

Professor Gordon Hillman

Pioneering archaeobotanist who inspired many to forage for food

Gordon Hillman's research into ancient farming and food was above all based on a thorough first-hand knowledge of edible plants. Dinner for his family was usually gathered from the wild: perhaps nettle soup, followed by acorn burger and pollen pancakes. Ants were a favourite snack, if rather acidic.

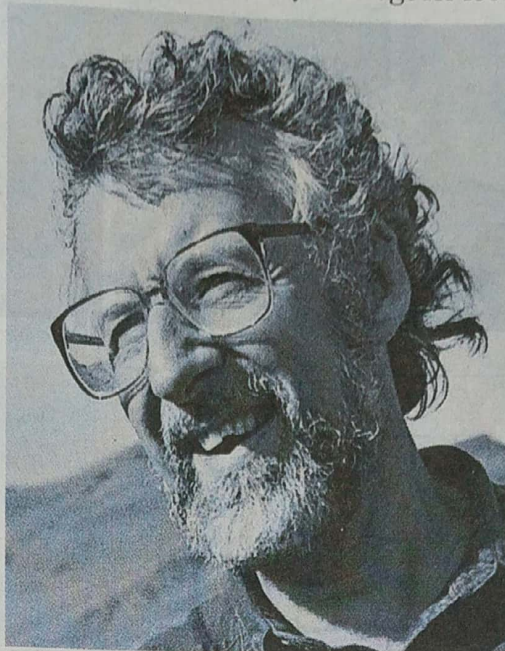
His formative experiences came through fieldwork in Syria and Turkey in the 1970s. Many dams were being built, leading to the urgent need for archaeological digs before sites were flooded. In 1970 he joined the British excavations at Asvan, a village on a tributary of the Euphrates in eastern Turkey. Here David French, the archaeologist, assembled a remarkable team, including many from other specialisms such as anthropology and geography. Heavily criticised by establishment archaeologists at the time, this approach is now standard practice. Hillman soon realised that the traditional farming system at Asvan, with few machines, was an opportunity to study prehistoric farming in real life.

Over four seasons Hillman, known as "Gordon bey", was able to perfect his Turkish and tap the expertise of local farmers, who could draw on millennia of experience of surviving in a harsh environment. Crucially, he observed how practices such as threshing and winnowing affected the composition of grain samples. This insight is now central to the way that archaeological seed samples are interpreted, as the result of human activity rather than as random assemblages. Hillman also carried out botanical surveys at a time when travel in the region was relatively safe, if more arduous than it is now.

Hillman's trips involved long days negotiating poor roads in a Land Rover, or Volkswagen camper van, and climbing rocky slopes to record traces of vegetation that had survived grazing. By 1971 he was becoming well-known in archaeological circles as a pioneer archaeobotanist. He was approached to join Andrew Moore's excavations at Abu Hureyra in Syria, a prehistoric site due to be flooded in the Euphrates valley. Two seasons of work uncovered four metres of occupation spanning one of the great transitions in human history, from foraging to farming, about 11,000 years ago. The study of the plant remains was to take another 25 years, with a final report published in 2000.

Hillman's strong empathy with plants and farmers had its roots in his childhood. Gordon Charles Hillman was born in Hailsham, East Sussex, the second of three children of Albert Hillman and his wife, Joyce, in 1943. Albert was a talented landscape gardener, owning a well-established nursery.

Gordon went to Bexhill Grammar School and then spent a year as a field assistant at Alston Moor nature reserve in Cumbria. In 1960 he joined the staff of the European herbarium at the Natural History Museum, where he acquired the broad knowledge of wild plants that was essential for making ecological studies in the Middle East.



Gordon Hillman, in about 2000, was sent exotic plants remains

While there were no modern guides to the plants, Hillman had a near photographic memory for plants, seeds and books, as well as being fluent in four languages.

He left the museum in 1965 to study agricultural botany at the University of Reading, where he came under the influence of Professor Hugh Bunting. Hillman later took up a postgraduate studentship in Mainz, West Germany, where he studied archaeobotany for a year before leaving for Turkey.

In 1975 Hillman returned to England, taking up a post at Cardiff University and working part-time on plant remains from Welsh excavations. This showed that the insights gained from his work in the Middle East could

institute. All were treated as his peers, which could be an alarming experience for a new student, but many of them are now in senior positions, taking forward his ideas.

Hillman lived and died in the house in which he was born, in Hailsham. He had married Wendy MacInnes in 1974, but the marriage was dissolved. He had a daughter, Thilaka, who is an environmental artist.

His commute to London was often late and there were invariably queues of students and eminent visitors eager to discuss seeds or new excavations. All would be seen, but it was a stressful lifestyle, with the added pressures of publication.

In 1997 Hillman noticed a tremor in his hand while writing on a blackboard. Correctly suspecting Parkinson's disease, he took early retirement. Immediately appointed a visiting professor by UCL, there began a productive 20 years of research into what hunter-gatherers may have eaten 6,000 years ago.

Hillman took a highly practical approach, digging up even the most unlikely roots and applying methods of cooking from around the world. This research came to public attention in 2009 with *Wild Food*, a book and television series made with Ray Mears, the bushcraft instructor. Some of Hillman's catchphrases, such as "nutritious, but somewhat bitter" for particularly inedible foods, became well known and he inspired many to take up foraging.

Despite the increasing effects of Parkinson's, Hillman remained active to the end, still cycling (to the alarm of his family) and pounding acorns for dinner. A part-edited manuscript was found on his dining-room table on the day of his death.

Professor Gordon Hillman, archaeologist and botanist, was born on July 20, 1943. He died from the effects of Parkinson's disease on July 1, 2018, aged 74

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