

Speech delivered on 29 May 2026 on the occasion of the unveiling of an Oxfordshire blue plaque in honour of Beatrice Blackwood at 45 Walton Street, Oxford, by Christopher Morton (Acting Director, Pitt Rivers Museum):

Beatrice Blackwood (1889–1975) was one of the most important anthropologists and museum curators associated with the University of Oxford in the twentieth century. A pioneering fieldworker, teacher and collections specialist, she played a major role in developing the Pitt Rivers Museum and in advancing the study of anthropology at a time when women still faced considerable barriers within academic life. Her long career combined scholarship, museum practice and field research, and her work continues to shape understandings of anthropology and museum collections today.

Beatrice Mary Blackwood was educated at home before studying at Oxford. She attended Somerville College, one of the first Oxford colleges established for women, and read English before turning to anthropology. Blackwood studied human anatomy and physical anthropology under some of the leading figures of the period, including Arthur Thomson, the University's Professor of Human Anatomy. Physical anthropology at the time focused on the comparative study of human variation, evolution and anatomy, often through the measurement and classification of skeletal remains and living populations. A notable academic achievement was becoming the first woman to receive the Oxford diploma in anthropology with distinction, reflecting both her intellectual ability and her competence across the scientific and ethnographic aspects of the discipline. Her training in anatomy gave her a strong empirical and observational approach that influenced her later museum and fieldwork practice.

In 1912 Blackwood joined the Pitt Rivers Museum as an assistant to Henry Balfour, the museum's influential first curator. Miss Blackwood (as she was always known) quickly became an important member of staff, developing expertise in collections management, ethnographic documentation and public interpretation. At a time when relatively few women held senior academic or curatorial positions, she established herself through meticulous scholarship and professional dedication.

Blackwood's career was interrupted by the First World War, during which she undertook nursing and war-related service, but she returned to Oxford afterwards and increasingly combined museum work with anthropological field research. In the 1920s and 1930s she carried out extensive fieldwork in North America and the Pacific, particularly in the American Southwest and Papua

New Guinea. Here, Blackwood conducted fieldwork in the Buka Passage and among communities in the Solomon Islands region, collecting objects, recording languages and documenting social customs and everyday life. Her work contributed valuable ethnographic information at a time when colonial administrations and missionaries were rapidly transforming Indigenous societies.

Some amusing anecdotes about Miss Blackwood's work in the Pacific have come down to us. According to an obituary written by her colleague Tom Penniman, Blackwood chartered a small aeroplane to reach a remote region and was met by an interpreter who apparently knew only three English words — “and those bad ones, but amiably spoken”.

Another memorable story involves a kitten called Sally, whom Blackwood carried with her in a string bag while travelling through New Guinea. She also carried a ball of wool for the kitten to play with. Local people were reportedly fascinated by the sight of the kitten chasing the wool, and many came considerable distances to see it and trade artefacts with her. The image of this formidable Oxford anthropologist trekking through remote Papua with a kitten in a bag has become part of Pitt Rivers folklore.

Blackwood also undertook fieldwork among Indigenous communities in the American Southwest, particularly among Pueblo peoples in New Mexico and Arizona. She developed interests in technology, craft production and domestic life, documenting how objects were made and used within communities. This attention to material culture reflected her museum background and distinguished her work from some contemporaries who focused more exclusively on social organisation or ritual. Her publications combined careful ethnographic description with detailed analysis of artefacts and techniques.

Alongside her fieldwork, Miss Blackwood became an influential teacher at Oxford. She lectured in anthropology for many years and helped train generations of students during a period when the discipline was becoming increasingly institutionalised within British universities. She was known as a rigorous but supportive teacher, particularly encouraging women entering anthropology and museum work. In 1938 she became the first woman to be awarded a lectureship in anthropology at Oxford, an important milestone both for her personally and for women in the University more broadly.

Blackwood retired from her formal academic positions in the 1950s but remained associated with Oxford and the Pitt Rivers Museum for many years afterwards, continuing to assist in the museum right up until her death. As

former director Schuyler Jones later remarked, “She was our database in the days before computers.”

Yet beneath Miss Blackwood’s sometimes serious exterior there was clearly a dry wit. During fieldwork in Papua New Guinea she wrote a humorous poem titled *Lament of an Anthropologist*.

**Lament of an Anthropologist
who is not at the same time an Entomologist**

There are spiders in the soap-dish,
There are beetles in the bed,
There are ants in the sugar,
And weevils in the bread.

And anywhere and everywhere
Wherever I may be,
The ubiquitous mosquito
Is prospecting for his tea.

And sometimes, while I’m dressing,
I find my shoe has housed
A large and vicious centipede
Annoyed at being roused.

Besides the beasts I’ve mentioned
There are fifty million more.
And some of them, I rather think,
Have not been tamed before.

The cockroach in the store-room
Enjoys his midnight dance.
He’d like to chew my notebooks
If he only got a chance.

So if, instead of working
On Anthropology
I’d directed my attention
To Entomology’

There are green and yellow lizards
A-frisking up the wall.
My kitten loves to chase them,
But catches none at all.

My efforts would be certain
To win undying fame,
For down all future ages
Those bugs would bear my name!

There are hornets in the rafters;
And as I walk the floor
I meet a dozen hermit-crabs
A-crawling through the door.