

FRANK ELGEE

Frank Elgee, archaeologist, geologist and naturalist, and former Curator of the Dorman Museum made a lifelong study of the North Yorkshire Moors.

He was born in Kings Road, North Ormesby, on 8th November 1880, the eldest of three children. His father was a pay clerk at a local ironworks. His mother taught him to read and write and in 1887 he went to the North Ormesby Board School. Here he caught scarlet fever which left him short-sighted and partially deaf.

The Elgee family moved to Middlesbrough in 1892 but Frank and his brother Alan continued to attend the school in North Ormesby, until the Hugh Bell Higher Grade School opened in Middlesbrough in 1893. Frank was a shy, sensitive boy, probably because of his partial deafness and Albert Park became his playground after the move to Middlesbrough.

In May 1894 his bad fortune struck again when in May of that year he caught pneumonia and he was unable to sit for a scholarship to the High School.

Instead, in 1896 he started work as an office boy at 5/- per week for William Jacks & Co., Iron and Steel Merchants. The office routine wore him down and in April 1898 he had a chest operation at the North Riding Infirmary. He was allowed to leave after a few weeks but had to be carried by his father from the hospital to a cab as he was too weak to walk.

His parents arranged for him to recuperate away from Middlesbrough in the country surroundings of Ingleby Greenhow. Here he spent three formative months in a place where he could watch the varied local wildlife and stare up from his wheelchair at the purple hills of the moors. In his diary he recorded how his mother 'used to wheel me down to the stream, and ...I would sit for hours watching the birds...wagtails, dippers, redstarts and swallows'. 'I also used to sit in the garden facing the Cleveland Hills, watching the rosy light of the sun flash on their craggy summits, or observing the insects on the flowers and gooseberry bushes'.

During his time there he met the vicar of Ingleby Greenhow, the Reverend John Hawell who was himself one of the area's foremost collectors of natural history specimens. Hawell probably interested Frank

in joining the Cleveland Naturalist Field Club on his return to Middlesbrough and this brought him in to contact with a range of people that were to prove very influential.

While he was unable to work he spent his time teaching himself Latin, French and German and to study botany, geology, conchology and astronomy. Once out of the confines of his wheelchair he became the Honorary Assistant Secretary to the Cleveland Naturalist Field Club in 1899 and began a series of weekly articles, principally on entomology and geology, for the Northern Weekly Gazette. Dr. W.Y. Veitch, first president of the Field Club had many years previously, begun a museum collection for display at the hall of the Field Club's parent body – the Cleveland Literary & Philosophical Society. By the 1890's this collection had been put on display at the Municipal Buildings and Elgee almost certainly helped Veitch with display, cataloguing and collecting.

In 1904 when Sir Arthur Dorman gave the Dorman Memorial Museum to the town Elgee was made Assistant Curator, on £70 per annum, under Baker Hudson the Curator (and Borough Librarian) and Veitch as Honorary Curator. It is obvious from his rate of pay that Frank was actually responsible for the day to day running of the museum.

Frank was probably primarily responsible for moving the collections from the Municipal Buildings to the new museum and for arranging three displays. He also spent time writing articles on geology and natural history for various local and national societies.

In 1907 he began writing 'The Moorlands of North Eastern Yorkshire: Their Natural History and Origin'. This built on his previous researches such as his early studies of plant communities of the areas as well as his contact with specialists, such as Dr. W.G. Smith. In the book he attempted, in his own words, "to trace the moors to their causes; to indicate their interaction and interdependence between the animals and plants and the geological history of the district". The book was published in 1912 and was almost half a century ahead of its rivals that began with Prof. Hoskins' *The Making of the English Landscape* in 1955.

In August 1911, while on holiday at Danby with his father, his mother having died in 1907, he met Harriet Wragg, then headmistress of Byth County Secondary School who was staying at the same guest house. It was to be a most fortuitous meeting since they were married in 1914. The couple moved to Comondale in 1920 to live in the 'heart of the moors'.

They were both then able to spend a considerable amount of time studying the surrounding area.

Frank was finally made Curator of the museum in 1923, a much overdue appointment. By then his research had changed direction toward archaeology, probably as a result of coming in contact with the numerous burial mounds and other features of human habitation that lay unexplained on the vast stretches of moorland. In 1923 he published a handbook 'The Romans in Cleveland', based largely on the collation and retrieval of information from the efforts of 19th century antiquarians, compiling a catalogue of the antiquities of North East Yorkshire.

He did conduct some minor archaeological excavations, even persuading Middlesbrough Town Council to employ two men for one day near Comondale and Castleton. A major achievement was directing the Field Club excavations on the Iron Age hillfort at Eston Nab.

In 1930 he published 'Early Man in North East Yorkshire'. This survey, was principally concerned with the pre-Roman settlement of the area and is still one of the main sources of information for people studying the pre-history of the area. Both Frank and Harriet wrote a county survey 'The Archaeology of Yorkshire' which appeared in 1933 after Frank had resigned from his post of Curator due to ill health. Harriet was appointed Curator in his place.

In 1933 Leeds University recognised the value and importance of Frank's work by conferment of an honorary degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Whenever possible he still played an active part in the development of the museum and led groups to the Orkneys and Holy Island. In 1937 he organised the excavation of the burial mound at Loose Howe but his failing health meant that the work was largely directed by his wife. In 1938 acting on doctor's orders he moved south to Alton in Hampshire but still communicated with local archaeologists up until his death in 1944

His friends and the societies he was connected with erected a memorial stone to him at Rosedale Head in 1953 bearing the inscription 'Frank Elgee 1880-1944 Naturalist Archaeologist'.

His connection with the Dorman Museum encouraged many people to donate archaeological material thus enabling the Elgees to continually improve the displays. The museum became the natural repository for archaeological finds and excavations from the surrounding region.