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# Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

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(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

Volume LXXIX

for 1990



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# A different kind of Cambridge antiquarian: Marshall Fisher and his Ely Museum

Nigel Holman

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## Introduction

The recent anniversary of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society (CAS) has prompted an interest in the history of the society, marked most obviously by Michael Thompson's published history (1990). This book tells the story of a society which, during its earliest decades, was dominated by educated and influential men from Cambridge University and, only later, drew members from a wider constituency in the county. The names of these men feature repeatedly in the society's *Annual Reports* and *Proceedings* and, thus, their contributions to the sum of knowledge of local and other antiquarian matters is comparatively well known.

In this article I wish to offer a complementary view of nineteenth-century antiquarianism in Cambridgeshire, using sources other than the CAS archives and looking beyond the comparatively well-documented lives of its best-known members. This is the story of Marshall Fisher of Ely, a man forgotten by all but a few people in the county, but whose dedicated and under-appreciated work remains relevant for present-day archaeological research (Holman, in press). Marshall Fisher was an enthusiastic collector of a range of artifacts and natural history specimens and an amateur scientist who curated Ely Museum's collections from shortly before 1849, when it opened to the public, until his death at the age of 92 in 1899.

This paper also has a wider focus, which derives from the observation that published accounts of antiquarianism and museums of the last century have been invariably composed around the exploits of prominent personalities, such as John Evans and General Pitt-Rivers, and the stories of larger

institutions and national collections (Kenneth Hudson's 'Museums of influence': Hudson 1987). Less prominent individuals and smaller museums rarely figure in these histories. Admittedly, many of these individuals never made the national impact of Evans and Pitt-Rivers, and many of these smaller museums have been long closed and their collections dispersed. In such cases, research may be problematic due to a paucity of surviving documentary records. Nevertheless, they form an undercurrent to the activities of more prominent people and institutions, and their significance in the history of museums and archaeological research should not be underestimated out-of-hand.<sup>1</sup>

## The man

Little is known of Fisher's early life, though all the evidence points to his family background having been humble rather than privileged. After briefly working in the offices of Mr William Marshall, he moved to the offices of Evans and Sons where he served as a solicitor's clerk for 50–60 years, eventually retiring at the age of 87. In addition, he held various part-time local government posts such as Parish Overseer in Ely and Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages for several surrounding villages. He also served as a librarian and curator.

William Marshall undoubtedly influenced

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<sup>1</sup> It is also hoped that this paper will encourage others to investigate the histories of local antiquarians and smaller museums in the county. It is clear that Cambridgeshire antiquarians from the last century are poorly documented, as are early (now defunct) museums, such as the short-lived Cambridge Museum (John Goldsmith, personal communication).

Fisher's interest in natural history and archaeology. Marshall was a 'country-cousin' of the family of an eminent London surgeon, Professor John Marshall (Schonfield 1987). He was a solicitor who also served as the Isle of Ely Coroner, Superintendent Registrar, and Clerk to the Ely Union and the Board of Guardians. He himself was an amateur botanist and antiquarian.<sup>2</sup> As such, he fits much better than Fisher into the nineteenth-century antiquarian mould. Unfortunately, it is not possible to ascertain the precise role played by William Marshall in the setting up of the museum, although newspaper advertisements showing that he was responsible for Fisher's appointment to local government posts, as well as other indications, suggest that he was Fisher's 'patron' over a long period of time.

Fisher's character is hinted at, somewhat anecdotally, in a couple of published references. According to 'H.G.W.', writing in the *Cambridgeshire Times* in 1930, Fisher was 'somewhat brusque in manner [and] definitely of the Old School . . . his preference for knee breeches linked him, *qua* dress, to a bygone generation'. He appears to have been an admirably efficient worker – the report of the fourth annual meeting of the Ely Mechanics' Institute, published in the *Cambridgeshire Chronicle* of 10 January 1846, states, 'Great credit is due to Mr M. Fisher for the attention, arrangement, and regularity in every particular, as Librarian to the society.' His eldest daughter, who contributed numerous literary pieces to the *Cambridgeshire Chronicle* under the pen name 'Fanny Fern', wrote whimsically of her father's love of antiquarian books:

Sometimes Mr Librarian brings in one of his awful profound books and lays it quietly on my parlour table; he looks for it shortly afterwards, and finds it not. 'I knew it would be banished when I put it there,' he says, 'because the binding was so homely.'

His legal experience and his love of antiquarian books was combined when he reissued in 1857 James Bentham's *Considerations and reflections on the present state of the fens near Ely with a proposal for enclosing and dividing the common called Gruntfen*, originally

published in 1778. This made generally available valuable and interesting information at a time when the enclosing of Grunty Fen was a matter of considerable public concern.

Although it is not possible to paint a fuller picture of the personality of Marshall Fisher than this sketch, it is evident that he stands out from the crowd of contemporary antiquarians who, in Levine's words, 'were largely derived from a class where education was an unquestioned privilege and leisure an ample commodity' (Levine 1986: 54).

### The museum

A suitable starting point for an investigation of Fisher's museum is Gardener's description (1851: 480):

The *Ely Museum* is held . . . in an apartment (formerly the dungeon of the old gaol [on the corner of Lynn Road and Market Street]) 22 feet long, 19 wide, and 10 feet high. This infant institution was established in the beginning of the year 1849, chiefly through the instrumentality of Mr Fisher and Mr George Bard; the former gentleman contributing a valuable collection of fossils, and the latter several well-preserved birds, &c. Several other donations have since been added, and this interesting collection is now open for public inspection on Mondays, from 12 till 4. . . . Thomas S. Jones, Esq., is chairman of the committee of management, and Mr Marshall Fisher, curator.<sup>3</sup>

However, as the immediately preceding section in his account makes clear, the museum cannot be considered in isolation:

*The Mechanics' Institute*, established in January, 1842, is held at the residence of Mr Marshall Fisher, and consists of about 120 members, of which the lord bishop of Ely is perpetual president; the very Rev. the Dean, vice-president; Wm. Marshall, Esq., secretary and Treasurer; and Mr M. Fisher librarian. The members of this excellent institute pay 10s. per annum, and 2s. 6d. entrance fee. The *library*, which consists of nearly 2000 vols., well selected, is open on Monday evenings from 6 till 9; and the *lectures* of the society are delivered in the boy's National School. The object of the institution is the instruction of its members in every department of useful knowledge, party politics and controversy being rigidly excluded. The *Ely Museum* is held on the same premises. . . .

<sup>2</sup> William Marshall (1815–90) was elected to the CAS in 1878. He made several contributions to the journal *Phytologist* and also published articles in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* (1874) and the *Proceedings of the CAS* (1877–8, 1878–9), as well as writing the section on botany in Miller & Skertchly's *Fenland: past and present* (1878). Unfortunately, it is not known whether his 1874 paper on the discovery of an unspecified number of 'skulls in the peat of the Isle of Ely' was based on the skulls which appear as part of the museum collection in Plate 2.

<sup>3</sup> George Bard may have been a member of the family of linen drapers, Butcher, Bard and Co., of High Street, Ely. A 'George Bard' is noted there in the *Post Office directory for Cambridgeshire, 1858*, p. 42. According to Gardener (1851), Thomas S. Jones was a surgeon. Their involvement in the museum was most probably short-lived.

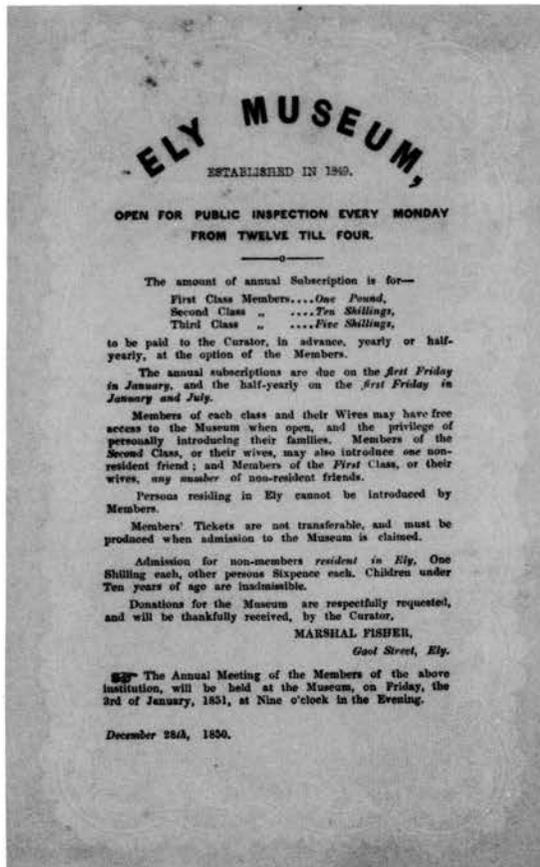


Plate 1.  
Handbill and membership tickets from Marshall Fisher's Ely Museum.  
(Courtesy of the Trustees of Ely Museum.)

The museum clearly formed part of a larger group of institutions for public adult education, sanctioned at the highest level, as indicated by the involvement of senior members of the Church in Ely.

Mechanics' Institutes were established throughout the country from the 1820s onwards (numbering 610 by mid-century), based on the model of a branch which opened in London in 1826 (Woodward 1979: 475–6). Although intended to offer working men opportunities for adult education, they lost their popularity, according to Woodward, due to poor lecturers and an approach to learning which ultimately failed to retain the interest of working men attending after a full day's work. In his words, 'institutes became centres of recreation for clerks [such as Fisher], mechanics, and shopkeepers, and their educational side was limited to a few popular lectures' (1979: 476). Lewis (1984: 29) notes that a number of institutes established museums, and credits them with the growth of public enthusiasm for museums which led to the

municipal museum movement of the second half of the nineteenth century, as well as the passing of the Museums Act in 1845. Although in the examples cited by Lewis there is a close, formal relationship between institute and museum, in Ely this relationship seems less clear. On the one hand, contemporary references often refer to them as having been connected, whereas newspaper reports indicate that their annual meetings were held at different times. In any case, in a small community such as Ely, it is quite likely that the instigators of the institute and museum were the same Middle Class gentlemen and that formal statements of relationship might never have been made.<sup>4</sup>

Several East Anglian museums might well have inspired Fisher and his colleagues. The Wisbech and Fenland Museum, which was established in 1835, has its origins in a literary

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the apparent lack of surviving documents relating to the museum and the Mechanics' Institute severely limit discussion, not least about their formal constitutions.

society, although its collections rapidly acquired scientific and ethnographic elements (Arthur & Powell 1985). A museum was established in Huntingdon by the town's Literary and Scientific Institution in 1840 (BAAS 1887: 104). Of course, the CAS was also established in 1840, and from its earliest years accumulated a collection of antiquities (Thompson 1990). Slightly more distant, but brought closer by the building of railway lines during the last century, we could also point to the museums of Norwich, Bury St Edmunds and King's Lynn, founded in 1824, 1840 and 1844 respectively.

It is not known whether Fisher's collection was accumulated with the express purpose of displaying it to the public. However, it demonstrably existed at least three years before the museum opened its doors to the public, because the collection merited a visit by two of the foremost geologists of the period. The *Cambridgeshire Chronicle* of 21 November 1846 records a visit by Professors Adam Sedgwick and Richard Owen. After breakfasting with the Dean of Ely:

they proceeded to the residence of Messers Bard, Fisher, and Squib [sic], to inspect their splendid collections of fossils which have been greatly added to since the formation of the railway commenced in this neighbourhood, and such was the immense variety in the different collections, that four hours were occupied in the inspection. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Although Sedgwick visited Ely on numerous occasions in the 1840s, frequently staying with the Dean of Ely, his published letters make no reference to Fisher and they seemingly did not correspond. However, they do record a visit he paid to the cutting made by the Great Eastern Railway at Ely – as Fisher must have done on numerous occasions (Clark & Hughes 1890).

### Museum admission and membership

A handbill and membership tickets (Plate 1) speak eloquently of the admission policy operated by Fisher, at least in the early years of the museum. In all probability, this leaflet was the principal publicity leaflet for the museum (certainly others seem not to have survived). The emphasis on museum regulations and the

complete lack of any description of its collections is striking.

A number of points about the contents of this handbill deserve to be emphasized. Fisher operated a three-tiered membership system, with the most extensive privileges going to those paying an annual subscription of £1 (c. £35 at today's prices). Fisher was thus foreshadowing a system commonly used today in 'Friends' organizations in museums and other institutions – benefiting, as such a patronage system still does, from the generosity of supporters. 'The member and his wife are entitled. . .': true to the spirit of the era, Fisher's Ely Museum was expected to be of principal interest to men, although it is not known whether women were members in their own right. Children under ten years of age were 'inadmissible' – an unusual turn of phrase, perhaps, but also an appropriate one! Non-members were admitted outside the membership scheme, residents of Ely at a greater cost than non-residents. To prevent the membership regulations being circumvented, members were not permitted to take residents of Ely into the museum as their free guests!

Clearly, there are a variety of strategies for raising revenues from admission charges. One extreme would be to have a low charge and hope that this would encourage large number of visitors, the other would be to have a high charge which would produce a break-even figure with a small number of visitors. Although it is far from clear that Fisher ran his museum as an economic concern, he chose a strategy towards the latter extreme. The implications of this will be discussed in further detail later in this article. However, it should be immediately evident that not only was Fisher apparently unconcerned to open his museum to a wide audience from all social classes, but that his elaborate regulations, for example, differentiating local from non-local occasional visitors, appear today to be unduly antagonistic.

The lack of any reference to the Mechanics' Institute in the leaflet and tickets supports the view that no formal relationship existed between the institute and the museum in Ely. There is certainly no hint of special privileges – which otherwise form the principal focus of the leaflet – for members of the institute. One might be tempted to argue that while books were considered by the committees who ran the institute and museum to be appropriate learning matter for the lower classes, the experience of material culture displayed out of context in a museum was considered beyond the intellectual grasp of the same audience. It

<sup>5</sup> The name Richard Squibb can be found in the Ely Post Office directories for the middle decades of the nineteenth century. He was a priest in the so-called 'Huntingdonian Church' (a sect which was then declining in popularity), in Chapel Street, Ely. Since the name is an unusual one, we can probably accept that this is the gentleman involved in the museum during its first few years.



Plate 2.  
Marshall Fisher in his Ely Museum, c. 1895, by an unknown photographer.  
(Courtesy of the Trustees of Ely Museum.)

is worth noting that the charges levied by Fisher are considerably higher than those levied by the majority of other museums surveyed for the British Association's 'Report upon the Provincial Museums of the United Kingdom' (BAAS 1887, 1888). Incidentally, the charges for the Mechanics' Institute noted above also appear considerably higher than could most likely have been afforded by the working class men who were presumably its intended members, although the 1846 annual meeting of the Institute, reported in the *Cambridgeshire Chronicle*, suggests that its library was well used.

This brings us to the inevitable question of who, if not members of the institute, were the museum's members and visitors? In the absence of surviving records we can make only the general inference that its opening times, restricted to four hours on Monday afternoons, would hardly have encouraged visits by full-time workers. Indeed, Fisher himself was probably not always able to attend at this time. His eldest daughters are occasionally

described as his 'assistants' in the library of the Mechanics' Institute and they may well have served as custodians in the museum when Fisher was working. It was not unusual for smaller museums to have restricted opening hours, although most of those listed by the British Association, even those which were privately owned or supported by local societies, were open for more than one day each week (BAAS 1887).

#### The museum collection

Three remarkable photographs (Plates 2 and 3: two views are essentially the same), by an unknown photographer, show Fisher around the year 1895 – at the age of about 88 – amidst the collection.

Further evidence for parts of the collection which cannot be seen in these photographs is to be found in several contemporary publications. Foremost amongst these are Sir John Evans' *Ancient stone implements* (1872) and *Ancient bronze implements* (1881). While



Plate 3.

Fossils, stuffed birds, and other objects displayed in Marshall Fisher's Ely Museum.  
(Courtesy of the Trustees of Ely Museum.)

the former states only that 'Mr Fisher, of Ely, has one [polished Neolithic axe], found near Manea, and several from Bottisham', the latter includes engravings of six bronzes artifacts from Fisher's collection and references to several more in the text. The provenances for these objects are given as being either Ely or its vicinity, the bulk of the collection evidently having been found locally. On the evidence of the composition of the collection when it entered the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (see below, page 90), the disparity between the number of citations for each type of object appears to reflect their relative frequency in his collection. The inconsistency of Evans' references, to Fisher's 'collection', to his 'museum' and sometimes simply to the fact that he 'has' objects, suggests that the status of the collection – as public museum or private collection – was not entirely clear, at least to John Evans. There is no surviving correspondence between Evans and Fisher (Sherratt, personal communication).

Miller & Skertchly's *Fenland: past and present* provides a more general, less detailed description of the archaeological part of the collection (1878: 463–5):

Mr Marshall Fisher, of Ely, who has been a collector of Fen Antiquities for years, possesses good specimens of Keltic pottery and implements. 1. He has a very perfect example of a *Cinerary Urn* . . . also a handled *Drinking Vessel*. 2. Implements of stone – celts and hammers. 3. Bronze celts – some with sockets and loops . . . and a bronze dagger . . . the handle having been attached by rivets. . . Mr Fisher has a fine specimen [of Nene Valley Roman pottery]. . . The Ely Museum contains specimens of *Roman Pottery*, found at Ely, Coveney, Stonea, Manea, Lakenheath, &c. *Romano-British arms*, *Bronze Spear-heads*, *Bronze Swords*. In the same Museum are *Iron Battle-axes* and *Spear-heads*, of various kinds, not assigned to any period; also a Saxon Iron Spear.

The hints in the above descriptions about the sources of much of the collection should be amplified. As noted above, railways reached the Fenland in the mid-nineteenth century, and the

large-scale civil engineering which this entailed would have revealed all kinds of archaeological and palaeontological remains. Many fossils in the museum would almost certainly have been collected from the local Roswell Pits, a principal source of the gault clay which was used in both railway construction and drainage works. As a parish overseer, Fisher would have been in regular contact with many farmers and farm labourers in the district. Consequently, he would have been ideally placed to collect objects, in particular the more recognizable stone and bronze axes, which had been recovered in the course of farm work. Other material – such as George Bard's stuffed birds – would have been donated by Fisher's acquaintances in Ely and the surrounding Fenland.

An intriguing exception to the local character of the collection is a small unfinished palstave of a very distinctive form. There is little doubt that it belonged to Fisher's collection (though it is only known definitively that it belonged to the collection of the purchaser of the museum, see below). Its highly distinctive form makes it possible to associate it with a hoard of approximately 70 practically identical small, unfinished palstaves (and 10 spearheads) which was found in Stibbard, Norfolk, in 1837 and exhibited by its finder, Mr Goddard Johnson, at the Norwich meeting of the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in 1847 (Anonymous 1851; Rowlands 1976: ref. no. 97). It seems probable that Fisher had contacts with Goddard Johnson and purchased or – more likely – was given, this palstave, since Johnson appears to have distributed a handful of them to other collectors and museums throughout East Anglia (Barbara Green, personal communication). There are no definite indications of other acquisitions from beyond the Isle of Ely.

#### Fisher's activities and publications

Other nineteenth-century publications provide additional insights into Fisher's activities, as well as describing the collection in further detail. The account of the meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute held on 4 July 1862, published in the *Archaeological Journal* (Anonymous 1862), refers to Fisher having exhibited a handled beaker covered by incised geometric designs found during the construction of the railway at March, near Ely (described as 'a small urn of very uncommon

fashion'<sup>6</sup>), and to Roman fibulae and coins found in Ely. Interestingly, it is stated that Fisher was not at this meeting to present this material in person. Even if Fisher was a member of the Royal Archaeological Institute – and their records indicate that he was not – he was, not surprisingly, unable to attend its meetings due probably both to the cost of travelling to London and the time required to do so. The above-mentioned articles had been presented to the museum by other people, although we also learn that 'Mr Fisher stated that the Romans undoubtedly had a camp or station about two miles south-west of Ely, and he had collected there numerous remains of pottery and other Roman relics'. With this single brief exception, it is evident from Gomme's comprehensive survey of archaeological papers (1907) that Fisher published none of his investigations.

Geologist, Sydney Skertchly (1877: 162–6; Miller & Skertchly 1878: 566 and figure facing 304) refers to expeditions which he made with Fisher and William Marshall to investigate the stratigraphy of the Fenland peat, discovering 'indisputable evidence of five successive forests'. It is clear from these accounts that Fisher and Marshall, who are both described as 'diligent observers of fenland phenomena', co-operated in fieldwork. The impression is given here that William Marshall was the more competent botanist of the two, and that he had a collection of antiquities of his own (about which I can find no information).

Fisher was only elected to the CAS on 28 November 1881 at the age of 75, forty-one years after the formation of the society. He was nominated by 'Mr Marshall', presumably William Marshall of Ely, and seconded by J.E. Foster, secretary of the society. The clear implication of the latter is that Fisher had no other friends or close acquaintances amongst the society's members. Not surprisingly, given his advanced years, he never presented a communication to the society, nor wrote in the *Proceedings*, although at the meeting at which he was elected he presented a 'photograph of a red Roman terra-cotta vase lately found in Downham Field, Ely'.

#### Fisher's death and the closure of his museum

The events surrounding the closure of the museum provide an interesting commentary on

<sup>6</sup> This report may well have been the source for references to this handled beaker, now in the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology (1922.572), in both Jewitt (1870) and Miller & Skertchly (1878).

how Fisher and his museum were perceived in various quarters. They also underline the extent of the uncertainty surrounding the future of the collection on Fisher's death.

Fisher was locally held in sufficient regard for the *Cambridgeshire Chronicle* on 27 January 1899 to report his illness: 'This well known gentleman is we fear sinking. His age is 92, and until a few days since he was braving the roughest storms.' That very same day Fisher died. His long and admiring obituary in the *Cambridgeshire Chronicle* provides further information about the origins of Fisher's museum. It also offers a sense of the perceived (albeit fifty years after the event) lack of enthusiasm in Ely for the institute and museum and an indication of the small number of individuals who were responsible for their establishment:

... it was in the sphere of natural science that he rose distinctly above the common order. In quite early life he was one of a small coterie of kindred spirits. A little society was formed, but then, even as it is now, they had little sympathy, their environments being antipathetic to science. Nevertheless they struggled on and a Mechanics' Institute was formed. Whether it died or still retains that appellation, we know not, but of this we are certain, there is a library with many rare volumes, and it has been growing for years by additions made at Mr Fisher's personal expense. The museum attached to the scheme has likewise grown from the same cause. The collection of fossils, ancient British, Roman and Anglo-Saxon antiquities, is especially valuable. How great a boon it would be to purchase these for the city! The unusual facilities afforded to a good collector for obtaining purely local specimens during an unbroken period of 70 years can scarcely occur again. ...

This anonymous obituary writer was not alone in hoping that Fisher's collection would remain in the city. As reported in the *Ely Gazette*, Chairman of the Ely Urban District Council, Charles Bidwell, took up the case for the collection remaining in the city: 'There is no good reason why the antiquities collected by Mr Fisher should go to London or for that matter to Cambridge, if a little self-sacrifice can keep them in the City, where they are of most interest.' However, there was a problem which he spelled out: 'The Council as a Council cannot purchase Mr Fisher's collection. That will have to be done by private means.' Yet, he was optimistic: 'The negotiations are in excellent hands, and will no doubt be carried to a successful issue.' The explanation for the inability of the Council to purchase the collection itself lies in its limited finances and the inability for a town the size of Ely to raise the necessary funds through the Rates. The

very fact that the collection was not offered as a gift to the town or to a society – even though, as a solicitor's clerk, Fisher would have known to have made such a provision explicit in his will had it been his wish – underlines the difference between Fisher and his better-known antiquarian contemporaries: the latter would have been sufficiently wealthy to make such a magnanimous gesture without their children suffering as a result.

A subsequent report brought *Ely Gazette* readers up to date:

[The Chairman] had to report that after the Board meeting a month ago, he immediately wrote to Mr Addison the solicitor for the executors, asking him to give the Council the first refusal.

Mr Addison wrote him a note in reply stating that he thought he (the Chairman) might take it, the antiquities would not be sold without their having an opportunity of buying them.

Mr Redfern who visited Ely with a view to purchasing them, also said he would not stand in the way of the City.<sup>7</sup>

However, as the report continued:

There the matter stopped. On the 20th Feb. he received the following note which was addressed to the Chairman of the Ely Board –

'I have purchased the museum of the late Mr Fisher and I shall be pleased to let you have it for £350. C. Ambrose'

He (the Chairman) wrote him the following reply –

'I have to acknowledge your letter of 20th. I observe you have purchased the books and the museum. Whether you are to be congratulated is an open question.'

(Laughter!). The suggested price puts the idea of purchase out of the question, but if anyone wished to take the matter up they were open to do so. Speaking as an individual he did not think they should take any further steps in the matter.

So, Bidwell and his friends were 'gazumped' and Mr Addison – presumably acting under instructions from Fisher's daughter, Harriet, the sole beneficiary of his will – appears to have disregarded his earlier assurances. It is not known the price which Cole Ambrose paid, and his motives for immediately offering to sell the collection are unclear since he was an enthusiastic (if not entirely discerning)

<sup>7</sup> Some-time theatrical manager, William Redfern owned a significant private collection of antiquities and was an active member of the CAS, author of books, as well as of notes published in the *Proceedings* of the CAS. His willingness to pass-up the opportunity adding to his own collection in favour of allowing Ely the opportunity to retain Fisher's collection is worthy of comment and commendation.

collector of archaeological and ethnographic artifacts.

For two decades, until Cole Ambrose's death in 1923, the collection remained hidden from public view in Stuntney Hall. Together with Cole Ambrose's archaeological and ethnographic collections, it was subsequently purchased for the bargain price of £100 by the CAS who presented them to the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. I can find no trace of neither the fossils nor the books in Fisher's/Mechanics' Institute library (with certain few exceptions in the latter case).

### Discussion

Marshall Fisher's Ely Museum was neither large, nor of national importance. Despite the attention of some of the most distinguished academics of the period, Fisher and his museum never achieved recognition beyond the traditionally-insular confines of Ely. Indeed, the museum slipped through the net cast by the British Association for its 'Reports upon the Provincial Museums of the United Kingdom' (BAAS 1887, 1888). It is not among the 240 museums who are included in this survey, although a circular letter was sent to town clerks of all the municipal boroughs in the country, and despite the fact that A.C. Haddon, a member of the committee, had read *Natural Sciences at Cambridge* and had for a time been Curator of the University's Zoological Museum.<sup>8</sup> The main themes of a discussion about this museum must firstly be the lack of wider recognition gained by its curator, the failure of the museum to build on the strengths of its collections, and secondly the reasons for the museum's closure on its curator's death.

What should be inferred from Fisher's very limited participation in the antiquarian establishment at both national and local levels, including his very belated election to the CAS? It is difficult to escape the conclusion that his lowly status as a full-time solicitor's clerk prevented him from becoming more involved with this Establishment of men whose personal circumstances were for the most part very different to his own. His long-standing interest in palaeontology and archaeology (as well as books and astronomy), and his curatorship of a collection which contained specimens which were sufficiently interesting to attract the likes of John Evans and Adam Sedgwick, might have opened a variety of

opportunities. Yet he failed to publish the results of his investigations at a time when such opportunities had never been greater – at least for those who had the necessary contacts with all-powerful editors and society committees. In contrast, William Marshall, Fisher's 'patron', published several articles.<sup>9</sup> It seems that Marshall's standing in the local community was translated through these publications, and through his ability to attend meetings such as those of the CAS and the Royal Anthropological Institute, into a standing (albeit minor) in the regional and national antiquarian and scientific communities Fisher remained a local figure and his work and collections never received the wider recognition they probably deserved.

Turning to the failure of the museum to outlive its Curator, we are hampered by not knowing the relationship between the various elements which occur in descriptions of the museum: the Mechanics' Institute, William Marshall, Messers Bard and Squibb, and, indeed, other unnamed individuals who undoubtedly were involved at various times. Despite the assertion (Gardener 1851) that the museum was established 'through the instrumentality of Fisher and Bard, it is tempting to see William Marshall (and perhaps other men from amongst Marshall's social equals) as the real driving force behind the museum. Of course, Marshall would have wanted the day-to-day running of the museum to be the responsibility of someone else. Who was more ideal than Fisher, an enthusiast with wide-ranging interests? Marshall could presumably trust him, having employed him as a clerk and there might also be the suggestion that he could rely on Fisher's compliance because Fisher's career as a local civil servant partly depended on Marshall's goodwill. Despite this uncertainty, it is evident that the museum outlasted the Mechanics' Institute and came to be associated exclusively with Marshall Fisher so that, on his death, the collections were treated as his own property.

The seeds of the eventual demise of the museum on Fisher's death were sown by a number of local and more general factors. Ely, a small market town with a population in the nineteenth century of around 8000, lacked a large and active Middle Class from which a museum and science-oriented group large enough to support a public museum would have been drawn. Neither did it have large and successful industries from which a wealthy philanthropist could have emerged. The

<sup>8</sup> Inevitably, the question arises: how many other museums were not included in this survey which, on the face of things, appears such a useful document for historians of British museums?

<sup>9</sup> See footnote 2, above.

provincial museums listed by the British Association in the 1880s were, with few exceptions, in towns and cities larger than Ely. As a young member of the 'small coterie of kindred spirits' who were involved with the formation of the museum in the 1840s, he must have become an increasingly lonely figure (perhaps as suggested by Plate 2) as the decades passed and his antiquarian and science-minded friends and acquaintances died. However, Fisher and his committee did not help matters: the museum's high entrance charges and restricted opening hours must have been a considerable disincentive for many would-be visitors. Yet, given Fisher's income from his job as a clerk and other positions, it is difficult to see how they were financially justified. Were they simply a clumsy pricing policy or a deliberate policy to prevent all except the most wealthy from visiting the museum?

Nevertheless, entrance charges alone cannot explain the failure of the museum to attract new and enthusiastic supporters. As Marshall Fisher grew older, the age of the antiquarian drew to a close. When he died, there was no younger, like-minded individual to take his place and keep the museum open, and the local council was not able to purchase the collection which was consequently lost to the community. If we disregard a small private collection, consisting mainly of miscellaneous by-gones, displayed in a tea shop during the earlier part of this century, a museum was only re-established in Ely in the 1970s (and then only through an equivalent 'small coterie of kindred spirits'). The lack of a museum in Ely over almost a century has had many deleterious consequences for the preservation and documentation of the City's history. Only with further research in other towns can we assess whether museum histories such as this one can be identified elsewhere, and thus arrive at a better understanding of the history of museums during the last 150 years, in Cambridgeshire and elsewhere.

#### Postscript

I cannot close without a couple of further remarks about what light the story of Marshall Fisher and his museum seems to shed on the workings of the CAS in the second half of the nineteenth century. The successes of the society during this period are substantial and well documented. A balanced picture, however, can only be achieved by a consideration of how, in hindsight, it might be seen to have failed in certain respects. By reason of its emphasis on

University and City matters during much of the last century, and its failure to embrace individuals such as Marshall Fisher, the society missed a golden opportunity which was only taken during this century with the development of the CAS into a truly county-wide organization. Had this transformation occurred earlier, we might have expected the following two local consequences possibly with equivalent scenarios elsewhere. Firstly, Marshall Fisher might well have published, and otherwise documented, considerably more information about his fieldwork and collections. Secondly, instead of the museum closing and being sold to a private collector on Fisher's death, the involvement of the CAS might have brought about a more satisfactory conclusion. The museum might have remained intact in Ely or, possibly, have been transferred in its entirety with accompanying documentation (which was missing when sold by Cole Ambrose 23 years later) to Cambridge. One consolation, however, is evident – the same will not happen again, not least due to the present role of this society in the county.

#### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mrs Muriel Wallace, Marshall Fisher's great grand-daughter, for her considerable help and the interest she has shown in this research. My attention was first drawn to Marshall Fisher by a small display in the present Ely Museum set up by Nick Merriman, my predecessor as Curator there. John Pickles went out of his way to help with additional information and comments. Gavin Roberts and John Goldsmith also made useful comments. Naturally, the author alone is responsible for the mistakes which remain.

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# The Proceedings

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