

# The Chester Antiquary

Newsletter of the Chester Archaeological Society  
2005 Issue 2(Autumn/Winter)

## The Society's Antiquaries

**T**HE newsletter editor, correctly identifying me as a left-over from the Society's earlier days, has asked for reminiscences of the great men who populated the Society at that time. This presents a problem. At my age memory is not what it was and, although I joined the Society after I came to Cheshire in the 1940s, it was not until the 1950s that I was able to attend meetings at all frequently. Consequently, while I have some recollection of one or two of the leading personalities, others were merely respected names.

I did in fact attend one meeting at which Professor Newstead was present. It must have been one of the last he came to. My impression was that he was calling for buildings in St John Street to be razed, so that he could see if there were any Roman remains he could excavate underneath. In those days Roman Chester was the flavour of the month – as it still is in some quarters today – and excavation had not yet been recognised as a destructive method of archaeological investigation. However this is unfair to the professor, whose single-minded dedication to uncovering Roman Chester was of inestimable value to the Society and to Chester. None of his excavations did in fact involve the deliberate demolition of standing buildings.

By the time I was more involved in Society events the presiding genius was the Chairman, Archdeacon Burne, who ran the Society for many years with quiet and unassuming dominance; no easy task considering the strong personalities he had to deal with. He seemed to have all the right contacts for us to visit remote churches and small country estates – now no longer extant, alas. One rather larger mansion we visited was Dunham Massey, where the Earl of Stamford (who was a patron of

the Society) showed us round personally, waving his stick alarmingly near precious vases. The Archdeacon remarked to us that he had played tennis with Lady Jane Grey; the lady in question was in fact Lord Stamford's sister, who married a clergyman.

The Archdeacon was followed, all too briefly, by Alderman Philip Lawson, another friendly and accessible person, who seemed to have an encyclopaedic knowledge of the structure and history of all the buildings in Chester city centre, knowledge which one feared died with him. Two cogent memories of him are firstly, his debate with an outsider on the origin of the Chester Rows; a problem still somewhat obscure but, in retrospect, Alderman Lawson's views seem closer to the mark.

The second memory is of an hilarious, but in retrospect significant, occasion when Alderman Lawson was proposing a vote of thanks to Margaret Groombridge, the City Archivist, who had delivered an excellent paper on the City Guilds. He praised her for all the work she had put in, but then remembered his aldermanic role and remarked that he supposed this was what the city were employing her to do anyway. Underlying the hilarity was a serious point, of which that good friend of the Society, Graham Webster, took due note.

The cases of Archdeacon Burne and Alderman Lawson illustrate the close links that existed in those days between the Society and the church and civic authorities. Circumstances are now different as such relationships are no longer possible, and the Society's influence necessarily lessened.

Indeed the Society was then a quite different beast to what it is today. It was the county archaeological society, as its title indicated – *Chester and North*

*Wales Architectural, Archaeological and Historic Society*. In many respects it was more like a club. Our library was housed in an upper room of the City Library in St John Street, where we could browse at our leisure and could borrow books; the staff knew who we were and controlled access to the books.

Many of the luminaries of the 'good old days' had either passed away or no longer attended Society meetings before my own attendance became frequent. However, I have some recollection of two, both schoolmasters, who bore the name of Williams. W J, who was responsible for the identification of the amphitheatre site and the pioneer of Heronbridge, was known to the irreverent as 'Walrus Williams', on account of his distinctive moustache. I have one particularly comforting memory of Mr B T Williams, towards the end of his days. He had come with us to Chichester on a weekend excursion, organised with his customary efficiency by Dr Driver, and on the return journey we stopped in Oxford to visit New College. This was B T's old college and the Warden (Sir William Hayter), who guided us round and showed us the college treasures, gave B T an especially fulsome welcome. It was nice to think that B T, who was a fine man and a loyal member of the Society, had this final memory of his old college.

You will note that I refer to him as 'B T'. We had not adopted the modern habit of calling everybody by their Christian names; in fact we addressed our seniors as "sir" unless they had some other respectful title. One of the housemasters at my school was a Mr McBride, and his young widow, who has long survived him, always refers to him as 'Mc B'.

One feature of the Society's activities then is that it was possible to attract  
(continued on page 2)

major national figures to give lectures, including Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Sir Ian Richmond, John Harvey and Martin Biddle. We also had good relationships with Liverpool and Manchester Universities: the historian, Professor A R Myers, and the archaeologist, Mr T G E Powell, from Liverpool and, from Manchester, the architectural historians W A Singleton and T E Marsden. Mr Marsden led us on a tour of old halls, mainly timber-framed, in N E Cheshire and S E Lancashire, which included a visit to the recently restored Ordsall Hall. Mr Powell likewise led an excellent tour of chambered tombs on Anglesey, including Bryn Celli Ddu, and ending with the denuded tomb outside Plas Newydd.

These tours, effectively summer meetings, were quite a feature of the Society's activities, often into North Wales (like the Anglesey excursion) with the co-operation of our membership and contacts in that area. One particularly memorable occasion was a tour led by Mr Bevan-Evans, the Flintshire County Archaeologist, which

included a remote hillfort near Corwen. One of the party was temporarily mislaid, but it subsequently transpired that the lady concerned, rather than scrambling over boulders, had elected for the option of gathering wild flowers, for which Wales is notable.

Alderman Lawson was succeeded as Chairman by Miss Estelle Dyke, who gave an excellent paper on the parish boundary marks in the city centre, still a sadly neglected feature. She also instituted a policy of delegation of duties and encouraged greater publicity for the Society. One member who typified the Society's distinguished antiquarian side was Maurice Ridgeway, the vicar of Banbury, who became a close family friend and was fittingly described as one of the last of the 'scholar priests'. Another who contributed much to the Society was Judge Seys-Llewellyn, a civilised man with a fund of stories; somewhat apprehensive about the change in the Society's title, and indignant at the uncoordinated way in which Chester's streets were dug up without

any opportunity for archaeological investigation.

Alan Crosby's history of the Society, published on the occasion of our 150th anniversary, gives the impression of an organisation with much rancorous infighting, perpetually on the brink of collapse. That is not at all how it appeared to the ordinary members of the Society. If we thought about it at all we realised that in any organisation there were bound to be personality clashes, which got sorted out by goodwill, and that shortage of funds was a perpetual problem, leading to delays in the production of the Journal. The Society has a role to play, it has problems to solve and always will have. But one thing we can learn from the great men and women of the past: they were amateurs, and the big change since their time has been the growth of professionalism. Our task is to bridge the gap between the interested amateur and the professional, and this we are successfully doing.

**Edmund Hawes**

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## Point of View

### A message from the Chair

**T**HIS has been a productive year, but also a difficult year. The major event was at Heronbridge, where we located the site of the battle of Chester in AD 613 and many members took part in the excavations. We are grateful to David Mason for having organised the Society's first major excavation for many years, and also to George Storey, who did much of the administration and fundraising.

It has been a difficult year because David Mason left us unexpectedly last autumn to take up the post of County Archaeologist in Durham. David was our Secretary, but he did far more than take minutes and write letters. He also organised the Heronbridge excavation; administered the annual program of lectures; organised the annual weekend excursion, council meetings and the AGM; and liaised with the City Council and English Heritage over archaeological developments. He also

found time to write three books as well as three interim reports on the excavations at Heronbridge.

David was also our Vice Chairman and was scheduled to be elected Chairman at the last AGM and his departure left a big hole in our organisation. I am glad to report that the Council quickly managed to find volunteers to do most of the tasks I have listed.

The key task is that of Secretary. We are most grateful to Anthony Holliday for volunteering to act as temporary secretary and I am glad that his appointment has now been confirmed.

The annual lecture program will now be administered by a new sub-committee of three professional archaeologists – Julie Edwards, Zosia Archibald, and Sarah Semple, plus Anthony Holliday who will administer it.

The one post that we have not yet filled is that of weekend event organiser.

I am hoping that someone will offer to do this for us. It would be possible to split the job into two parts – organising the venue, and organising the travel arrangements – so it should not be too arduous. We are happy that Prue Wendt is continuing to organise the day trips and Ian Archibald is doing the administration for her.

Looking ahead, what may prove indirectly to be an important development for the Society, is the decision of Chester College to teach archaeology as a single honours degree. Sarah Semple, who has just been elected to our Council, is the College's first lecturer in archaeology. We are already working with her on the re-housing of our journals in the archaeology department at Bluecoat School. However, I can foresee other sorts of collaboration which should benefit both the Society and the new University.

**Alan Comyns**

## Heronbridge 2005



The photograph (above) shows our site director David Mason with Dr Francis Prior, one of the Time Team experts, who helped to present the broadcast.

**T**HE fourth year of the Society's excavations at Heronbridge was different in that we entertained *Time Team* for some live television, as part of their *Big Roman Dig* week-long series of programmes. A trench to the west of Eaton Road was opened at their request and this showed several phases of Roman buildings of second- and third-century date, possibly preceded by timber buildings. Industrial activity, especially iron-working, was prominent in the later phases. In other trenches to the east of Eaton Road, the south end of the Roman settlement was established and the precise line of Watling street was determined.

*Time Team* made a significant donation to the Society to help fund the cost of this year's work, as well as carrying out a major geophysical survey on the site.

We are hoping, if finance is available, to have a further short season on site in 2006 to complete our investigation of the post-Roman bank and ditch

**David Mason**

## New Books

*Upton-by-Chester, A People's History* Phil Pearn, Kate Roberts, and Barbara Smith 298pp + ills, maps, plans, photographs, 8pp colour photographs (unnumbered). Chester: W H Evans & Sons Ltd for Upton-by-Chester Local History Group, 2005. ISBN 0-9548854-0-6 £15.

**L**OCAL history societies have multiplied in recent decades but few, I suspect, have yet produced a tangible piece of work as well researched and as promising as this one. 'People's history' is a slippery concept. Community projects with a historical dimension are becoming increasingly common and, in future, may well play a significant role in the collection and synthesis of local data. The real challenge to such initiatives is that they lack appropriate models and have to invent a formula that is achievable, without the support of institutional or academic structures. Moreover, the delivery of a substantial manuscript requires the services of a skilled and dedicated editorial team, who can tap into the energies and resources of a wider group of community members, as well as understanding which questions to ask and what kinds of resources to use.

The editors of this volume have created a work that will be the envy of many other local societies. They generously acknowledge their debts, first and foremost to the Upton Heath W I, whose Festival of Britain local history project of 1951 formed one of the nuclei that they have elaborated on. The number of individuals, who have contributed to the production side, as well as to the research, demonstrates that this has been an extraordinary team effort.

The structure of the book is broadly chronological, beginning with prehistoric (Mesolithic) flint flakes, and ending with personal tales – private reminiscences by twentieth-century residents; zoo animal stories; and even a ghostly touch. Each of the three authors took responsibility for a certain group of records, which were taken, in practice, to coincide with a general period of Upton's history. Kate Roberts researched the early history and

archaeology of the area, in consultation with specialists in the city and county Record Offices, the Grosvenor Museum, and with named local historians. Phil Pearn worked on the public records for the chapters covering the early modern to modern development of Upton as a residential suburb of Chester (chapters 4–13), while Barbara Smith has brought together the evidence for the people of Upton in the twentieth century, their societies, schools, places of worship, and leisure pursuits (chapters 14–19). The three contributions rightly overlap in terms of chronologies and subject matter, but the broad division into three organising principles, environment/early historic patterns; properties and their owners; and Upton society, creates a clear structure for the narrative.

The layout of the book is attractive and transparent. Each chapter is headed by a brief summary, highlighted in colour. There are a number of well produced maps, many of which are coloured to show specific spatial features, such as property ownership or land development. The wide range of photographic images includes structures that have disappeared in the course of the last century, as well as important historic views. Images are almost all carefully annotated and individuals identified. The most recent photographs bring the Upton story up to 2004.

Almost three-quarters of the book is concerned with the history of the last century. This reflects the greater accessibility of recent data to amateur researchers, as well as the focus of interest of local residents. But the early chapters show that there is much potential for future archaeological work. The members of Upton's Local History Group are to be congratulated for sponsoring such a splendid model for other societies to follow. Upton residents might nevertheless reflect on whether they want to be more ambitious, and set future projects in the wider context of city and county affairs, in view of the fact that Upton residents did not confine their activities exclusively to where they lived.

**Zosia Archibald**

## Excursions

Ruthin  
21 May 2005

**R**UTHIN, standing on a steep knoll in the Clwyd Valley, is one of the most attractive towns in North Wales. After excellent coffee and cakes at the castle, we tried to decipher the layers of its structure during the seven centuries of its construction and rebuilding – from Edwardian fortress, through seventeenth-century slighting, to Victorian mansion house. There was much to see in the old town, notably St Peter's collegiate Church, reached through the splendid wrought-iron gates made in 1727 by Robert Davies; the timber-framed Courthouse of c1401 (now the National Westminster bank); the nineteenth-century Town Hall and Market Hall; the Georgian coaching hotels and the eighteenth-century

County Hall and County Gaol, built by Joseph Turner.

On our way to Holywell, Basingwerk and Greenfield, we examined the fine pre-Norman Maen Achwyfan Stone Cross at Whitford.

The Cistercian Abbey of Basingwerk provided a splendid setting for our lunch, before we examined the eighteenth/nineteenth-century mill and factory buildings in the steeply sloping Greenfield Valley. In its heyday, this site of early water-powered industrial mills and factories must have been one of the busiest centres of rural manufacture in Britain. Its products included smelted copper, wire, brass, cotton thread and cloth. For those of us who still had breath, the final venue was the ancient St Winifred's Well, a few hundred yards up the valley, whose setting was splendidly re-designed during the Middle Ages. Thank you, Prue, for all the effort you put in to make the trip most enjoyable and informative.

**Oliver Bott**

Anglesey  
9 July 2005

The day of the trip to Anglesey dawned bright and it stayed glorious all day. After coffee at the Bridge Inn at Menai Bridge we drove to Penmon Priory, which is a very interesting monastic foundation, now the parish church. Lunch was taken in Beaumaris, giving members the chance to explore the splendid castle, the church and the courthouse.

The afternoon was spent in Amlwch port and Parys mountain. The port of Amlwch had been very busy in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, exporting minerals from Parys, but when the copper ore ran out, the port lost most of its activity.

Many thanks are due to Roy Coppack who found out much of the information about the area.

**Prue Wendt**

## Forthcoming Excursions

Two possibilities are being considered for the main weekend excursion of 2006. The first is a late summer trip to Dorset, comprising four days/three nights in the area with trips to, amongst others, Dorchester, Maiden Castle, Avebury, Badbury Rings and Deerhurst. The second possibility is a two day/one night visit to the Worcester area from April 22–23, with possible trips to Claverley, the Avoncroft Museum of Buildings, Kenilworth, and Ragley Hall amongst others.

Please indicate whether you are interested in either or both proposed excursions by giving your name and choice(s) to George Storey (*see contact details opposite*).

There will be two Saturday excursions in 2006 – on 13 May to Arbor Low, Bakewell and Haddon Hall and on 1 July to Stafford and Eccleshall. Application forms will be available in the New Year.

## Society Information

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### Library

Members are reminded that they are welcome to come in and browse through the Society's library at Chester Community History and Heritage.

### Internet

<http://www.chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk>

The *Chester Antiquary* is published twice a year, in Spring and Autumn. We welcome letters and articles from Members. Contributions for the next issue should be with the newsletter editor, Dr Ian Archibald, no later than 31 March 2006.