

Ben Samphire

Ben Samphire (1978–2009) died in February 2009, less than six months after he graduated from the Institute of Archaeology. He was tragically killed during fieldwork on a primate conservation project in Ecuador. Here friends and colleagues from the Institute of Archaeology record their memories of Ben.



Ben Samphire on the occasion of his graduation in September 2008

Ben came to the Institute of Archaeology in 2003 to do a PhD after gaining a Distinction in his MSc in Cognitive Evolution at the University of Reading. Ben always showed a strong interest in primate behaviour through his PhD research and more recently fieldwork in primate conservation. During his time at the Institute Ben was actively involved in student life, as research student representative from 2004–2005 and working in the Institute Library; he was also a popular member of the student body and will be greatly missed.

Ben's PhD thesis

Ben's thesis was on the subject of *The mind in prehistory: archaeological interpretation and evolutionary theory*. The flavour of this work is given by a quotation from

the Introduction, which illustrates the rigorous intellectual approach he adopted.

“‘It is not possible’ argues Hill (1994: 83)¹ ‘to learn about what was in the minds of prehistoric people – these minds are gone, and their mental contents are not recoverable’. I wish to suggest almost entirely the opposite; that it is possible to learn about what was ‘in the minds’ of prehistoric beings, precisely because it is possible to ‘recover’ (at least some of) the contents of their minds. It will be critical, however, that we get a clear understanding of what it means for our minds to have content. It will also be crucial that we properly understand the phenomena of mind in which we are interested. This thesis will argue that while there have been increasingly numerous and diverse attempts to archaeologically investigate the minds of prehistoric

beings, they have been severely hindered by pervasive misunderstandings regarding the phenomena of minds. Indeed, I will suggest that this failure to properly understand the key concepts is the most urgent impediment to the possibility of a successful archaeology of mind. Drawing centrally on Wittgenstein's (1958)² philosophical insights, I will illustrate a number of these misunderstandings, and their negative implications, and by developing a method that will not only avoid these problems but will enable the uniquely secure archaeological identification of aspects of past minds, will demonstrate that (and to what extent) an archaeology of mind might be possible.”

Press release

**Stephen Shennan,
Director of the Institute of
Archaeology
(issued 24/02/09)**

Ben was a very bright and engaging young man who ploughed his own furrow. His PhD explored current theories on human cognitive evolution, comparing these to evidence in the archaeological and anthropological record. By the time of its successful conclusion Ben had decided that he wanted to work at a more practical level and decided to pursue a career in primate conservation. In order to do so he needed to gain experience as a volunteer and so went to Ecuador. He had planned to go on and apply for a masters in this field. Only a few days ago he wrote to me from Ecuador asking me to write a reference for him, as his former PhD supervisor. I held him in enormous regard and liked him very much. His death is deeply saddening to me and to all his friends at the Institute.

Memories of Ben 1

Jago Cooper

Ben was great. From the very first day that we all started our PhDs together, I remember chatting with him for half an hour or so about his PhD topic and still not having a clue what it was about at the end of the discussion. I am not sure if he knew either, to be honest, but given his incredibly sharp mind and wonderfully relaxed approach to life you just knew that it would all work out well. Ben's role



Graduation Day, 8th September 2008: Ben with friends and fellow PhD students, Anna Clement and Sam Nixon after graduation



Ben with fellow PhD students from 322b at a Christmas party in 2006

as PhD rep meant I mainly enjoyed the pleasure of his company in the pub during our PhDs, despite having a desk behind him in the research room. In fact the only way I ever got to know how his PhD was progressing was through the series of ferociously intimidating books that would appear on his desk over the years and by monitoring his increasingly extravagant beard, which waxed and waned in line with his word count. Chatting with Ben on graduation day in the Norfolk Arms it quickly became clear that he had really enjoyed his recent work in Africa, had nailed down exactly what he wanted to be doing more of and was extremely happy with life. It is just such a tragic loss.

Memories of Ben 2

Lisa Daniel

One of the first and certainly the last conversation I had with Ben revolved around monkeys. After years of never quite being sure if he was on the right path he had finally cracked it, focusing on primate conservation. Perhaps the only consolation of his untimely death was that he was doing something he loved. He was one of the most open hearted (as well as one of the most intelligent) people I knew and I was privileged enough to count him as a friend as well as a research student. His smiley face and anecdotes are sorely missed.

Memories of Ben 3

Michael Seymour

One of Ben's most striking qualities was his determination to live by his values. He was not himself at all dogmatic and would approach moral and ethical questions with an open mind, but he always acted on the conclusions he reached. His decision to work on primate conservation is one outstanding example of this, but I also think that it showed in the critical honesty he brought to his academic work. Ben was concerned with the philosophical basis of his subject: his doctoral research was shaped by a desire to establish what we as archaeologists can legitimately say about the elusive concept of mind in prehistory. (The answer, he would pessimistically joke, sometimes seemed to be very little indeed.) He set out to challenge the assumptions, elisions and fudges by means of which we all tend to proceed, because in his academic work as in his personal ethics he believed that awkward conclusions could not simply be waved aside for the sake of practical expediency.

It seems strange to write only of his work. My memories are all of evenings spent talking with a warm, funny, exceptionally gentle friend. To me though, it seems that Ben's generosity of spirit and his intellectual rigour came from exactly

the same source: a deep intelligence that valued honesty and sought actively to do good.

Memories of Ben 4

Tessa Dickinson

I met Ben for the first time in the top floor bar of the UCL union. He was sipping a pint and was sitting with a group from the 322b research room. The seats were still velvety red back then. It was a Monday evening in autumn. Ben's kindness and interest got us talking and it felt like a warm welcome. He was the first person to really talk to me from my research room and this was also the first of a few but significant PhD-life conversations we were to share. Suffice to say that what Ben said that night stays with me and I would like to thank him for expressing himself with such sincerity and honesty. It has meant so much to me during the course of my PhD. I would like to thank Ben for that. I would also like to thank Ben for always welcoming everyone he met with such a warm smile. We were very lucky to have him in 322b, and as Liz said, he always made people laugh. It is true, his corner of the room was like a little laughing corner – bubbles of it would come wafting down to those of us sat by the window. I think that it is fair to say that his warmth and kindness stays with everyone of us in 322b. Thank you Ben.

Memories of Ben 5

Susanna Harris

In 2004–2005 Ben, Hannah Cordts and I shared the role of postgraduate student representatives. As academic research is so often an individual process it was wonderful to be able to work alongside Ben and benefit from his abilities. One of the campaigns we initiated was to increase postgraduate involvement in the Institute's research groups. Ben was instrumental in creating an effective structure to analyse the results, part of a process that allowed us to successfully propose the appointment of student co-ordinators for each research group. Ben was a kind and generous friend who had the ability to make people feel relaxed and appreciated. This was a huge asset during our time as student representatives as, not only a great motivator for organizing social events, he was also able to make everyone feel welcome.

Ben could be rather quiet about his research and intellectual ability, so it was always a pleasure to hear his ideas. PhD upgrades are often turgid affairs, but I remember being genuinely fascinated at Ben's, where he presented his preliminary results, convincingly bringing the audience into the mind of early hominids.

With friends we shared many evenings together, eating, drinking and deep in discussion and for this I am eternally grateful. Unfortunately, I always missed Ben's birthday parties as they clashed with the UCL Primtech weekend that I was involved with. The only exception was in 2008, when I was finally able to join the celebration with Ben and Gail. Throughout the evening many of Ben's friends turned up and by the end he was surrounded by birthday cards. I remember looking at them together – each one was primate themed. We all knew Ben's passion for primates and this was a wonderful shared moment of appreciation for Ben – the monkey man.

Memories of Ben 6

Anna Clement

When I first met Ben I was so excited to have found another PhD student who was interested in Neanderthals. However, after examining Ben's blank expression when I asked him which sites and specimens he was looking at, I soon realised we were actually doing very different types of PhD! I was lucky enough to be allocated a desk space next to Ben and although he often chose to work out of the British Library, the days he spent in the research room were always a welcome distraction. Most

of my memories of Ben are full of lots of laughter, whether this was at Sam's upgrade when he kept putting his overheads on the projector upside down and back to front, at Institute parties, being slung over Jago's shoulder on the way to our research room's Christmas party, or just putting the world to rights down the pub.

We even managed to maintain our sense of humour while writing up. Ben, Sam, Jago and I all occupied one corner of our research room and were all funded by the AHRC, which meant the same deadline for submission. This was a stressful time for all of us, but together we battled our way through. Ben was a real support to me at this time and when we weren't writing we were often down at the Norfolk Arms distracting ourselves from the task at hand. We attempted to submit our PhDs at the same time, only to find that Senate House had my examiner form, but no submission form, and Ben's submission form, but no examiner form. At least between us we made one complete PhD student! In the end Ben submitted one day before me, which gave us an excuse for two celebrations instead of one.

Ben and I kept in touch after submitting our PhDs, although most of our discussion evolved around coffee rather than beer and talk of primate conservation rather than the toils of writing a PhD. He texted me on his way to the airport and was so looking forward to being part of the project in Ecuador. He seemed to have finally found what he wanted to do.

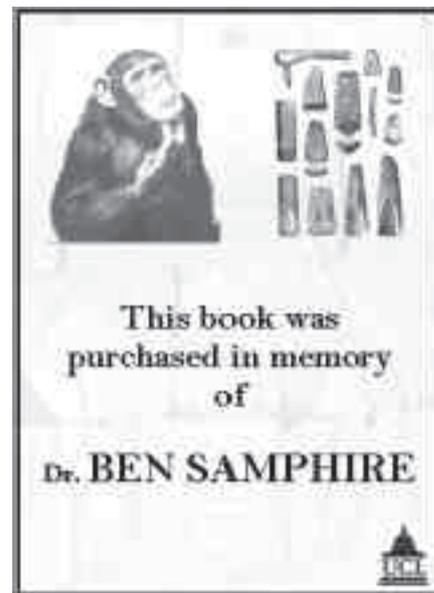
Library Legacy

Katie Meheux and
Robert Kirby

Ben worked in the Institute of Archaeology Library for two years from November 2006 to September 2008 as an evening assistant and later as an evening supervisor. He was a greatly valued member of our team and we all considered him a friend, as did many others from UCL Library Services who had worked with him. We all heard of his death with great sorrow.

To mark his contribution as both an academic and as a member of the Institute library staff, the Institute of Archaeology Library Committee agreed to set aside a sum of £1200 to purchase books in his research area of evolutionary biology and cognitive archaeology, for which a special commemorative book plate was designed by a member of our library team.

Some items have already been purchased and we look forward to adding to the collection. We hope that in this way Ben will not be too soon forgotten.



Commemorative book plate in memory of Ben, designed by Paul Majewski

Orang Utan Foundation

If you would like to pay tribute to Ben Samphire, his family have asked that people make a donation to The Orang Utan Foundation - www.orangutan.org.uk. This seems like a very fitting way to remember Ben and the work that he was pursuing.

Notes

- 1 J. Hill, "Prehistoric cognition and the science of archaeology", in *The ancient mind: elements of cognitive archaeology*, C. Renfrew & E. Zubrow (eds), 83–92 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- 2 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).