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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Captain Vivian Hewitt and the fate of his collection of birds' eggs and specimens

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ABSTRACT

Vivian Hewitt was a little known collector of natural history specimens (mainly birds and their eggs) during the early and middle years of the twentieth century. Although an obscure figure his influence on the museum world of his time – and later – was considerable and his collection of Great Auk material became almost legendary. Some of his story and that of his collection is a matter of published record but many elements remain obscure. In this study we present previously unpublished details of Hewitt's extraordinary life.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the centuries there have been many celebrated eccentrics who – in their various ways – have made a significant impact on the history of natural history (Muensterberger, 1994). To those who interest themselves in such matters, the names of individuals like John James Audubon, Frank Buckland, Walter Rothschild, Richard Meinertzhagen, or Alfred Russel Wallace might spring to mind. Some of these people were wildly driven collectors, others were artists, writers, or men with various scientific aspirations. Some achieved high levels of importance, while others are simply footnotes at the bottom of the long list of characters who gave colour to the study of the natural sciences Mearns and Mearns 1988).

One figure who is comparatively little known but whose story is as enigmatic and as extraordinary as any of the better known names is Captain Vivian Hewitt, 1888 – 1965 (Hywel, 1973). Largely forgotten he may be, but his tangled tale is one of enormous contradiction – fabulous privilege and wealth combined with a love and respect for the working man, a mind consumed by unstoppable passions, incredible levels of secrecy, and driving energy. As far as natural history is concerned, Hewitt was, little more than an obsessed collector, but he was ultimately responsible for the saving and preserving of some of the most valuable relics of the natural world at a time when such items were entirely out of fashion and facing wide scale loss and destruction on every front. Many of the important items that Hewitt saved during this period now repose in British and America museums with little or no acknowledgement of the man himself, or how such specimens come to be there.

The story of Hewitt's life is certainly stranger than fiction[1]. Not only was it fascinatingly varied but in so many ways his private life reflects the moral inhibitions and attitudes of the times he lived through[2]. He wrote virtually nothing except for two papers in the *Oologists' Record* (Hewitt, 1923; 1924), and in the eyes of the world his ornithological achievements amounted to virtually zero.

Captain Hewitt was an intriguing mixture of the highly organized yet totally unstructured, of the tremendously acquisitive on a personal level while at the same time often showing the most generous instincts towards others – and he assembled one of the largest and most remarkable collections of zoological specimens ever formed by a single person! (Hywel 1973; Fuller 1999; Chilton 2009).

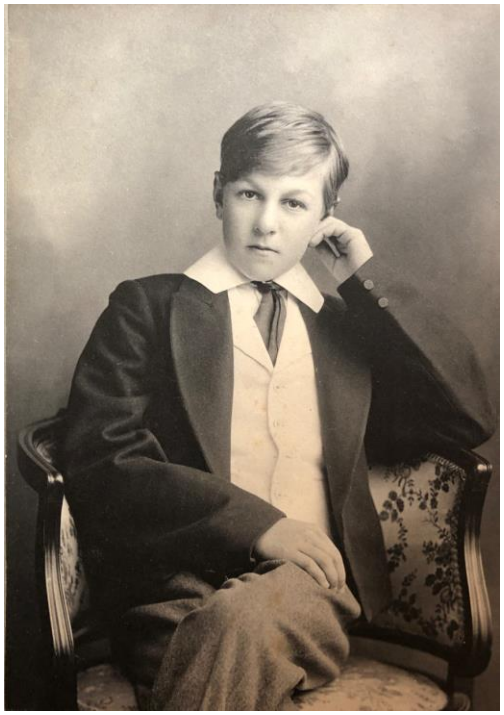

Figure 1. Vivian Hewitt photographed during his time at Harrow (circa 1902).

Early years

Vivian Vaughan Davies Hewitt was born in Grimsby on 11 March 1888 into considerable wealth and spent almost his entire life spending (some might say squandering) his inheritance. He was privately educated and sent to Harrow School where he excelled at mathematics, yet on leaving school he decided not to follow the kind of course generally undertaken by his fellow privileged pupils. Instead, he enrolled as an apprentice locomotive builder at the railway works in Crewe. He stuck to this particular course of action for four years. Then he turned his attention to racing cars both as a driver and as a skilled mechanic. Not satisfied with the level of danger provided by this pursuit he became deeply interested in aeroplanes and in 1909 he rented a flying shed at Brooklands in Surrey and learned to fly. At this time flying was very much in its infancy, and any attempt to take to the sky was likely to end in disaster. Hewitt purchased three Bleriot models (using family money) that his engineering skills allowed him to take apart and put back together! He gave a number of exhibitions of his aeronautical skills, thrilling large groups of the general public who had never seen a plane, let alone watched as a daredevil flew one above their heads.

Not satisfied with the small amount of adulation he was receiving Hewitt decided to make the first flight from the mainland of Britain to Ireland and on the 26th of April 1912, at the age of 24, he flew from near Holyhead, Anglesey landing successfully in Dublin – a distance of sixty miles. At the time this was apparently the longest flight over water ever made. It was an incredibly brave undertaking, especially as he had no compass to navigate, and just a few weeks earlier an aviator was lost at sea attempting to achieve the same record. Having made the flight successfully Hewitt had no intention of returning the way he had come. He simply dismantled his plane and had it packed up and shipped back to the UK mainland. The historic and groundbreaking flight brought Hewitt some celebrity, but he never received the full acclaim he deserved because a few days before his epic flight the *Titanic* had gone down and all other news was eclipsed.

Figure 2. A promotional photo of Hewitt taken after his epic flight in 1912.

The outbreak of World War I put something of a break on Hewitt's career as an aviator and he placed his aeronautical skills at the disposal of the country. Using his skills as an engineer he helped to develop techniques for the accurate firing of machine guns from moving aircraft. He represented Britain as a test pilot for the Curtiss Aviation Company in Buffalo USA and in January 1918, whilst testing a Curtiss biplane

he landed on a ploughed field adjacent to a runway. At the moment of impact he was thrown forward and hit his head on the instrument panel, leading to a serious concussion. After spending time in hospital his medical advisors cautioned prudence considering that he might be prone to blackouts.

This put an end to his flying activities. He was advised to use his skills and knowledge to less dangerous pursuits and by March 1918 he was in Virginia testing 80-foot long motor launches (Hywel, 1973).

The brewing firm from which Hewitt's fortune derived was based in Grimsby, but at a comparatively early age he developed a fondness for Wales. The family moved to North Wales and he soon moved into a house, Holmfield 21 West Kimmel Street, Rhyl, where he met a Mrs. Parry who became his housekeeper and who played a great part in his later life. Some years later he acquired a house, Bryn Aber, in Anglesey. Later he also bought at property at Nassau in the Bahamas; he would visit this retreat frequently allowing him tax exile status. In the late 1940s he also bought an estate in Co. Cork, Eire that enabled him to import foreign bird skins with few restrictions

At some stage during the early 1930s, Hewitt's already vast fortune was swollen when his uncle died, and he inherited a large share of the Grimsby brewery. When the brewery was sold this share amounted to one and a quarter million pounds (a truly vast sum at the time) and brought him an income of some £50,000 a year. His collecting instincts (already huge) ran riot. He assembled rare stamps, gold coins, guns, and objects d'art on a grand scale. He also continued to indulge his passion for natural history and increased rapidly his collection of specimens – and continued to do so for the rest of his life. By the time of his death Hewitt owned between 500,000 and a million birds' eggs (almost all purchased from men who had amassed their collections in previous decades), perhaps 100,000 bird skins and not less than one hundred stuffed birds set up in extravagant glass cases[3]. All this was acquired by a man who rented Puffin Island off the coast of Anglesey to study seabirds, who collected hardly any eggs himself, shot virtually none of his preserved birds and turned his home and the surrounding area into a private wildlife sanctuary.

Hewitt collected a few eggs himself. In 1922 he purchased a speedboat that enabled him to visit the Welsh offshore seabird colonies including Puffin Island, the Skerries, Bardsey and Grasholm. From these islands he took sea-bird eggs, including Roseate (*Sterna dougalli*), Sandwich (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) and Little Terns (*Sternula albifrons*) as well as Gannet (*Sula bassana*) and Guillemot (*Uria aalge*).

Collecting

On completion of his war service in the USA Hewitt returned home to Wales and thereafter collected on the grand scale using his wealth to outbid anybody at Steven's Auction rooms in London; he bought from professional dealers such as Harold Gowland (Wirral); Watkins and Doncaster (London); W. Rosenberg (London); Rowland Ward (London); and Peter Adolph (Tunbridge Wells), to name but a few within the UK. Desmond Nethersole-Thompson provided him with British and Irish taken eggs of Chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*), Hobby (*Falco subbuteo*) and Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*) (Hywel, 1973; Cole & Trobe, 2000).

As his collection increased Hewitt became particularly interested in the family Accipitridae and had collectors throughout the world providing him with both eggs, study specimens and stuffed birds. But for sheer numbers his own collection swelled with the purchase of entire collections, including those of E. M. Rocke (1942), R.W. Tufts (1946) and R. Etchecopari (1946)[4]. Quite often as collectors became too old and infirm to deal with their eggs – or had died – he made offers that couldn't be refused to the person or their relatives. He was not averse to sending hard cash in payment rather than by a cheque[5].

By far the largest egg collection he ever purchased was the outstanding and very comprehensive collection of mostly self-taken specimens belonging to Reverend Francis C.R. Jourdain (Cole and Trobe 2000). Hewitt and Jourdain were in regular contact by letter but met only occasionally at meetings of the British Oological Association in London, to which Hewitt rarely attended. A few years before Jourdain died in 1940 they had jointly discussed setting up a National Egg Collection using Hewitt's money to find suitable premises. It never came to fruition as the war upset their plans and Jourdain died. Jourdain's wife had already

pre-deceased him and his daughter had no interest whatsoever in her father's eggs and wanted to sell them as soon as possible (Mearns and Mearns, 1998). Jourdain's collection was huge in size. There were in all over 500 boxes

of all sizes and over 300 cabinet drawers. Hewitt promptly made an offer for the entire collection that included two Great Auk eggs, and all Jourdain's notebooks, diaries and ornithological library. However, the Oxford-based ornithologist W.B. Alexander (Alexander, 1974) had previously been allowed access to the house and had removed the manuscript notebooks and diaries to Oxford. Having discovered this, Hewitt refused point blank to buy the collection. However, there appeared to be no other buyers in the frame and following protracted negotiations beginning in June 1940 until December of the same year, a deal was concluded. The author has the receipt from Major Jourdain (an uncle): "Received from Capt. Vivian Hewitt, the sum of £2,200 in full payment for Great Auk eggs, Library, Birds Eggs, Cabinets and all Scientific material etc. pertaining thereto".

This is dated 2 December 1940 and it represented an amazing bargain for such an important collection. The collection was very nearly completely destroyed by enemy bombing when the eggs had been held in storage at Allens' Warehouse in Bournemouth awaiting road transport to Hewitt's home in North Wales.

Letters retrieved by David Wilson (the circumstances of which will be described below) from Hewitt's house and later passed to David Clugston provide a rich source of information on his collecting activities

One notable collection purchased came from William F.H. Rosenberg (1868 – 1957) a Natural History dealer from Edgware, Middlesex who had trading premises in Haverstock Hill, London. Rosenberg had many specimens of South American species. His collection of bird skins alone totalled 6,000 made up of some 1,500 species. This included a Tuamato Sandpiper (*Prosobonia parvirostris*) A French Polynesian endemic once thought to be extinct, but now found on several rat-free islands.

Figure 3. The scene at Stevens' Auction House, Covent Garden in 1934 where Hewitt bought two stuffed Great Auks. He can be seen standing at the back of the picture.

In addition to many rare and unique specimens Hewitt's collection contained no less than four stuffed Great Auks (*Pinguinus impennis*) and thirteen Great Auk eggs. Yet all of this precious material – much of it of scientific significance – would have been destroyed (apart from the Great Auk items) were it not for the intervention of the antiquarian bookseller and bird enthusiast David Wilson.

The fate of the collection following Hewitt's death

After Hewitt's death his entire ornithological collection passed to Jack Parry, who Hewitt treated as if he were his own son. This gentleman seems – like Captain Hewitt himself – to have been something of an eccentric character, but he was a man with little interest in the ornithological collection he had inherited. Naturally, perhaps, he wanted to sell it and enjoy the proceeds.

Despite the historical importance of the material, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds gave the new owner some highly inaccurate and short-sighted advice. This was that the entire collection was illegal and that if an attempt was made to sell any of it there would be serious legal repercussions. They expressed the fanatical view that the only correct and moral mode of proceeding was to destroy the whole lot.

In 1954 legislation had come into force preventing the buying or selling of British wild bird eggs. However, their purchase had been legal when Hewitt acquired them, and in fact foreign birds' eggs (of which there was a considerable number) were exempt from this legislation.

Despite the ban on sales, collections could legally be passed on as a donation to any interested person, or to an institution. Also, there was absolutely no legal restriction on the sale of the rest of the collection – the stuffed birds and the reference collection of bird skins. But Jack Parry was intimidated by the RSPB's warnings and erroneous advice. With hindsight it is unfortunate that the RSPB seemed to have no appreciation of the scientific or historical significance of the collection. Jack Parry came to the conclusion that his best course of action would be to throw the entire lot over an Anglesey cliff[5]. Luckily, this did not occur, largely, it seems, thanks to David Wilson.

Concern over the fate of Hewitt's collection came to the attention of David Wilson, then acting as secretary for the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), via another BTO member and personal friend, a Mr. Pat Venables.

Wilson decided to intervene and save the collection on behalf of the BTO. Possibly at his own expense and mainly on his own initiative David Wilson travelled from his home near Tring, Hertfordshire to Bryn Aber in Anglesey.

Wilson met Jack Parry on the doorstep of the Anglesey house. Perhaps as eccentric as Hewitt himself[6], Mr. Parry refused to let Wilson into the house. Instead they spoke for a while on the doorstep where Wilson explained that he wished to acquire the collection on behalf of the BTO. But Jack Parry, desperate to be immediately rid of what he considered a troublesome inheritance, refused to accept this and put forward an extraordinary proposal. He would give everything to Wilson, and if they shook hands on the arrangement there and then while still standing on the doorstep he would consider that his own responsibility was over and that everything was Wilson's personal property and his (Wilson's) burden! Such a bizarre outcome seems extraordinary but such was the case, and David Wilson took possession of all the specimens – in spirit if not in physical actuality – from that moment on, despite the fact that he hadn't entered the house and had not even seen a single item[7].

A note written in Wilson's hand in his signed copy of Hywel's biography records: "For a time I was the owner of the largest private collection in the world".

The collection remained at Bryn Aber until five lorries were sent to fetch it. David Wilson was an honourable man and although the whole collection was now his personal property, in his own mind he had acquired it for the BTO[8]. However, there was to be another twist to the tale. Apparently, the BTO didn't want the collection and with nowhere to house it, the entire assembly was deposited and stored in the basement of the Rothschild Museum at Tring.

The BTO decided that the collection was 'politically incorrect', and didn't want to be its owners! Wilson's intervention was regarded as unwelcome, perhaps even inappropriate. Disappointed by the indifference of his colleagues Wilson retained a handful of items that he particularly liked and kept them for many years – some right up to the time of his death in 2020 (Clugston, 2020).

The rest of the material was disposed of by the BTO in a rather random manner, along with a failure to keep full records of the particulars. The Natural History Museum acquired approximately 7,130 study skins of birds for which they paid the BTO £3,565, or 50p each! Other museums, Edinburgh, Liverpool and Cardiff, along with an unspecified museum in Paris, then bought – for small but undisclosed sums – various specimens that they wanted. David Wilson told the authors of this paper that other provincial British museums were then allowed to help themselves to anything they wanted (9).

Figure 4. Two of the cases of mounted birds that were commissioned by Vivian Hewitt from Rowland Ward Ltd. – Black Vultures (*Aegypius monachus*), Tawny Eagle (*Aquila* rapax) and Spanish Imperial Eagle (*Aquila adalberti*). These give some idea of the space taken up by this part of his collection.

Many of the magnificent stuffed birds in their glass cases (see fig 4) that were at that time considered unscientific by academics and therefore unwanted in museums, were sold off privately for undisclosed sums. Some of these specimens still exist (Fuller, 2014). All had been prepared by the Rowland Ward company and are of the highest quality. This company had been in existence since the late nineteenth

century and continued in business until the 1970s, long after the death of its founder. It was based in Piccadilly, produced many specimens for the Natural History Museum, and other prestigious museums around the world, as well as work for private clients (Morris, 2003).

What remained was sold for £25,000 to John Dupont (1938–2010) heir to the Dupont family fortune and founder of the Delaware Natural History Museum (Birkhead, 2016). Dupont subsequently became deranged and spent the last part of his life imprisoned for murder (Schultz & Thomas, 2014).

This was the fate of Vivian Hewitt's massive natural history collection, but what of the man himself?

Hewitt's later years

It is recorded that over the years he regularly received begging letters from those less fortunate than himself. His response was to make no written answer but simply pop a five pound note into an envelope and post it to the person concerned. In June 1940 as the blitz raged in World War II, Hewitt sent a cheque for £50,000 to the then Chancellor of the Exchequer as an interest free loan to help with the war effort.

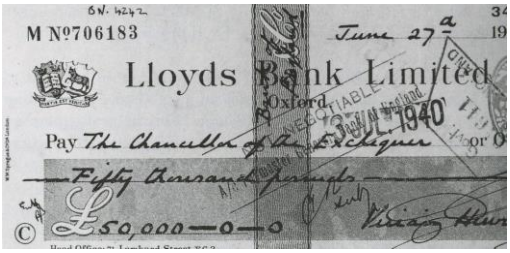

Figure 5. The cheque that Hewitt wrote for the Chancellor.

Hewitt owned a pet parrot (Jardine's parrot *Poicephalus gulielmi*) to which he was very attached. After he acquired the property in the Bahamas and at a time when air travel was somewhat unusual, he made regular trips to and from there accompanied by the parrot positioned in a first class seat in its cage. When the parrot finally died Hewitt had it stuffed by Rowland Ward Ltd., the celebrated taxidermy firm that he had used to produce many of the high quality glass cases that housed his large collection of mounted birds.

Hewitt's private life was unusual. A bachelor in his privileged position could not have been expected to function without some kind of domestic help and he employed a housekeeper. To keep up a semblance of respectability this lady was always 'officially' known as Mrs. Parry (although her first name was Eleanor and in family records she is referred to as Nellie), but she was much more than just a housekeeper. She became his lifelong companion and his lover. It is possible that she bore him children who survived him at his death. Beyond the walls of the family home they were referred to as the children of Mrs. Parry and this seems to have helped maintain the façade of normality. The precise nature of Hewitt's relationship with Mrs Parry's children is impossible to establish. The census records and the birth records are confusing, perhaps due in part to Hewitt's extreme reluctance to engage in official documentation of any kind. And whatever happened to Eleanor Parry's relationship with the original Mr. Parry is unknown.

Figure 6. Vivian Hewitt and Mrs Parry photographed as they travelled to the Bahamas (circa 1960). By chance Hewitt became the millionth passenger to travel on the now defunct airline Pan Am. He received a free flight because of this, and the photograph commemorates the occasion.

It is unclear why Hewitt and Mrs. Parry did not marry. It may have been due to Hewitt's fear of putting his name to official documents. He apparently purchased Bryn Aber in Nellie's name and technically became a lodger in what otherwise would have been his own property.

Notwithstanding this rather unusual situation Hewitt clearly remained the master of his small

domain. For reasons unknown he decided to build an immense wall around the property, a wall so big that it seems it was never completed. He employed ten men to work at it week in, week out, year after year.

After his death a friend, his GP, William Hywel, decided that Hewitt's life had been so momentous that a biography needed to be written and so *Modest Millionaire – a Biography of Vivian Hewitt* (1973) was published. Hywel, however, was faced with something of a dilemma. Wishing to avoid his friend's various frailties he glossed over them, and as a result parts of the book concerning Hewitt's personal relationships are ambiguous. There are also mistakes since William Hywel had little interest in natural history. He refers, for example, to Hewitt's pet parrot as an African Grey (*Psittacus erithacus*) when in reality it was another commonly kept African parrot – the Red-fronted, sometimes known as Jardine's parrot (*Poicephalus gulielmi*)[9]. In fact the parrot still exists as a taxidermy specimen (Fig. 7).

Figure 7. The parrot that Hewitt kept as a pet. It survives as a stuffed specimen.

The great auk

The pride and joy of Hewitt's collection was, of course, his Great Auk material. By the time the RSPB became involved, the thirteen eggs and four stuffed birds had already been passed to Spink and Son Ltd., the celebrated London coin dealers so they were not subject to the general advice that had been given to Jack Parry. Because the species had been extinct for more than a century its eggs were not subject to the legal restrictions that forbade the egg sales of British birds, and they were very valuable (Fuller, 1999).

Spink and Son Ltd. set about selling all the great Auk relics (Ford, circa 1970). The reason for the unlikely choice of Spink for the handling of this delicate matter was simple. With his mania for collecting coins, Hewitt had had a long relationship with the company and so it was to them that the family turned. The ultimate outcome was in itself not as satisfactory as might be wished (Birkhead, Clugston, & Fuller, in press).

Hewitt's personality is epitomized by his action after he had bought two of his stuffed Great Auks at auction in 1934. His biographer William Hywel (1973) tells the story of their arrival at Bryn Aber:

> The Captain, unable to suppress his joy at their safe delivery, summoned all the workmen (…) The occasion was worthy of an audience and the building of the wall assumed secondary importance for the time being. He launched into an oration on the Great Auk (…) finally concluding with the price he had paid for these much sought after additions to his collection. The men were stunned, almost unbelieving. It was yet another of the imponderables which surrounded their master and shrouded his actions in mystery (…) One of the men could not contain himself. "Pay me that much," he said to the Captain, "And I'll go in a ruddy cage myself and sing to you" (p. 159-160).

It seems that towards the end of his life Hewitt's collecting grew out of control. His great delight on acquiring a new possession and having it delivered to Anglesey was to open the box, look longingly at the item, then repack it carefully in the container in which it had arrived. Often the box would never again be re-opened! Hywel (1973, p. 168-169) described the situation:

> So easy would it have been to build a special room with display cabinets, where he could have tabulated his

> specimens and exhibited them with pride. But no, they were hidden away in every conceivable and unlikely corner (…) His bed-sitting room, as well as the passages were stacked high with countless boxes, and all available drawers were equally crammed. He himself had an uncanny knack of laying his hand on a required box, but he never appeared to have the inclination of showing off his wares to anyone else

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the late David Wilson, the late Jack Parry, and the late Dr. Jack Gibson.

Notes

[1]This account is based on Hywel (1973). It is also based on independent interviews that David Clugston and Errol Fuller had on numerous occasions with both David Wilson and Dr. Jack Gibson over a period of several years.

[2]Hywel's 1973 biography is based on long years of experience as Hewitt's doctor and his friend. It was published eight years after Hewitt's death, and skirts round some of the issues that concern Hewitt's private life. It is also apparent that Hywel had little interest in natural history since he makes comparatively few remarks concerning the collection.

Fuller's account is largely based on many conversations that he had with David Wilson and Dr. Jack Gibson while researching his book *The Great Auk* (1999). It also uses much information from Hywel's biography.

Chilton's (2009) account is based around conversations he had with elderly members of Hewitt's family while trying to trace the whereabouts of a stuffed Labrador Duck (*Camptorhynchus labradorius*) that Hewitt once owned. It contains some useful and previously obscure material but certain assumptions, made on the recollections of very elderly people, may be misleading.

[3]To his credit David Wilson rescued several hundred Hewitt documents from Bryn Aber. These consisted of letters, telegrams, photographs and notes to and from Hewitt to his correspondents all over the world. These are particularly strong in oological material, most notably dozens of letters concerning the acquisition of the Jourdain egg collection during 1940 – from the initial inquiry to the final purchase.

This Hewitt archive was given to DC by David Wilson a few months before his death in April 2020. Wilson had written to DC during 2019 asking for help in sorting out his enormous library. With Wilson's agreement DC invited Dominic Winter Auctioneers to visit and agree terms of sale. Wilson's modest house in Weston Turville near Tring was crammed with papers, books, and specimens.

Once the rescued archive has been catalogued, it will be passed to the most appropriate institution for the benefit of future researchers.

[4]V. Hewitt, personal correspondence.

[5]V. Hewitt, personal correspondence.

[6]Pers. Comm. from David Wilson to Errol Fuller, 1998

[7]Despite the strange nature of their first encounter, Wilson and Parry developed a friendly relationship and Wilson visited him in Anglesey on a number of occasions.

[8]Pers. Comm. from David Wilson to Errol Fuller, 1998.

[9]Pers. Comm. from David Wilson to Errol Fuller, 1998.

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