

The World of Disney

From Antiquarianism to
Archaeology

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Introduction

The name of Dr John Disney is celebrated in the title of the University of Cambridge Chair of Archaeology. Disney's benefaction in the mid-19th century prepared the way for the scientific study of the past. In spite of Disney's antiquarian interests, there is no obvious reason why archaeology should have inspired his interest.

My first formal professional encounter with Disney, or at least his collection of classical sculptures, was as a curatorial member of the Department of Antiquities at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Some of this material formed part of a temporary exhibition at the museum exploring the impact of the Grand Tour on the formation of parts of the classical collections.¹ I was subsequently invited to write a new memoir for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) as part of a series of archaeological lives that included Dr Winifred Lamb, Honorary Keeper of the Department of Greek Antiquities at the Fitzwilliam during the inter-war period.²

The important question is why did Disney choose archaeology as the focus for his gift? The bequest of the sculptures, along with The Hyde near Ingatestone in Essex, by Thomas Brand-Hollis to Disney's father, the Reverend John Disney, establishes the antiquarian past.³ The collection had been formed by Thomas Hollis and Thomas Brand (later Brand-Hollis) during their Grand Tours of Italy in the mid eighteenth century. Disney's uncle (and father-in-law), Lewis Disney-Ffytche, had collected material in Italy in the 1790s when he was forced to flee from France; some of the objects were displayed at Danbury Place in Essex. Disney himself was involved with the creation of the new museum in Chelmsford, the county town of Essex, as an initiative of the Chelmsford Philosophical Society. He subsequently helped to establish the Colchester Archaeological Society that evolved into the Essex Archaeological Society. Disney, like his father, was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries; he also was a member of the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.

An equally practical question was how did Disney come to be in a position to grant this benefaction? The Disney wealth came from different sources. First, the Reverend Disney received a significant benefaction from Thomas Brand-Hollis who had supported Disney's ministry in London when he left the Church of England; Brand-Hollis had received much of his wealth from his friend Thomas Hollis. The Brand-Hollis bequest included The Hyde, and its contents, as well as extensive estates in Dorset. Second, Disney's marriage to his first cousin Sophia meant that he inherited part of the estate of his uncle Lewis Disney-Ffytche; this in part had been derived from the Ffytche family involvement in the East India Company. Third, the Disneys had profited from their investments in first canals and then the railways; in

¹ Gill 1990c; see also Gill 1990b.

² Gill 2004c.

³ For the place of antiquarianism: Momigliano 1950; see also Miller 2007.

later life Disney was a recipient of the proceeds from the California gold rush. The model for generous benefactions to universities can be traced back to Thomas Hollis who was a liberal donor to universities in New England.

This biography ranges far from archaeological and antiquarian interests, though it touches on the collecting of the classical past in the Grand Tour, the display of antiquity in eighteenth and nineteenth century country houses, and the creation of public museums. The story emerges in the enlightenment values of republicanism, as well as the theological challenges within the Church of England during the late eighteenth century. Disney's own intellectual interests and commitments were broad and included the Zoological Society of London, the Royal Society, the Royal Society of Literature, the Society of Antiquaries, as well as the Royal Horticultural Society.

A linear chronological narrative of a biography is difficult to apply to the life of Disney. The biography starts with the Norman conquest origins of the Disney family in Lincolnshire (at the village of Norton Disney) and Nottinghamshire, and explains the family's associations with specific houses and locations, specifically Flintham Hall in Nottinghamshire, and Danbury Place and The Hyde in Essex. The account then follows the Reverend John Disney from Cambridge and ordination in the Church of England, to the resignation of his livings in Lincolnshire and his appointment as a Unitarian minister in London. It is in London that he encountered Thomas Brand-Hollis who is a significant benefactor of the Unitarian Essex Street chapel. The biography then switches back in time to the lives of Thomas Hollis and Thomas Brand-Hollis, considering their eighteenth-century travels in Italy and the formation of the collection that was displayed at The Hyde. It explores their associations with Archdeacon Francis Blackburne, the father-in-law of the Reverend Disney. The following chapter considers the Disney links with Essex: not only the gift of The Hyde to the Reverend Disney, but also his brother Lewis, who on marriage took the family name of Disney-Ffytche. Lewis had been a supporter of republicanism and purchased property in France (that was seized during the French Revolution). He and his two daughters were forced to flee to Italy. Lewis' daughter Sophia married her first cousin, the Reverend Disney's son, John, and they settled in Dorset where Disney was the Recorder of Bridport. Sophia's sister, Frances, married Sir William Hillary who later formed the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI). The main Disney home became The Hyde where the Hollis and Brand-Hollis collection of sculptures and other art works were displayed. After the death of the Reverend Disney, John Disney inherited the Hyde and became involved in a number of learned societies notably the Chelmsford Philosophical Society that led to the creation of the Chelmsford Museum. Disney prepared a substantial catalogue of the classical collection that was published as the *Museum Disneianum*.⁴ The sculptures then formed part of a gift, the Disney Marbles, to the University of Cambridge, alongside the benefaction of a Chair of Archaeology. Subsequent to this gift Disney helped to establish the Essex Archaeological Society, one of a series

⁴Disney 1846; Disney 1849a; Disney 1849b.

of regional and county-based archaeological societies that were emerging in the middle of the nineteenth century.

This study contributes to a study of the history of archaeology, especially the transition between antiquarianism and archaeology as a scientific discipline. This was a time when there was growing scientific interest in the remains of Britain's prehistory.⁵ This is an area of research that is growing in interest.⁶ Yet Disney's perception of archaeology is far removed the range of the discipline in the 21st century. The impact of Disney's benefaction continues to bear fruit more than a century and a half later with Cambridge as one of the leading centres for archaeology both in the UK and internationally.

⁵ Marsden 1974, 48–50.

⁶ E.g. Daniel 1967; Trigger 1989; Bahn 1996; Bahn 2014; Cline 2017; Fagan 2018.