

# The Piltdown Hoax

by Jeannette Holland Austin



I never did buy the theory of evolution that the origin of man is descended from an "ape" or a one-cell animal in the sea. I knew my parents and grandparents; they were humans. Tracing the lineage back to ca 1066, each generation consisted of humans. If the human being had any relationship to the ape and evolution were true, we would see "evolving" apes amongst us.

That theory floated around in the academic spectrum while I attended grammar school until the high school books accepted it as fact. Then, an assembly of jawbones emerged and each was labeled a descendant of the ape. For many years, people simply accepted the theory. Yet, tracing

human-kind back to an ape has been rather awkward.

The controversy was popular in 1868, when some ancient human skeletons were discovered in a shallow cave at Cro-Magnon near the town of Les Eyzies-de-Tayac in the Dordogne region of southwestern France. The French geologist Edouard Lartet, uncovered five archaeological layers.

The human bones found in the topmost layer were assessed to be between 10,000 and 35,000 years old. Those people were presumed to have been about 5 feet 5 inches to 5 feet 7 inches) tall, having sturdy bodies. The forehead was straight with slight brow ridges and the face short and wide. From a study of these skeletons, an observation emerged that Cro-Magnons were the first humans to have a prominent chin while the brain was somewhat larger than the average for modern humans.

The Piltdown Man, which people believed confirmed Darwinism was a paleoanthropological hoax in which bone fragments were presented as the fossilised remains of a previously unknown early human. In 1912 an amateur archaeologist came along by the name of Charles Dawson who claimed that he had discovered the "missing link" between ape and man. After finding a section of a human-like skull in Pleistocene gravel beds near Piltdown, East Sussex, Dawson contacted Arthur Smith Woodward, Keeper of Geology at the Natural History Museum.

Dawson and Smith Woodward made further discoveries at the site which they connected to the same individual, including a jawbone, more skull fragments, a set of teeth and primitive tools.

After Smith Woodward reconstructed the skull fragments he hypothesised that they belonged to a human ancestor from 500,000 years ago. The discovery was announced at a Geological Society meeting and was given the Latin name *Eoanthropus dawsoni* (Dawson's dawn-man). A "missing link" gave some credibility to Darwin's theory of evolution. Yet, the find promoted great controversy until it was exposed as a forgery in 1953.

The reason is that the skull was found to have consisted of the altered mandible and some teeth of an orangutan deliberately combined with the cranium of a fully developed, though small-brained, modern human. The Piltdown hoax is prominent for two reasons: the attention it generated around the subject of human evolution, and the length of time, 45 years, that elapsed from its alleged initial discovery, was used to bolster the theory of evolution.

Also, the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel created drawings of human embryos next to developing animal embryos, making them virtually indistinguishable.

Although Haeckel was charged with fraud by five professors at the university where he taught and convicted by a university court and his fraud exposed in "Haeckel's Frauds and Forgeries" published in 1915, for decades, the theory continued to be published in high school and college biology textbooks and taught as being true.

What is amazing is that the discovery of the hoax did not alter the study of biological evolution. Because, evolution was still being taught as scientific fact in the school system, I found it necessary to explain this hoax to my children.