

## An Introduction to The Benjamin Harrison Archive at the Maidstone Museum and Bently Art Gallery

Benjamin Harrison was born on the 14<sup>th</sup> December 1837 in 'Ightham Place' and died on the 30<sup>th</sup> September 1921 in 'Old Stones' his home for almost eighty-two years. The house, from which the village grocery store also operated, was inherited from his father, his elder brother Thomas, a published amateur geologist, to whom the store would have passed, having emigrated to Australia in pursuit of a climate more conducive to his poor health.

Benjamin Harrison was not, according to his son, Sir Edward Harrison, a particularly adept grocer, his passions being geology, natural history and, most of all, prehistoric archaeology, which all-consuming interest led to his speculation on the antiquity of man in and around his own 'world' of Ightham and its environs. Such ideas proposed by Benjamin and his coterie of aficionados, resulted in sustained, and by no means always purely academic or gentlemanly debate, the life of which is not entirely extinguished today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

By any account, the prehistoric material found and acquired by Harrison during his long, and archaeologically productive lifetime, is impressive. Maidstone Museum is in possession of much of this material which, together with the 23 bound volumes of writings, copies of letters, both written and received, newspaper clippings, twelve sketchbooks and many loose watercolours, two autobiographical volumes, various other items of ephemera and illustrations, as well as several folders containing yet more letters, receipts, copies and original papers and articles, provides a valuable historical resource for anyone interested in the life and times of this most fascinating man and, more generally in the development of prehistoric archaeology in Britain from the mid-nineteenth century to the first few decades of the twentieth.

Harrison's writing is, on the whole difficult to decipher so the annotation and transcription of his archive will assist researchers interested in his work. His artwork is generally quite the opposite being delightful to view and providing an accurate representation of whichever of his artefacts he sketches. In the case of his eoliths however, there is a degree of exaggeration of features resulting in the impression of stones that look more artefactual than the products of nature that they are. Comparison of the sketches with the actual stones shows this very clearly.

The 23 bound volumes held in Maidstone Museum are but part of the

original number of notebooks, which Edward Harrison suggests originally numbered over forty. Some of these were lost in Harrison's lifetime and a few may still be extant in the personal possession of the descendants of people to whom Harrison loaned them. It is to be hoped that a few may still lay unrecognised in museums. Dating them is sometimes difficult owing to Harrison's habit of mixing current and past events on the same page. How the notebooks were developed and from which sources, has been dealt with in more detail elsewhere.

Benjamin Harrison developed the somewhat odd habit of compiling the volumes from both ends. Though Edward Harrison suggests that the rational reason for this, that is to record parts of academic papers, books and articles more fully than would have been desirable in the main body of the notebook, is not readily discernable in all the 23 volumes, in number 4 however, this broadly seems to be the case.

Angela Muthana, 3 December 2013