

GEORGE HILLIER: AN ISLE OF WIGHT ANTIQUARY

By C. J. ARNOLD

GEORGE Alexander Hillier is perhaps best known as the excavator of the Anglo-Saxon cemeteries at Bowcombe and Chessell Down, Isle of Wight (Arnold forthcoming) and as the author of the *History of the Antiquities of the Isle of Wight* (1856), which relates aspects of the archaeology and history of the island from the bronze age to the sixteenth century A.D. But while Hillier received considerable acclaim for this work, there was another side to the man which was not generally known.

Hillier was born in 1815 in Kennington, south London, the eldest son of William Hillier, Commander R.N., and was educated at Place Street House Academy, Ryde. Hillier's primary interest seems to have been the writing of the history of the Isle of Wight and from 1847 Hillier is known to have worked at the British Museum copying letters concerned with a number of famous families, and especially those connected with the Isle of Wight. He appears to have gained the confidence of Sir Frederick Madden and was selling manuscripts to him for his private collection and through him for the British Museum which he claimed he had bought at various places in the country.

The events of this period of Hillier's life have recently been dealt with in detail by Father Hockey (1977) and need only be summarised here. Hillier sold Madden an increasing number of seals and charters, the supply seemingly endless, and Madden's suspicious queries over this brought unsatisfactory replies from Hillier. These pressures on Hillier were reduced for a while due to his absence from London during the summer of 1854 when between 4th and 29th August he excavated a number of barrows on

Brightstone and Bowcombe Downs (Hillier 1855).

However, upon his return to London, Madden's continuing enquiries had produced sufficient evidence to suggest that Hillier was involved in selling stolen manuscripts to Madden and the British Museum, possibly in league with one of Madden's assistants. The situation naturally caused the Trustees of the museum considerable embarrassment and the wranglings with the original owners that followed were initially fruitless. Hillier managed to slip away quietly because of the British Museum's understandable desire to keep the affair as quiet as possible, though not without threatening Madden with a libel suit. It was also pointed out that it would have been an interesting spectacle to bring Hillier to the Bar of the Old Bailey as a thief with the Trustees beside him charged with receiving stolen property. Fortunately for both parties the suggestion never became a reality and the 166 stolen manuscripts were returned to their rightful owners.

It is a credit to Hillier that throughout these troubled times he was active making a living from his writing; in 1854 *Sieges of Arundel Castle* was published in London, and in the following year *A Memorial of the Castle of Carisbrooke*. He does not appear to have stayed in London very long after the affair with the manuscripts as he moved to the Isle of Wight, where in April 1855 he began his excavations at Chessell Down.

'On examining the edge of the pit, traces of graves were easily discernible by the loose nature of the soil which had been filled into the natural hard marl that formed the cists: and . . . on removing a

portion of this material a skull was quickly exposed.'

(Hillier 1856, 28)

After an intermission, the result of heavy rain, work continued in August. Hillier received full permission to excavate from the land-owner the Hon. A'Court Holmes (1809-91) who throughout 'behaved most kindly and liberally; giving him also right over the remains excavated' (Smith 1883, 228). This is an important point, if true, as the ensuing details show, and it is an exaggeration to say that 'the outlook was more cheerful for him in the Isle of Wight' (Hockey 1977, 28).

In August, during the second stage of the excavation, Hillier entertained a large number of visitors including Charles Roach Smith (1807-90). With Mr. Thomas Wright he 'left Newport at an early hour to superintend and direct the excavations of the day'. At noon about a hundred visitors arrived among whom were the Hon. and Lady A'Court Holmes, Sir John and Lady Simeon, the Rev. E. M'All, 'and other gentry'. As three or four graves had been discovered, and were in part already opened, they proceeded to excavate them fully, producing an urn with calcined bones, 'numerous brooches, rings, and other ornaments of these ancient people'. The Hon. A'Court Holmes 'provided a substantial and elegant lunch, spread out upon the grass in the pit below the cemetery. From these happy combinations, aided by a calm, warm and cloudless day, the attendants at the excavation upon Chessell Down, on August 28th 1855, enjoyed the intellectual profit of the lecture-room combined with the innocent hilarity of "pic-nic" (Smith 1883, 35-38). In the evening there followed a public dinner at the Bugle Inn, Newport in Smith's honour where 'about fifty of the principal persons of the island and non-resident gentry sat down'. The 'toast of the evening was "The health of Charles Roach Smith esq."' but Hillier also received praise from Holmes as Smith reported:

It is with gratification and pride he mentioned the name of his friend, George Hillier; and he felt sure the "History of the Isle of Wight", on which he was engaged, would far surpass any former county histories; that it would correct very many mistakes, and do full justice to the island. He proposed the health of Mr. Hillier; and announced, that Mr. Holmes wished to add the designation of "the future historian of the Isle of Wight". This compliment paid to Mr. Hillier was sanctioned by unanimous and hearty applause.'

(Smith 1862, 50; *Hampshire Advertiser* 1-9-1855, 7)

The following evening Smith attended a meeting of the Isle of Wight Philosophical Society at Ryde where the question of the future of the Chessell Down finds was raised, and it was generally felt that a public museum should be built on the Island; Carisbrooke Castle was put forward as a possible site, but nothing came of this until much later. Ernest Wilkins later claimed that:

In 1855, additional and more extensive excavations were made by an explorer [ie. Hillier] in conjunction with myself—the explorer referred to, continued to appropriate the interesting antiquarian relics discovered, although he had pledged himself at the outset of a series of explorations, undertaken by the Committee of the Museum at Newport, to deposit in their local collection all antiquities discovered!

(Wilkins and Brion 1861, 59)

By 'the outset of a series of explorations' Wilkins was clearly referring to Hillier's work at Brighstone and Bowcombe Downs, but no mention was made at the meeting at Ryde that these conditions existed. Clearly there was general agreement among those present that the finds should not leave the Island and shortly afterwards the *Hampshire Advertiser* (4-8-1855, 7) claimed that 'in the course of a few weeks, the finds would be deposited in the Isle of Wight Museum'. On 15 September

it was reported that they had actually been deposited there, but a letter sent to the *Hampshire Independent* expressed annoyance at 'the permissive privilege to traffic in the ancient historical relics of the island'. Whatever Hillier was doing at the time, he still retained Smith's favour. He wrote:

'There can be little doubt that the Isle of Wight would have been the fittest place, had there been a suitable receptacle; and had there been an application to Mr. Hillier, such as would have met the exigencies of the case. But these requisites were wanting; and when Mr. Hillier ceded the collection to Lord Londesborough, he relieved himself of what would have been an encumbrance, placed the precious objects in security: and freed himself from pecuniary liabilities which he had incurred.

(Smith 1883, 228)

Others didn't view the situation quite as compassionately as Smith. Dr. Wilkins, lamenting the loss, wrote:

'It is feared that this Island, will for ever be deprived of these local historical treasures, for they were soon after sold to the late Lord Londesborough for £150 or £200'.

(Wilkins and Brion 1861, 59)

At Smith's suggestion, Lord Londesborough had invited Hillier to one of his soirées to exhibit 'his valuable collection of Saxon remains', probably soon after 1855, and as Smith reported: 'On my arrival, his Lordship told me that he had become the owner of the entire collection' (1883, 165). The result of this action was that Hillier was subjected to 'sharp and severe attacks in the local paper' for 'not depositing in a particular place not prepared to receive them'. The strongest objector was the Revd. Edmund Kell F.S.A., a good friend of Smith's, who thought he took 'a very strong view of Mr. George Hillier's discoveries' and was placed in an awkward position. Smith, as usual, defended Hillier's

actions which led to the 'suspension of correspondence for a few years' with Kell, but later, 'the intercourse resumed its old friendly character, and (he) visited him at Southampton on the best of terms' (1886, 67). F. W. Fairholt wrote to Smith on the matter saying:

I cannot yet help thinking —'s vulgar attack should have been left to itself . . .

The tone of Mr. —'s letter to Mr. Holmes was sufficiently vulgar to be its own damnation, particularly in the last paragraph about Isle of Wight pirates.

(Smith 1883, 229)

However, Kell's fears were well founded. Londesborough returned the collection to Hillier for the purposes of publication, but he never regained possession of them 'notwithstanding law proceedings'. After the death of both parties Lord Otto Fitzgerald, Lady Londesborough's second husband, heard through Mr. Charles Warne, the Dorset antiquarian, that the antiquities were lying at a pawnbrokers to whom they had been pledged by Hillier, and he recovered them (British Museum Register of Antiquities, Medieval and Later, vol. 2, 36). On July 27, 1867 the Trustees approved the purchase of the collection for £150. Some of the objects, mainly the ironwork, had come into the possession of Warne himself, and on May 29 Franks went to Brighton, whence Warne had retired, to examine, and to purchase them, which he did for £50. Whether Hillier had given or sold them to Warne, or he had redeemed them himself from the pawnbrokers, is not clear. Warne and Hillier were good friends and the former was present in August 1855 at the dinner at the Bugle Inn. Warne had employed Hillier to illustrate his *Map of Dorsetshire*, and travelled with the author throughout the county. In his introduction to this work he pays tribute to Hillier:

The late Mr. George Hillier, of Ryde, Isle of Wight will ever be remembered to me with sentiments of esteem and gratitude.

He was my companion in many an anti-quarian excursion, and to his graphic skill most of the illustrations that accompany this volume are to be ascribed. It is much to be regretted that he was not spared to finish the work he had so ably commenced, the *History of the Isle of Wight*.

(Warne 1872, iv-v)

Hillier died on 1 April 1866 at Ryde, aged 59, without completing his *History*, having suffered from a lack of subscribers. He 'had collected ample materials for two volumes in quarto and had advertised as early as 1850; but the list of subscribers was far too confined even to pay the necessary outlay for so expensive an undertaking, and consequently the parts appeared slowly and at long and uncertain intervals. The plates of this work he engraved with his own hand, and, in order to lighten the burden of the cost, he latterly undertook the printing at his own house. There can be little doubt that in doing so he acted unwisely; he apparently overstrained the mind and ultimately broke down both bodily and mentally' (anonymous obituary, *Gentleman's Magazine* August 1866, 262). As early as 1857 it was apparent that Hillier was having financial problems; Smith observed:

. . . the work Mr. Hillier has undertaken to print is being conducted in the most conscientious and satisfactory manner, and is highly worthy of extensive patronage. It is lamentable to observe in the list of subscribers, the absence of names which would gracefully and worthily have headed such a list. Had a work of so much national, as well as local, importance been attempted in France, the Government would immediately have encouraged the author by subscribing for a considerable

number, probably a hundred, of copies, which would have been presented to a provincial library. (Smith 1857, 214)

Hillier and his wife Marie had lived at 13 Player street, Ryde, with his widowed mother, Ann, until her death in 1862 when they moved the short distance to Swan's Nest Cottage, St. John's Road, which still stands today. After his death, the lease of the property was transferred to his wife, as he died 'without leaving any property for her maintenance' (Isle of Wight County Record Office, Newport; Uncatalogued draft leases). Hillier, the 'Man of Letters' was buried next to his parents at Binstead Church, Isle of Wight.

Hillier would seem to have had two strongly opposed sides to his character; the brilliant historian and artist who devoted his life to the research and publication of his *History*, but who was prepared to steal the very objects which were material for the work to achieve his aim. Like many writers at that time he would have found the task of earning a sufficient income extremely difficult and the situation was compounded by the problems of raising sufficient capital through subscribers. Though it was never established by a court of law that Hillier did knowingly sell stolen manuscripts, it may be no coincidence that the affair came to light while he was researching for the *History*. Hillier died a poor man, ignored by most of his contemporaries, though his achievements were by no means small.

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