



## Frank Elgee, Man of the Moors

Albert Elliot

**H**igh on the moors near Ralph Cross on Blakey Ridge, virtually at the centre of the National Park, is a memorial stone unveiled on 21st October 1953 by Harriet Elgee, the widow of Frank Elgee. The inscription reads simply 'Frank Elgee 1880–1944. Naturalist. Archaeologist'. All the leading natural history and archaeological societies donated funds towards the memorial in recognition of the great contribution Elgee made to the area. This simple stone commemorates the life of an exceptional man who was passionate about the North Yorkshire Moors.

Frank Elgee was born at North Ormesby, Middlesbrough. In 1888 he caught scarlet fever and throughout his childhood suffered from illnesses which eventually wrecked his health, curtailing his formal academic studies at the age of 14. In 1895 he became an office boy. However, the confined environment and long working hours exhausted him and his health broke down completely, leaving him seriously ill. He underwent a major chest operation at North Riding Infirmary, in Middlesbrough, and although after a few weeks the sickly teenager was allowed home, the prognosis was bleak and his future uncertain.

His parents took their chronically ill son for recuperation to Ingleby Greenhow, at the foot of Urra

Moor. Confined to a bath-chair while convalescing there, he read voraciously and studied. Although in poor physical health, his enquiring mind was insatiable for knowledge and he was, even then, determined to discover the origin and evolution of the northeastern moorlands, whose blue escarpments were tantalisingly in view from his sick-bed. Elgee went on to spend a lifetime studying the natural history and archaeology of his chosen area. As he grew stronger, he paid frequent visits on foot to his beloved moorlands to carry out studies and investigations first-hand, eventually becoming intimate with the whole of the northeastern moorland. He was meticulous and kept careful records of his travels and investigations.

In 1904 he was appointed Assistant Curator (and later Curator) to the Dorman Museum, Middlesbrough, a post he held from 1904 to 1938. This enabled him to do carefully planned work and gave him the wherewithal to travel further afield, staying overnight at farmhouses on remote moors. The whole of the area, some 400 square miles, was now open to his eager scrutiny. He began keeping diaries. In 1907 he started writing his first major book, 'The Moorlands of North-Eastern Yorkshire; Their Natural History & Origin'. Published in 1912, the book was a pioneering original work and the first ever in-depth regional survey to be published in Britain.

In 1911 Elgee met Harriet Wragg, who was to become his wife and assistant, in Danby. From 1920 to 1931 Frank and Harriet lived in the moorland village of Commondale, from where he travelled to work along the Esk Valley railway line and wrote his second book, 'Early Man in North-east Yorkshire' (published 1930). His profound respect for and pride in the area shine out from lines taken from the preface:

“This work surveys the archaeology of North-east Yorkshire, one of the greatest prehistoric regions of England... With this region I have been on intimate terms for a lifetime so that it is not too much to say that my love for it has been a powerful motive in the creation of this work. Otherwise I question whether I should have been able to summon up enough patience, endurance and courage to study so much arid archaeology, or to examine dusty antiquities in so many museums. These dry labours, however, were essential to a right understanding of the vast collection preserved on the wide-open spaces of the moors,

the North-east's greatest glory. Here amongst the bracken and ling and with the companionship of wind, sun and rain, archaeology became a real joy and the life of the past a real presence.”

His third major book, written in conjunction with Harriet, was 'The Archaeology of Yorkshire' (published 1933). Also in 1933, the local and national importance of his work was recognised by conferment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Leeds University. Due to ill-health, he resigned as curator of the Dorman Museum in the same year and was succeeded by Harriet, who held the post until 1938. Elgee remained forever grateful for what his beloved moors had given him and wrote the simple but moving words: 'The moors have satisfied my reason, captivated my imagination, and elevated my heart'. His health continued to deteriorate, so the couple moved to Alton, in Hampshire, in search of a milder climate. He died in 1944 aged 66 and is buried at Alton.



## Find out more

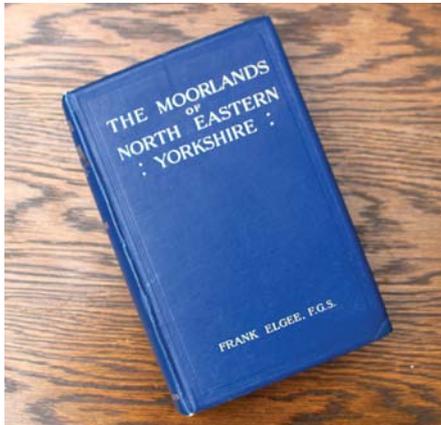
Frank Elgee's 1912 book 'The Moorlands of North-eastern Yorkshire' is online at  
<https://archive.org/details/moorlandsofnorth00elge>

Memorial Stone on Blakey Ridge at the junction with the road to Rosedale Abbey, grid ref. NZ 676019

The Dorman Museum, Linthorpe Road, Middlesbrough TS5 6LA,  
<http://www.dormanmuseum.co.uk/>



*Frank Elgee*



*Elgee's first book*



*Memorial stone to Frank Elgee on the moors, near Ralph Cross*



*The view down Rosedale from close to Elgee's memorial stone*