

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

Hon Secretary, Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society

Dr Alan McWhirr, Honorary Fellow in the School of Archaeology and Ancient History, died on 14th April 2010 following a period of treatment for cancer. He will be greatly missed, not only in the University but in the city and county of Leicester for his enormous contribution to 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 and came 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 1960-1968, but also archaeology, then in its infancy in the History Department. His short digging experience led his being put in charge of one of the first student field courses on a Roman villa at Tixover in 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, much of it directly supported by what had then become the Department of Archaeology in the University, a link established originally via John Wacher. To start with, Alan was a school teacher in Leicester who dug in the holidays, a situation which continued when he became a lecturer in Environmental Studies at Leicester College of Education at Scraftoft (later Leicester Polytechnic). 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 1987-1997, 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.

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 1960-1988. He gained a PhD for his work on the Roman brick and tile 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 MA and then a Postgraduate Certificate in Archaeology and Heritage, followed by PhDs 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 himself.

Throughout his life as a lecturer in Leicester, Alan worked very 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, running 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 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 has 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 Archaeological and Historical Society.

Alan has also been 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 has been 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. 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 one 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. Alan's funeral will be private but there will be a memorial Choral Evensong at St James the Greater in the early summer, and hopefully an event to pay tribute to his achievements later on.

Marilyn Palmer
Emeritus Professor of Archaeology
University of Leicester