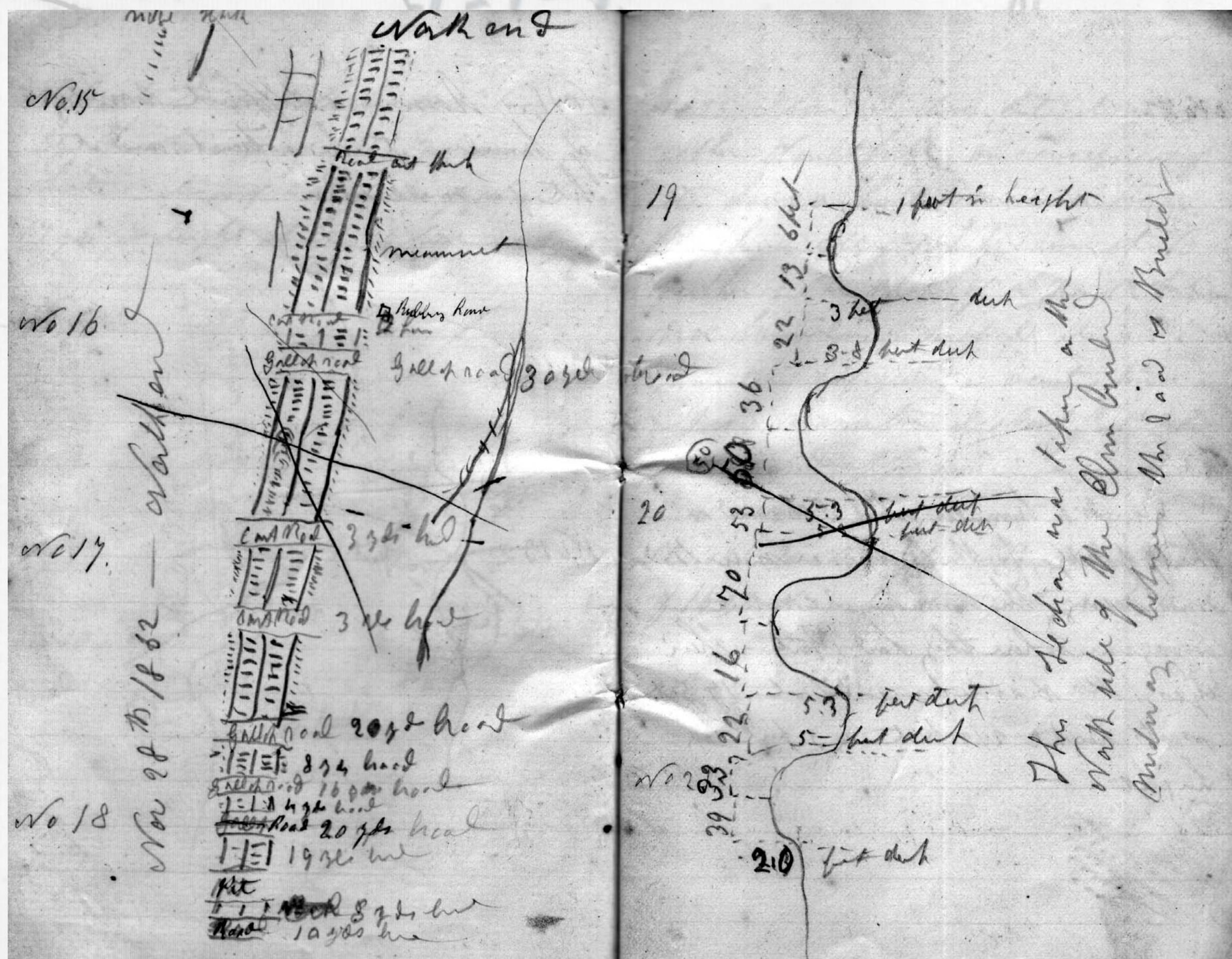


# JOHN ROBERT MORTIMER AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE YORKSHIRE WOLDS

Up to 1851 John had never left the East Riding. In that year he made the journey to London to visit the Great Exhibition. During his stay, he also visited the British Museum. It was these two experiences that diverted his 'scientific tastes from astronomy to geology and archaeology'.

Inspired by these visits, Mortimer began to systematically explore the archaeology of the Yorkshire Wolds. He collected prehistoric artifacts from the surfaces of ploughed fields, and surveyed and described the prehistoric linear earthworks (land boundaries) and burial mounds of the area. His attention then turned to excavation.



Survey notes compiled by Robert Mortimer of a stretch of prehistoric linear earthwork on Leavening Wold, 1852.



Mortimer excavating a barrow near Fridaythorpe in 1875.

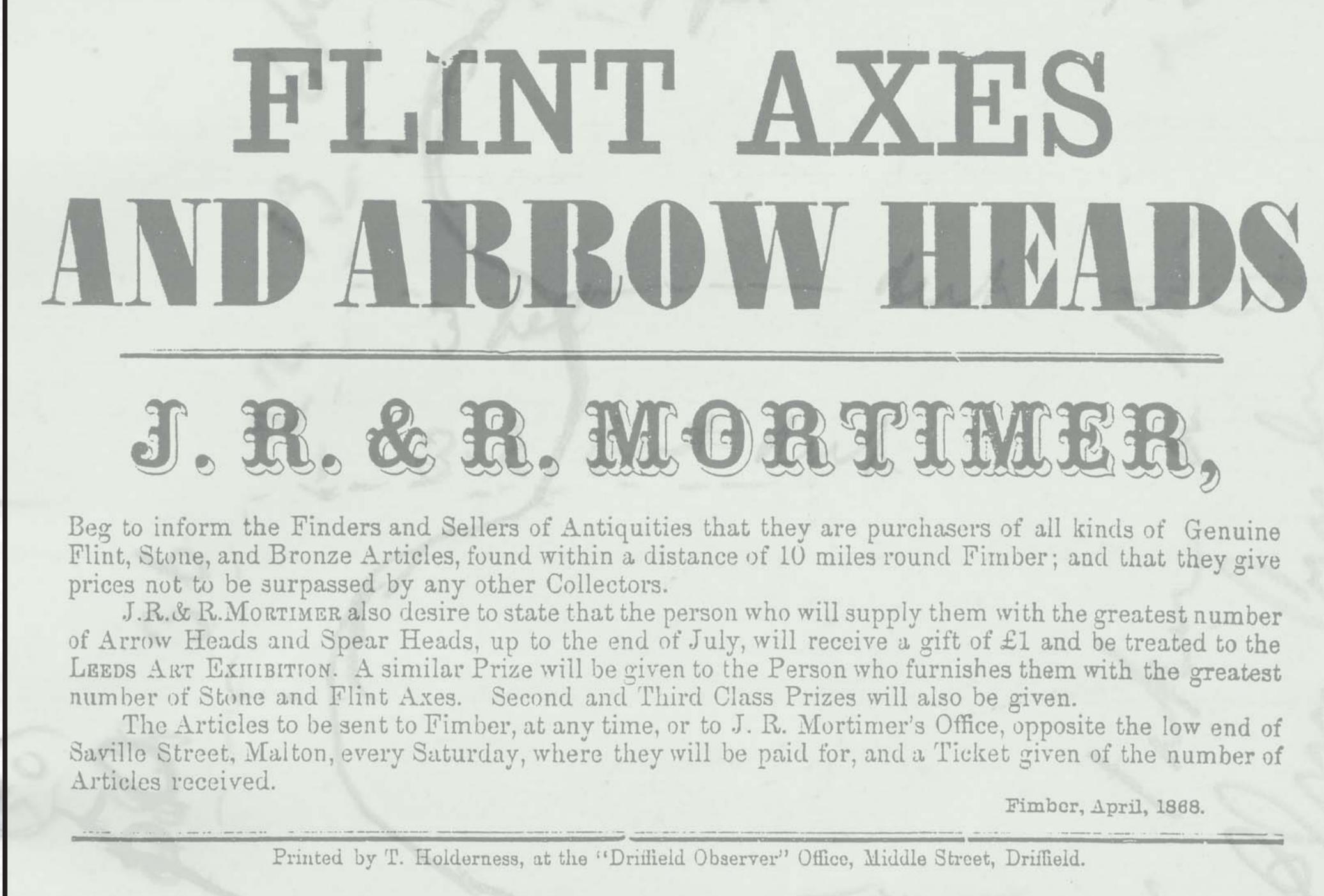


Excavation of Duggleby Howe in 1890.

(The middle figure on the extreme left is Mortimer)

## Dating the past

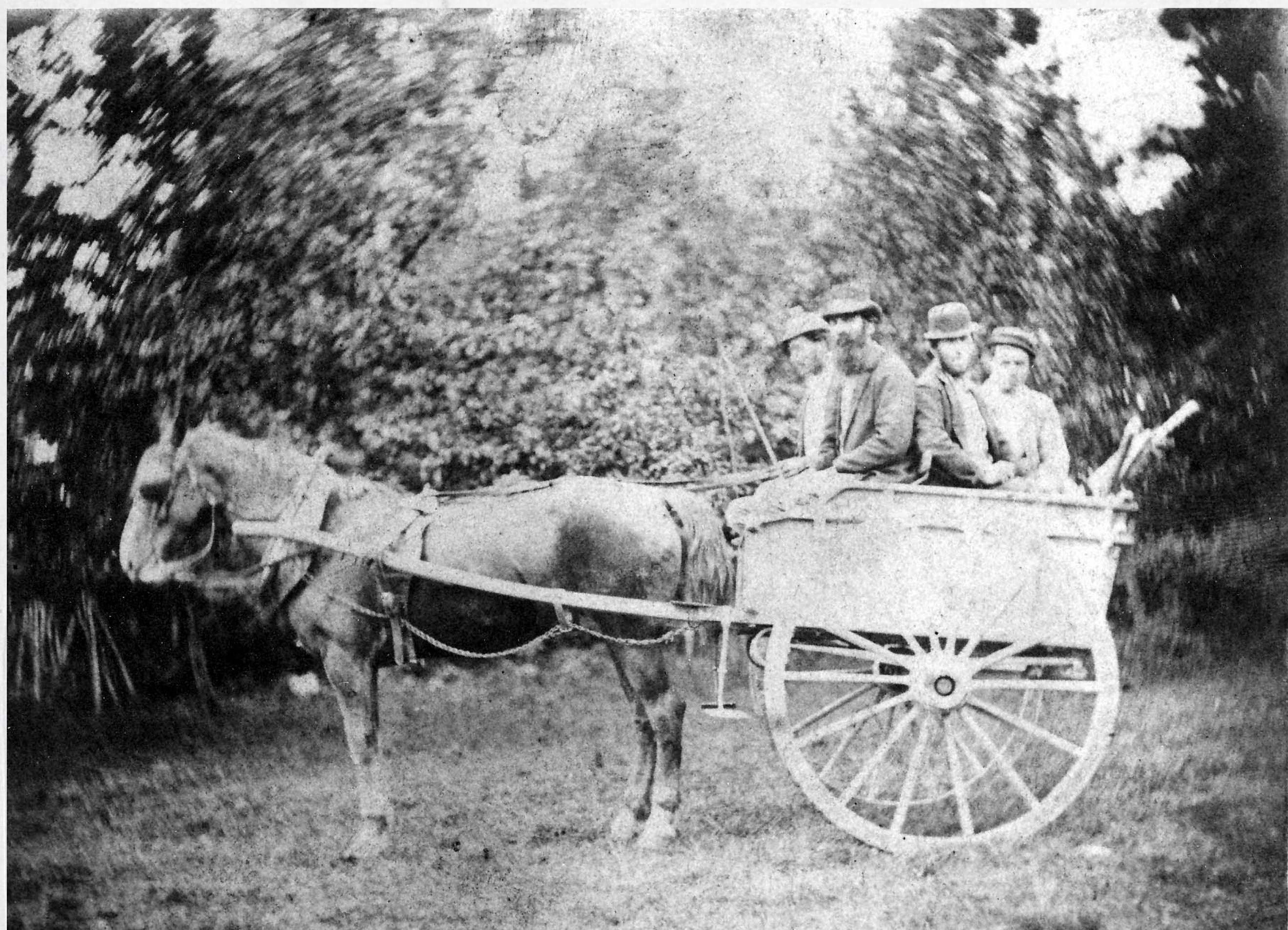
In the nineteenth century prehistoric chronology was ill-defined. For much of the time prehistoric remains were simply classed as 'pre-Roman' or 'British'. Mortimer used these terms but, like many others, also used 'The Three Age System' of Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age. This was devised in Scandinavia in the 1830s and was widely adopted across Europe. It reflected what was then thought to be a straightforward technological and evolutionary process through time whereby early societies first used stone (Stone Age), then bronze (Bronze Age), and later iron (Iron Age) for the manufacture of implements and other items. Chronological precision had to wait until the scientific advances of the second half of the twentieth century.



Mortimer handbill advertising for prehistoric artefacts, 1868.

In 1862 John, frequently assisted by his brother Robert (1829-1892), began to excavate prehistoric burial mounds on the central Yorkshire Wolds. This marked a decisive turning point in his archaeological researches. The influential Sir Tatton Sykes of Sledmere and other members of his family supported this work. These investigations were undertaken with exemplary care and skill, far in advance of the standards displayed by most other contemporary excavators.

Mortimer's archaeology was based on the recording and interpretation of facts. For him, as for other serious practitioners, artefacts and the sites they came from were seen as documents of the past that could be read to create narratives of long-vanished prehistoric societies.



Four men on their way to an excavation, c. 1865.

(John Robert Mortimer seated in the front of the dogcart, facing the camera, with his brother Robert Mortimer immediately behind. The individual seated behind Robert is thought to be Thomas Hebb, Mortimer's long time archaeological foreman. Note the excavation equipment at the rear of the cart).

## The erosion of the past

During the nineteenth century the intensification of arable farming, following enclosure, dramatically transformed the appearance of the Yorkshire Wolds. This included the large-scale destruction of archaeological monuments. This destruction was the driving force behind Mortimer's archaeology. He saw his work as a 'moral obligation', recovering the past in order to educate present and future generations. He believed that by understanding the past we understand ourselves, a view that is nowadays taken for granted but in Mortimer's time was far less commonplace.