Obituaries

Dr Alan McWhirr, BSc., M.A., Ph.D., F.S.A., M.I.F.A.

Dr Alan McWhirr, Honorary Secretary of Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society, died on 14 April 2010 following a period of treatment for cancer. He will be greatly missed, not only in the city and county of Leicester, but in British archaeology as a whole, for his contribution to Roman archaeology, as well as the study and conservation of the historic environment. Born in St Albans in 1937, he had dug with Sheppard Frere on the Roman site of Verulamium before coming to the University of Leicester in 1957. The General Degree which was then offered enabled Alan to take not just maths and chemistry, which he went on to teach at Gateway School from 1960 to 1968, but also archaeology, then in its infancy in the History Department. His earlier, short, digging experience led to his being put in charge of one of the first student field courses on a Roman villa at Tixover, Rutland, by Stanley Thomas, the first Lecturer in British Archaeology in the Department. Alan retained his interest in Roman archaeology and went on to direct excavations in Cirencester from 1965 until the mid-1970s, a project which had many connections with the Verulamium digs (Fig. 1) – the new Cirencester Excavation Committee even acquired many of their wheelbarrows from St Albans! Alan worked with John Wacher on the Lealome site and then with David Brown on the Abbey site. The real triumph came with the excavation of the Beeches Road site, where a substantial town house of the late Roman period was excavated, which included the iconic Hare Mosaic, now used as the logo of the Corinium Museum, to which Alan also gave a great deal of time. The digs involved up to 100 volunteers and Leicester University students, and Alan gave many impromptu commentaries, aided by a ranging pole as a pointer (Fig. 2). It must be remembered that Alan’s day job was as a school teacher in Leicester who dug in the holidays. This situation continued when he became a lecturer in Environmental Studies at Leicester College of Education at Scraptoft (later Leicester Polytechnic). Alan’s frequent visits to Cirencester involved a long round trip from Leicester of some 150 miles, about which he more than once recalled the contemplative nature of a drive down the Fosse Way, that great highway of the early Roman period, and today is not entirely devoid of its own special character.

When the Cirencester Excavation Committee handed over its responsibilities to the Cotswold Archaeological Trust in 1989, Alan remained as a continuing link with the new body as one of its voluntary directors. He was President of Cirencester Archaeological and Historical Society from 1987 to 1997, and he wrote or co-wrote and edited the first four volumes of Cirencester Excavations. These were Early Occupation at Roman Cirencester (Wacher and McWhirr 1982); Romano-British Cemeteries at Cirencester (McWhirr, Viner and Wells 1982); Houses in Roman Cirencester (McWhirr 1984); and Cirencester: Anglo-Saxon church and

medieval abbey (Wilkinson and McWhirr 1998). He also wrote more popular books on the Roman period in Britain, including *Roman Gloucestershire* (1981), *Roman Crafts and Industries* in the *Shire Archaeology* series (1982), and a guide to Verulamium in the Ginn History Patch Series in 1971. In 2008, the *Cirencester Excavations VI: Excavations and Observations in Roman Cirencester, 1998–2007*, edited by Neil Holbrook, was published to mark the 50th anniversary of the formation of Cirencester Excavation Committee. This was dedicated to Alan, and he was formally presented with the volume at the Christmas meeting of the Society of Antiquaries of London on Thursday 18 December 2008, to
acclamation. Alan continued to contribute articles to both popular and learned journals throughout his life.

His early work in Leicestershire was fortunately recorded in a history of 50 years of teaching archaeology in Leicester University, written by Alan himself, Marilyn Palmer and Neil Christie, and produced in Alan’s inimitable style in 2008. This was launched on the occasion of the School of Archaeology and Ancient History’s 50th anniversary celebrations in April 2008 (Figs 3 and 4). The book was published by the School of Archaeology and Ancient History, and can be obtained from the School: it contains some of Alan’s photographs of early excavations at Burrough Hill and Breedon-on the Hill, as well as a photograph of Alan very much resembling Sir Mortimer Wheeler! (To obtain a copy, contact Pauline Carroll in the School of Archaeology and Ancient History in the University. The cost is £5 inc. P&P.)

My earliest memory of Alan is being taught Roman archaeology by him on the University of Leicester’s Certificate Course in Archaeology at Vaughan College in the early 1970s, where he was an occasional tutor for the University’s Department of Adult Education from 1960 to 1988 and greatly inspired my growing interest in archaeology: it is due to Alan that I have been visiting Roman sites in Britain and Europe ever since. He gained a Ph.D. for his work on the Roman brick and tile

Fig. 2. Alan pointing out various features of the Beeches Road town house in Cirencester, home of the Hare Mosaic. Note Alan’s characteristic way of hitching up his trousers when digging!
industry in Britain and wrote widely on this topic, including an article on ‘Brick and Tile Production in Roman Britain: Models of Economic Organisation’ with Tim Darvill in *World Archaeology*, in 1984. Following early retirement from what had become Leicester Polytechnic, he joined the Department of Archaeology of the University of Leicester in 1988 on a part-time basis – the same year I also came to Leicester from Loughborough University. Alan was always an inspired teacher: I well remember one occasion when he decided to give a lecture on Roman military practice in a suit of Roman armour. He clanked across the campus, but found
when he got to the lecture theatre that his voice echoed round inside the helmet and he had to take it off!

When Graeme Barker and the Department of Archaeology decided to initiate distance learning courses in archaeology and heritage in 1996, the obvious person to ask to take it on was Alan McWhirr, since he had so many contacts in the archaeological world and was known for getting things done! He showed enormously innovative skills in producing distance learning materials, first for an M.A. and then a Postgraduate Certificate in Archaeology and Heritage, followed by Ph.D.’s by distance learning and then, to meet a growing demand, for Certificates in Archaeology. He made the best possible use of his extensive IT skills in producing attractively designed materials, but also demonstrated considerable initiative in the ways in which the courses were marketed. The students poured in and those of us who were asked to write modules for the course had to work very rapidly, but always did so as none of us ever wanted to let Alan down! As a result, the School of Archaeology and Ancient History in the University of Leicester is the world leader in archaeology courses by distance learning. At the same time, Alan initiated the School’s important Monograph Series in the early 1990s, doing much of the editing, production and marketing

Fig. 4. Alan with the three Heads of the School of Archaeology and Ancient History at the University of Leicester from 1989 to 2007 – left to right: Graeme Barker, Alan McWhirr, Marilyn Palmer and Colin Haselgrove. The Stonehenge cake was being cut for the 50th anniversary of the School in 2008.
himself. He retired from his role in the School (although retaining many links with it) in 2004 and was presented with, among other things, a John Flower print of a Leicester scene (Fig. 5). Alan developed a considerable interest in topographical drawings and was working on this until his illness, having already talked to the Leicestershire Archaeological Society on the topic.

Throughout his life as a lecturer in Leicester, Alan worked hard in a voluntary capacity to promote public awareness of the historic environment in both the city and the county. He was involved with BBC Radio Leicester from its foundation, devising and presenting a programme called ‘digging up the past’, which involved on-site interviews with those involved in archaeology in the county. One would be quietly digging away on a site in Leicestershire, or measuring up a building, and Alan would appear in the distance with his recording equipment, including a large, grey, fluffy microphone, which would appear in front of your face as you were encouraged to talk about what you were doing! He also used to do commentaries on matches of the Leicester Tigers for Radio Leicester on Saturdays, since he had a lifelong interest in the game of rugby.

Not content with his role in Cirencester Archaeological and Historical Society, Alan served on the Committee of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society from 1964, acting first as Secretary of the Sub-Committee for Fieldwork and Research, and later as Hon. Assistant Editor, Hon. Secretary (Publicity) and, since 1980, as Hon. Secretary. He has done far more than anyone else on that committee to see that this learned society takes positive action on local issues concerning the historic environment. He was assiduous in seeking publicity for the lectures and other activities put on by the Society and oversaw its publications. He

Fig. 5. Alan being presented by Marilyn Palmer with a John Flower print on the occasion of his retirement from the University of Leicester in 2004.
produced its quarterly newsletter and when an independent magazine called the *Leicestershire Historian* was in danger of collapsing, brought that under the auspices of the Society, thereby giving it a popular outlet alongside its more academic *Transactions*. He was also the editor of another independent magazine called *Leicestershire and Rutland Heritage* from 1988, but unfortunately the publishers decided to discontinue it in 1992. As a committee member of the Leicestershire and Rutland Rural Community Council, he was also on the editorial board of a community magazine called *Village Voice*, and more recently had been heavily involved in efforts to re-start the Leicestershire volumes of *The Victoria County History*.

The Leicestershire Museums, Arts and Records Service also played a major role in Alan’s life. He was a valued member of the Leicestershire Archaeological Advisory Committee, set up after the establishment of the Leicestershire Archaeological Unit (LAU) in the mid-1970s to advise the Leicestershire Museums, Arts and Records Service on archaeological matters. When the county archaeological unit was dissolved in 1995, he was also largely instrumental in persuading the University of Leicester to take it on, therefore helping to establish the University of Leicester Archaeological Services, which has played a major role in archaeological work in the city and county ever since. Alan also served on the Conservation Advisory Panel to Leicester City Council, in order to give advice on wider conservation issues concerning the historic environment. His concern for the future of the City’s museums led to his establishment in August 2000 of the Museums Supporters Group, and he was always assiduous in bringing matters concerning both the museums of the city and county, and the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, before the Committee of the Archæological and Historical Society.

Alan was also heavily involved in the preservation of the historic fabric of churches in the county. He was a member of the Parochial Church Council of the important city church of St James the Greater from the 1980s and served as a churchwarden. He wrote *The Building of St James the Greater* (1986) and *Century to Millennium: St James the Greater, Leicester 1899–1999* (1999), and gave many talks about the church. Beyond St James, he was Chairman of the Leicestershire Historic Churches Trust from 1988 to 2006, but remained as a Trustee until his death. Alan brought to the Trust his unrivalled knowledge of the historic churches and chapels of Leicester and Leicestershire. He also built up a large collection of photographs of churches and, with Richard Gill, he produced a series of leaflets for the Millennium highlighting important churches and chapels all over the county and city. He encouraged the Trust to start the annual Ride+Stride, or Sponsored Bike Ride, fundraising event in 1990, which has become its principal source of income. In the Diocese of Leicester, he served for many years on the Diocesan Advisory Committee which deals with the fabric of churches in the diocese, and was appointed its chairman in 1996. As Chair of this Committee, he was also a member of the House of Laity of the Diocesan Synod and served on the Cathedral Appeal Committee when this was formed in 1999 to raise money for a visitor centre attached to Leicester Cathedral. He has therefore
made a unique and outstanding contribution to the care of historic churches within the diocese of Leicester.

In summary, much of Alan McWhirr’s professional life was concerned with the practice and teaching of archaeology both in Cirencester and Leicestershire, and, through his work with the School of Archaeology and Ancient History’s Distance Learning Unit, throughout the world. His excavations in the Roman city of Cirencester helped to advance the knowledge of urban life in Roman Britain, particularly the spectacular mosaics which are now so effectively displayed in the Corinium Museum in Cirencester, another institution to which Alan gave a great deal of time. He was an inspired teacher and was always willing to give his time to speak to local groups and take them round sites and museums in the county: in 2009, he led over a hundred people around Burrough Hill in Leicestershire as part of the Festival of British Archaeology, a site where he had worked on excavations in the 1960s. Alan carried his interest in the historic environment over into multifarious voluntary activities in the City and County of Leicester, utilising his skills in diplomacy, written and oral communication, organisation and marketing. It is through his efforts that the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society has maintained its pre-eminence in the city and county, and that more historic churches survive reasonably intact than would have been the case. Finally, his skills in local radio and magazine editing have ensured that the people of the city and county of Leicester are well aware of, and proud of, their archaeological and historical heritage. Those of us who also work for the study of history and archaeology in the city and county are now having to come to terms with just how much he did, and he will be very sadly missed, not just for this, but also because he was a thoroughly nice, warm and supportive man. Our sympathies go to Helen and to his children Rachel and James.

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