

AILEEN FOX: AN OBITUARY

29 July 1907 – 21 November 2005

Lady (Aileen) Fox was probably the last surviving member of the generation of archaeologists who shaped the modern discipline in this country. She had a remarkable career over seven decades as an archaeologist in Britain and, after her formal retirement, in New Zealand. Her published works and her teaching made important contributions to several generations of archaeologists, and to the study of South West England and Wales.

Aileen came from a comfortable upper middle class background: her father Walter Henderson was a solicitor. She lived first in London and then in Surrey, and was educated at Downe House School 1921–5. The eldest of three sisters, she was very close to her father and accompanied him abroad on walking holidays to examine Alpine flora. Enthusiasm for flora remained with her throughout her life, as did the relish for vigorous outdoor exercise. She was presented at court in 1926 and, after overcoming some parental opposition, read English at Newnham College, Cambridge, 1926–9.

Naturally sociable and confident, she formed a wide range of acquaintance at Cambridge, among them the prehistorian Professor Miles Burkitt. At something of a loose end after her degree she decided to take part in an excavation, building on latent interests inspired by her travels with her father. She obtained an introduction to J. P. Bushe-Fox, Inspector of Ancient Monuments, and went to work in a voluntary capacity at the Roman site of Richborough in the summer of 1929. The winter of 1929–30 was spent at the British School at Rome and in the summer of 1930 she returned to Richborough as Bushe-Fox's paid assistant, with the special task of arranging the site museum and subsequently preparing finds reports. Through work at Richborough she made numerous archaeological acquaintances, among them Bryan O'Neil (another Inspector), Raleigh Radford, Thurlow Leeds from the Ashmolean Museum, and Reginald Smith and Christopher Hawkes from the British Museum. In 1932 she had her first introduction to Devon when she assisted Dorothy Liddell in the third season of the Devon Archaeological Exploration Society's excavations at Hembury hillfort near Honiton. Also in 1932 she met her future husband Cyril Fox who was to lose his first wife through a drowning accident later that year. He was one of the pre-eminent prehistorians of his day and, in 1935, received a knighthood for his development of the National Museum of Wales. The close companionship of her father and friendship with many older eminent scholars made her comfortable with the prospect of marrying him when he proposed in 1933 although the then Director of the National Museum of Wales was 25 years her senior.

In Wales Aileen integrated her developing career with the demanding roles of a supportive wife to a high-profile husband and with the raising of three sons. With Cyril or alone, she carried out fieldwork and excavation on a wide range of sites which provided the foundation for her life-long interest in the Iron Age and its fortifications and in Roman sites in Britain. She also, as her bibliography reveals, made a substantial contribution to the archaeology of the medieval period. From 1940 until 1945 she consolidated her knowledge by lecturing at University College, Cardiff, where she realised how much she enjoyed disseminating archaeological knowledge through teaching.

In 1945 she accepted the challenge of three seasons' work investigating the Roman levels of war-damaged Exeter before its rebuilding, the earliest systematic 'rescue' programme of its kind. Extensive areas of the walled city had been bomb-damaged and

subsequently razed to the ground; she appreciated that this calamity offered a unique opportunity for excavation. A decade earlier, V.E. Nash-Williams had commented that all that was needed to understand the archaeology of Roman Exeter was a few well-placed trenches. Aileen aimed higher than that, examining parts of Roman buildings, streets and town defences. Being of an independent mind, she did not excavate by laying out a grid of squares in the manner of Wheeler and his followers but instead used a mix of trenches and open areas, presaging later practice, albeit on a modest scale. Funds and labour were restricted; her excavators in the first season were six Italian prisoners of war who cooked their spaghetti in an abandoned air-raid shelter. The first seasons' work was published in *Roman Exeter: Excavations in War-Damaged Areas 1945-7* (1952); further excavations in the city followed into the mid 1960s. Although her conclusions were often modified by later work – a fact which she warmly applauded – the excavations of the 1940s laid the foundations for our modern understanding of Exeter in the Roman period.

Her work in Exeter led to an invitation to take up a Special Lectureship in the then University College of the South West in 1947. Initially part-time, this became full-time after Sir Cyril's retirement in 1948 when a family move to Exeter became possible. As Senior Lecturer she remained at Exeter until retirement in 1972; as Sir Cyril lived until 1967 there was time for some collaborative projects. At Exeter she energetically pursued the development of the teaching of archaeology, only thwarted in the establishment of an archaeology department by the mesh of university politics and of (male) personalities. Throughout her career she was deeply conscious that women had to fight for much that men took for granted and this background injustice was an enduring motivation. Her enthusiasm for her subject, taught unusually for the 1940s and 50s with a strong emphasis on fieldwork, made her teaching a warm and inspiring memory to several generations of archaeologists, the late Desmond Bonney, Graeme Guilbert and John Allan among them. Even in her later years she was a person with tremendous energy; her last Exeter students recall the sight of Aileen, then aged over 60, striding purposefully up the steep slope to a hillfort, shooting stick in hand, with a string of students lagging behind.

During her time at Exeter Aileen embarked on several important research programmes in South West Britain, on topics which then had had little up-to-date study. Two excavation campaigns on Dartmoor, at Kes Tor in 1951-2 and at Dean Moor 1954-6, provided good data on the extensive prehistoric settlements on Dartmoor. Their publications in the *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* remain classics and formed the basis of a paper in the *Prehistoric Society's Proceedings* for 1954 'Celtic fields and farms on Dartmoor'. Her interest in hillforts led to the identification of a distinctive group with multiple enclosures in South Wales and South West Britain, published as papers in the *Archaeological Journal* and in *Problems of the Iron Age in Southern Britain*.

In 1945 there was no formal evidence for a Roman military presence in Devon or Cornwall. Aileen's investigations with her collaborator historical geographer William Ravenhill first demonstrated fortlets at Old Burrow and Martinhoe on the Exmoor coast. Between 1965 and 1969 they conducted four seasons of excavations at Nanstallon in Cornwall and showed conclusively that it was a Roman fort. All excavations were rapidly and clearly published to a high standard. A synthesis *South West England* appeared in 1964 in Thames & Hudson's Ancient Peoples and Places series; revised in 1973 this remains an important work which has had a wide influence on local archaeology. In writing archaeological reports, especially those on unpublished finds or excavations, she found great fulfilment in reducing the subject to an orderly and accessible account, aimed at more than just her professional colleagues. Her publications were influenced by the 'culture history' school developed by her husband and other major scholars of the 1930s such as Christopher Hawkes and Mortimer Wheeler.

The discovery of a mirror at the Roman 'villa' site at Holcombe, Uplyme, in the late 1960s linked in with Aileen's interest in Iron Age design, a topic in which Sir Cyril had

been very much a pioneer, in works such as *Pattern and Purpose*. The mirror, now the Society's logo, formed the subject of a major paper co-authored with Sheila Pollard in *The Antiquaries Journal* for 1973. She also carried out pioneering work on medieval settlement at Dean Moor on Dartmoor, provided the first publication of post-Roman imported wares at Bantham in South Devon and arranged for the first radiocarbon dates to be obtained for the Neolithic causewayed enclosure at Hembury. One major aspect of her work which has been often overlooked was her term as Recorder for Archaeology and Early History for the Devonshire Association from 1949 to 1963: her reports in that Society's Transactions provide an invaluable record of archaeological research and discoveries through those years. She was also one of the few academics who have presented their learning to children, writing *Roman Britain* with Alan Sorrell in 1961.

Aileen had been an enthusiastic supporter of the Council for British Archaeology since its inception in 1944. Initial efforts to set up the local Group XIII had not worked out and in 1949 Aileen was asked to re-form the group and act as its Convenor, and thus she laid the foundations of the successful regional group which exists today. She continued as Convenor for over a decade and was actively involved in the work of the Group until 1972. She also served as a Vice-President of the national body.

In 1947 there was no other archaeologist employed in Devon or Cornwall. In the next twenty five years Aileen became involved in all aspects of local archaeology playing pivotal roles in the Devon Archaeological Society (President 1963-4), the Devonshire Association and the Exeter Civic Society. She became archaeological consultant to Devon County Council, the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments and the Archaeological Division of the Ordnance Survey. In all her concern was the protection of archaeological sites and appropriate provision for excavation when development made destruction inevitable. She continued rescue excavations in Exeter until the mid-1960s but recognised that modern techniques and area excavation now demanded full-time staffing. The establishment of the Exeter Archaeological Field Unit in 1971 was largely the result of her efforts, efforts rewarded in that first year by the major discovery of the bathhouse of *Legio II Augusta* in the Cathedral Close. The Unit, now named Exeter Archaeology, continues to provide a high-standard archaeological service in the City and throughout the South West, and she remained a firm supporter of its successive Directors. Archaeology finally achieved its own Department at the University of Exeter in 1998, and now has 14 academic staff and over 200 students.

On her retirement from Exeter in 1972 Aileen decided to leave the staff in the University, the Museum and the Field Unit, many of whom were in posts created because of her campaigning, to 'get on with' (her own words) the archaeology of South West Britain, while she accepted the offer of a visiting lectureship at Auckland in New Zealand. She recognised that she needed a new challenge and a new outlet for her energies. The initial appointment was for one year, subsequently extended. There followed a two year post at Auckland Museum and then the voluntary position of Honorary Archaeologist until 1983. In New Zealand archaeology was still the small world she had first encountered in Britain in the 1930s, though on the brink of major expansion, and provided numerous challenges of the type she enjoyed. Moreover the principal field monuments, the Maori *paa* or fortified settlements, had some similarities with the hillforts of southern Britain. She conducted excavations at Tiromoana Pa, carried out field survey work with students, and became heavily involved the work of the Archaeological Committee of the Historic Places Trust which necessitated the compilation of a national register of sites. She was excited by the challenge that the recent Maori archaeology presented, by prehistoric sites which could be studied together with documentation provided by incoming colonial settlers. Three monographs resulted, each of which has provided an enduring contribution to the study of archaeology in New Zealand: *Prehistoric Maori Fortifications in the North Island of New Zealand*, 1976, *Tiromanga Pa*, *Te Awanga*, *Hawkes Bay: Excavations*

1974-5, 1978 and *Carved Maori Burial Chests*, 1983. She was also instrumental in the establishment of the *New Zealand Journal of Archaeology*. The esteem and affection with which her colleagues came to hold her is well expressed in the Festschrift presented to her on her departure, *A Lot of Spadework to be Done*. The title comes from a typically forthright comment made by Aileen about a New Zealand project; its use for the Festschrift reflects the warm atmosphere in which her help was accepted and appreciated.

On her return to Exeter her contribution to Southwestern studies was recognised by the dedication of *Prehistoric Dartmoor in its Context*, the proceedings of a major conference organised by the Devon Archaeological Society in 1979. She again involved herself in the archaeology of the South West, promoting appropriate preservation of buildings and writing archaeological papers into the 1990s including a handbook to Devon's hillforts in 1996. In 1985 the award of an Honorary Doctorate by Exeter University provided validation of her long career and proved the source of very great pleasure among the growing restrictions of age. She continued to play an active role in local archaeological affairs, and took a lively interest in current work, continuing to visit excavations and leading a visit to Devon hillforts in her 90th year. In 1998 she was awarded Honorary Membership of the Prehistoric Society in recognition of her contribution to the prehistoric archaeology of South West Britain.

Aileen's final contribution to archaeology was her delightful autobiography. Written in the 1980s and published in 2000 (*Aileen-A Pioneering Archaeologist*, Gracewing), this is a highly readable and personalised account of her life, work and married life. It is remarkable for the 'flavour' it provides of the character of archaeological life in Britain through the successive decades of her involvement. Today's is indeed another world from that in which Aileen started out, a world in which a lady volunteer was only expected to supervise records and finds with perhaps a little light trowelling. All the post-war generation of both sexes who started work with pickaxes and wheelbarrows, to say nothing of earth moving machinery and computers, can see how far the profession of archaeology has now come and how its structure has changed with the years. Her autobiography forms a fitting end to an influential and long-lasting career.

Henrietta Quinnell

AILEEN FOX: A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PUBLISHED WORKS

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