

The Wilson Art Gallery & Museum Information Sheet



George Backhouse Witts (1846-1912)



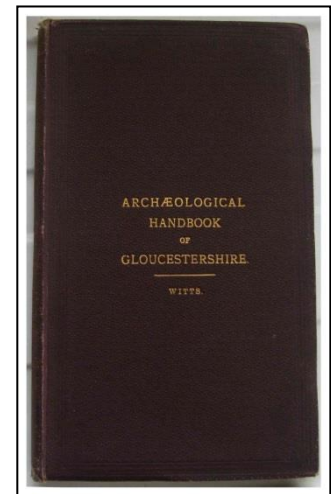
Portrait of George Backhouse Witts.

G B Witts, a resident of Leckhampton, near Cheltenham, has rightly been described as the 'father of archaeology in Gloucestershire'. His interests encompassed prehistoric and Roman periods and he is best known for his research into the county's prehistoric round and long barrows. His influential book *Archaeological Handbook of the County of Gloucester*, published in 1883, was the result of his investigation of many prehistoric burial mounds, Roman villa sites and early British and Roman roads and track-ways in the county. It remained a standard reference well into the 20th century.

Unlike many of the antiquarian 'barrow diggers' of his time, bent on simply extracting the contents of barrows, Witts set new standards in excavation by recognising the importance of scientific observation and of methodically gathering evidence. In this regard, he is acknowledged to have contributed towards the later, more scientific, developments in British archaeology. The Wilson holds a number of the objects collected by Witts and a documentary archive which includes hand-

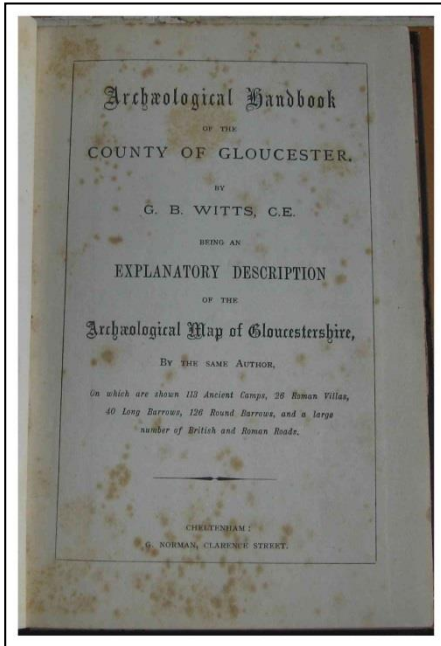
written journals and personal correspondence covering the period from 1877 until his death in 1912.

G B Witts was born in 1846, the son of the Rev. F E Witts, rector of Upper Slaughter. His grandfather, the Rev. F E Witts, also of Upper Slaughter, is best known for his diaries which have been published as *Diary of a Country Parson, 1758-1802*, depicting life in the Cotswolds in the early 19th century. As a boy, he was encouraged to study science and geology and after an education at Rugby School he qualified as a civil engineer. In this capacity he was responsible for the construction of the railway between Cheltenham and Bourton-on-the-Water, and was involved in other railway construction projects in the county, including the old Severn railway bridge. Apart from being a founding member of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society, he was also Secretary of the Cotswold Hunt and an active figure in the local community.



The cover of the Archaeological Handbook

The G B Witts collection at The Wilson comprises a quantity of documents, many handwritten by Witts himself, and a number of artefacts collected by him during the course of his investigations of ancient sites around the Cotswolds. The finds include pottery, flints, axe heads, and arrow- and spearheads. In addition to an original copy of his *Archaeological Handbook of the County of Gloucester*, his correspondence, hand-written journals, lecture notes and various site reports reveal much about his approach to archaeological investigation, how systematic and assiduous he was in recording sites visited, the extent to which he sought knowledge and comment from other expert archaeologists and academics of time, and the importance he attached to educating and informing people about their local heritage. His interest in early British and later Roman roads and trackways around Gloucestershire is also well represented.



The title page of the Archaeological handbook.

In all respects, Witts may be said to have differed from the generality of 19th-century English antiquarians, whose primary interest was in opening up ancient monuments for what was hidden inside them, little serious thought being given to the context of the monuments and what they could tell us about past human history. Witts's scorn for his less admired antiquarian contemporaries is clearly shown in the Preface to his *Handbook* :

[Not sticking rigidly to facts] *would have given way to suppositions, and, once the door of imagination is opened to the antiquary, there seems little chance of controlling the impetuosity of his upward flight!*

The title page of the *Handbook* describes it as an 'Explanatory Description of the Archaeological Map of Gloucestershire by the same author'. The scope of Witts' interests is evident from the fact that the book contains details on 113 'ancient camps', 26 Roman villas, 40 Long Barrows, 120 Round Barrows and a large number of 'British and Roman' roads. It covers the length and breadth of Gloucestershire, as well as a number of peripheral sites in neighbouring counties but close to the county's boundary. Sites in the Cheltenham area which attracted his close attention included the Leckhampton and Crickley hillforts, Dryhill Roman villa, and burial mounds on Cleeve Hill and at Belas Knap.

As a point of principal, he aimed to visit personally all the sites that interested him – no mean feat given that his main means of travel was horseback.– and he usually recorded the features and dimensions of each structure in some detail. His approach to the task is well summed up in the following extracts from the Preface to his *Handbook*:

'[My aim is] above all things to eschew fine writing and confine myself to matters of fact. It is hoped that...this will prove sufficient for the ordinary observer, while the references to the volumes and pages of those works that have previously mentioned it, will be found useful in directing to the proper source those who wish for fuller information.'

His papers include handwritten notes, sketches, and plan and elevation drawings relating to many of the sites he investigated. He was particularly engaged by the West Tump and Notgrove barrows about which he writes in considerable detail [e.g. *Transactions of the Bristol & Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, vol.5 (1880/81) and *Proceedings of the Cotteswold Naturalists' Field Club*, vol.18 (1925)]. Most remarkably, his work at West Tump resulted in over 3,000 recorded fragments of human bone now in the collection of The Wilson.

His visits to the British Museum in search of information are reflected, as well as his collaboration with other eminent and innovative antiquarians and archaeologists of the day such as William Greenwell (1820–1918), George Rolleston (1829–1881), Sir Henry Dryden (1818-1899) and General Pitt-Rivers (1827-1900). He also appears to have been a keen follower of the politician and anthropologist Sir John Lubbock (1834–1913) who, in 1873, introduced a ground-breaking bill in Parliament to preserve ancient monuments.



Map of Cheltenham and surrounding areas.

On roads and trackways, his writings reflect his use of primary sources ranging from the Antonine Itinerary and Saxon Charters to local place and field names. He was concerned also to distinguish as far as possible between early (i.e. 'British') and Roman alignments, in a way that had not been done before to the same degree.

He was a regular public lecturer, delivering lectures to Cheltenham College, the Bristol and Gloucester Archaeological Society and other interested groups. His notes for these lectures reflect his desire to disseminate knowledge as widely as possible and in a way that would be comprehended by all classes of audience. According to a *Cheltenham Examiner* newspaper report of the time relating to a lecture he gave to a Leckhampton audience, he was not beyond finishing with a short recital of popular Gloucestershire ballads, accompanied on the piano by his wife. Above all, his *Handbook* is probably his greatest legacy. It provided the first comprehensive account of prehistoric burial mounds in Gloucestershire, was extensively used by O G S Crawford (in his publication *The Long Barrows of the Cotswolds (1925)*) and was still a standard reference in 1960 when O'Neil and Grinsell published their findings on Cotswold barrows (in *Transactions of the Bristol & Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, vol. 79 (1960)).

To find out more about the collections held by the museum contact:
Collections Team, The Wilson, Clarence Street, Cheltenham GL50 3JT

Tel: 01242 387488 **Email:** collections@cheltenhamtrust.org.uk

Visit our website: <http://www.cheltenhammuseum.org.uk/>

The Cheltenham Trust VAT Registration number 194 2512 07.
Cheltenham Leisure & Culture Ltd VAT Registration number 194 2476 82.

The Cheltenham Trust is a Registered Charity in England & Wales, number 1158606.
Registered address: Cheltenham Town Hall, Imperial Square, Cheltenham GL50 1QA.

