

DIGGING IN THE ARCHIVES: REDISCOVERING THE EXCAVATIONS OF JOHN D. EVANS

July 10, 2012 Todd Whitelaw Day of Archaeology 2012, Education, Excavation, Prehistory Andrew Reynolds, Archaeology, Athens, British Museum, Cambridge, Czech Republic, Gabe Moshenska, Institute of Archaeology, John Davies Evans, Lisa Fentress, Museology, Oxford, Rachel Sparks, Salisbury Museum, Sheffield, Sheffield University, Stonehenge, Stuart Laidlaw, United Kingdom

I saw the poster for the Day of Archaeology (DoA) in our lift and thought I'd join in, looking at the importance of archives to the documentation and re-interpretation of older excavations. I planned to focus on archives related to the first century of excavations by a fairly eccentric cast of characters from the British School at Athens, at Knossos in Crete, where I am currently working. But in the event, I've been side-tracked in quite different directions, digging into the archives of John Evans, allowing me to dip into archaeology in five countries in one day, all without leaving an overcast London.

Last July, one of the former Directors of the Institute here in London, [Professor John Davies Evans](#), died at the age of 86. I didn't know John well, we had only met a few times, but we had a good talk at a workshop held at Sheffield in 2006, organised in honour of John and his excavations at Knossos in 1958-60 and 1969-70, which provide the entire framework for, and our most comprehensive evidence supporting, our understanding of the four millennia of the Neolithic period on Crete (see V. Isaakidou and P. Tomkins (eds) 2008. *Escaping the Labyrinth. The Cretan Neolithic in Context*. Oxford: Oxbow Books). As we talked, it was clear John was extremely pleased that his work at the site was still considered so fundamental, and he was also immensely relieved to be able to hand over the completion of its publication to others.



Fig. 1. Saliagos. Left: the islet of Saliagos; right: the main trench

I was working at Knossos on a [current project](#) when I learned of John's death. I knew that while he had handed over much of his Knossos excavation archive, a large amount of the original documentation had not yet been collected from him. This was needed for the full publication of his excavations, and would eventually be archived in the British School at Athens.



Fig. 2. John Evans sorting Saliagos pottery on Antiparos

Via e-mail, I contacted his family, and we agreed that on my return from Crete in September, I would collect his academic papers, sort them, and determine how and where it would be most appropriate to archive them. With my Institute colleague Andrew Reynolds, and with help from John Lewis of the Society of Antiquaries, we collected all of John's academic papers, and they have been taking up about half of my office ever since. (On the plus side, any meeting involving more than one other person has had to take place elsewhere – fa'coffee.)



Fig. 3. Excavations in the central court of the Minoan palace at Knossos

My original hope of sorting the papers over the Christmas or Easter breaks disappeared behind mountains of marking, and it was only last week, when I finished that and could take over one of our vacant teaching rooms to unpack it all, that I had a chance to find out what's there. Now having consolidated it into some 40 boxes, in place of the odd assortment of boxes, suitcases, a filing cabinet, card and slide chests and a full chest of drawers, I now don't have to slam my door whenever our fire safety officer walks by.

One of our recent PhD graduates who specialises in the history of archaeology, Amara Thornton, very kindly gave up her week to help me, and we've done a first sort of everything. So we now have an overview of the material, which allows us to approach others who we suspect may be interested in particular elements of the archive, and gives us an idea of the scale of the further detailed cataloguing which will be involved. I have no idea when we will be able to do this, and we will have to find some funding, as there will be a couple of months worth of work involved.

But particularly relevant to today, are John's excavation records, so let's go digging in the archives, working, as archaeology usually does, from the known to the unknown.

I was familiar with John's excavations on the tiny Greek Cycladic islet of Saliagos, co-directed with Colin Renfrew in 1964-65 and published in 1968 as *Excavations at Saliagos Near Antiparos*. [Figs 1-2 above] I talked a local boatman into taking me to the tiny offshore islet about 20 years ago to see the over-grown ruins, so seeing colour slides of the site under excavation was a treat. Colin handed over the bulk of the excavation archive to the British School some years ago, but John kept his correspondence and many slides, so I'll copy a few for teaching, before I pack them off to Athens.

I was also very familiar with John's Knossos excavations (Fig. 3 above and Fig. 4 below) from 1958-60 and 1969-70, through my own work at the site (our current project was the subject of [a post for last year's DoA](#) by my colleague Andrew Shapland at the British Museum). The eight boxes of notebooks, finds lists, photos, and numerous rolls of plans and sections will be absolutely essential to complete the full publication of this major excavation. I've scanned and sent a couple of documents to Peter Tomkins in Leuven, which I know will help his current work on reconstructing the development of the Neolithic community.



Fig. 4. The deep sounding in the central court at Knossos

John is particularly well known for sorting out the sequence of prehistoric occupation on Malta, documented in his 1959 *Malta* in the classic Thames and Hudson 'Peoples and Places' series, and in more detail in his monumental survey of Maltese prehistory, *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the*

Maltese Islands, published in 1971. [Fig. 5 below] Tucked away in the latter are extremely succinct accounts of small but strategic stratigraphic tests he did in 1953-55 in eight Maltese monuments, which enabled him to establish the cultural sequence used in his publications (and still valid) to organise the results from all previous investigations. I have found about 100 photographic negatives and some section sketches from these excavations, but so far, no detailed excavation notes, nor any plans; it is just possible he archived these in Malta, and any plans may be hiding among the many rolls of drawings which I have yet to sort through individually [Fig. 6 below].



Fig. 5. John Evans on Malta, 1954-56.

An exciting surprise was recognising several original excavation notebooks by other investigators on Malta, from 1911 to 1930, which John must have brought back to the UK to draw on for his synthesis, and over 300 early photos of sites and excavations, which should go to the archive of the National Museum in Malta. Some of these seem to have come to John from the Palestine Exploration Fund, and a note says ominously ‘Harris Colt Malta orig: throw away if not wanted 20s or 30s’ – thankfully he didn’t!

I've e-mailed a former student, Anthony Pace, now the superintendent for cultural heritage on Malta, to work out how best to return this material. I hope we can locate John's excavation notes, and link these with his abundant photographic documentation. As well as photos documenting his own tests, there are some 600 negatives of pottery and other finds, only some of which were used in his 1971 volume. More significant are some 300 negatives representing site visits he made in the early 1950s, only a few of which were eventually published, which document the condition of many monuments half a century ago. Altogether, this might just be the spur for a busman's holiday to Malta, which I've wanted to visit for over 30 years.



Fig. 6. Malta excavations 1954. Left: Hagr Qim trench E; right: Mnajdra trench C

What I wasn't at all familiar with, were John's unpublished excavations, and I spent the week dashing off to the library, doing web-searches or sending e-mails to colleagues and former students, each time I stumbled across a new paper trail. With some follow-ups this week, I think I've now got the outlines, and since none of them are in my own field of specialisation, they generate some of the excitement of discovery, without having to say au revoir to decent coffee.

The first surprise was an excavation John conducted jointly with Francisco Jordá Cerdá of the Seminario de Historia Primitiva del Hombre, in 1950, at the earlier Bronze Age Argaric site of La Bastida de Totana in south-east Spain. This was the last in a series of campaigns in a settlement with abundant intra-mural burials. [Fig. 7 below] I haven't yet discovered any correspondence to indicate why John got involved, but he spent much of that year in Spain researching his PhD dissertation on the possible relations between Argaric Spain and Early Bronze Age Anatolia. The specifics of how he got involved in the project may eventually emerge from his papers, though I've found no clues so far.



Fig. 7. La Bastida, 1950. Left: the excavation area; right: jar burial.

An e-mail to a Spanish former PhD student, Borja Legarra Herrero, now working in both the Aegean and Spain, pointed me to the web-site of the [recently resumed excavations](#) at the site, now one of the largest field projects in Spain. There, and in interim publications, the directors indicate that in 2009 John had sent them the original excavation notebooks of his Spanish collaborator, which had been bequeathed to him in 1960, along with a photocopy of his own 1950 excavation notebook (still among his papers). [Fig. 8 below] Seemingly over-looked by John at that time, are 78 cards mounted with excavation photographs, primarily of burials in situ, identified by burial and context. These relate to the 1944-45 seasons of excavations, before John became involved in the project; there must be an interesting story of personalities and politics behind why these were sent to John, but whether we can piece it together from surviving clues at either end remains to be seen.

By chance, I had taught Roberto Risch, a co-director of the new project, during his MA nearly 20 years ago, and an e-mail out of the blue from me received a reply within a couple of hours (though he cut it short because the Portugal vs Czech Republic Euro 2012 game was starting – I guess we all have priorities).

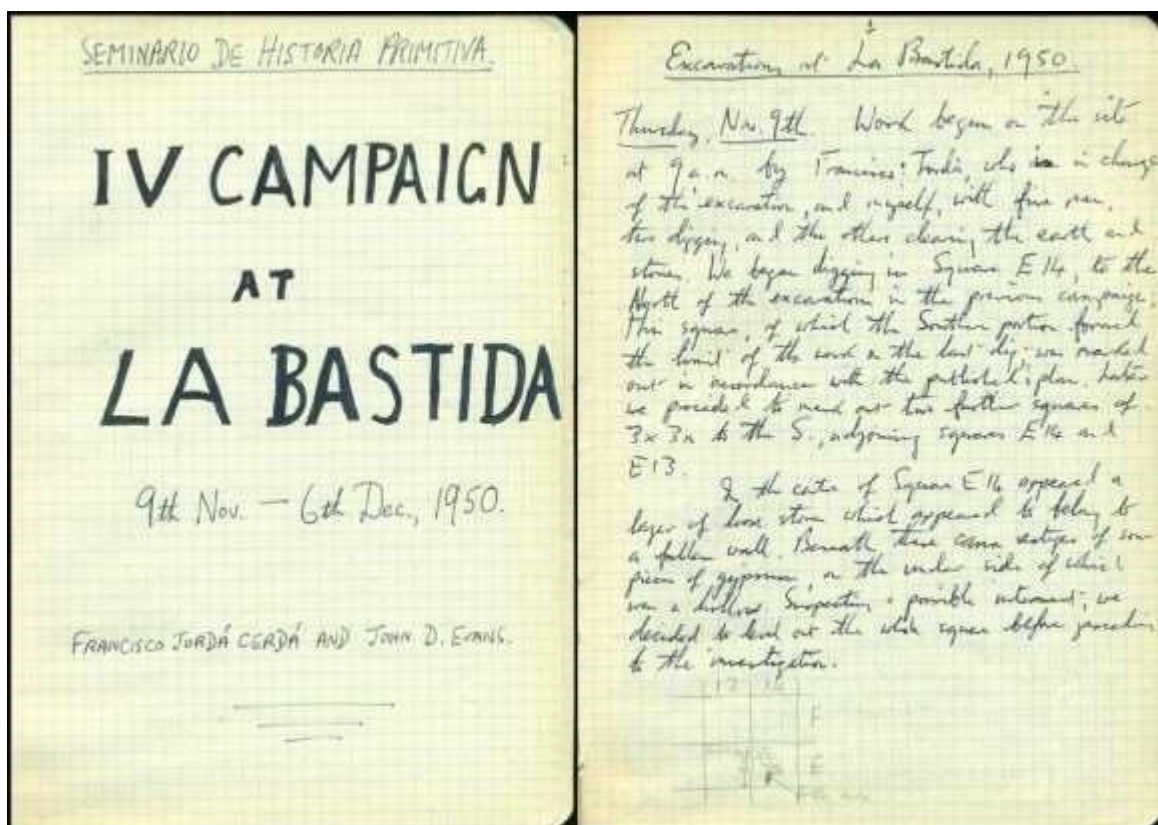


Fig. 8. La Bastida, 1950, excavation notebook

While the notebooks John sent them have allowed members of the current project to restudy the original material for publication, they had not come across these photographs in any archive in Spain, and they have had difficulty reconstructing the contexts of individual burials. (Purely coincidentally, Borja and Roberto met at a conference in Denmark a few weeks ago, and had arranged to meet for dinner while the former is working with me, and the latter is on holiday, on

Crete in August; Borja planned to bring me along, though hadn't yet mentioned it to me – I think I'd better go via the cashpoint, just to play it safe.)

So the first of today's tasks has been to finish scanning these photographs. Ultimately, I hope the originals will be returned to Spain for archiving with the other dig records and the finds in the newly built museum at the site. In the meantime, the scans should assist the study of the old material, which has been going on for several years, and Roberto is going to get back to me for higher resolution scans of some of the photos, for incorporation into the new museum displays.

The second surprise was a series of small notebooks, a few photographs, more negatives, a few small bags with potsherds, and a box with 1/3 of a skull, from John's 1956 excavation of three

Bronze Age barrows at Earl's Farm Down, just east of Amesbury, ca. 6 kilometres south-east of Stonehenge. [Fig. 9 below]



John Evans at Earl's Farm Down, 1956

Amara had her laptop with her, and a Google led to the Wiltshire sites and monuments record, which, while not seemingly aware of John's excavation, noted the excavation of four nearby barrows by Paul Ashbee in 1956. A quick run up to the library to consult Ashbee's 1983 publication in the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine confirms which barrows were excavated by John, so we can put them on the map. A contemporary report (by John – uncredited, but the typescript is among his papers), included in N. Thomas 1958,

'Excavation and field-work in Wiltshire: 1956' Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine 56:238-40) provides information on each barrow, and indicates that these, as well as Ashbee's excavations, were undertaken for the Department of the Environment, so this seems to have been fill-in employment just before John took up his appointment as Professor of Prehistoric European Archaeology at the Institute, to succeed Gordon Childe. [Fig. 10 below]

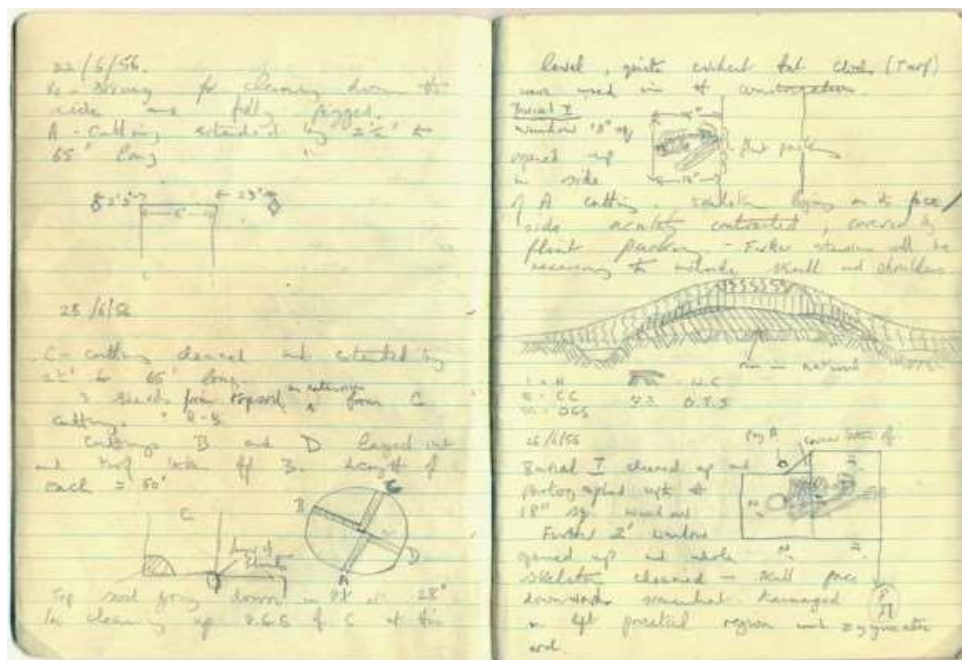


Fig. 10. Earl's Farm Down, 1956, excavation notebook

A much later letter mentions in passing that John thought the finds were all stored in the Institute. On the off chance that there were more than the few sherds he had kept with the notebooks, I fired off an e-mail to my colleague Rachel Sparks, who manages our collections, only to get her out of office message – jury duty! However, that evening I got a message back that a search of the records suggests we have material from Earl's Farm Down which wasn't identified as John's excavation in our records, so has been in that special limbo all collections have for underdocumented material.

So the second of today's tasks has been to see whether this material is from the barrows, and to get an idea of the potential size of a publication project. The writing on the bags is John's, and the recording system matches that on the few bags he kept with his notes, so that's confirmed (see [Rachel's DoA entry](#)). There is a fair collection of material, and with it in the box were a few more negatives, as well as a few finds from other sites which had been mis-filed in the same box. So confirmation for me, a few mysteries back to limbo for Rachel to try to sort out – but fewer than she started her DoA with, so I'd say we're winning.

Writing-up this excavation should be suitable as a student dissertation project, possibly for publication in WAM (I mentioned it in passing to Andrew Reynolds, the editor, and he's interested), after which the finds and records should probably be archived with other local material in the Salisbury Museum.

A third surprise was that John conducted a single season of trial tests in 1972 in collaboration with local archaeologists at the Iron Age hillfort of Segovia in southern Portugal. John's principal academic interests were in the Mediterranean Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, so what led him to get involved in a major Iron Age and Roman site? [Fig. 11 below] Hopefully there will be some hint when I can work through the documentation and correspondence systematically.

Again, purely coincidentally, his Portuguese collaborator, José Morais Arnaud, was completing his PhD at Cambridge when I began mine in 1980, and Teresa Judice Gamito expanded the 1972 trenches in connection with her own doctoral research in the early 1980s, publishing her thesis with BAR (*Social Complexity in Southwest Iberia 800-300 B.C.*), which we have upstairs, though we don't have the Portuguese journal where she reported her excavations. Her summary indicates the importance of the excavation, providing the principal regional stratified sequence from the Late Bronze Age through the Roman conquest.



Fig 11. Segovia, 1972. Left: site; right, summit trenches

The documentation for this excavation is more extensive, involving several trench notebooks, photos, plans, sections and finds drawings, which I will need more time to sort through. Because the trenches were subsequently extended, I expect John gave his collaborators copies of everything, but I'm chasing this up with José to see if we can supply whatever may be needed for their archives, to facilitate future study.

Following this trial field season, John became Director of the Institute, and administration seems to have taken over his life (a feeling all of us are now experiencing) and he stopped fieldwork; he was only able to return to working on his excavations after his retirement, as several boxes of transcribed notebooks, finds and photo lists for Knossos, along with a large box of computer disks testify (now I have to find a working Amstrad computer, to read the disks, to make sure we have copies of all the relevant files).

Sorting the Segovia records, along with more detailed cataloguing of all of John's papers, will have to wait until sometime in the winter at earliest, when I may get another chance to unpack the boxes. So I've just had to figuratively back-fill my excavation in the archives, until the next season.

But as a final surprise, my query to Rachel about Earl's Farm Down, has turned-up other materials in our storerooms, brought in by John, and checking these with Rachel is my third task for the DoA, which she has noted in her own [DoA account](#). As well as various small bits of pottery useful for teaching purposes, given to John by excavators during his early travels in Spain, which we may be able to document more fully (presently simply catalogued by site name), two more significant collections exist. We have the human and animal skeletal material from his excavation of six communal rock-cut tombs at Xemxija on Malta. Summary reports on this material were included as appendices in John's 1971 volume, but more could now be done to study the human remains in terms of community demography, the health and life history of individuals, and the social and ritual contexts of burial; the much smaller collection of animal bones holds much less potential. The former would repay new study, particularly in comparison

with more recently excavated material, and could make an excellent dissertation project for a student on our MSc in skeletal and dental bioarchaeology.

The second collection consists of two boxes of carbonised plant remains and soil samples (to which I can add another box John had at home) from Knossos. The site is one of half a dozen representing the earliest Neolithic communities in Europe, established ca. 7000 BC. The plant remains were originally studied as part of the British Academy's Major Research Project on the Early History of Agriculture, with John taking enthusiastic advantage of the newly developed flotation recovery technique and fine sieving in his 1969-70 excavations. The botanical samples from the two different campaigns were distributed among different specialists in the UK and Denmark.

I had hoped we could track down all of these through the paper trail of John's administrative correspondence for the project – I wasn't expecting to find any still in London. Checking them, they are still in bags with their context labels (Rachel and I took the opportunity to replace a few fragile bags) so their study should contribute to our understanding of early agriculture in the

Aegean. I've notified Valasia Isaakidou of Sheffield University of this material, as she is coordinating the study and publication of the environmental and bioarchaeological material recovered by John at Knossos.

Finally, still completely unexplored, are some rolls of plans and a box with the documentation and a few finds from several small excavations conducted by John's wife, Evelyn Sladdin, before she started her undergraduate degree in Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge and met John. She published one, but the others, small Roman and Medieval digs, apparently not. I may have to pencil-in the 'excavation' of that multi-site box for the DoA next year.

So what's next? My priority for the autumn and winter, to fit in around teaching, will be to catalogue the Knossos documentation, about five times as much as all the rest together, as this major excavation is actively being worked up for publication by a number of colleagues, and the full documentation is eagerly awaited. Peter Tomkins, who is writing-up the stratigraphy and pottery from John's excavations, and synthesising this with his own extensive work with Sir Arthur Evans' tests below the [Bronze Age palace](#), is coming to London in September for a meeting at the Society of Antiquaries being organised to commemorate John's career, so I hope we can start going through this material together then.

It's frustrating to have started this 'excavation', but have to leave it – but then most real excavations are like that too. This has turned into a far larger, but also much more interesting task than I anticipated nearly a year ago when I contacted John's family. From my conversation with John in 2006, when he was both pleased that his excavations at Knossos were still important, and

relieved that their publication would be completed, I'm sure he would approve our excavating his archive, to make the material available to other researchers.

This Day of Archaeology marks the last attention I can give to it for some time, but has clarified what we have, and what we need to do next. Realistically, considering the job ahead (and there is a lot more to his papers than just his excavation documentation), I think it may be some time before I'll see the floor on that half of my office again. It's been busy but intriguing – and it isn't often that one can dig into archaeology in five different countries in one day.

Today has also brought home forcefully three things that confront me every time I work on Knossian material: how productive and cost effective re-examining older material can be, despite the constant push to recover new evidence with up-to-date techniques; that we have a responsibility to squeeze as much information as we can out of what we dig up – it is a nonrenewable resource; and how crucial it is to understand our own disciplinary history – who collected what, when and why – to understand that evidence most effectively.

I'd like to thank Judith and Mike Conway, John Lewis, Andrew Reynolds, Kelly Trifilo, Stephen Shennan, Cathy Morgan, Peter Warren, Sandra Bond, Katie Meheux and Gabe Moshenska who helped arrange for and assisted the transfer of the material to the Institute of Archaeology; Lisa Fentress, Reuben Grima, Borja Legarra Herrero, José Morais Arnaud, Anthony Pace, Colin

Renfrew, Artur Ribeiro, Roberto Risch and Tim Schadla-Hall for responding to my queries; Stuart Laidlaw for scanning slides and negatives; Amara Thornton for helping me sort John's papers and providing details about some of the colourful characters who dug on the then colonial 'circuit'; Rachel Sparks for chasing Institute collections records, digging out John's material from the Institute storerooms, and helping me look through it; and the DoA folks for coping with this submission.

All images from J. D. Evans archive.