

24th May

Memory Verse

In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Colossians 2:3

This is such a short verse that anyone can learn it but has something enormous in it. The “whom” here is the Lord Jesus Christ. This verse tells us that *all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hid(den) in Christ. He is the source of **all** knowledge, the way, **the truth** and the life. And today's lesson is about... untruth!

Something to read

May 23rd 1912 was Arthur Smith Woodward's fiftieth birthday. He was Keeper of Geology at the Natural History Museum in London and the following day he received what he must have considered a wonderful birthday present. Back in February he had had a letter from his friend Charles Dawson, an amateur fossil collector, in which he mentioned that he had been looking for fossils in a gravel pit at Barkham Manor, near Piltdown in Sussex and had found part of a human skull. He was excited about it, he wrote, because he thought it would “rival *H. heidelbergensis* in solidity.” *H[omo] Heidelbergensis*, a fossilised jaw bone, was thought to be the oldest human fossil known at the time and had been discovered near Heidelberg in Germany in 1908.



By “solidity” Dawson had meant that the fossil was indisputably human – or as he would have put it indisputably an *ancestor* of humans. He and Woodward both believed that the Bible's account of the creation of the world in general and of Adam and Eve in particular was not true. Instead they imagined that over a very long period of time human beings had evolved from a common ancestor shared with apes. Both men were hoping that fossils could be found that would illustrate human development rather as depicted in the illustration on the left.

What was needed (and still is!) were some definite fossils that were “missing links” between creatures that were undoubtedly apes and creatures that were undoubtedly human. They also hoped that *they* would be able to make some discoveries as exciting (exciting that is for fossil enthusiasts) as those made in Germany. It was on **24 May** 1912 that Mr Woodward received the Piltdown finds from Mr Dawson's hands with the words ‘How's that for Heidelberg?’

Together they spent the summer of 1912 hunting for fossils in the Piltdown gravel quarry and they came up with some very exciting finds – a jaw bone, teeth, primitive tools, more bits of skull – Germany might have its *H. heidelbergensis* but Britain now had its own very impressive *Eoanthropus dawsoni* or “Dawson's Dawn Man”!

Mr Smith Woodward made a reconstruction using the found pieces and filled in what was missing. Then the find was announced at a meeting of the Geological Society. Perhaps “Dawson's Dawn Man” was a bit of a tongue twister but, whatever the reason, the name “Piltdown Man” quickly caught on. In the painting you can see Mr Dawson and Mr Smith Woodward (both standing on the right) while the fossil is examined by Mr Peecraft in his white laboratory coat. Charles Darwin himself looks on at the scene– from a portrait on the wall in the background.



There could be no doubt now, apelike creatures had evolved into humans – and what was even better they had done so in England! “The earliest man? Remarkable discovery in Sussex: a skull millions of years old,” was the Guardian's headline. Artists painted reconstructions of what Piltdown Man looked like, the bones were carefully studied, articles on Piltdown Man were included in encyclopaedias, textbooks, school reading books and popular science writing. When Mr Smith Woodward retired from being Keeper of Geology in 1924 he spent the rest of his days digging for more fossils in the Piltdown quarries. He kept on going to the last and found – none.

The reason for this disappointment became apparent in the 1950s by which time Mr Woodward and Mr Dawson were dead. Close examination revealed that Piltdown Man was a forgery put together from remains of an ape and a human skull. The teeth had been filed down to create the right impression and one had been stained the “correct” colour with brown paint! “The Biggest Scientific Hoax of the Century” gasped the newspapers – but who had done it?

Suspicion naturally fell on Mr Dawson and to a lesser extent on Mr Smith Woodward and until 1996 Mr Dawson was generally considered to be the main, and probably the only, culprit. Then a trunk containing animal bones and teeth carved and stained just like those of Piltdown was found in store in a loft in the Natural History Museum. The trunk bore the initials of a museum curator, Martin Hinton (1883-1961), a man with a taste for practical jokes – and a grudge against Mr Woodward, who once had not paid Mr Hinton what he thought he was worth. Mr Hinton was known to have gone to the Piltdown area during the relevant period and he must have planted the finds for Mr Dawson to discover. Perhaps he was amazed when his trick worked so well and for so long!¹

Something to think about

How could it be that such an obvious fraud (even file marks on the teeth were visible) was not discovered at the time? The answer is that the scientists of the time desperately *wanted* the finds to be genuine and for over forty years that remained the case. Scientists with good qualifications had simply seen what they *wanted* to see. Scientists are no more objective than the rest of us. They have access to facts but these have to be interpreted. Our world-view will determine how we view things and that applies to experts as well as the rest of us. Since then, each successive “missing link” between apelike creatures and humans has been discarded, not as a fake but as either an ape or a man or bits of both – usually as soon as the next candidate for “missing link” comes into view.

Piltdown Man was not the last fake fossil by any means. Archaeoraptor was a fake made by mixing parts of different dinosaurs together that was “found” in the 1990s and displayed in a museum in Utah and featured in National Geographic magazine a year before the forgery was discovered. The export of fossil from China is forbidden by law in that country and attracts penalties up to the death penalty. Some Chinese fossil exporters have therefore become expert at putting together fakes! It is no exaggeration to say that there is almost a flood of fake Chinese fossils at the moment. You have been warned: don't buy a Chinese fossil for £1000 from Ebay!²

Something to do

You can have your own archaeological dig if you are allowed to dig in your own garden. You will need a **trowel** and a **sieve**, if you can get hold of one, and a small **paint brush** is useful to gently dust off anything you find. A **bucket** or container is also handy to hold soil that has been searched.

Mark out a small area of soil, ideally away from any plants that could get damaged, and carefully sift it through your sieve. You never know what you may find! Small pieces of broken crockery are

1 Here is a fascinating demonstration of how to tell the difference between various fossil skulls that is really worth watching: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Z2b8QseCng&feature=em-lbcastemail>

2 You can read about some recent ones here: <https://creation.com/fake-spider-fossil>

quite common and can often be Edwardian or Victorian. Pick your finds out of your sieve and dust them carefully with your paint brush. Perhaps you will find some bones – but make sure nobody put them there specially for you to find! Replace the soil when you have finished your dig and try to leave everything as you found it.

Something to make

If people from the Natural History museum made fossils why not try it yourself!

You can make fossils using salt dough. Use your own recipe or the one given on 19th of May. If you want to make dough that has a more realistic colour for fossils try these ingredients:

1 cup of used coffee grounds

1/2 cup of cold coffee

1 cup of flour

1/2 cup of salt

Now you need something to make the impression of the fossil. If you have toy dinosaurs that would be ideal. Shells collected from the seaside on your holidays would be good too. Snail shells found in the garden might be another possibility or even if you've recently lost a milk tooth and kept it....

Plants as well as animals become fossilised so you can experiment with leaves or flowers. Press your object into the dough and then leave it to dry out. Do not try your fossil out on any museum curator you might know.