

Retrospect: Douglas Ellicott

by George Dixon

Stukeley, Morton and Artis recorded for us in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century their interpretation of the archaeology of the Nene Valley. The new Archaeological Field Centre in Ham Lane now presents the modern view. Between them stands the work of countless enthusiasts: Dr T. J. Walker, George Wyman Abbott, and more modest workers in the field. This article is about one such worker, who has literally covered the world with his activities and in one life's span has seen archaeology develop from a pleasant hobby to a meticulous science.

George Ellicott (fig. 17), now living in retirement in Vermont, Victoria, still spends two mornings each week, at the age of eighty, in the anthropological section of the Victoria State Museum. Here he examines skulls and other remains brought in from archaeological digs or from the coroner's office.

When he first went out to Australia in 1968 he lived in Adelaide and dug with Graeme Pretty, the local archaeological group director. Later, he confined his activities to urgent field-work on skeletons, necessary in studying the ways of aborigines. Much of his early amateur work proved invaluable when in 1974 Dr Prokopek from the Institute of Medical Hygiene, Prague, came to advise the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. This led to a permanent professional conservator being appointed.

But this article is about the Doug Ellicott we knew in the Nene Valley. He has told the world about us in *The Artefact* of the Archaeological Society of Victoria, which devoted their August 1975 issue (no. 38) to his 18-page 'Retrospect'.

Douglas spent his early boyhood near Salisbury, and whilst cycling with his schoolboy friends visited Old Sarum in about 1908. He met Colonel Hawley and Ministry of Works men who were tracing the foundations of the Norman citadel. He later realised that he had been playing on the site of an Iron-Age hillfort and the Roman town of Sorviodunum. This led him to search for flints on the chalk of Salisbury Plain, and soon he visited Stonehenge itself, about which he had avidly read in Aubrey and Stukeley. He explored the Wansdyke, Silbury Hill and Avebury, where he recalls Mr Keiller setting up a Museum. He cycled to the Uffington White Horse, the Cerne Abbas Giant

and other more modern symbols cut in the chalk downs. He was intrigued by the ridgeways, such as Icknield Way and the Pilgrim's Way, dating back to long before Chaucer. He followed in the footsteps of General Pitt-Rivers in Cranborne Chase and pondered on the legends of Camelot.

It was at this time, in the early 1920's, that he became interested in skull formation — and also obtained his first car. This took him to Maiden Castle and Hod Hill. His grandfather lived in Wells Cathedral Green and from there he visited the Mendips, Cheddar and Bath. In the Mendips he studied the palaeolithic relics of the cave-dwellers, and visited Dartmoor, the dolmens and Celtic crosses of Cornwall. He looked deeper into the legends of Glastonbury and visited the sites of the Iron-Age lake-villages there — the first glimpse for him of a peat bog. This he was able to recognise again when a few years later he moved to Whittlesey.

In Whittlesey he soon became immersed in the relics of the Roman occupation of the Nene Valley, and his home was less than 200 metres from the Roman Fen Causeway, leading to Ermine Street near Durobrivae. Opposite his home were the brickyard clay-pits. These revealed belemnites and ammonites, and he was soon accepted by local people as the fossil and bone expert. He joined in the busy activities of the Peterborough Museum Society's Archaeological Field Section and refers in his article to visits by Brian Hartley, with his special knowledge of samian ware, to the young Adrian Challands, who had become the group's coin expert, to 'that talented amateur, the late G. F. Dakin, who looked into the recording', to Eric Standen for general direction, to the lady members for their delicate trowelling and to himself, humbly, as doing the only job left — studying and identifying animal and human bones. He learnt to recognise the sites where E. T. Artis had already dug and pays tribute to the good trench discipline expected by Fred Dakin.

His brief and accurate summing up of the Roman occupation reads: 'As the Nene Valley had been inhabited by the Coritani, a tribe which it seems offered no great resistance to Roman colonisation, and to the east by the Iceni, who, after their suppression following the Boudiccan revolt, appeared to live in amity with the colonisers, the district settled down to a long period of farming and pottery making in peace'.

Douglas Ellicott left for Australia at an exciting time, with the prospect of large-scale excavation becoming necessary in face of plans for the Greater Peterborough townships. He realised reluctantly that the role of the amateur needed to give way to the professional, and he has been interested in my keeping him abreast of the Nene Valley Research Committee's activities. We remember his short, scholarly, figure, his ever-willing help in identifying bone finds and wish him well in his continuing efforts Down Under.



Fig 17 Douglas Ellicott (shirtless) on the King's Dyke excavation