



Left Martin Hinton at work in the Museum's Mammal Room, 1924. This page Hinton on the shores of Dornoch Loch, 1927, photographing exposed muscles of a beached false killer whale.



# MARTIN HINTON

## The innate habits of a squirrel

Martin Alister Campbell Hinton, Keeper of Zoology at the Natural History Museum from 1936 to his retirement in 1945, is one of the many individuals suspected of being implicated in the Piltdown fraud. Although his Museum career began late, within six years he was appointed Deputy Keeper. But, as **Karolyn Shindler** discovers, his life, both professional and personal, was stormy and chaotic.

**M**artin Hinton was appointed to the staff of the Museum in 1921, when he was 38 years old. His post was that of an assistant in the Zoology Department. His subsequent rise was swift, even though he had started so late. Shortly after becoming a member of staff, he became Curator of Mammals and in 1927, just six years after his appointment, he became Deputy Keeper of Zoology. In 1936 he was appointed Keeper. It was triumph indeed for an individual who, through the early death of his father and his family's poverty, had had to leave school at the age of 12 and earn his living as a barrister's clerk. Determined to pursue his love of learning, he had spent all his spare time in museums and libraries, and excavating the Pleistocene

deposits of Kent and Essex. By 1905 he was regularly visiting the Geology and Zoology departments of the Museum and in 1910, he became a volunteer in Geology, working on the catalogue of fossil rodents.

### EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS

By the time he joined the staff of the Museum, Hinton had published more than 50 books and papers, had a considerable reputation for his expertise in small rodents such as rats, voles and lemmings – living and extinct – and was also married with three children. He possessed a library of more than 1,000 volumes, hundreds of papers and had his own scientific equipment, including a microscope, slide-rule, dissecting table and tanks. Before 1921, he claimed his income >



was never below £104 a year, never much above £150. His wife had 'no means'. It was little wonder that money – or rather, his lack of it – haunted his life.

His Museum career was highlighted by some remarkable incidents, which illustrate both his dedication to science and his not infrequent anger at what he perceived as injustice. One such occurred in October 1927, when a huge school of whales became beached in Dornoch Firth in Scotland. Within hours, Hinton and his friend and colleague Percy Stammwitz, taxidermist and preparator in Zoology, set off for Scotland. As Hinton told *The Daily Chronicle* a few days later, 'I strolled down to have a casual look at one of the whales and I got what I can only describe as the shock of my life, when I discovered what I suspected to be the very whale for which science has been searching in vain in all the Seven Seas for 80 years'. To his 'great surprise and joy', as he told the Keeper of Zoology, William Calman, the species was *Pseudorca crassidens*, the false killer whale, thought to be extinct. It was a sensational discovery.

#### A WHALE OF A TASK

Hinton then mounted an extraordinary operation. At least 150 whales had been stranded, varying in size from three to six metres long. Some of the bodies were towed out to sea, but Hinton dealt with an astonishing 143 of them.

Speed in working on the whales was of course essential. A huge number of rotting carcasses spread along nearly 30 miles of shoreline was a hazard in every sense, but Hinton wanted to examine, in the most minute detail, every possible aspect of this rare animal. Over six weeks, Hinton gathered what information he could – including measuring all the whales, determining their sex and examining the food contents of

their stomachs. He employed local men to strip the flesh from the skeletons (known as flensing) and to prepare and pack the bones and material for dissection into 500 huge sacks. Two of the whales, a bull and a female, were preserved whole. All this was transported to the Museum in London – a feat in itself – where detailed examination could take place.

#### FIGHTING FOR FUNDS

Once there, he organised teams in 24-hour shifts to clean the skeletons, and did what he could to get suitable recompense for the men. In February 1928, he wrote to the Keeper: 'Boiling down and cleaning of 143 whale skeletons in so short a time is an amazing achievement. It was a very unpleasant and dangerous task and each of the men engaged has suffered from gastric disturbance and/or poisoned fingers.' He recommended three days extra leave for them and added, 'No distinction should be made between boilers and cleaners in this matter; one job was as bad as another'.

Hinton was not only responsible for the science of this expedition, but also for the accounts. All the way he had to fight the Treasury and the Museum to try to ensure the men got a decent rate of pay for this unsavoury work. Although he believed that his recommendation for a special wage for the men had been officially sanctioned, the Treasury refused to pay. Hinton was so outraged that he told William Calman he would fund the difference personally. 'No other course seems to me to be consistent with either the interests of the Museum or with my own honour'.

Matters got even worse when it appeared that he and Stammwitz had been overpaid for their expenses and the Treasury was demanding that they should repay the excess. Hinton fired off this memo to the

Museum's assistant secretary, Dr Herbert Smith, in September 1928: 'I refuse to waste time in commenting upon the despicable meanness of the Treasury. So I enclose a blank cheque which must be completed and presented within a month'. He wanted it put on record, he told Smith, that 'I was misinformed officially as to subsistence allowances for protracted periods (on that ground alone I might repudiate all liability to pay)', and also that he 'had to spend a great deal on hospitality in order to get very unpleasant things done in very difficult circumstances'. He ended, 'I am very grateful to the Treasury for teaching me the vast difference between "justice" and "generosity"; in future dealings with the state I shall no doubt find that knowledge valuable'.

It may have been some comfort to Hinton, however, to receive the unstinting approbation of his colleagues. 'I am proud of you!' the ornithologist and osteologist William Plane Pycraft wrote to him. 'Only the grimmest of grim determination would have tackled the task you set yourself. Only a Hercules could have achieved the achievement which is yours. The financial side alone would have appalled me'.

#### BONDING OVER RODENTS

It was mammals at quite the other end of the scale to whales that most fascinated Hinton – rodents. He was even called in by the Government in the 1930s to solve the problem of muskrats that had escaped from farms and were causing hugely costly damage. But, as his colleagues in the Museum noted, he resolved the problem after the most intensive period of work and never received adequate thanks.

It was through rodents that he became great friends with Sir John Ellerman, who the newspapers could not mention without

**Left** False killer whale, *Pseudorca crassidens*, stranded in Dornoch Firth, 1927. The pod of whales in the Firth. **This page clockwise from left** The Museum's Director, Dr Clive Forster-Cooper, appointed in 1938, whose plans outraged Hinton. Sir John Ellerman, philanthropist, businessman and natural historian. Tring Park and Mansion, which the Rothschilds wished to present to the Museum as a centre for the study of zoology.



adding, 'the richest man in England'. His wealth came from an empire that embraced shipping and property, but Ellerman, then a young man, wanted most to devote himself to small rodents, fossil and recent. He spent a lot of time in the Museum, researching his three-volume work on living rodents, published only with Hinton's considerable help. Ellerman was a generous man, subsidising not only Hinton, but other scientists and activities in the Museum, including the purchase of a state-of-the-art X-ray machine.

#### OPPORTUNITY LOST

Hinton was also at the centre of what seemed an amazing opportunity for the Museum. In 1937, the Rothschild Museum at Tring in Hertfordshire had been bequeathed to the Natural History Museum on the death of Walter, Lord Rothschild. His nephew Victor then offered to present both Tring Mansion and Park to the Museum as a centre for the study of zoology. Hinton advocated acceptance of this magnificent gift and involved Ellerman, as the running costs of such a large building and grounds, not to mention the staffing implications, would obviously be considerable. Judging by the vast correspondence, Hinton must have spent an enormous amount of time

negotiating between Rothschild, the Museum Trustees and Ellerman. With the outbreak of war in 1939, it all came to a grinding halt, and when an attempt was made to resurrect the scheme four years later, Ellerman was by then paying a staggering tax rate of 19s 6d in the pound (97.5p). 'I think it is extremely improbable that I shall be able to do anything,' he told Hinton. 'Perfectly frankly and in confidence not only have I no spare cash for anything on a large scale but owing to unforeseen excessive tax demands I am in debt'.

#### TROUBLE IN THE WORKPLACE

In 1938 a new Director was appointed who came from outside the Museum. He was Dr Clive Forster-Cooper, a Cambridge zoologist. Hinton had also been considered for the post by the Trustees, but as Dr Julian Huxley, the zoologist and philosopher, wrote, not altogether consolingly, to Hinton, 'it was felt that since you were junior to a certain other Keeper whom they did not want to appoint, they had to rule you out – such is red tape!' However he added, 'Forster Cooper is a v. [sic] nice man, & does know something about museums'.

But their relationship was never going to work. Matters came to a head in 1943 over Forster-Cooper's plans totally to reorganise

the Museum's exhibition space. Hinton was outraged that the Director had presented his plans to the Trustees before discussing them in detail with the Keepers. As he told the Trustees, that left each Keeper in the embarrassing position of either fighting it out with the Director in front of the Trustees or 'shutting his eyes' and allowing 'what he regards (perhaps mistakenly) as catastrophic changes to fall with devastating effect upon the department for which he is responsible'. Hinton wrote coruscating memos to the Director on the subject, marked 'Secret' and even, 'Without Prejudice'. For a man who worked so long in the law, the idea of achieving your goal by reasoned argument seems to have passed him by. Hinton even fired this off to Julian Huxley – although he knew he was an old friend of Forster-Cooper's: 'Our man [Forster-Cooper] has gone stark staring mad and I have told the Trustees exactly what I think of his hare-brained and wasteful scheme for the exhibition. Only an unbalanced mind could have produced such a fantastic & useless scheme at the present time... the Trustees are meeting today and they may give me the sack. But I do not care if they do... I await the result with amused indifference'.

He was not sacked – though his arrogant obduracy must have pushed everyone to >

the limit – but he retired two years later in June 1945 on his 62nd birthday.

#### PERSONAL PAIN

In 1948, Hinton's wife Jane – or 'Mamma' as he calls her in an agonised letter to his son-in-law Richard Mott – became very ill with breast cancer. In unbearable detail, Hinton records how he cared for her most basic and intimate needs as she declined, and attended to her 'as though she were a little child'. For Hinton, the most 'pleasant part of the story' was that as her illness developed, 'Mamma became completely reconciled towards me. She found that I was the person who never begrudged time or trouble on her behalf... who watched her through the night coming to her aid instantly to prevent or relieve her pain'. But the letter portrays a deeply unhappy marriage. Hinton states he had discovered his three children – who had all disappointed him – had been brought up to regard him as 'a sort of wicked ogre who made mother unhappy by his wicked deeds'.

Jane died in 1948, and just the next year he married an old friend, the archaeologist Dina Portway Dobson whose first husband had also died. Hinton had known the Dobsons for many years, visiting their home at Wrington, near Bristol, and it was there that Dina and Hinton continued to live.

#### CLUES AND CONTRADICTIONS

In 1953, when Piltdown Man was exposed as a forgery, Hinton was asked about what

he knew – he had been a volunteer in the Geology department in 1912 when its discovery was announced. His remarks were odd and contradictory. He told Sir Gavin de Beer, who had become the Museum's Director in 1950, that he thought an unbalanced member of Benjamin Harrison's Ightham circle might have been the forger. Hinton had, of course, been a member of this group of archaeologists, geologists and palaeontologists, who searched the ancient gravels and fissures of the Kent Weald near the village of Ightham, for fossils and flint tools. But Hinton told Professor Wilfrid Le Gros Clark, one of the men who exposed the forgery, something quite different – that although he did not know who was responsible, he suspected that it was a joke aimed at Charles Dawson, the Sussex solicitor who had originally discovered the Piltdown site. The forger, Hinton suggested, 'was a local man who thought it very amusing to pull Dawson's leg'. Hinton also told Le Gros Clark that his old friend, the geologist Alfred Santer Kennard who died five years before the exposure, 'always said he knew who had done it. But he never mentioned names. One thing, or rather two things I am quite certain of is that neither Dawson or Kennard were guilty. Neither possessed the inclination to do such a thing or the necessary knowledge'. But Hinton had yet another version for a BBC producer – that the forger had worked at the Museum, though he would not reveal the name as the man was still alive.

#### DROPPING HINTS

Martin Hinton died in 1961, leaving unresolved all questions regarding Piltdown – what he may have known or whether he may have somehow been associated with the forgery. In July 1972, Dr Kenneth Oakley – former Deputy Keeper of Anthropology at the Museum and one of those central to the exposure of the fraud – wrote to a friend, discussing who might have been involved. Ever the scrupulous scientist, Oakley would not say openly what he thought, without proof. However, at the end of his letter, Oakley gave this cryptic clue: 'Do you have PPS 1936 with King & Oakley on Thames? You may look for clues about a dozen lines above Kennard in the bibliography'. I looked in the volume of the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, and the name is MAC Hinton. Whether Oakley thought Hinton was involved all the way, or was perhaps responsible for planting the famous 'cricket bat' bone implement, he never revealed.

#### A CACHE OF EVIDENCE?

In 1978, in a loft over the Keeper of Zoology's room – which of course had once been Hinton's – a trunk was found, with Hinton's initials on it. This contained papers, assorted specimens, and some cut mammal bones and tusks apparently stained to look like the Piltdown fossils and particularly the cricket bat. In the 1990s, this was seized on as evidence of Hinton's complicity, but it could equally well have been Hinton's

attempts to see how the forgery was done, rather than how to do it. That material is now part of the major re-analysis currently being undertaken of all the Piltdown specimens to see if it can be linked in any way to the forgery.

If Hinton really had been the Piltdown forger, would he have left such apparently incriminating evidence? Well yes, he might quite possibly have done so, simply because he never threw anything away. When his scientific executor and biographer Professor RJG Savage came to clear out Hinton's study at Wrington in 1961 after his death, he discovered that Hinton 'had the innate habits of a squirrel; literally everything was kept'. There was more than a tonne of paper, from chequebook stubs to notices of meetings, and that did not include his manuscripts and correspondence. There were also 10,000 tobacco tins – Hinton had smoked since he was 17 years old – in some of which he kept his rodent specimens. As Savage remarks with commendable understatement, for someone who had held administrative jobs, Martin Hinton 'was never an organized man'. But whether a man who cared so passionately for the Museum and its history, and for his hard-won position in science, could so betray everything he had worked for by creating the Piltdown chimera – that is another question.



Left Cut and stained mammal bones and tusks discovered in the 1970s in a loft above the Keeper of Zoology's room.  
Below The Piltdown bone implement, known as the 'cricket bat'.

