduced the study of snails to archaeologist.

In 1972 he published the seminal work *Land Snails in Archaeology*, a book that unlike its companion *Soils and Archaeology* by Susan Limbrey (1975), had no predecessors and, to this day, also

unlike its companion, has no successor. Over 30 years later has still not been surpassed. Long out of print, this book remains the 'bible' for several generations of archaeologists, environmental archaeologists and archaeomalocologists alike. So sought after is this tome that it is currently available second hand at the modest sum of \$436!

John was a member of the Conchological Society from 1964-97, rejoining again in 2003. In retirement John's interest in snails had been re-awakened, and he was revisiting ideas about mollusc assemblages from sand dunes (see Evans 2004). At his last attendance at a Conchological Society meeting (26 February 2005), only months before he died, he was ordering and collecting the few back numbers of *J. Conch* that he'd missed. More ironic was that he was attending my lecture on, of all subjects, 'Molluscs in archaeology'. Why was he there? and what had he, of all people to learn? Perhaps little, but it was the interest in the subject, the ideas and the people generating and discussing them, that constantly intrigued him. He died prematurely at 63, two years after retiring, on 14th June 2005, after a short illness.

LIFE BEFORE SNAILS

Born in St. Albans, Herefordshire 11 November 1941, son of the microbiologist Sir David Evans (director of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine) John was brought up in London, and went to University College School, Hampstead and studied zoology at Reading University (1960-63). As an undergraduate he was a keen chorister, rower and demonstrated his love of Wagner to his fellow students.

It was here that some of his first interest in archaeology was gained, that interest would lead him to a life long connection with snails. He met the then curator of Reading Museum, John Wymer, himself a celebrated and recently departed doyen of British Palaeolithic archaeology. This friendship provided some of the inspiration for John to take zoological studies into archaeology it also introduced him to the university's excavations at Silchester.

With this fusion of archaeology and zoology

John set off back to London, after graduating in 1963, to study under the illustrious Pleistocene archaeologist and archaeozoologist Prof Zeuner. That summer he was sent by Zuener, 'to a site at Rainham, Essex, under the supervision of [two young and later eminent archaeologists], Derek Simpson and Isobel Smith to learn how to excavate'. This was Zeuner's way of initiating John into archaeology; the acquaintance of these two, as John continued (2004), 'was an auspicious choice because two significant strands of my PhD thesis on fossil snails were developed under these two archaeologists, the one on Neolithic chalk soils under Isobel and the other on windblown sand under Derek'. Unfortunately, Zuener died suddenly, aged 58, that autumn. Instead of studying mega palaeo-fauna, John ended up working on sub-fossil land snails. He continued at the Institute of Archaeology but was supervised by Michael Kerney of Imperial College, who had developed a methodology for their study from Pleistocene and Holocene deposits, focusing on changing distribution of species and climatic conditions. From this time John earned the epithet, and became affectionately known as, 'Snails' Evans; in part to distinguish him from John D. 'Malta' Evans, Mediterranean prehistorian, later Director of the Institute of Archaeology. He was rigorously encouraged, from 1964, by the newly appointed professor of Human Ecology, Geoff Dimbleby, and together they worked on a number of projects and together they wrote, in 1974, a seminal paper on pollen and snails from chalkland sites.

Prior to the final completion of his PhD John was offered a job as the first field archaeologist for Buckinghamshire County Museum (succeeded by Ros Dunnet, then by Mike Farley). By report this was not a complete success as John saw the job as an opportunity to complete his PhD and personal research investigations (clearly evidenced in his research in the area at Pitstone, Pink Hill etc), rather than dealing with the 'archaeology'. I'm sure John was convinced that studying key snail and sedimentary sequences *was* archaeology, much to the consternation of the curator. He completed his PhD at the Institute in 1967 on 'The stratification of Mollusca in chalk soils and their relation to archaeology', largely subsequently published 5 years later in 1972 as 'Land Snails in Archaeology'. He was appointed lecturer at University Cardiff in 1970 where he stayed

as reader, later professor until his retirement in 2002. He was elected as a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, London, in 1974.

SNAILS IN ARCHAEOLOGY

John made snails important in archaeology. Where previously landscapes devoid of pollen yet rich in human activity, remained empty of palaeo-environmental information and reconstruction, the analysis of snails enable the study of chalkland vegetation. He provided evidence for prehistoric woodland, of clearings and opening for settlements and of the first positive indications of tillage and farmers. In this way rewrote much of the prehistory of the chalk though the analysis of snails combined with archaeology.

John had bouts of tremendous energy, zeal, enthusiasm for archaeology, in his research and field investigation. This is exemplified by campaigns of fieldwork in the Avebury area in the late 1960s with Isobel Smith; on sand dunes in Scotland with Derek Simpson from the early 1970s; revisiting Avebury studying the landscape from alluvial deposits and snails with Prof Susan Limbrey (1980s), and later Neolithic monuments with Alasdair Whittle (1990s). Rivers and alluvium of the Test (Hampshire) and Wylve (Wiltshire) were studied in the early 1990s, and from each of these campaigns were borne post-graduate research and a number of disciples.

At least three generations of archaeologists were brought up on John's seminal works: *The Environment of Early Man in the British Isles* (1975), *Introduction to Environmental Archaeology* (1978), and more recently *Environmental Archaeology: Principles and Methods* (1999; with Terry O'Connor), and *Land and Archaeology* (2001). More recently, his thinking and writing had become more adventurous in *Environmental Archaeology and the Social Order* (2003) in which he was willing us, as environmental archaeologists, to think of the meanings of our work in terms of people inhabiting landscapes. John was involved in editing the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* from 1975 (vol. 51) to 1994 (vol. 60), producing 20 volumes containing many papers and site reports upon which much of our current archaeological foundation is based. Accompanying these was a wealth of his own major papers and contributions; many based on the analysis, or interpretation derived from the analysis of, land snails.

STIMULATING BUT HARD WORK

John developed a reputation as a stimulating and challenging teacher and there were few students who attended his courses who were not left with vivid and inspirational memories. He was particularly noted for his innovative methods. These included the arrival, as an active participant, of his dog (Darwin - see photograph) at a laboratory session designed to examine the effects of carnivores on large animal bone collections. He pushed friendship, teaching methods, technical procedures and theoretical ideas to the limits and was unpredictable; being dismissive one meeting, and overwhelmingly excited and encouraging at another. His interest and encouragement in others' research was sometimes overwhelming and detrimental; his ever enthusiastic questioning consumed time that the recipient might have preferred to have been enquiring of John's own, better, more wide-ranging, and significant research. Working with John was seldom predictable, often exhausting, but always stimulating and mind-broadening. Despite his significant contribution as a prehistorian, environmental archaeologist, conchologist and teacher, he was surprisingly modest. He inspired many, wrote ground-breaking texts but he himself never spoke about that, and never boasted to anyone about what he had done and achieved.

John's funeral said it all – a packed house in light airy summer clothes, Wagner, hymns in Welsh, tears and laughter, anger at his untimely departure and delight in shared memories, and simple coffin adorned with wild grasses and meadows flowers. He will be remembered for his individual style, such as ejecting potted plants through opened pub windows because they were irritating to the eye, but also for his guidance of and kindness towards the next generations of scholars. His enthusiasm was infectious and anyone showing an interest in his work or challenging his ideas was in for a great experience of discussion, debate and banter. His genuine interest and support of others work, whether they be students or colleagues, engendered an intensely loyal, but not uncritical, following.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF JOHN G. EVANS

Note: This bibliography aims to include all of John's

major works, most of his papers – but I am sure that there are, unfortunately, omissions especially amongst the list of his numerous contributions to others work and papers, and particularly those geographically further away from my own research, and those earlier in his career. Where it is not evident from the title, I have indicated papers where snail analysis or evidence is discussed.

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EDITED VOLUMES

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THESIS

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JOURNAL EDITOR

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Photograph of John Evans and Darwin courtesy of Gill Swanton.

A number of John's friends and colleagues willingly provided information about their encounters with and memories of him, which, due to space, I have unfortunately been able to commit only a few to these pages; nevertheless I thank them all for their help. This is for all who knew John and for Vivian, Dickon, Ailiner and Thomas.

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