tEXtcavation Tour

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(cuts made in performance in *italics*)
photos: Stephen Hodge

Exeter Central Library.

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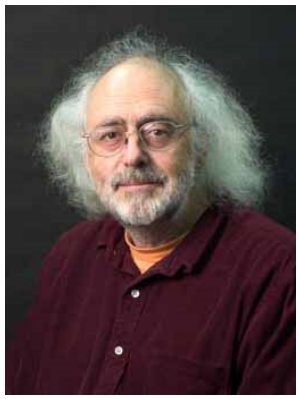
Welcome, to Level 3.



I've grown a beard to look like Professor Aston on Time Team – but I've grown a beard before to half be someone else so now I'm here – today - it feels inappropriate as well as irritating. The beard will be the next stratagraphic unit to be excavated from this site. *(I was going to wear these shorts. But integrity prevailed.)*

We've a number of excavation sites to visit … some are keyhole excavations to be made over the two hours bringing up six particular books and some are open area excavations of the whole layers laid down through levels 2, 3 and 4.

(A couple of things about how to behave on site: it's a place that's been built on, re-built, decorated, re-decorated, burned up and burned down, dug and re-dug, its artefacts bought, borrowed, returned, gone missing, given, stolen, sold and it is in present use.)

(And, of course, it's not simply an archaeological site in itself, all its artefacts are in themselves records of other sites – some distant, others near at hand, some imaginary, others mathematical.)

(If you have your library card with you and you make a find during the visit, then carefully and swiftly remove it, as far as possible leaving its environs undisturbed. All the artefacts are documented under the Dewey System and librarians will be waiting to deal with your finds at the end of your visit. So, help yourself.)

OK? Then follow me.

(Lead group through the Children's Library.

Pause at the door from the Children's Library.)

Before we go in, for a moment excavate something from your memories of childhood reading.

(Pause. Then through the door from the Children's Library. Up the stairs. At the door into the pre 50 stack.)

I've been asking myself what people who have never been in the stacks think they might be about to see.

(What are the stacks?)
Doors or pylons. Sloping tunnels, corridors and shafts.

A landfill site of words. A mass grave of books. An afterlife of text.

A brain.

(Eyes and cells that switch on when you move close to them.)

Trenches of print.

(Through the door. Go to the shelf of books. Taking down the books and opening them on the table:

Living Races of Mankind (OSIZE: 572) Vol. 1: p.109
'' '' '' '' Vol. 2: p. 456

The Mechanism of Creative Evolution (OSIZE: 575.1) p. 156

Rude Stone Monuments (OSIZE: 571) plate 29

Experiments In Genetics (OSIZE 575.1) p.304)

In an excavation neither the vertical nor the horizontal can be ignored or privileged– and they are often in conflict with each other.

(A horizontal trench running South East to North West through shelf six, 4th book to the North reveals: 18 male authors, one female, one female translator and three authors of indeterminate gender.)

(*The space seems to bend under the tension. Rich fruits of mutation struggle with dry Dewey numbers trying to fix them in hierarchical races.)* At one site you find the remnants of a moment when ideas floated free from their local origins and hybridised with others… Jewish monotheism, say, or Iranian Mazdaism's dualism of body and spirit… at another you find the intellectual history of the Holocaust, written before it happens. The book slammed shut.

This is the way to the first of our keyhole excavations - down here at 370.1.
(Into Bay 10)

We burrowed down through Half Hours With Highwaymen, histories of Dartmoor Prison… you can see the Egyptian influence on the monument to the prisoners from Napoleon's armies. Secret Societies. Freemasonry… through the twin pillars of the temple, down the winding stairs of the lodge. London Clubs, The Idea Of Social Justice… and under all this rubble our first find: 'World Brain' by H. G. Wells, 1938, Methuen, London– it's a series of essays and speeches proposing a rolling international encyclopaedia, continuously updated and sifted by local and global committees independent of private capital or states and governments… with reading room access to everyone in the world. O, and in English. But what if the bureaucracy, the exclusiveness and the general bossiness of Wells' vision were removed – by a JCB 3, say, or a Bobcat, and then with spades, shovels, mattocks… and finally and finely with a mason's pointing trowel cast in one piece with the tang… could the idea float free as inspiration for a nostalgic, subversive organisation of informal committees? Like house churches or night clubs or groups of wandering bishops – re-exploring text everywhere – survivalist, evangelical, organised in playfully covert cell-structures moving circus-like through all the world's Level 3's – in Wells' words: (page 23) "a nervous network" - a physical internet of people and ideas in liquid libraries everywhere – Wells again: "the material beginning of a real World Brain."

The second of our keyholes is just a few feet North West of here…

– Dewey number 510 is where we find William Kingdon Clifford's 'The Common Sense of the Exact Sciences'. Number 82 is where we might have found Clifford as a child at home in Longbrook Street, a three minute walk from here – from the turret of which we might imagine him watching the executions on the prison ramparts, aware, like the man with the rope around his neck, of the way space curves about time… anticipating Einstein by forty years … but the turret wasn't built until Harry Hems bought the house and Clifford had grown up and gone. Clifford described

scientific knowledge as a set of hypotheses waiting to be contradicted by an exception, and in that spirit he anticipated the non-Euclidean mysteries of geometries close to the speed of light and the strangeness of non-locality at the quantum level - for he speculated that exceptions to nineteenth century physical orthodoxies might lie in the realms of the very small or the very large. And that's the physical nature of good libraries – we could get along with what's on show… but there's be a suspicion that somewhere in the stacks is a very small or a very large book that contradicts everything on Level 3.

Follow me.

(Points to sign that reads: "Sparks. This is the one.")

The sign here is a pointer for the pneuma – those sparks that are the alien parts of our effluent souls – directed here to an alchemical process, in which 'Distillation' – one hundred Dewey numbers out of place – interacts illicitly with 'The Small Canteen,' – aspiring to burn off all materiality and leave only a pure gnosis, a pure knowledge. Yet - even in this dryness – isn't there a persisting aroma of cabbages from a small (half-remembered) kitchen of memory?

Could you all please take a helmet from the table?

(Move to the stairs. Handing out the helmets.)

There was a fire here. In the past. The spark, after the bomb falls, passing from room to room – like a soul after death. (Then every book was the Book of the Dead.) But it was not a Gnostic fire – instead the inner was burnt and only the material shell remained.

The design of these post war stairs – emerging from the fire – reappears in the monumental and sepulchral hall of the Westcountry Studies Library – just out here –

(Unlock ad open the door to the hall of the Westcountry Studies Library.)

…a space so excitedly redundant it would require a post-processual archaeology to excavate its symbolic meaning from its absence of function.

(Close the door and lock it.)

Now, mind your heads.

(Climb the stairs. At the top.)

Keyhole excavations like those for 'World Brain' and 'The Common Sense Of The Exact Sciences' *(have been compared to "cutting a square out of a mediaeval document and trying to interpret it." Even box grid excavations in which keyholes are systematically or symmetrically sunk – these)* have for some time been considered inferior to open area excavation in which the site, where possible, is exposed layer by layer starting at the top.

(Mind your heads.)

(Excavating down from the 5th level to the 4th, to the 2nd shelf, 6th book to the South, and reading along a line) We excavated such an open area here, then with a trench – stretching from the winding stairs to the back of beyond – using an imaginary total station and a détourned ranging rod – we got a series of finds reading like this:

The Mountain Maid
Der Grosse Brockhaus Schra – Spu

Britannica Book of the Year, 1950
Kunst-Geschichte Die Rennaissance in Italien
Dismembered Masterpieces
Ancient Marbles in the British Museum - Part 9
New Ideas For Farm Buildings
Kunstler-Lexicon XIX
Ancient Furniture
Homes and Haunts of John Ruskin
Die Zeitinsel
Memoirs de Napoleon Tome 3
Shakespeare's Wild Flowers, Fairy Lore, Gardens, Herbs, Gatherers of Simples and Bee Lore
Lords 1691 – 1696
Trail of Opium
Price's Review of Morals
Connaissances Nécessaires À Un Bibliophile 4
Manual of Heraldry
The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth 1821 – 1830
William The Silent
Socrates – World Makers and World Shakers Series
Lord Shaftsbury
The Great Pierpont Morgan

In the same trench we found 'The Problem of Atlantis' – a problem that begins in a book – Plato's 'The Timaeus' – *(which makes an island)* which inspires books of archaeology without a site… but no islands *(which become their own islands… beginning the library right here at: 001.94 …)*

Immediately followed by the love of books: 'Philobiblon', 'Bibliomania'…

"What is a book?" page one, F. Harrison, 'A Book About Books'. (002)

In shelves there - opposite - an ‘Introduction to Symbolic Logic’ rubs covers uneasily with ‘The Place of Prejudice’ – the content of which is exactly as its sounds.

(Sounds.)

(Then walk silently and slowly down the passage to the end and then along the shelves to the Rougement Park side of the gallery. Moving away from the recorded sound.

Moving to the shelf after the gap in the shelves. 3rd shelf from the bottom, take out ‘Vikram and the Vampire’.)

Vikram and the Vampire – in which the hero keeps an eloquent vampire in a sack – this vampire is very different to the one whose property conveyancer operated out of the Cathedral Close in Exeter, speaking not of the dead, but of an outrageous future

(At the climax of ‘Vikram and the Vampire’ the narrative fuses all sorts of hybridity:)

((page 237) “enormous goats, vivified by the spirits of those who had slain Brahmans; things with the bodies of men and the faces of horses… hideous worms containing the souls of those priests who had drunk spirituous (meaning: mischievous) liquors…”)

(It’s an unreliable text, especially given Sir Richard Burton as translator.)

(The hero, Vikram, goes amongst the hybrid transgressions, inspired and outraged by the visions of an eloquent vampire that he keeps in a sack – bundled and bondaged, like the Tadpole of an Archangel – this vampire is very different to the one whose property conveyancer operated out of the

Cathedral Close in Exeter, speaking not of the dead, but of an outrageous future:)

("… a queer time coming, O Raja Vikram… society shall be all 'mouth'…" - in other words all will be priests – "…and mixed castes… …wars shall last six weeks and their causes shall be clean forgotten… there shall be a hospital for destitute kings, those that have not lost their heads… building tanks, feeding Brahmans, lying when one ought to lie; suicide, the burning of widows, and the burying of live children, shall become utterly unfashionable." (p.221-2))

(Put the book back and walk on.)

'Old Gods Falling' (823.05)

'The Light Reading Of Our Ancestors' (823.09)

((Showing the face of Paul Verlaine on the spine of a book – FR 840. ?))

(The next book is past the next gap in the shelves, 3rd shelf up, yellow cover.)

'Horse Sense and Sensibility' (798.2) - (page 76) "Really The Worst Of All"

('Gardens of the Great Mughals' (712.954)

'The Formal Garden In England' (712.6242)))

Behind the pillar here, in the same vertical shaft as Clifford's 'Common Sense Of The Exact Sciences' is 'Anglo Saxon Church' at 274.201 which acknowledges on page 167 the acquisition of numbers from Islam…

But the third of our six keyhole excavations is right here.

'The Book Of The Dead', – at 288.91.

(… unfortunately it has been broken into three volumes – possibly by the movement of ideas between levels or volcanic shifts of policy elsewhere?)

Translated by E. A. Wallis Budge these volumes contain a map of the afterlife and the responses the dead traveller must learn to recite to the doorkeepers, to the gods in their chambers, to the beasts in their passages… places the traveller might dimly recognise from their time among the living - the sloping passage here on page 10 … here's the pylons or doors (p.8 or p.11, 12 and 13), here the twin tats or pillars (p.9) …

(Maybe) we have now to take our own *(should take a)* sloping passage *(pre-1950 to closer to the present)*. But first we must go down the winding stairs…

(Take the visitors to the tope of the winding stairs.)

You can leave your helmets here.

(All leave helmets on the shelf at the top of the stairs.)

Here are the winding stairs – in freemasonic symbolism, 15 steps from Solomon, the King of Israel, and his temple architect Hiram at the top… right down to the bottom few steps of feeling, rhetoric, logic, body and grammar…

Watch your step. Watch the texture of the stairs. And wait at the foot of it (the staircase).

(Descend the spiral staircase down to the sloping tunnel. At the bottom, into the slopping tunnel. Move through the group to the point of vocal resonance:)

Here we travel from the Old to the New, from level 3 to level 2; it's unusual in archaeology for the more recent layer to lie below the older one. The heat of the fire is still here. And memories of small canteens. There are vampires in the pipes shooting along inside, like tadpole souls - shaped like mason's pointing trowels (cast in one piece with the tang). Shhhhhh!

(At the far end of the tunnel. Look back.)

One last resonant text from the Old City Library.

"...the first wave of the Atlantean race..."

It's an unfortunate metaphor that – "first **wave** of the Atlantean race..." (given the fate of Atlantis...)

Imagine a wave rushing down here.

"...the first wave of the Atlantean race, the Crô-Magnons, were instrumental in bringing to European soil the seeds of its civilisation – to an admixture of Crô-Magnon and Iberian blood we owe the genius of Shakespeare and Burns, Milton, Scott and Mr H. G. Wells..."

Imagine an admixture of blood running down here.

(Roll a tiny bottle of water and a tiny bottle of salt up the slope so that they roll back.)

The same racial fantasist also wrote, as if for the next place we'll visit:

“Imagination, vision, if rightly interpreted and utilised, is one of the most powerful aids to historical and archaeological understanding; and the ability to cast an eagle glance down the avenues of the ages is… one of the first steps in psychic progress.”

Mind your heads.

(Walk to the meeting of many routes, close to the cage. Wait a moment. Listen to the whispering and look around.)

For future reference.

(Open the door to the Reference Library.)

Let’s go to the cage…

‘The Cage’ by Thomas Hinde.

(Take out and hold up the volume for a moment.)

…inside the cage is the Hortus Veitchii of J. H. Veitch – rooting around among the volumes. A Companion To Murder has made a sinister friendship with the Second Companion. On another day we might have taken An Unhurried View Of Erotica, even a short tenancy with the Widow that keeps the Cock Inn. The Seaside Book by W.H. Harvey is being eyed oddly by a book with a cover like a crab shell…

We could all pile in now and handle them, but the cage then collapses into just another set of shelves. (So, perhaps I can ask just one of you to spoil it for yourself and help me…)

((Unlock and enter the cage with one volunteer. Shut the door and then address the remainder through the mesh of the cage.)

('Description de l'Egypte' is the record of Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition into Egypt, as archaeological as it is military – it's a rational record of the origins of a new irrationality and a return to an older one. It's the twin pillars again. But maybe just take a look.)

((Bring the large volume 3 of 'Description de l'Egypte' to the gate of the cage. Place on the floor and open at the print of the gate to the temple at Luxor/Thebes. Print : 5? Let people look. For a while))

(Don't tell anyone, but when I found this book the page here had not been cut entirely – in other words – nearly 200 years old - it's being seen for the first time today.)

(Let's put it away before we look at it for too long.)

((Return the 'Description de l'Egypte' to its table.))

This is also the site of our fourth excavation: 'On Growth and Form' by D'Arcy Thompson… which proposes that the shapes in which a collection of books grows up and dies away… is as significant as the contents of any of its separate units…

It's such a wonderful, far-reaching book that its tip surfaces above us in Level 3 in Evelyn Fox Keiller's 'Making Sense of Life: Explaining Biological Development with Models, Metaphors and Machines', published last year by Harvard University Press.

But you can find that for yourselves, later - let's go to the fifth site.

(At the Tadpole of the Archangel – one bay back.)

‘The Tadpole Of the Archangel’ by Major Drury – in the marvellous title story of this collection the narrator comes across the remains of the eccentric Admiral “Archangel” Telfer-Bagge, who had had himself stitched into albatross wings and fired from a torpedo tube to overtake an enemy… the soldiers now guarding what remains of his extravagance have placed the bits in a sack, bundled and bondaged like an eloquent Vampire and tied to the top of a tall pole, where the smell can drift harmlessly away; the sack moves in the wind, its shadow wriggling on the ground like the tadpole soul of an archangel.

(Tapping the book.)

Now right here is the problem of access to the contents of these books – it’s not just the winding staircase and the sloping passage, but access to the more eccentric layers of meaning down here is almost impossible to negotiate through the library’s computerised catalogue. Physically excavating – as we are doing, yes – but highly resistant to the geo-phys of a computer. So how do you excavate a tadpole shadow? How would we look it up? Could you learn – like a dead soul – all the questions and namings needed to find all that you do not even know yet that you want to know? *(The criteria for this library’s very being is its use… once a week a stock manager passes through these stacks culling the volumes that are no longer useful… but what of the alien and magical works whose usefulness is camouflaged to the library’s users by their very titles?)*

(The Jersey Monster. The Hour of One. The Tadpole Of An Archangel.)

(If the library is to fulfil its role as a place of use it will have to find the means to release its buried treasures. Not by destroying their caged-ness and hidden-ness – but by confirming guides and placing the means upstairs to initiate readers into the mysteries of this site’s hidden stratagraphic units.) A Book Of The Dead for the accidental discovery of the afterlife of books - continuously updated by local, global, nostalgic and

subversive organisations, working in playfully covert cell-structures moving circus-like through the Library's Level 3 – in Wells' words: (page 23) "a nervous network", "the material beginning of a real Exeter Brain."

(What this library needs is an organisation of accidental excavations of what we don't know yet that we want to know. After all - most archaeological sites are discovered accidentally.)

(In the Hammer series of 'Mummy' movies the desecrating archaeologist disturbs those things "better left untouched," unleashing unpredictable forces… this blundering archaeologist is probably the best library user of all…)

(Lord Carnarvon: Can you see anything?)

*(Carter: Yes, **wonderful** things.)*

(Now move to stand by the large-size Book Of The Dead, but make no reference to it.)

The final keyhole excavation site I won't take you to.

At 133.4, alongside the magic of Eliphas Levi, is a modest pamphlet: 'Exorcism: A Commission Convened by The Bishop of Exeter' – SPCK, London, 1972.

When the report describes "haunts" as "impersonal traces of earlier personal actions, (that) seem to be caused by habitual actions or by actions accompanied by violent emotions" it could be talking about books. "It is rare to find a place memory more than four hundred years old," it reports; confusing "possession" and "printing".

(Water and salt might not be welcomed here.)

And deliverance from “all vain imaginations, projections and phantasms” might have an unfortunate effect for a library.

So, perhaps we should go before we are either contaminated by “the evil atmosphere of a particular place” or it loses its charm from over-familiarity.

So as they say in many of these novels here: This THE END.

(These are the ends:)

(“Be courteously pleased to accept our thanks for the gift of the honorable orange.”)

(Danziger didn’t look like a spy.)

(To be, forever, a banana skin on the stage of History.)

(But she could try.)

(Mrs Cressing made no reply but she smiled as she raised the latch, and passed into the cottage.)

(She was one of those anonymous Russian women in a grey scarf and quilted jacket.)

(So all of us together – my mother, myself and nanny – drifted into the hopes and uncertainties of 1927.)

(Such are welcomed and communication may always be made with Mrs Rees Howells, the widow of the late Director, who continues his rich

ministry of faith and love in the midst of the college family – at the Bible College of Wales, Derwen Fawr, Swansea, South Wales.)

(Paradoxically, the repercussions of her sins and her weaknesses are her real memorial.)

(The Méséglise and Guermantes Ways, the self we are born with and the self which we acquire, always join at last, for the rarest and greatest in a work of art, in death for everyone: but to find their point of unity we must first travel them, in the world of people, place and things, in Time.)

("O yes," she replied "I knew her intimately." And then she added wistfully, "But she never comes to see me now.")

(And ***that*** *is 'The End'.)*

(Open the door to the Level 3 and lead the group up the stairs to Level 3.)