

Discover...

FRANCIS HOWE SEYMOUR KNOWLES

They also serve who volunteer

Not all the staff who have worked at the Pitt Rivers Museum since 1884 have been paid for their services. The Museum has been fortunate enough to benefit from the hard work of many volunteers over the years, including Francis Howe Seymour Knowles, one of the longest serving, and perhaps the hardest working.

Knowles was born in 1886, studied law at Oriel College, Oxford, and was one of the first students to be awarded the Diploma in Anthropology at the same university. In 1909 he was appointed to be Assistant to Professor Arthur Thomson, specifically to carry out teaching and research in physical anthropology, the first post of its kind in the University. In 1912 Knowles began fieldwork on the Iroquois Reserve, Ontario, and from 1914 to 1919 he held the post of physical anthropologist to the Canadian Government. Typhoid forced him to give up his career as a physical anthropologist so he took up the study of the methods used to make stone tools and weapons. He used the collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum to further his studies and so began his long career of volunteering at the Museum.



▲ Henry Balfour with some student volunteers in 1908. 1998.266.3

Knowles' first interest was always in working stone. By experiment, using only the materials and tools known to have been available to prehistoric man, he perfected his own technique. His discovery of the secret by which the best stone tools could be made was published in his paper 'The Manufacture of a Flint Arrowhead by Quartzite Hammer-stone.' He carried forward these practical interests in other areas of the collections and became expert in throwing the boomerang and using a spear-thrower, and in carving ivory. He arranged a number of exhibition cases

for the Pitt Rivers Museum, showing the techniques employed in stone-working from the earliest times to the gun-flint-makers of Brandon.

In addition Knowles performed a variety of jobs as unofficial and unpaid assistant to Henry Balfour, the Curator of the Museum. In 1932 he prepared a card index 'of more than a thousand specimens illustrating primitive methods of illumination' [Annual Report, 1932] which took him many months. Once he had finished this he started on cataloguing the 'primitive Surgical and Medical appliances' [Annual Report, 1933]. He continued work on these card catalogues until at least 1940.

Perhaps the catalogue which most fired Knowles' imagination was that for the pipes which he prepared at the end of the 1930s. From reading these cards it seems likely that he smoked tobacco himself and had a great interest in the pipes. He described the work he carried out as:

Aim.

- (1) Ready identification of the specimen from the catalogue card.
- (2) Concise description of specimen.
- (3) Salient measurements.
- (4) All information available and all references to literature concerning the specimen.

Method.

- (1) A drawing of the specimen to aid in speedy identification.
- (2) Concise description of shape, material, colour and ornamentation.
- (3) Measurements of length of pipe, height of bowl, and outer width of rim (on the reverse of this card there is a diagram of a pipe showing exactly how and where these measurements were taken).
- (4) Identifying marks, chips, breakages, parts missing etc.
- (5) Tribe, locality, native name, collector and how acquired noted.
- (6) References to literature and notes and extracts referring to the particular specimen written on card, together with any other information available'.

On the reverse of this card is a 'Diagram of composite tobacco pipe to illustrate descriptive terms and measurements used in making the catalogue of the Pitt Rivers smoking collection F.H.S. Knowles Feby 27th 1939'. This seems to be an exemplary methodology for a documentation and cataloguing project in the late 1930s.

In addition to volunteering Knowles gave over a thousand artefacts to the Museum including many stone tools he had collected during visits around the United Kingdom. Later on during his volunteering career at the Museum Knowles undertook some teaching, especially about the Museum's stone tool collections.

Knowles lived and worked in Oxford until his death in 1953. His hobbies were fishing and croquet, and, presumably, volunteering in the Museum. In his obituary Blackwood and Penniman described him as 'a scholar of rare quality who contributed to the advancement of more than one branch of our subject.' In the Annual Report for the year of his death Penniman wrote: 'Here we will do no more than say that he and Lady Knowles have been closely associated with the Museum as long as the oldest of us can remember, and have shown the kindest interest in all of us even to the most lately joined apprentice. A large section of the Museum will always testify to the importance of his work here, and those whom he taught here will remember how generous he was in the gift of his time and knowledge, and his character which developed in his pupils affection, respect, and a desire for hard work. His work will continue.'

Further reading

Blackwood, B. and T.K. Penniman, 'Obituary : Sir Francis Knowles: 1886-1953', *Man*, June 1953, n. 127, pp. 88-89.

Petch, A. 2003 'Documentation in the Pitt Rivers Museum' *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, No. 15 pp 109-114

Compiled by:
Alison Petch,
Museum Registrar, August 2005