

Discover...

THOMAS KENNETH PENNIMAN

An American at the Pitt Rivers Museum

Penniman is perhaps the least well known of all the senior staff that have ever worked at the Pitt Rivers Museum. This is strange because although he was not very well known internationally he did contribute a great deal to the Museum.

He was born in 1895 in New Hampshire, USA. He was brought up on a farm in the country. After graduating from Middlebury College in Vermont he applied for the Rhodes scholarship to Oxford. Although he was awarded the scholarship in 1917 he decided to enlist instead, not arriving at Oxford until 1919 when he read Greats. After graduating he stayed on in Oxford working in a series of temporary jobs and studying for a Diploma in Anthropology, which he was awarded in 1928. That same year he visited Kish in Mesopotamia, as part of the Oxford-Field Museum Expedition and around the same time he took British citizenship.



▲ Thomas Kenneth Penniman 1998.356.3

For almost a decade after this Penniman continued to live in Oxford, doing a series of part-time or temporary jobs such as acting as secretary to the Committee for Anthropology and coaching students. In 1939 he finally got a career break when he was appointed as Henry Balfour's (see the separate fact sheet) deputy at the Museum during Balfour's illness. After Balfour's death in 1939 Penniman was appointed Director (or Curator as it was then known) and remained in post until 1963.

One of Penniman's main contributions to the Museum was to create, with Beatrice Blackwood, the card catalogue index system, which still exists today. This labour took many years and was welcome distraction from the effects of the Second World War in the museum:

'We could not black-out the Museum, but we could, and did, pick up an Accessions book, a few packets of index cards and a portable typewriter, and take them to a blacked-out room' [1970, 12]

Penniman took the difficult decision not to move the objects to temporary accommodation during the War, 'partly because no place is safer than another, partly because many of them would certainly suffer greatly by movement, handling, lack of suitable supervision and conditions, and partly because other people with collections would find our empty space too tempting'. (Annual report 1940) Wire-netting was stretched below the glass roof as a safety measure. Blacking out of the museum was impossible; therefore it was closed earlier in winter, and the academic staff continued to work in the blacked-out Assistant Secretary's room off the Main Court of the Museum.

Penniman also instituted an overhaul of the museum—the Court glass roof was made sound against the weather, curtains on runners were fitted over cases containing materials which would fade or suffer from light, and certain screens with perishable specimens were glassed over. The heating and drainage systems were modernized, so that floors, exhibition cases, and specimens were safe from damage by water (which had happened in previous years).

Penniman founded the so-called 'Occasional Papers' series whereby topics interesting to the Museum could be published and more widely disseminated. He appears to have been the first Curator to put forward formal plans to totally develop the Museum. It was his broad ideas that his successor, Bernard Fagg, developed into the plans for a new building on the Banbury Road. Penniman was deeply disappointed when these plans fell through.

Another interest was the musical instruments collections and he insisted that a large number of the musical instruments should be in playable condition (the collections are now a research collection rather than a playing one). He was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and of the Royal Anthropological Institute. His published work includes *Spencer's Last Journey* (with R. R. Marett), 1931; *Spencer's Scientific Correspondence*, 1932; and *A Hundred Years of Anthropology*, 1935.

Penniman recorded his views of the Museum's distinctive displays: 'The student needs to see as much material as possible if he is not to go away in a matter of minutes feeling that he has mastered the subject, and need never look again, and the scholar needs a great deal in order to form a just estimate whether it is worth his while to go further into our resources. Even those who have no special desire to be examined or to write a learned paper return again and again to many of our cases which have taken their interest, and express appreciation of the fact that this is not a place where they can 'do' the collection between showers, but one in which they can always find more of what interests them and learn about the subject rather than put up with our idea of what is best for them to see. Pictures and sculpture of course require other treatment, but in a scientific collection plenty of evidence including awkward facts is necessary.' (Annual Report, 1953). He finally retired in 1963 and died in 1977.

Further reading

K.O.L. Burridge, 1977 *'Remembering Tom Penniman' Man*, New Series, Vol. 12, No. 3/4 (Dec., 1977), 530-531

Compiled by:

Fran Larson, Researcher and
Alison Petch, Museum Registrar,
August 2005