

## The Piltdown Man, or the most famous hoax ever

Flat Earth, toxic vaccines, alien invasions, chemtrails... Scientific hoaxes run rife on the web since social networks came into being. And yet they are not modern inventions, such hoaxes have always existed. One of the most famous hoaxes ever concerns the finding of an exceptional fossil: the Piltdown Man.

Due to migrations, our ancestors died everywhere in the world, therefore human fossils are found practically everywhere. Everywhere except in England.

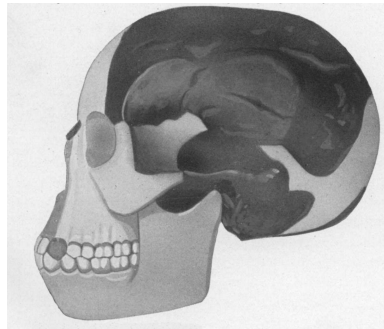


*Cheddar Gorge*

The oldest human fossil discovered in England was found in Cheddar Gorge just a short way from the areas where the famous hard cheese is made. It is the skeleton of a young man, known as "Cheddar man", who died only 10,000 years ago, therefore somewhat recently.

This was a tremendous humiliation, especially from the late 19th to early 20th century when the British superpower stood by watching while sensational discoveries were being made in other European countries. The fossils that began to reveal the evolutionary path of humans and related species were found in France, Spain, Croatia, Italy and above all Germany. In 1856, for example, in the Neander Valley near Düsseldorf, the best known extinct human species came to light: the Neanderthal Man.

Charles Dawson was a solicitor and amateur palaeontologist. He collected fossils and dreamed of becoming famous for a sensational discovery, like the one he made at Piltdown, a hamlet in East Sussex near the English Channel. Dawson showed a number of fossil fragments that were presumably human to Professor Arthur Smith Woodward, Keeper of Geology at the British Museum. Intrigued, Woodward asked to visit the site where they were found, so Dawson took him there; convinced of the importance of the finds, the professor embarked upon thorough excavations. Other fragments came to light which when assembled formed a cranium that was exceptional because it showed both human and animal characteristics at the same time.



*Pitdown Man skull reconstruction. Credits: [Wikimedia Commons](#)*

While the skull was typically human, the jawbone was large and prominent, like that of an ape. The discovery was made known to the scientific world in 1912 and aroused a well-deserved sensation. Dawson obtained his long-desired renown: the Pitdown Man was called *Eoanthropus dawsoni*, in his honour. The Pitdown Man was a find of inestimable value, due to its intermediate characteristics, representing the legendary missing link between humans and apes, the totally English proof of the theory of evolution put forward by Charles Darwin, another Englishman, was correct. National pride. Dawson died famous and happy four years later, in 1916. His death spared him the shame of seeing his discovery branded as sensational, yes, but as the most sensational scientific hoax in history. In 1953, the Pitdown Man was dismissed permanently as a hoax. Analysis of the find revealed that it was a human skull dating from medieval times joined to the jawbone of an orangutan, all treated with chemical agents to give the bones an appearance of age.



*Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Credits: [Wikimedia Commons](#)*

Who did it? Dawson clearly tops the list of suspects, but it is possible that he had a secondary role and the real perpetrator was precisely Professor Woodward who due to the fossil became a leading light in palaeoanthropology. Others on the contrary claim that no other than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes books, was behind the hoax because he knew Dawson personally, collected fossils, was a member of the Pitdown Golf Club and had already had one of the characters of his novel, "The Lost World" published in 1912, say how easy it is to falsify a bone. Is this evidence too weak? Or, as the great Holmes perhaps would have said: "Too elementary, Watson!"

by Andrea Bellati