



The Leakey Foundation Oral History of Human Origins Research: David Pilbeam

Interview conducted by
Bernard Wood in 2023

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Bernard Wood (00:00:00):

I'm going to get rid of an irritating thing that keeps asking me a question about Zoom, but... Okay. Alexis, are we okay?

Alexis (00:00:14):

Yes, the recording has started.

Bernard Wood (00:00:18):

Okay. David, thank you very much for agreeing to do this oral history. You and I know each other, and I think we are determined that we will do our best to make sure that our friendship doesn't intrude too much into our conversation, but I think we both know that that's... we're unlikely to be successful.

David Pilbeam (00:00:47):

Agreed. We'll do our best.

Bernard Wood (00:00:51):

So could you, for the record, give us your full name? And you're retired, but if you could give us your last position at Harvard University.

David Pilbeam (00:01:05):

Yes. My... David Roger Pilbeam, Henry Ford II Professor of Human Evolution. That was it.

Bernard Wood (00:01:19):

That was it.

David Pilbeam (00:01:20):

In the Department of Human Evolutionary Biology.

Bernard Wood (00:01:24):

Okay. And could you remind me when that department began?

David Pilbeam (00:01:30):

I was afraid you'd ask me that. Let's see. It's probably 15 years ago.

Bernard Wood (00:01:38):

Okay.

David Pilbeam (00:01:39):

Because our current chair was complaining about the fact that he'd been chair for 15 years. So it's roughly 15 years, maybe a little bit less.

Bernard Wood (00:01:47):

Okay. And could you tell us a little about your family background? Some people sort of come into academia because their parents are involved, but I think you and I do not fall into that category. So could you just give us some sense of your family background?

David Pilbeam (00:02:11):

Sure. Yes. It would be, in American terms, blue collar. So we would recognize it as working class. Both my parents left school when they were 14, which is not at all unusual for people who were born in the very early 1900s. And remember, when you and I went to university or medical school, only about 5% of our age group were doing that. So it was not unusual to be what's now called a first gen.

Bernard Wood (00:02:49):

Okay. Okay. And your father... And you were brought up in West London?

David Pilbeam (00:02:56):

Yes. I grew up in a place called Chiswick in West London. I had been... I was born in Brighton, Sussex, on the south coast. And the reason for that is I was born in November 1940, and the German bombing of London, the so-called Blitz, had begun a couple of months earlier. And my mother was very reluctantly persuaded to move... to go down to Brighton where my father's parents lived, which was where I was given birth.

Bernard Wood (00:03:30):

Okay. Okay. And your family name, could you tell us, just for my curiosity?

David Pilbeam (00:03:39):

Well, it's unusual and it's traceable back to somewhere in West Sussex or East Kent. So actually not very far from Down and the famous Darwin House. And it's traceable back into the... plausibly into the 1400s. And it was never very widespread as a name until quite recently.

Bernard Wood (00:04:08):

Okay. Okay. Did you have brothers and sisters?

David Pilbeam (00:04:12):

I had one sister, who died in 1997.

Bernard Wood (00:04:19):

Oh, okay. And was she older or younger than you?

David Pilbeam (00:04:22):

She was older. She was 7 years older than me.

Bernard Wood (00:04:25):

Okay. So tell us about your, what you and I would call our schooling. Where did you go to school, and how come you were encouraged to apply to go to university and particularly Cambridge University?

David Pilbeam (00:04:50):

Okay. So my primary school was about 100 yards down the road from where I lived, and so I would go home for what I would call dinner, but what now is called lunch. And then my teacher in my final year in the primary school was very keen on encouraging her bright pupils.

Bernard Wood (00:05:22):

Right.

David Pilbeam (00:05:23):

One day, I noticed there was a mysterious visit from Mrs. Key to our house, which never happened. And it turned out she was persuading my parents to let me apply to a secondary school called Latymer Upper School, which was a kind of school called direct grant school, which existed between 1945 and 1975, where 25% of the places were supported by the government. And so it was a private school. What would here be -- yes, what in England would have been, I suppose, a public school. And I got an admission by taking an exam and having an interview.

Bernard Wood (00:06:12):

Okay. And it was a day school?

David Pilbeam (00:06:17):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:06:17):

There weren't any boarders?

David Pilbeam (00:06:18):

No boarders, no. It was in [deletion] Hammersmith close to Chiswick, so it was within walking distance.

Bernard Wood (00:06:29):

Okay, okay, okay. And Latymer Upper has a reputation... well, has and had a reputation as an academic school. So were you a good scholar? I mean, was it obvious that you were a junior version of yourself?

David Pilbeam (00:06:51):

I'm not quite sure. I know after one parent-teacher night, my parents came back and said that the chemistry teacher assured them that I was not university material. So I think I probably had a mixed reputation.

Bernard Wood (00:07:14):

I see.

David Pilbeam (00:07:16):

You will probably remember every May or June you had exams.

Bernard Wood (00:07:22):

Yes.

David Pilbeam (00:07:22):

And depending on which year you were, then you got resorted in the next year. So all of the top-30 kids showed up in the A stream of the next year and so forth. So after the first year, I was always in the A stream, and I was always in about the middle of it after those exams[inaudible 00:07:42].

Bernard Wood (00:07:43):

And who made the decision that you should go to Cambridge? And you studied natural sciences. I mean, I forget the terminology at Cambridge.

David Pilbeam (00:07:57):

It's not necessary to know the terminology. I was very much influenced in my last couple of years by a man named Alan Graham, who was a biology teacher, and he'd written a

textbook that was widely used in schools at that time. And what I enjoyed about his teaching was that he was very keen on Darwin and Mendel. I can't remember how many times he said that it was a tragedy that Darwin didn't know about Mendel's work. Well, it's just that he had them, but he didn't read them. And Mr Graham decided that two kids in his class in my year were Cambridge material, and he had connections to two colleges at Cambridge. One was to Peterhouse, which is the smallest and oldest of the Cambridge colleges, and that's where I was tutored, if you like. So I took the entrance exams and got in.

Bernard Wood (00:09:07):

Okay. And do you have any recollection of when you were first aware that there was a topic called paleontology?

David Pilbeam (00:09:28):

Yes, and I can tell you when. It was in... So let's see. I went up in 1959. So 1958, I'd have been studying for my A-levels. You remember that?

Bernard Wood (00:09:42):

Right. Yep.

David Pilbeam (00:09:43):

And one of the... So there are four subjects in which one took the A-levels, and there was an additional called scholarship paper.

Bernard Wood (00:09:57):

Yes.

David Pilbeam (00:09:57):

And I was sitting in the Chiswick Public Library going over questions asked in previous state scholarship questions, and one of them was simply the word Australopithecus. And I had no idea what that was, and so I went and looked it up. So I came across paleontology and decided, well, that's a question I should obviously avoid if I got one like that [deleted] next year. But then after I had got to Cambridge studying natural sciences, and for a number of reasons, I was not particularly contented doing that. And I looked around, and I looked for a subject or a topic which involved humans but also evolution and came across this area called physical anthropology, which was one of three units in the anthropology department, the Department of Anthropology and Archeology at Cambridge. And so after the end of my second year at Cambridge, I shifted from natural sciences to physical anthropology.

Bernard Wood (00:11:22):

Okay. And we should explain to people that Cambridge is a collegiate system. So some of your education would have been university-wide, and some of it would have been within the college.

David Pilbeam (00:11:38):

With supervisions, yes. And Peterhouse, being a small college, I think I might have had one supervision from a college fellow, but most of my supervisions were elsewhere.

Bernard Wood (00:11:51):

Okay.

David Pilbeam (00:11:52):

My supervisions on physiology, for example, were at Addenbrooke's, which doesn't exist anymore, but anyway.

Bernard Wood (00:12:04):

Okay. Okay. And were you ever tempted to do medicine, or did you... or...

David Pilbeam (00:12:11):

I had gone up to... For natural sciences, I was, in our terminology now, pre-med.

Bernard Wood (00:12:20):

Right.

David Pilbeam (00:12:23):

But for a variety of reasons, that was not something that was a comfortable fit for me.

Bernard Wood (00:12:28):

Okay. Okay. So you moved from being a pre-med to sort of a specialism in physical anthropology. And I think we probably... Or you know more about this than me, but we probably need to remind people that in the UK, the UK wasn't like the US in the sense that there were many departments that specialized in physical anthropology. It was a bit of a niche interest in the UK.

David Pilbeam (00:13:00):

Well, there was an equivalent at Oxford. I mean Geoffrey Harrison.

Bernard Wood (00:13:05):

Right.

David Pilbeam (00:13:06):

University College London had a physical anthropology program, but there were other people in London that did what you and I would call paleoanthropology, John Napier, for example.

Bernard Wood (00:13:21):

But they were at medical schools rather than in the university writ large.

David Pilbeam (00:13:29):

That's right.

Bernard Wood (00:13:30):

So what were the major influences on you at Cambridge? And is your lifelong interest in history anything to do with the fact that you were at Peterhouse, which has a reputation for being a history college?

David Pilbeam (00:13:48):

Please don't allow me to wander down the Peterhouse path because that's a very... Yes, it was known for history, but boy, they had some really interesting characters that were historians in that college. Very interesting.

Bernard Wood (00:14:07):

Okay.

David Pilbeam (00:14:09):

Interesting question because my favorite subject and probably my best subject at [deleted] Latymer was history. I remember one... in one exam, I got more than 100%, and it was in history. As you know, I tend to talk too much.

Bernard Wood (00:14:31):

Okay, okay. I don't think... As much as I would like to explore the more than 100%, I think we should probably move on.

David Pilbeam (00:14:42):

It was offset by the 30% I got in woodwork. Sorry.

Bernard Wood (00:14:49):

So how many years was the undergraduate course at Cambridge?

David Pilbeam (00:14:55):

Well, it's normally three years.

Bernard Wood (00:14:57):

Right.

David Pilbeam (00:14:58):

In my case, for reasons that I think it's probably best we don't go into that are too technical, it was four years. I went up in '59, and I graduated in 1963, although I got my BA in 1962 after three years.

Bernard Wood (00:15:15):

Okay. Okay. And then what was the process that you went through to determine what you did next? And what did you do next?

David Pilbeam (00:15:29):

Okay. So physical anthropology at that time had two teachers at Cambridge: one man named David Hughes, who was a human biologist. He left and went to Toronto, and I don't know what's happened to him. The head of the department was a man named Jack Trevor, who was originally a Tanzanian and he was-

Bernard Wood (00:15:56):

He was a European Tanzanian.

David Pilbeam (00:15:58):

Yes. He was a wonderfully eccentric person.

Bernard Wood (00:16:03):

Right.

David Pilbeam (00:16:04):

When I first met him, he was clearly exhibiting symptoms of bipolar problems. By the time he died, he was very severely affected. But he was a wonderful mentor and teacher, very helpful, very kind. He treated me very nicely. He treated me almost like I was a junior colleague, which I wasn't, but that's the way I felt that he treated me. [deleted] Because the departments were so small, we would have a series of guest lecturers come up to Cambridge to give lectures. So for example, Geoffrey Harrison came over from Oxford to do some human biology, and John Napier came from London and gave a very memorable series of lectures on primate and human evolution. And during that time, he [deleted] talked about possible early hominids, one of them being Ramapithecus. And he mentioned Elwyn Simons, whom he had known when Elwyn was at Oxford for the second PhD.

Bernard Wood (00:17:34):

And Elwyn... If I can just interrupt, Elwyn was Le Gros Clark's PhD student.

David Pilbeam (00:17:39):

Well, that's what he would say. Actually, he was Joe Weiner's PhD student.

Bernard Wood (00:17:44):

Oh, okay. Okay. Fine.

David Pilbeam (00:17:46):

Full professors didn't have students, but yeah, I think he was very close to Le Gros. And Le Gros was a visiting lecturer at Yale, after that, after he retired.

Bernard Wood (00:18:00):

I'm sorry, I interrupted you. You were explaining how you...

David Pilbeam (00:18:03):

So I was very curious to learn more about Ramapithecus, and I had got into the habit of going to a very secluded reading room in what's called the Cambridge Philosophical Society, and discovered that they had copies of this very obscure journal from Yale called Postilla. And they had a 1962 paper that Elwyn had written about Ramapithecus in which he re-studied it. It had been found in 1932 by a then Yale graduate student. So I read Elwyn's paper and got very enthusiastic about it. And various... I don't know how it came up in conversation, whether it was John Napier who suggested it or Jack probably suggested it, that I should apply to Yale.

Bernard Wood (00:18:59):

So what did you apply for? What were the options of a salaried sort of job in those days at Yale?

David Pilbeam (00:19:11):

I didn't have any notion about what my career path was going to be. I just knew I wanted to do something different. I didn't really... I hadn't really absorbed the fact that you could be an academic. I'd been taught by academics, but that this was a kind of career path for me or someone like me struck me as... It didn't cross my mind.

Bernard Wood (00:19:36):

Yeah. Likewise.

David Pilbeam (00:19:37):

I was impulsive and adventurous in ways that I wish I still were, but I decided it would be kind of fun to apply to Yale. So I wrote to Elwyn, not knowing at the time that he was in the geology department. And I got back a response from a man named John Buettner-Janusch, who was... Exactly.

Bernard Wood (00:20:05):

Of... of... right. Okay.

David Pilbeam (00:20:08):

The well-known John Buettner-Janusch, who was in the anthropology department. He was the only physical anthropologist there. And he said, "I'm coming to London. I'd like to talk to you." So I went up to London, and he was staying, I think... Would there have been a Westbury Hotel in London?

Bernard Wood (00:20:27):

I think there was. And so in other words, you wrote to Elwyn Simons. Elwyn Simons got in touch with John Buettner-Janusch and said, "This young man wants to come and do something that's probably more appropriate in your department than mine."

David Pilbeam (00:20:43):

Check him out.

Bernard Wood (00:20:44):

Right. Okay.

David Pilbeam (00:20:49):

So I don't know if you ever knew BJ, but he was a-

Bernard Wood (00:20:52):

I only met him once, but he was a colorful character.

David Pilbeam (00:20:55):

Flamboyant, I would say.

Bernard Wood (00:20:57):

Yes, yes.

David Pilbeam (00:20:57):

Singular. So then I heard quite quickly from Elwyn, saying that he was going to come to London and why didn't we get together? So I was interviewed by Elwyn, and we immediately got on like a house on fire.

Bernard Wood (00:21:12):

Why do you think that was?

David Pilbeam (00:21:16):

Well, one explanation is that we were both obsessed with Ramapithecus and Miocene hominoids, and not many other people were. And anyway, the short version is I ended up getting a fellowship to go to Yale for a year and ended up in Elwyn's department, in the geology department, which turned out to be, I think, probably one of the several good things that happened to me, because I was in a cohort of geologists, maybe a few paleontologists. But there weren't other what we would call paleoanthropologists. There were invertebrate paleontologists, vertebrate paleontologists, and so on. So that was good for me.

Bernard Wood (00:22:06):

Right, right. And so what year did you go to Yale?

David Pilbeam (00:22:11):

I went to Yale in 1963.

Bernard Wood (00:22:16):

Right. And so you were there initially for a year, and then what happened within that year, and what happened after that year?

David Pilbeam (00:22:29):

Sometime... And again, this is a long time ago, and it's very hard to retrieve what I did. I can make up reasons why I did things. I can make up memories, but I don't know. For some reason, I decided I would continue for another year, I think possibly because I got a chance to do some fieldwork and also to do a museum tour, where I could look at fossils.

Bernard Wood (00:22:55):

So the fieldwork, let me get a sense. How many times had you left the UK before you went to America to go to Yale?

David Pilbeam (00:23:05):

I think I went with my sister to visit her pen-friend in Cherbourg.

Bernard Wood (00:23:12):

Okay.

David Pilbeam (00:23:12):

That was as far as I'd gone.

Bernard Wood (00:23:15):

Okay. So in other words, you weren't a world traveler?

David Pilbeam (00:23:22):

Not really, no.

Bernard Wood (00:23:23):

No, but you... And so where did you go for the fieldwork, and how was that arranged?

David Pilbeam (00:23:33):

Elwyn had been working for some time in Egypt, in the Oligocene, in an area called the Fayum. It's south of Cairo. It's out on the edge of the Sahara Desert. So I joined his field team in probably October of 1964. I was in the field there through Christmas, and I can't remember through New Year. But at some stage [deleted], I had been able to plan and get funds for a kind of fossil tour. So I then went to Kenya. I went to Nairobi and got to Nairobi in January 1965. And Louis was very kind, and I could see the Miocene fossils there. I had met Louis a year before.

Bernard Wood (00:24:39):

These were Miocene fossils that were from the west of Kenya at-

David Pilbeam (00:24:44):

Yes, [inaudible 00:24:45], Karungu, and so forth, and [inaudible 00:24:47], and Rusinga. I'd met Louis a year before when he'd been a Silliman lecturer at Yale. And he was very kind to me. Anyway, so I was there for a while and was taken by Ron Clarke to visit Glynn Isaac's field site at Olorgesailie. Glynn couldn't meet me. I had known Glynn because he had been an undergraduate at Peterhouse when I was there [deleted]. Glynn couldn't join me because Barbara had just given birth to Gwyneira and was quite ill. And so I went with Ron Clarke with a sack of goat bones to Olorgesailie, which he then spread out. And I was puzzled as to what was going on, and that's my introduction to taphonomy. Glynn was a very early believer in figuring out how could you trace bones from when they start as bones on a surface to becoming fossils.

Bernard Wood (00:26:01):

So that was a... I mean, that must have been an earlier... I mean, there were the experiments with water flumes and things of that sort, but that must have been one of the earliest attempts to see what was going on.

David Pilbeam (00:26:14):

As far as I could figure out, very early, yes.

Bernard Wood (00:26:17):

Right. Okay. So you were now in Kenya. You were doing your museum tour, and you went back to Yale?

David Pilbeam (00:26:29):

No, I went then down to South Africa and met... Phillip Tobias had arranged for me to see the australopithecines. I met... Alun Hughes was there. Alun and Tobias at Sterkfontein.

Bernard Wood (00:26:51):

I don't know what your experience with Alun Hughes was, but he was... As far as I was concerned, he was a little sort of gruff, but extremely kind. And once he'd worked out that you weren't a waste of his time, he was a kind guy.

David Pilbeam (00:27:15):

Bernard, I think you and I were used to English academics, so he didn't strike me as being at all odd. He was very nice, kind, generous to take time to take this young whipper-snapper on.

Bernard Wood (00:27:28):

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

David Pilbeam (00:27:30):

I also spent part of a day with Raymond Dart, who [deleted] took me around and was extremely generous and very kind. And again, I was astonished that someone of that stature would be so nice and so interested in, again, just a very young, rather callow graduate student.

Bernard Wood (00:27:54):

Do you think those experiences sort of colored how you behaved as the years went by?

David Pilbeam (00:28:04):

That's an interesting question, which I hadn't thought of. I think the answer is yes. I think I'd mentioned that Jack treated me kind of as a junior colleague. Elwyn did as well. And I don't

know if I was lucky in [deleted] coming across people that behaved that way, or I somehow made it easier for them to behave that way. I don't know. But yes, I think that also made it easier for me to feel comfortable in the presence of greatness, which is why you and I are such good friends. Sorry.

Bernard Wood (00:28:48):

Well, I didn't realize that you had met Raymond Dart in that context because that... 19... I'm not sure when he retired and Phillip Tobias took over as chair.

David Pilbeam (00:29:00):

He was retired, and Phillip was very kind to me.

deletions

Bernard Wood: Okay. Okay. So I have on the desk here what I assume is your PhD thesis.

David Pilbeam (00:29:17):

It is, yes.

Bernard Wood (00:29:18):

Okay. And in the references, I can see that you and Elwyn published a paper in American Scientist in 1965. So that must have been sort of once you got back from your museum tour.

David Pilbeam (00:29:37):

There were two papers that we published as co-authors in 1965, both of them were written before we went to Egypt. So it would've been, those were mostly written in '63. The preliminary revision was pretty much drafted in '63. I know in the summer of '64, one of the places I visited was Spain, because I wanted to look at some of the fossil apes they had. And of course, I saw the fossils when I was in Nairobi, but I am pretty sure that the... No, I know the paper was done, because after South Africa, I flew to Zurich to measure some teeth. And I met Adolf Schultz, who was the editor of Folia Primatologica, where the preliminary revision was published, and it was in the press by that time. So yes. So those were both done before October 1964, which explains some of the kind of pompous tone, certainly in the paper that I mostly wrote that was in American Scientist.

Bernard Wood (00:31:15):

Good, good. And yes, I mean, we all look back at our early papers and think, "Who the hell was that?" But-

David Pilbeam (00:31:24):

Who do you think you're talking to? Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:31:26):

Who do you think you're talking to? So essentially for our viewers, you did a Ph.D. program at Yale.

David Pilbeam (00:31:38):

For two years, yes. Then I went back to-

Bernard Wood (00:31:40):

Two years?

David Pilbeam (00:31:40):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:31:43):

But most Ph.D. programs now are five years. So how did you manage to cram a Ph.D. program into two years?

David Pilbeam (00:31:52):

It explains the blue book you waved at me, and it explains its many defects and deficiencies. In 1965, so at the end of my second year at Yale, I stayed in New Haven for the summer. I was in a rented apartment. And one day in probably June, I got a phone call from Jack Trevor in Cambridge. Now how in heaven's name Jack got my phone number, I don't know.

Bernard Wood (00:32:24):

Well, that's why Cambridge people are so impressive. It's probably something to do with British intelligence.

David Pilbeam (00:32:33):

Which he was in, yes. But so, the conversation went something like this. "David, how are you?"

"Fine."

"David Hughes, the second anthropologist at Cambridge, has just resigned and we have a position that's open. Would you be interested?"

I said, "Yes, I would be. I've got fellowship for another year here, and so I'll be ready, say a year from now. That would be good."

And he said, "No, no. David, my boy," I'm sure he said, "I've just come out of the appointments committee. Are you interested in the job?"

(00:33:16):

I told you I'm impulsive, so I spent about five seconds and I said, "Sure. Yeah, why not?" So that's how I got the job at Cambridge.

Bernard Wood (00:33:25):

So you were essentially being considered in absentia without your knowledge for a job at Cambridge?

David Pilbeam (00:33:33):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:33:35):

Okay. Okay. I think it's important that we share how human resources was managed in the mid-1960s.

David Pilbeam (00:33:48):

It's very well put, yes. Actually, the nature of the process reminds me very much of the way the tenure process at Harvard generally works. You don't know that you are being considered until you get a phone call.

Bernard Wood (00:34:04):

Okay. Okay, okay, okay. Which is probably not the way it mostly works now.

David Pilbeam (00:34:11):

No, [deletion] I'm quite sure it's not the way it works now.

Bernard Wood (00:34:15):

Okay. So you went back to Cambridge?

David Pilbeam (00:34:18):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:34:20):

And you were a faculty, you were now Jack Trevor's colleague?

David Pilbeam (00:34:25):

Yes. My title was, I was a demonstrator in physical anthropology, demonstrator being the assistant lecturer equivalent at Cambridge if you're in a science department. So my equivalents in archeology and social anthropology were assistant professors, and I was a demonstrator, which I've always liked as a term.

Bernard Wood (00:34:50):

Yeah. I mean, it's a very old sort of term, rather like a readership, which is a thing that you see in the UK, that there was only one book. And so, the reader read the book while the professor sat there and sort of waved always his hands, and then the demonstrator would actually demonstrate what the reader was talking about. So it made perfect sense. So you were back in Cambridge, and this is now 1965?

David Pilbeam (00:35:30):

'65, yeah.

Bernard Wood (00:35:32):

And how long did you spend in Cambridge before you had another phone call saying, "My boy?"

David Pilbeam (00:35:41):

Three years.

Bernard Wood (00:35:42):

Three years. So you were in Cambridge long enough. Where did you live? Did you live in college or did you have-

David Pilbeam (00:35:50):

I lived in an apartment in biking distance of the, or actually walking distance of the department, on what was then the end edge of Cambridge, but it is not really the edge.

Bernard Wood (00:36:06):

And see, we're teaching for three years in Cambridge. Would we recognize the names of any of the students that you taught?

David Pilbeam (00:36:18):

Tim Clutton-Brock, Ian Tattersall, Alison Richard, who became vice chancellor at Cambridge, was Provost. His Royal Highness, King Charles V.

Bernard Wood (00:36:34):

Right. Well-

David Pilbeam (00:36:39):

Which is not what he was at the time.

Bernard Wood (00:36:42):

Right.

David Pilbeam (00:36:45):

That's about it.

Bernard Wood (00:36:46):

Yes, because he read archeology and anthropology. I think actually, I was rather later than John Napier, one of the people that used to get the train up to Cambridge, to give lectures at Cambridge.

David Pilbeam (00:37:00):

Oh, okay. Yeah. No, he spent his first year in archeology and anthropology, so he would've had supervisions in the three divisions. So I was supervisor, I think it was decided that I would perhaps more appropriate than Jack, perhaps being closer in age too.

Bernard Wood (00:37:24):

Okay, okay, okay.

David Pilbeam (00:37:25):

His [inaudible 00:37:26].

Bernard Wood (00:37:27):

So not many people have supervised the present King of England?

David Pilbeam (00:37:34):

Not many, no. I mean, his second two years, his second and third years, he was in history. Part two in history, part one in archeology and anthropology. Yeah.

Bernard Wood (00:37:54):

And so ,how did you back to Yale, and it's interesting that Alison Richards went backwards and forwards between Yale and Cambridge. Was there a special connection between Cambridge and Yale?

David Pilbeam (00:38:09):

No. No, but there became one. Because I had been at Yale, I had a chance, I had a leave from Cambridge and I took it at Yale. And Jack Trevor had died and there was a search underway for his replacement, and I had applied. A number of other people had also applied. And while I was at Yale on leave, I got the word that I did not get the job, I did not get Jack's job.

Bernard Wood (00:38:51):

Was that a disappointment?

David Pilbeam (00:38:57):

I think yes, but I think it was a disappointment in the sense of how on earth could they do this to me?

Bernard Wood (00:39:08):

Well, as one does.

David Pilbeam (00:39:10):

Right, exactly. A disappointment. Whether it was a disappointment in that it meant that you were going to go on being a demonstrator for at least a while, maybe you could make it to lecturer, but you're not going to be a leader of the department. I think word was out when I was there that I was not that happy. And so, the then chair of the Yale anthropology department got in touch with me to see would I be interested in applying. So I did apply. And I know that later on they had done a search and I was one of four or five candidates that they considered for the position. But I got offered the position. And once I had that, I went back. I was back in Cambridge when I got offered the position, I simply decided, I think I'd rather go to Yale. More potential for kinds of things I was interested in.

Bernard Wood (00:40:24):

But this meant, although you had visited the US, you were now being offered a job in the US.

David Pilbeam (00:40:32):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:40:33):

And so, were you sufficiently comfortable that you could live your life in the US at that time?

David Pilbeam (00:40:40):

Again, stop me and Alexis, you should stop us if I'm going to... The first six months I was at Yale, I hated it. I got more comfortable as time went by. And when I left and went back to Cambridge, I was surprised, because I was quite eager going back to Cambridge, because I'd come to really enjoy it as an undergraduate. When I got back there, I was surprised I didn't like it. And one of the reasons I didn't like it is because I wanted to start doing things. I wanted to get 80 watt light bulbs in the lab rather than 40 watt light bulbs, dangerous things like that.

Bernard Wood (00:41:30):

Oh, okay.

David Pilbeam (00:41:30):

It started to rub people up the wrong way, because-

Bernard Wood (00:41:35):

So, the word radical was... Right, okay.

David Pilbeam (00:41:40):

These annoying American ways, that if there's a better way to do something, why don't you go and do it?

Bernard Wood (00:41:47):

Right, okay. So this is now 1968?

David Pilbeam (00:41:54):

1968, yes. I went back to Yale 1968.

Bernard Wood (00:41:59):

Okay. And you were an assistant lecturer?

David Pilbeam (00:42:03):

Assistant professor of-

Bernard Wood (00:42:05):

I'm sorry, assistant professor.

David Pilbeam (00:42:06):

... anthropology, yes.

Bernard Wood (00:42:07):

Yes. Okay. And who were your colleagues?

David Pilbeam (00:42:12):

Well, I spent most of my time in the geology department talking to Elwyn, and a really nice colleague of his, another vertebrate paleontologist named John Ostrom, who studied dinosaurs. [inaudible 00:42:28]-

Bernard Wood (00:42:28):

Yes, yes, okay.

David Pilbeam (00:42:29):

And had the office next door to Elwyn. And I was very fond of John and liked him a lot, and learned a lot. At Yale, BJ had left and the decision had been made that maybe they would have one physical anthropologist, but they didn't want more than one.

Bernard Wood (00:42:50):

Wow, okay.

David Pilbeam (00:42:53):

So I was hired, and then I started to lobby for another physical anthropologist. And I learned later that mostly the social anthropologists agreed that they would only agree to a second physical anthropologist if I was tenured. Now, in those days, if you breathed and could write your name, you probably will get tenure. So I went back in '68, and in 1970 I was considered for tenure. Now at Yale, there was a tenured associate professor rank and there still is. And I think to the surprise of many people and the irritation of the social anthropologists, I got tenure. And so, it turned out that the then chair of the department, an archeologist, had done a deal with the provost at Yale, that if I got tenure-

Bernard Wood (00:44:01):

They could have a-

David Pilbeam (00:44:02):

... anthropology would get another position.

Bernard Wood (00:44:05):

And who was that, or had you... Who took out that?

David Pilbeam (00:44:12):

Well, the first person that we got was a geneticist, Henry Harpending. And Henry was married to a social anthropologist, and I think they had an agreement that they would end up in the same place. And it turned out there was no position for her at Yale. So he left. And by that time I was convinced that the next subject we needed was behavior, ecology, primate behavior and ecology. Alison Richard that I'd mentioned, had been an undergraduate of mine. She ended up actually in John Napier's stable. PhD, she did a PhD on Malagasy lemurs. I picked up the phone and said, "Would you be interested in the job here?"

(00:45:17):

And she said, "Well, I don't know. Where's that? Where's New Haven?"

(00:45:21):

I said, "Well, why don't you come over and check it out?" So she came over and gave a talk, and everybody loved her of course. And that's how she ended up at Yale.

Bernard Wood (00:45:31):

Okay. Okay. What I want to do is just sort of go through your employment career, and then we will revisit research and fieldwork. So when did you leave Yale for Harvard and why?

David Pilbeam (00:45:53):

Okay. I went up through the ranks at Yale, and at some stage I got a joint appointment in geology and geophysics, which was, I enjoyed colleagues there more than I enjoyed them in anthropology. And it wasn't entirely out of the blue, but I got an offer from Harvard for professorship. Because again, the tenured system works quite mysteriously. And I had received hints, but it was out of the blue. That would be, I got this offer in 1978. So I went up to Harvard, met people and had a delightful meeting with the then dean of the faculty, a man named Henry Rosovsky. You have a book from his book.

Bernard Wood (00:46:51):

Absolutely.

David Pilbeam (00:46:54):

And got offered the job, and I thought it was a very generous offer. And I went back to Yale and I think I was a bit nervous about taking yet another step. I felt that I'd been quite impulsive over the last 20 years or so. So I said no. And not very long after that, I remember walking, I would often be in the Peabody Museum, which was just across the street from where my lab was. I remember walking down the steps of the Peabody and I asked myself, "Do you want to be walking down these steps for the next 40 years?" And the answer came back no. So I wrote a groveling letter to Harvard saying, "Is it too late?"

(00:47:48):

And they said, "No, it's not too late." And then I finalized the job, and I could have had it in 1979, but in 1979, I went down to Nairobi for a year.

Bernard Wood (00:48:06):

And that's where you and I-

David Pilbeam (00:48:09):

Became good friends, yeah.

Bernard Wood (00:48:10):

Yeah. Okay.

David Pilbeam (00:48:13):

So that slowed things down, but I finally moved to Harvard in 1981.

Bernard Wood (00:48:19):

And so, what were you leaving at Yale? Who were your junior colleagues? Did you have research fellows, PhD students and so on?

David Pilbeam (00:48:35):

Alison Richard was there.

Bernard Wood (00:48:37):

Yes.

David Pilbeam (00:48:39):

[deleted] John Rhodes, who studied human genetics. And PhD students, Glenn Conroy was one of them.

Bernard Wood (00:48:51):

Was he your first PhD student?

David Pilbeam (00:48:53):

No, that was a man named Michael Gibbons. Glenn was one of the early PhD students, yes. And had several others. I enjoyed Yale immensely. For me, it's the best liberal arts college you can find anywhere, because it's a university that has many faculties. It has a medical school, a law school, and so forth. But Yale College was at that stage clearly the center of the enterprise, very different from Harvard College when I first went to Harvard. So faculty were very dedicated undergraduate teachers, and they took pride in that and they enjoyed it. And it was a pleasure and I enjoyed most of my colleagues there. Certainly those in geology and those I met in other departments.

Bernard Wood (00:49:56):

And so, what was the attraction of Harvard? I mean, obviously what you're telling me is that, was it at that time, although Yale and Harvard to my mind are somewhere in the stratosphere in terms of academic institutions, you are really telling me that Yale had its nose ahead at that time. So what was the attraction of going to Harvard?

David Pilbeam (00:50:26):

Well, this may sound odd, and it probably needs to be, as people annoyingly say these days, unpacked. If I was going to go anywhere, the only place I would consider going to from Yale was Harvard.

Bernard Wood (00:50:42):

Yeah, I can understand.

David Pilbeam (00:50:43):

Really snobby and snooty, and all that sort of thing, but that's the way I felt. And I also thought that there would be probably as much or different kinds of opportunities at Harvard than at Yale, and that I might be able to build a different kind of department. The person I was joining as we would be the only tenured professors in what was then biological anthropology, was Irv DeVore. He was a very interesting and attractive character. He was an entrepreneur and I thought that if anybody was going to be able to build a department, it would be Irv.

Bernard Wood (00:51:38):

Okay. And where had he come from?

David Pilbeam (00:51:41):

Irv had been a graduate student at the University of Chicago as a social anthropologist, and he'd been influenced by Sherry Washburn, who was at that time at Chicago. Sherry said, "You are a social anthropologist and you seem a bit bored with social anthropology. Why don't you go and study the social life of baboons [inaudible 00:52:02]?" Sherry thought very much that it was important to study non-human primates.

Bernard Wood (00:52:11):

Right, right. So you were there with Irv DeVore, this is now 1981. And then, how did you manage to build the department? How did you manage to attract the people that you attracted?

David Pilbeam (00:52:28):

Well, let's see. We first of all focused on behavioral ecology, and we hired a wonderful and underestimated scholar named Mark Leighton, who worked on among other things oranges, but he was mostly a tropical forest ecologist, interested in plants and the animals that consume them, and how they did it. So we hired him. It was clear given the ferocious competitive nature of getting tenure at Harvard, that he wasn't doing the sort of things splashily enough to make it. Richard Wrangham had been a visiting lecturer before I moved to Harvard, because Irv had met him, I think in Kenya.

(00:53:36):

And we were very fortunate in being able to attract Richard away from Michigan, where he was already in tenure position. We also had a Harvard graduate student as a lecturer, a man named Peter Ellison [inaudible 00:53:59], who had a stellar career as a human biologist. He did fantastic work and wrote some amazing papers, and got tenure, and he ended up in the National Academy. So there was Richard, and then Peter, who was next?

The next person to get tenure was Professor Ruvolo in genetics. And then, I mean, I should have written this out in note form, but that's the start. So that what I thought was a pretty stellar group.

Bernard Wood (00:54:46):

I think you did. And so, can you remind me how Glynn came to be at Harvard? Glenn Isaac, who we talked about earlier, who was working at Olorgesailie.

David Pilbeam (00:55:01):

Glynn, I say I'd met him when he came to do his second BA at Peterhouse, and we had stayed in touch. We ended up at the same conferences. At Harvard the Paleolithic archeologist deleted had been Hal Movius, who was long retired, same cohort as Bill Howells. And we'd had a series of paleolithic archeologists that had not made it to tenure. I was very, very keen on pushing Glynn, and I know what anguish it caused him to leave Berkeley and Desmond Clark, and others there. But we got him and he came in, I think it would be 1983, deleted soon after I got there. deleted

Bernard Wood (00:56:10):

Right, right. Okay. Well, it's not surprising, but, okay. And when did you get the chair that you retired from, the named chair, or was that the one you always had at Harvard?

David Pilbeam (00:56:31):

No, it wasn't one I'd always had, I got it in probably sometime in the deleted early 1990s, deleted something like that.

Bernard Wood (00:56:50):

And that was money that was given in response to the success that you were obviously making of the department.

David Pilbeam (00:57:01):

I guess. The then dean was a man named Michael Spence, who was an economist, who eventually got a Nobel, what's termed the Nobel Prize in economics. And he was younger than me and we got on very, very well. And I think because he liked me, thought it would be nice for me to have a chair. I said to him, I said, "Small stool would've been more than good," but I got a chair.

Bernard Wood (00:57:34):

And so, you were also the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, is that right?

David Pilbeam (00:57:44):

Very briefly, yes. What happened in, I was there in... '87, Mike Spence asked me to become Dean of Undergraduate education, which I was for five years, until '92...

David Pilbeam (00:58:03):

... was for five years, until '92. And in 1990, I also became director of the Peabody Museum, which I was for six years. One of the questions that I'm going to answer is, "What did I most not like or dislike?"

Bernard Wood (00:58:24):

Okay-

David Pilbeam (00:58:24):

[inaudible 00:58:25]-

Bernard Wood (00:58:26):

Why don't we answer that now?

David Pilbeam (00:58:28):

[inaudible 00:58:28] administration hated it. So there was a new dean in '91, named Jeremy Knowles. Very distinguished organic chemist, and was sort of Nobel Prize material. He became dean, and I thought... I stayed on for a year, and I was tired of being undergraduate education dean, and director of the Peabody. Just tired, so I stepped down as dean of undergraduate education. And then, so that was '91, and then 1996, my successor as dean of undergraduate education, his three-year term was not renewed, and the person that Jeremy wanted was going to be on leave for a year. So I was asked by Jeremy if I'd come back for one year as dean of undergraduate education, which was fine by me, because it also gave me a plausible reason to stop being director.

Bernard Wood (00:59:55):

Being the director of the... Right, okay.

David Pilbeam (00:59:58):

Because what it meant, if I can briefly mention the year I became, the day I became director of the Peabody, so July 1st, 1990 was the day that the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act came into effect. And anybody who was director of a museum that had an anthropological specimens was in for a lifetime of nightmare.

Bernard Wood (01:00:23):

A rough ride, okay.

David Pilbeam (01:00:25):

So I was more than happy in 1996 to say, "Forget it." So I stepped down, and I was dean of undergraduate education for a year, and then Jeremy asked me to stay on as what Maryellen (Ruvolo) referred to as stealth dean. If departments looked as though they were struggling, I would be parachuted in quietly and diplomatically to help. [inaudible 01:00:53]-

Bernard Wood (01:00:54):

So you were obviously, you were the dean of undergraduate education. You were clearly asked to carry on, not like the person who for whom they said, "Thanks, but no thanks." You became the stealth dean. What is it about you that makes you successful at doing these things? Are you good at time management, or are you just good at working out what the hell is important and just ignoring everything else?

David Pilbeam (01:01:29):

The guy who was Dean of the Graduate School when I was dean of undergraduate education was a really delightful, originally Irishman named Brendan Maher. And at one stage, he said to me, "You know, you make a good dean because you're down to Earth." And quite a bit later, another year later, when I was another kind of dean, someone who sat in my weekly deans' meeting afterwards said to me, "I want to be like you. I want to see how you deal with people, you listen to people, you ask people's opinions. You're able to give the impression that you've taken the opinion seriously, and you might even act on it, but you don't, but you do it in a way that nobody's going to be particularly offended," so I took that as a compliment.

Bernard Wood (01:02:30):

Well, you should, you know. And where do you think that came from? I mean, was it nature or nurture?

David Pilbeam (01:02:41):

Both, as with almost everything. But I think both of my parents were very down to Earth people. They were inclined to deletion see the best in people, other than the other way around. So I think I had absorbed that without being in any way religious. I think if my mother had been religious, she'd have been a Quaker. If she were a Quaker, it would've been described as the Inner Light, but she had about her a kind of kind decency... Yes, anyway, and my father was a communist, and he really believed in all that. No, I'm serious. He was a [inaudible 01:03:30]-

Bernard Wood (01:03:30):

No, no, no, sure.

David Pilbeam (01:03:31):

[inaudible 01:03:32].

Bernard Wood (01:03:33):

So can I just ask you a personal question? When each of them died, where were you in this impressive career? I mean, were they ever aware? Did they sort of come and see you at Yale and Harvard?

David Pilbeam (01:03:55):

They would come and visit, they visited at Yale. They visited after I was at Harvard, and Harvard's the only time I invited them to come to a lecture, and they remembered it, because I don't know how you felt about lectures, but it really annoys me to see students sitting there reading a newspaper or obviously doing the equivalent of checking their laptops. So I was teaching a big introductory course, about 300, something that kids, and I started lecturing. I looked up, and I could see someone reading a copy of The Harvard Crimson. So I ran up the gangplank, I walked across the row, and I said to him, "Get out."

(01:04:45):

So he got out, and I went back, went on with my lecture, and I didn't say a word. Nobody said a word. Much, much later, a colleague of mine said, "You know, I heard that once you'd thrown an undergraduate out of your lecture." And I said, "Oh. Oh, yeah, I guess I did, yeah, but it's the only time." But there's certain things that are kind of trigger points.

Bernard Wood (01:05:16):

Right, right. Okay, okay.

David Pilbeam (01:05:19):

Sorry, I'm going on too much.

Bernard Wood (01:05:21):

No, no, no, no. So let's sort of go back to the fieldwork. And I mean, one of the reasons I'm glad that we're having this conversation now is because it's a few months after the publication of an extremely impressive volume about your work in the Siwaliks.

David Pilbeam (01:05:44):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:05:45):

I know that you did fieldwork in Kenya, at Baringo. So how did these projects emerge? And maybe we can focus on the Siwalik project, I'd like you to say just a little bit about Baringo. And of course, you went to Cameroon with Michel Brunet. So while you were doing all these things at Yale and Harvard, you were also managing to do a substantial amount of

work in the field, or at least you were managing to organize a substantial amount of work in the field.

David Pilbeam (01:06:29):

I was fortunate in being able to persuade people to do things, yes.

Bernard Wood (01:06:33):

Right.

David Pilbeam (01:06:35):

And I could promise them a bit of the action. So specifically Pakistan and the Siwaliks, because of Ramapithecus, Elwyn was very keen to get back to where G.E. Lewis had found the original specimen of Ramapithecus, which a place called Haritalyangar in Northern India. So he wrote to the Geological Survey of Pakistan, he wrote to the Geological Survey of India, he wrote to the University of Chandigarh to see if it was possible to arrange a field project. And he never heard back from Pakistan. He heard back from the University of Chandigarh, and arranged a field project, and he did two years of field work. And the two years were while I was in Cambridge.

(01:07:38):

When I went back to Yale in '68, and that was the second of his field seasons in India, with Haritalyangar, and things had not gone very well collaboratively. So I would frequently be in Elwyn's lab, just because there were nice people to talk to there. And it was in the summer of 1973, and a man named Grant Meyer, who was Elwyn's lab manager and field manager, came into the lab waving a letter. And he said essentially, "Well, we finally heard back from Pakistan, you've been approved." So I think Elwyn, by that time, had had enough of the Indian subcontinent and wanted to go back to work in Egypt anyway. So he came out of his office and looked at me and said, "Are you interested?"

(01:08:50):

And I said, "Oh, yeah, why not?" So that's the short version, and it became possible to get funding, which turned out to be much easier than it is now. Deletion I had an NSF grant for work in the Miocene of Kenya, and it didn't take much to persuade the program manager that it would work equally well in the Miocene of Pakistan. And there was also a source of money called PL 480. Public Law 480 was a law, thanks to Senator Hubert Horatio Humphrey and President Dwight David Eisenhower, which was a law signed so that American food aid given to certain countries could be repaid in the local currency, and which could then be used for certain specified purposes, one of which was cultural, so it covered paleontology. And the administrator for funds in Pakistan, Deletion was based in the Smithsonian. And so we were able to get a PL 480 money, which covered transportation. It covered all of the stipends for geological survey of Pakistan personnel, vehicles, and so forth. It really enabled us to do field work.

Bernard Wood (01:10:40):

And so the first time year you went to Pakistan was 1973, or-

David Pilbeam (01:10:45):

[inaudible 01:10:45] 1973, yeah.

Bernard Wood (01:10:52):

I mean, my understanding is that that project is sort of winding up or has wound up?

David Pilbeam (01:10:59):

The field work continued almost every year, not every year, but almost every year. The last field season was 2001.

Bernard Wood (01:11:09):

So that's 1973 to 2001. Math is never my strong point, but that's nearly three decades.

David Pilbeam (01:11:18):

Yes, and then the following two decades were spent... Obviously, we had been publishing, because we were also getting NSF grants, and the only way you can get an NSF grant, as you know, is to publish on what was your last previous hypothesis. We were fortunate then to be able to fund, not just from PL 480 money, but Harvard had an endowed fund. It's a restricted fund. The Harvard endowment is made up of about 14,000 different funds, most of which are restricted, meaning you can only spend it for certain purposes. And the ASPR, American School of Prehistoric Research, covered what we do, and it enabled me to have a lab and to have a lab group that was salaried in two cases, partial salaries in one case, full salary, without having to get a constant stream of NSF grants.

Bernard Wood (01:12:33):

So when did John Barry come into your life, and could you just explain to people what his role was?

David Pilbeam (01:12:42):

John Barry has become what I refer to as the vertebral column of the Siwalik project. He's one of the most competent mammalian paleontologists I know. He knows just about every mammalian group that we dealt with. And also, he's worked in Kenya as well, so he's up to speed on those. He knows it almost as well as the experts in those groups know it. He also, from the beginning, kept not just one database, but multiple databases.

(01:13:22):

So you'll be familiar with this sort of thing, Bernard, and you probably Alexis, too. So there are databases that can be merged in such a way, if you wanted to say, "This particular specimen with its number, what's its locality, what's its isotopes, if it's been isotoped? What

do we know about its mesowear, microwear? What do we know about the age of that locality? And those are all in separate databases that can be merged if given the right question. So John built that, and-

Bernard Wood (01:14:04):

I mean, these days, that sort of thing is more common-

David Pilbeam (01:14:10):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:14:12):

... but was the vision that that was necessary, was that your vision or his vision?

David Pilbeam (01:14:18):

It was his, along with Kay Behrensmeyer's, because Anna K. Behrensmeyer did her second postdoc with me while I was at Yale, and she joined the field project in I think our third field season. And she and John worked very closely together, and they were very both deeply committed to documenting. deletion And of course, documenting now means many different things, but it meant taking Polaroids and marking little crosses on... You know, that sort of thing.

Bernard Wood (01:15:08):

Yeah.

David Pilbeam (01:15:08):

So I had met John when I was at Yale, first back at Yale, and he was a beginning graduate student. He was going to be a graduate student with Elwyn, but he got drafted. So he ended up two years, actually, he was in Vietnam, and then he came back, and he was sitting in the lab when Grant Meyer came in with the GSP letter. And he was there when I got back from that first field season, so the end of 1973, having already made a list of what was needed, including more people who wanted to do fieldwork. And I mentioned this to John, and John said, "I'm in." So he was in the second field season, along with Catherine Badgley, who's one of the co-editors of the book.

Bernard Wood (01:16:14):

And the third co-editor, what was her involvement?

David Pilbeam (01:16:19):

Michèle Morgan, she became my graduate student at Harvard. She was an undergraduate at Princeton, and she took a year to be a visitor at Harvard. Deletion She took my class, and then she applied to be a graduate student. deletion

Bernard Wood (01:16:42):

[inaudible 01:16:38]. I mean, it's always sort of struck me, you know, this interview is about you and not me, but it's always sort struck me that the science that we uncover is largely determined by the time span of the support that you have. So if you have a three-year grant-

David Pilbeam (01:17:01):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:17:02):

... you're going to find out things that can be sort of uncovered in three years, but you're not going to find out things that it takes a decade to discover.

David Pilbeam (01:17:12):

We were extraordinarily fortunate.

Bernard Wood (01:17:14):

And so, well, I don't think you were extraordinarily fortunate, I think fortune favors the prepared mind and all that. But it was fortunate that you had this sustained period where, although you published, the continuation of support wasn't determined by having some short-term, flashy papers.

David Pilbeam (01:17:47):

Exactly.

Bernard Wood (01:17:48):

That seemed to me, from the outside, to make all the difference to this enterprise. Am I getting warm?

David Pilbeam (01:17:56):

No, you are absolutely red hot. I'm very proud of the book.

Bernard Wood (01:18:04):

You should be.

David Pilbeam (01:18:09):

Having said that, I'm proud of the book, and I'm proud of the people I met and learned from in the process of doing the fieldwork. And it didn't take us two decades, but it took a substantial part of the two decades to bring the book to genesis, because it involved lots of discussion, particularly among the lab group, which would be John Barry, Larry Flynn, Michèle Morgan, but also very often with Catherine Badgley and with Kay Behrensmeyer.

And we would sit around, we'd have two- or three-day meetings where we would just mull over exactly what we're going to do.

(01:18:57):

We would prepare outlines in the lab. We have enormous amounts of unpublished analyses still, but we needed the time to digest everything. Also, it's not immediately the case that the specialists that you've got to work on the birds, the mollusks, the elephants, pigs, the horses all produce deletion in time for you to then sit down and mull it. They take time, too. And so until we had really everything in hand, it was impossible to really finalize the... I'm thinking about what I would call the synthetic chapters at the end of the book.

Bernard Wood (01:19:47):

Right, right. Okay, I'm looking at the clock, and this sort of conversation could carry on for a long time, but I want just to redirect it towards two people, one is Andrew Hill.

David Pilbeam (01:20:05):

Yeah. Oh, yes, yes.

Bernard Wood (01:20:06):

Yes. The other is Elwyn Simons, and let's start with Elwyn Simons. Could you give me five words that you would associate with Elwyn Simons? Well, up to five.

David Pilbeam (01:20:24):

Somewhere between focused and obsessive. He thought it was a sin to not be writing a paper at any time. [inaudible 01:20:35].

Bernard Wood (01:20:34):

I mean, the impression I got was that he could write papers with both hands.

David Pilbeam (01:20:44):

I'm not sure that he did, but I was certainly in his office when he was writing several different papers at the same time, literally at the same time. But they were on his desk, and he'd go from one to the other. Yes, so deeply focused and dedicated would be a good description for him. And to me, generous to a fault. I think the only time we ever came close to falling out was when I said that I didn't think that *Ramapithecus* was a hominin, and that was tough for him. But we stayed very close delete, even after he moved to Duke.

Bernard Wood (01:21:35):

Right, right.

David Pilbeam (01:21:36):

Andrew, okay, for, again, complicated reasons, to my astonishment, I was invited to give the plenary address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science at Leeds in 1966. At the end of my talk, Andrew had been in the audience. Andrew was then an undergraduate at I think Reading. He came up to me and he said he's very interested in human evolution. What would my advice be for him? And I said, "Don't study human fossils. Why don't you do something geological and contextual?" The next time I met him, I was with Alan Walker at a place called Bukwa in Uganda, again on a Miocene site. Excuse me. This is, again, probably 1967, and who would show up Andrew. Andrew was then, he'd been I think in John Napier's group.

Bernard Wood (01:22:59):

Then, he was part of Basil King's group, or was he in never part of that?

David Pilbeam (01:23:04):

No, I think it was Bill Bishop who was in Basil King's... I think Andrew ended up in John's group, and how he focused on taphonomy, I don't know. But when I met him at Bukwa, he was off to dig out hyena dens to see what hyenas did to bones. He was, in a sense, following on what Glynn had been doing 5, 10 years earlier. So we got to know each other then. He got his PhD, but when and where? But he ended up at the museum in Nairobi. deletion So Richard Leakey had hired him, so he was in the museum. So in 1979, when I went down to Nairobi, I arrived there the day before Richard left for his kidney transplant. I was there as Ogot's scientific advisor. And by six months later, I was the acting director of that institute and Andrew was the acting executive director of the institute, because both the director and the executive director had stepped down. Deletion Andrew deletion had some connection with Bill Bishop, who'd done some work in Baringo, and his deletion That's when we began to cook up the idea of some work in Baringo. But because by that time, Andrew had been working in the Siwaliks, he joined the Siwaliks probably in '75 or '76, the Pakistan product. So we came up with the idea of, "Why don't we do a parallel Baringo and Pothohar Plateau project?"

Bernard Wood (01:25:57):

So these were both places with long sequences-

David Pilbeam (01:26:02):

Yeah, that's right. [inaudible 01:26:03]-

Bernard Wood (01:26:02):

... that were relatively well understood, geologically?

David Pilbeam (01:26:06):

And well dated. Both had good paleomag. So you could actually, if you interpreted the paleomag correctly, you could just line them up side by side. So you could say, "This locality in Baringo is the same age as this locality in Pakistan."

Bernard Wood (01:26:24):

Yeah, okay. And basically, Andrew was the Baringo person, or became the Baringo person, and-

David Pilbeam (01:26:37):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:26:37):

Right, right.

David Pilbeam (01:26:39):

Yeah.

Bernard Wood (01:26:40):

And what always astonished me about Andrew was that he seemed to go from sort of straight from being a post-doc and somebody who was clearly enjoying life, and then just became a full professor somewhere. But I'm sure that-

Bernard Wood (01:27:03):

... and then just became a full professor somewhere. But I'm sure that wasn't true, but it seemed to be.

David Pilbeam (01:27:07):

It's pretty close. After I had gone to Harvard, 1981, fairly soon after that, Andrew was looking for something. I think he wanted to leave Kenya, and I had enough money to get him as a postdoc. Andrew was a postdoc of mine, as Kay had been a few years earlier at Yale. So Andrew was postdoc and started looking for jobs. Alison Richard was by then chair of the physical anthropology at Yale, and after that she was chair of anthropology department, deletion Her first physical anthropology hire was Rick Potts. Rick left to go to the Smithsonian, so I urged Andrew to apply for the job. I contacted Yale, including Alison, saying, "This guy's perfect for you." deletion. They developed a very good close working relationship. He went to Yale as delete an assistant professor, quickly promoted to untenured associate professor. When his tenure review came up, he was to be tenured as an associate professor. They looked at the dossier and said, "This is ridiculous. He should be full professor." That's how that happened.

Bernard Wood (01:28:58):

Okay. Let's get back to the rather more prosaic questions. My assumption is that the answer to the question, "If only one of your papers or books could be preserved for posterity, what would it be?" What would the answer to that be?

David Pilbeam (01:29:24):

Well, the book, I think, would be the Siwalik book.

Bernard Wood (01:29:26):

Yeah.

David Pilbeam (01:29:34):

Do you want the title?

Bernard Wood (01:29:36):

Yes. Well, for the record, but I think we will have a link when this goes up on the website. But yeah.

David Pilbeam (01:29:46):

It's At the Foot of the Himalayas: Paleontology and Ecosystem Dynamics of the Siwalik Record.

Bernard Wood (01:29:53):

Okay. And just before we go to the short questions, my impression is that you were a regular attendee at the Wenner-Gren conferences at-

David Pilbeam (01:30:09):

... Burg Wartenstein? Yeah. I was at three of them, yes.

Bernard Wood (01:30:12):

What sort of role did they play in your academic life? And what sort of influence do you think they had?

David Pilbeam (01:30:27):

That's the sort of question that would require... I wish you'd asked me that yesterday so that I could think about it. But one of the things it did was to broaden my what are now called networks.

Bernard Wood (01:30:44):

Right.

David Pilbeam (01:30:44):

But I got to meet a lot of very interesting people. Enjoyed talking to people that didn't do exactly what I did, which is most people. One of the conferences I didn't particularly enjoy. Two of them, I enjoyed them immensely. They were great fun. I learned a lot. How that learning got carried over, I need to think more about it.

Bernard Wood (01:31:15):

Yeah, sure. But it's always sort of struck me, I mean, some of the volumes from those conferences were certainly among the most influential things I ever came across.

David Pilbeam (01:31:30):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:31:32):

And it was a combination of the broadness of the scope and the quality of the people who contributed.

David Pilbeam (01:31:40):

Yes, I agree. Yeah.

Bernard Wood (01:31:42):

You didn't spend a lot of time having to sift through the chapters and work out which were the ones that were worth reading.

David Pilbeam (01:31:50):

Exactly. Before-

Bernard Wood (01:31:53):

Yeah, go on.

David Pilbeam (01:31:56):

That's my book. Could I mention the paper that I'm most proud of?

Bernard Wood (01:32:01):

Yes.

David Pilbeam (01:32:01):

It's the one I wrote in the Journal of Experimental Zoology in 2004. So it's the axial skeleton and the development and variation and evolution. And what I'm proud about it is that I was so annoyed at reading, "Look, it's impossible for hominins with long lumbar regions to

evolve from apes that have short lumbar regions." And I had absorbed enough from my biology teacher, Alan Graham at Latymer, let alone my comparative embryology at Cambridge, to realize that it's not meristic, it's homeotic. I decided I would collect as much data I could about individual chimps, gorillas, bonobos, orangs, and humans, and just figure out, how did the patterning of their axial skeletons vary within a species?

Bernard Wood (01:33:08):

Right.

David Pilbeam (01:33:08):

Because it's variation within a species that lets-

Bernard Wood (01:33:13):

It is the raw material for natural selection

David Pilbeam (01:33:15):

[inaudible 01:33:16] to dig its teeth into. Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:33:18):

Sure.

David Pilbeam (01:33:18):

So that-

Bernard Wood (01:33:21):

Okay. Well, that's interesting. I mean, I'm not surprised because my experience with you is that there's probably nothing that I talk about that you haven't read three times more than I have.

David Pilbeam (01:33:37):

Not true.

Bernard Wood (01:33:39):

And it reminds me that Le Gros Clark's response to the australopithecines was to go off and look at nearly 300 gorillas and chimpanzees. And Le Gros Clark was a busy guy, but nonetheless, he understood that you needed to understand intra-specific variation before you could say anything about the existence of taxa.

David Pilbeam (01:34:13):

And you have lived that mantra as well.

Bernard Wood (01:34:16):

Oh, well, that's kind of you. So is there a paper written by somebody else that you wish that you had written?

David Pilbeam (01:34:27):

Yes, "The Process of Bipedalization in Hominids".

Bernard Wood (01:34:33):

Oh, okay. Okay. You and I both.

David Pilbeam (01:34:37):

Mike Rose, 1991. Everybody interested in human evolution should be forced or required to read it and write an essay about it.

Bernard Wood (01:34:52):

Okay. Okay. Well, my impression is that hardly anybody has read it and-

David Pilbeam (01:34:58):

Mine too.

Bernard Wood (01:34:59):

... they're all the poorer for it.

David Pilbeam (01:35:02):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:35:05):

So in terms of researchers of the past or the present, who do you admire? I mean, I certainly get the impression that you admire Elwyn Simons.

David Pilbeam (01:35:22):

He's not on my... This is the question, "Invite five researchers alive or dead to spend time with." He was number six on my... But he got bumped because two of them are married.

Bernard Wood (01:35:41):

Okay. So let's go through this list.

David Pilbeam (01:35:44):

Alfred Russel Wallace. Do you want me to say anything about them or just give you the names?

Bernard Wood (01:35:50):

No, well, I mean, I think Alfred Russel Wallace... Yes. Okay. Explain why.

David Pilbeam (01:35:56):

From a very humble background, extraordinary fieldwork.

Bernard Wood (01:36:00):

Right.

David Pilbeam (01:36:01):

Amazonia, Southeast Asia. What is his line? Invents biogeography.

Bernard Wood (01:36:12):

Yes.

David Pilbeam (01:36:14):

Reads Malthus and comes up with the idea of natural selection. Is very generous in agreeing to co-author, with Darwin, the first statement about natural selection. So that's why I would have him. I delete think he would be very interesting. I'd love to hear more about his Southeast Asia expeditions.

Raymond Dart. I'd be very much interested in exploring what he thinks his background, what was the background for his insights, because he had several really critical insights that other people had not had or hadn't written about. And I would be very curious to find out more about that.

Elizabeth Vrba. Several things. Her Turnover Pulse hypothesis, which is from 1980, something like that, where she's really discussing interesting aspects of macroevolution. Is natural selection involved in macroevolution or not? What are the abiotic determinants? What's the role of habitat in change in macroevolution? And then let's not forget a very important paper 1982 that she did with Steve Gould, which is the exaptation paper. The missing term in the terminology of adaptation. So that would be it.

(01:38:03):

And then the fourth and fifth would be Peter and Rosemary Grant, because of the growing recognition of the fundamental importance of long-term studies, certainly in the living world. So the Grants on finches, Jonathan Losos on lizards, David Resnick on guppies. Delete Richard Lensik, who's been studying 75,000 generations of E. coli. It's the longest long-term experiment ever done in terms of generation number. And then the recognition of how important long-term field work is for paleo, has been for paleontology. Look at Koobi Fora, the Turkana Basin, that's still going on, that's made possible by all kinds of funding arrangements. But again, arrangements where it was not necessary to produce a hypothesis-testing grant proposal every three years.

Bernard Wood (01:39:28):

Yes.

David Pilbeam (01:39:30):

So those would be my five.

Bernard Wood (01:39:32):

Okay. And you've already hinted that being the director of the Peabody Museum wasn't your favorite occupation. What runs through your career as a thread of something that you have enjoyed? Is it the people or is it the questions, or is it a combination of both of those?

David Pilbeam (01:40:05):

It's both. I really enjoyed some of deaning, not all of it, but some deletion. I certainly enjoyed, excuse me, field projects, particularly the Siwaliks. I got to meet an amazing crowd of brilliant, talented, driven people and learned far more from them than they ever learned from me. So that was a privilege. But I also had a chance to... There are a number of questions that always intrigued me, where I could go off and sit, actually, most recently, exactly where I'm sitting, not looking at you, but looking out, looking at my desk where I could write.

Bernard Wood (01:40:54):

Right. And if you hadn't had such a successful career in, let's call it human evolution-related primate evolution, what do you think you would've been good at or happy doing?

David Pilbeam (01:41:24):

I think being a historian, which is, as you and I have talked, is what I am.

Bernard Wood (01:41:36):

I was just saying, we are historians in that sense. I mean, it's-

David Pilbeam (01:41:42):

Different building blocks, but with... Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:41:44):

Yeah. Yeah. And so what is it about history? I mean, I know you read a great deal about Cromwell and that period, and I can imagine the influence of your father on your interest in Cromwell, but maybe I'm over-interpreting that. So what is it about-

David Pilbeam (01:42:16):

I have come to... I think I now draw distinctions between what I consider to be good history and not such good history. The head of, the master of Peterhouse when I went up in '59, was a man named Herbert Butterfield.

Bernard Wood (01:42:41):

Yes.

David Pilbeam (01:42:42):

Peterhouse has many distinguished historians. And he's responsible for the so-called Whig interpretation of history, criticism of the idea that you should view history really from the lens of the present as opposed to, you should view history and treat it as a kind of present, but try to understand it in its own terms. So I actually have two quotes here, and I think this applies to our work on paleoanthropology and human evolution. This is an example of what I would consider bad history. This is from a very distinguished African historian of Africa. Here's the quote. "For humankind, a need as universal as toolmaking is to tell the story of the past so as to portray an inevitable destiny."

Bernard Wood (01:44:03):

Wow.

David Pilbeam (01:44:04):

So that's not bad history, that's really bad history.

Bernard Wood (01:44:07):

That is.

David Pilbeam (01:44:09):

Here's another quote, from a Romanian philosopher, "That history just unfolds, independently of a specified direction or of a goal, no one is willing to admit." That's the good approach to history.

Bernard Wood (01:44:33):

Yes.

David Pilbeam (01:44:35):

So going back, I think that's the approach we should try to take to paleoanthropology. Homo sapiens was not inevitable.

Bernard Wood (01:44:44):

No.

David Pilbeam (01:44:44):

That's not what that whole business is about. In many ways it was an odd accident or a series of events that could easily not have happened.

Bernard Wood (01:44:55):

Yes. Or the direction of which might've been very different.

David Pilbeam (01:45:02):

Yeah. A number of things have happened-

Bernard Wood (01:45:05):

But extinction is the null hypothesis here.

David Pilbeam (01:45:12):

Yes, what's going to happen to us? But if things had been a bit dicier for the homo lineage, a paleontologist might've concluded that Paranthropus was the last surviving hominin.

Bernard Wood (01:45:26):

Yes, yes. And for some of us, I think that's a great shame. But there we are.

David Pilbeam (01:45:32):

Agreed.

Bernard Wood (01:45:35):

So I think we're running out of time.

David Pilbeam (01:45:41):

We've run out. Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:45:47):

Is there anything that you would like to talk about that is on the list of questions, or is there anything else that you would like to talk about before we wrap up?

David Pilbeam (01:46:00):

No, I would just suggest that, in future, you add this question. Over the course of your career, when and why did you change your mind?

Bernard Wood (01:46:12):

Okay. And how would you answer that question?

David Pilbeam (01:46:19):

Deletion But the two big changes that come to mind would be my approach deletion to the molecular as opposed to the paleontological. deletion Many people assume it changed since I married Maryellen (Ruvolo), but that's not the case. It changed at Yale because I became, not close friends, but I got to know a man named Charles Sibley very well. Sibley was interested-

Bernard Wood (01:46:55):

Sibley and Ahlquist.

David Pilbeam (01:46:56):

... used protein analysis and then DNA hybridization. And I had persuaded him to do hominoids. And it was his work that, although it was seen by some as problematic at first, but it turned out to be, he got it.

Bernard Wood (01:47:14):

He got it right.

David Pilbeam (01:47:15):

He got it right. And so that influenced me greatly. And I look back, a talk I gave at the American Anthropological Association, I gave it probably 1982. It has a figure that was based on, with Charles's permission, to use a phylogeny that I constructed based on the DNA hybridization. It shows human and chimp closest. So that was first thing. The second thing was, I changed my mind about Ramapithecus. And that was in two stages.

(01:47:54):

In the late 1980s, John Robinson visited Yale to look at the Ramapithecus material, and he upset Elwyn greatly by saying [deletion] pretty clearly, this isn't a hominin. And I stored that away. The second and third seasons in Pakistan, so that would be January 1965 and '66, we found specimens that were clearly Ramapithecus that didn't have any hominin features. And I began... If you look through what I was writing at that time, I was clearly beginning to waffle. And deletion a few years later, John Barry was the person who uncovered it, was the face of Sivapithecus. And on close examination it became clear that what we were calling Ramapithecus and what we were calling Sivapithecus-

Bernard Wood (01:49:22):

... were the same-

David Pilbeam (01:49:24):

... same genus and almost certainly the same species. And they were probably boys and girls of the same species. And whatever Sivapithecus was, it wasn't a hominin, it wasn't.

Bernard Wood (01:49:39):

Right.

David Pilbeam (01:49:42):

But that was a shift that took me, if you like, a decade. And in the introductory chapter to the Siwalik book, deletion a sort of background, I quoted Thomas Henry Huxley's definition of a tragedy as a beautiful theory slain by an ugly fact. And that's what happened. Once I had absorbed this, it didn't bother me at all, saying I've changed my mind. I knew of other people that don't feel as comfortable doing that sort of thing.

Bernard Wood (01:50:26):

Yes. I mean, one of the things about medical training, or at least my medical training, was that the people that influenced me said, "You are likely to make mistakes, but you need to own up and you need to not make them again. But nobody's going to bite your head off if you say that 'I was wrong' or 'I made a mistake.' They are going to bite your head off if you make the same mistake twice."

David Pilbeam (01:51:02):

Exactly. And mistake is-

Bernard Wood (01:51:06):

... a sort of misnomer, I think.

David Pilbeam (01:51:10):

... retrospectively correct. But I think what one should do, I think what I try to do is go through, why did I come to that conclusion? And go through the stage, I can't even imagine being the person that came to that conclusion. But this is... I tell you, before I wrap up, I have to say this. Lots of things have kind of generally teed me off. But what pissed me off over this time, two distinguished people told me that they thought my saying that I'd changed my mind on *Ramapithecus* was a good career move. And that really knocked me off.

Bernard Wood (01:52:07):

Yes. I mean, there are lots of people I think might be capable of making what you call "a good career move," but you are probably the least likely person to do that, certainly in my experience. And so that I think would tick me off, that they just don't understand what motivates you.

David Pilbeam (01:52:31):

Yes. If I say it ticked me off, then Alexis can splice out the pissed off and replace it with ticked off.

Bernard Wood (01:52:43):

No, I think the "pissed off" is fine. And people will have to look up waffling as well. So there are certain things... Maybe we need to have a link to the English-isms and what they mean in America. It's been a real pleasure, David.

David Pilbeam (01:53:08):

Mine too.

Bernard Wood (01:53:10):

And as I said at the beginning, you and I have known each other for a long time, and I have admired you for as long as I can remember. So it's been a pleasure, and I hope people appreciate how lucky they are to have listened to this. So, many thanks.

David Pilbeam (01:53:31):

Well, thank you. And everything you've said is reciprocated.

Bernard Wood (01:53:38):

We better stop before this gets-

David Pilbeam (01:53:42):

[inaudible 01:53:42] yes.

Bernard Wood (01:53:42):

Okay.

David Pilbeam (01:53:42):

Alexis [inaudible 01:53:46]

Bernard Wood (01:53:45):

Okay. Bye-bye.