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AUGUSTUS HENRY LANE FOX PITT-RIVERS

Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers and the founding collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum

Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers was born in 1827 in Yorkshire to a wealthy land-owning family. In 1841 he entered the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst and was commissioned into the Grenadier Guards in 1845. He fought for a short time in the Crimean War, and served in Malta, England, Canada and Ireland. He finally retired in 1882, at the age of 55, with the honorary rank of Lieutenant-General although he remained on the active list until 1896. Pitt-Rivers married Alice Stanley in 1853, and had nine children. In 1880 he inherited the Rivers estate and name from his great uncle. The country estate was a substantial one and he also received an income of around £20,000 per year: for the remainder of his life he led the life of a wealthy landowner. In 1882 Pitt-Rivers was appointed the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments and in 1881-2 he was President of the Anthropological Institute. He died in 1900, at the age of 73.

Pitt-Rivers' interest in collecting archaeological and ethnographic objects came out of his early professional interests in the history of firearms. It is generally believed that he did very little field collecting but, in fact, he did obtain a few objects whilst on active service, during a tour of Europe, in Malta and during the Crimean War. The vast majority of objects in his collection came from dealers, auction houses, and from fellow members of the Anthropological Institute (such as E.H. Man, John Petherick, Richard Burton and E. Belcher). It is difficult to estimate the overall size of Pitt-River's collection. Some 20,000 objects were donated to the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1884, but there was also a sizeable collection of objects displayed at his personal museum in Farnham, Dorset after this date.



▲ Pitt-Rivers and his family. (1999.19.7)

Pitt-Rivers always believed in the collection of everyday objects as well as ‘works of art’ and this is reflected in his collection. Pitt-Rivers described the intellectual framework for his collection and museum displays as:

‘The objects are arranged in sequence with a view to show ... the successive ideas by which the minds of men in a primitive condition of culture have progressed in the development of their arts from the simple to the complex, and from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous. ... Human ideas as represented by the various products of human industry, are capable of classification into genera, species and varieties in the same manner as the products of the vegetable animal kingdoms ... If, therefore we can obtain a sufficient number of objects to represent the succession of ideas, it will be found that they are capable of being arranged in museums upon a similar plan.’ [Pitt-Rivers, 1874:xi and xii]

Needless to say, attitudes to the objects and the intellectual basis upon which they are studied have changed since Pitt-Rivers’ collections were given to the University. Today the museum is still organised by function and type but does not (and could not) show the supposed evolution of objects from the simple to the most complex.

Archaeology became very important to Pitt-Rivers; he purchased archaeological items from dealers and salerooms, but also carried out excavations of his own, principally in Ireland during his service there in the 1860s, and in England (London, Yorkshire, Sussex and his own estates in Dorset). He documented his archaeological work fully, causing detailed site plans to be prepared and wooden models to be made.

Pitt-Rivers very soon exhausted the space available in his own house to show his collections. In 1873, he decided that his collection should be publicly exhibited and arranged with the South Kensington Museum to display around 10,000 objects at the Bethnal Green branch of that Museum. In 1878 his collection was



▲ General Pitt Rivers; oil portrait by Frank Holl ARA. Original painting still held by his family 1998.356.80.6

moved to the South Kensington Museum. In 1880 he decided his collection should have a permanent home and eventually settled upon the University of Oxford. On 30 May 1882 the University accepted the offer of Pitt-Rivers' collection; an annexe, measuring approximately seventy by eighty-six feet, was built onto the eastern side of the University Museum (of Natural History) to house the collection. Henry Nottidge Moseley, Head of the Department of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy, was put in charge of the collection and Edward Burnett Tylor was appointed the first Lecturer in Anthropology in Britain.

The University undertook to carry on Pitt-Rivers' general method of arrangement of objects during his lifetime and agreed that any changes after that date would only be instituted if 'the advance of knowledge required it'. Although Pitt-Rivers' original stipulations had suggested an on-going interest in his collection once it was given to Oxford, he did not display much interest in it, transferring his interest to his new museum in Farnham, Dorset.

Further reading

Bowden, M. 1991. *Pitt Rivers: The life and archaeological work of Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers*, DCL, FRS, FSA. Cambridge University Press

Gray, H. St.G 1905. 'A Memoir of Lt-General Pitt-Rivers' [sic] in Pitt Rivers, A.H.L.F. *Excavations in Cranborne Chase vol V*. Somerset [privately published] Lane-Fox, AH. 1874 [Pitt Rivers]. *Catalogue of the Anthropological Collection lent by Alison Petch* © Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, 1997.

Compiled by:
Alison Petch,
Museum Registrar, 2005