

# JOHN ROBERT MORTIMER 1825-1911

## A PIONEERING ARCHAEOLOGIST

*"The district around [Driffield] has been made classic in English archaeology by the many years of labour and research bestowed upon it by Mr Mortimer ... It is through the interest in these matters by his example that we may attribute the extension of archaeological research in this part of the country".*

*The Standard, 20 October 1883*

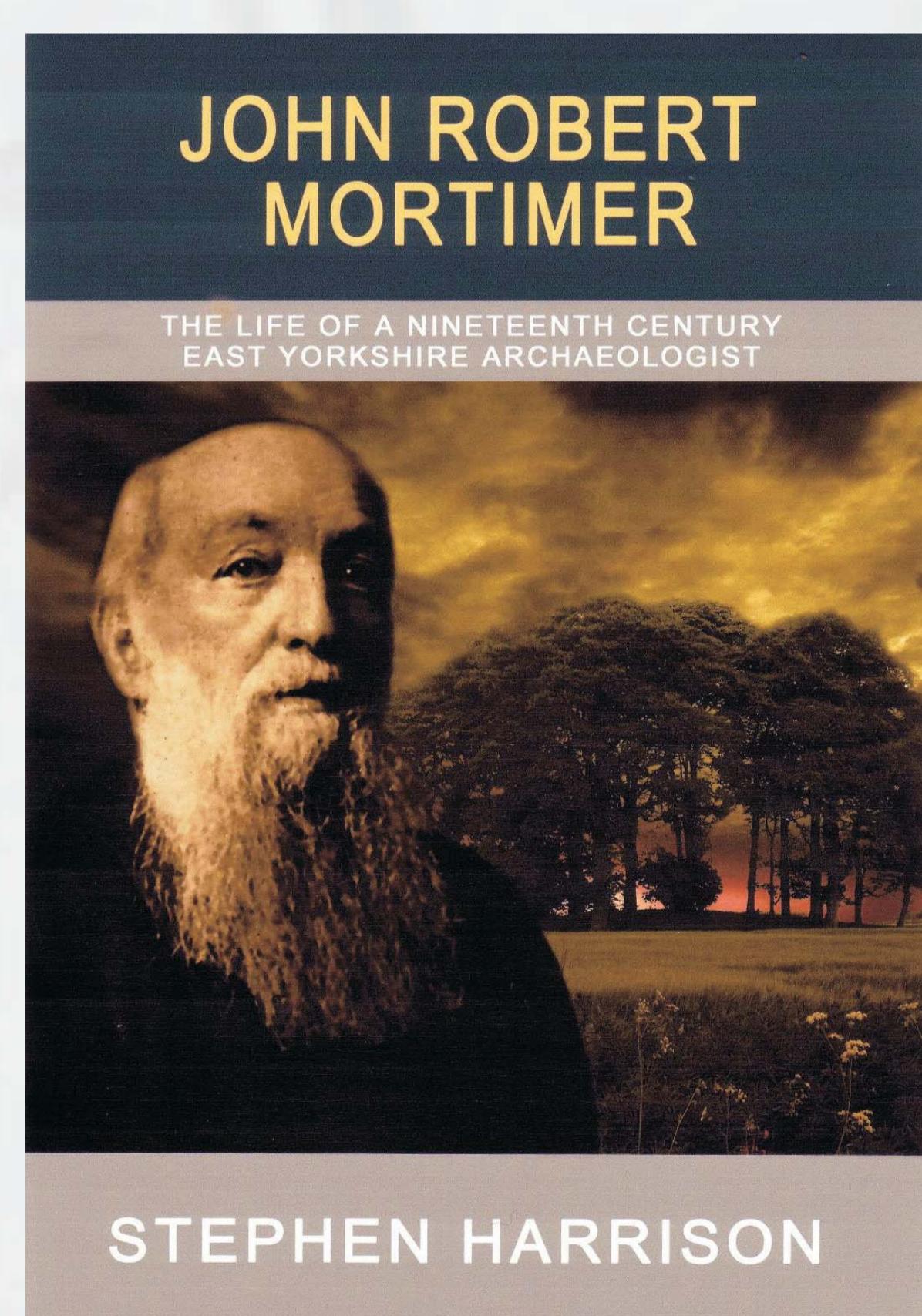
John Robert Mortimer was born at Fimber on 15 June 1825.

A corn merchant by trade, Mortimer is best remembered as a pioneering archaeologist who, despite his humble origins, made a nationally important contribution to the development of modern British archaeology. He devoted much of his adult life to the systematic and careful examination of around 420 prehistoric burial mounds, as well as other archaeological features, on the Yorkshire Wolds, eventually becoming a nationally recognised authority on the subject.

Mortimer was born into a world in which archaeology was not a defined subject and had yet to capture the public imagination. By the time of his death in 1911 archaeology was well on the way to becoming a recognised area of study. Through his high standards and, for the time, meticulous excavation and recording Mortimer helped to lay some of the foundations on which the subject came to be based. He can rightly take his place as one of the founding fathers of modern-day British archaeology.

Mortimer's archaeological work culminated in 1905 with the publication of *Forty Years' Researches in British and Saxon Burial Mounds of East Yorkshire*. This magnificent book, with over 1000 artefact illustrations by his eldest daughter Agnes, established Mortimer's reputation as one of the most important British archaeologists of the nineteenth century.

Mortimer succeeded in bringing together, preserving and documenting a vast amount of information relating to the early history of East Yorkshire, which, but for his work, would have been almost certainly lost to us.



### Extract from a Mortimer obituary by Thomas Sheppard

*"There can be no question that in the death of Mr J.R. Mortimer, of Driffield, British archaeological science loses one of its leaders, Mr Mortimer's worth, however, was appreciated far beyond his own district, and it can safely be said that he held a leading place as an archaeologist, and was recognised as one of the greatest authorities on prehistoric antiquities ... He probably did more towards unravelling the early history of the district in which he was born than has any other Englishman. Much as his work is appreciated to-day, it will unquestionably be more and more appreciated as time goes on. His loss is much greater than most people imagine".*

*The Eastern Morning News 22 August 1911*

### Chronology

- 1850 Establishes himself as a corn merchant at Fimber
- 1851 Visits the Great Exhibition and the British Museum
- With his brother Robert begins fieldwalking and the collection of prehistoric artefacts brought to the surface during agricultural operations. They also begin the recording of upstanding prehistoric earthworks. The brothers develop a deep and long-standing interest in the region's geology at this time
- 1863 First archaeological excavation
- 1869 Marries Matilda Mitchell and moves to the nearby market town of Driffield
- 1878 Builds museum at 25 Lockwood Street, Driffield, to house his collection (now the Masonic Lodge)
- 1887 Declared bankrupt (but manages to save his collection from the court-appointed administrators)
- 1905 Publication of *Forty Years' Researches in British and Saxon Burial Mounds of East Yorkshire*
- 1910 Last archaeological excavation
- 1911 Dies at Driffield and is buried in the town's Bridlington Road cemetery
- 1913 Mortimer's collection of artefacts and geological specimens purchased by Colonel G.H. Clarke for £1000 and donated to Hull Museum, where it is now curated in the city's Hull and East Riding Museum on High Street