
Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

Volume XCVI
for 2007



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Editor Sarah Bendall

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Obituary

DAVID RAOUL WILSON BLITT, MA, FSA, MIFA 1932–2006

The Society was very sorry to learn of the death of David Raoul Wilson on 6 August 2006. He served on the Council of the Antiquarian Society for 15 years from 1979, as Ordinary member, Vice-President and as President during 1988–90. He introduced the Capriol Dancers and spoke on Social dance in Europe 1250–1650 in 1987, and in 1989 lectured on and displayed the University's collection of aerial photographs to members. Both occasions were unusually and memorably concluded with 'refreshments'. It fell to him to oversee and host the 150th Anniversary celebrations of the Society's founding during 1989–90; they included a formal dinner at St John's College and a reception attended by the Duke of Gloucester. We are grateful to Derek Edwards for providing the obituary published below.

David Wilson was born on 30 October 1932 in Tunbridge Wells and died peacefully in Cambridge on Sunday 6 August 2006, aged 74, having been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in November 2005. In the short time remaining to him before his untimely death, with intense enthusiasm and typical attention to detail, he completed work on his publications in progress, prepared his own eulogy and determined the order of service for his Humanist funeral.

David Wilson had three careers: as a classical scholar and Roman archaeologist, as an aerial photographer, and as a dance historian. He had a profound effect on each of his chosen disciplines, attaining an excellence that both inspired and commanded the respect of all those who had the privilege to know and work with him. He was a deeply private man, with an alluring, if wry, sense of humour. In the field of archaeological aerial photography, he was one of a small and ever-diminishing number of master-practitioners, the like of whom we may never see again.

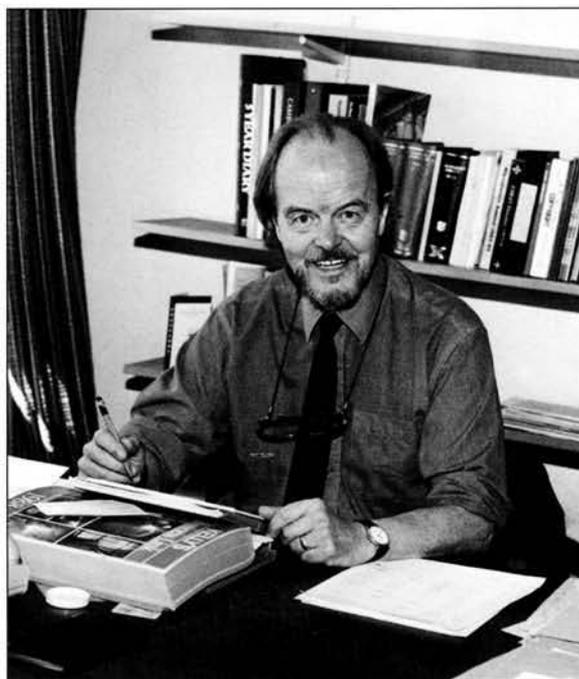
David's interest in Roman archaeology developed when, as a sixth-former, he learnt his excavation technique from Professor Sheppard Frere on the bombed sites of Canterbury, when Frere was still a schoolmaster at Lancing College. A scholarship in Classics to Oriel College, Oxford, caused David to delay his national service until 1955. It was this training in classical studies that would later place David in a unique position when reviewing the works of eminent classical scholars who strayed into the sphere of aerial photography and archaeology.

Four years in the Oxford University Cadet Force allowed David to complete eight weeks of basic training and to go on to officer training. In due course he passed out from Mons Officer Cadet School as Senior Cadet with the Stick of Honour and was posted to 1 RHA at Münster (Westfalen). David found army life as a subaltern in a leading regiment sufficiently congenial to consider a Short Service Commission. Two factors held him back. First, as a national serviceman he gave of his best, but he was still doing so under compulsion. Secondly, if he took a Short Service Commission, he would become a professional with the serious intention of training people to kill others. For David, even a three-year Commission was too much to contemplate and he returned to Oriel, determined to become a professional archaeologist.

Supported by a scholarship and then Fellowship of the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, he undertook two seasons of fieldwork in Northern Anatolia, (Bithynia, Paphlagonia and Pontus). The study of the historical geography of the area made good sense but was ludicrously large for ground exploration. It was as he was beginning to write up in his third year of study that Professor Sir Ian Richmond invited David to become his Research Assistant at Oxford and, with exquisite tact, told him that he (Richmond) was currently too busy to give David any work and that he had better get his thesis finished!

So began five of the happiest years of David's life, working as a Roman archaeologist, assisting Miss M. V. Taylor, the editor of the *Journal of Roman Studies* – who was heard to say on occasion that he had 'excellent judgement' – and working with Professor Sir Ian Richmond on the revision of R. G. Collingwood's classic *The Archaeology of Roman Britain* (1930). David was pleased to note that he was able to exert 'great influence' in the choice of illustrative material for the revised work.

On 1 April 1965, after an exhilarating trial flight, untroubled by *mal de l'air*, David Wilson began his second career and became an aerial photographer, joining the late Kenneth St Joseph's small pioneering team of aerial photographers and photo-interpreters at the Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography (CUCAP). In those



Photograph courtesy of Rozann Whimster

early months at Cambridge, following the death of Ian Richmond, David was also responsible for over-seeing the publication of the revised *The Archaeology of Roman Britain* for Methuen.

Three days after his appointment as St Joseph's Senior Research Assistant, on 3 April 1965, David married Gay Marsden and they went on a fortnight's honeymoon, digging at Lezoux (the south Gaulish production centre for *terra sigillata*) with Brian Hartley. Unfortunately, their marriage survived only into the mid-seventies; their amicable separation was celebrated with a fancy dress ball at their home in Haslingfield. The sight of David, masquerading as Mephistopheles, dressed in a crimson smoking jacket, with fiery horns and an enormous, black, barbed tail draped over his arm is a lasting personal memory and testament to his remarkable sense of humour.

By 1965 Kenneth St Joseph's unique programme of interdisciplinary aerial reconnaissance was already in its twenty-first year. It was, however, David's arrival that paved the way for some of the most important and creative years in the life of CUCAP and he acquired and developed new skills, involving both oblique and vertical survey photography that was relevant to many areas of research – agriculture, archaeology, ecology, forestry, geology and geographical subjects of all kinds – and subsumed himself in undergraduate and extra-mural teaching and the publication of educational text-books such as the *Roman Frontiers of Britain* (1967), for Heinemann Educational Books. However, working with Kenneth St Joseph in Cambridge was, for David, a less happy experience than his five years in Oxford.

These were the decades that saw the Cambridge flying programme extend its range from mainland Britain to Ireland, France, the Netherlands and Denmark. It was also the period when simple archaeological reconnaissance began to expand into the mature and sophisticated sub-discipline that it has become today. David's contribution to that growth took many influential forms. In the air he was responsible for literally hundreds of new archaeological discoveries, many of which were never acknowledged, while, on the ground, his rigorous standards ensured the consistent technical excellence of the CUCAP collection and its supporting catalogues.

David was elected a Fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge, in 1971 and it was in those halcyon days of the early seventies, when archaeological aerial reconnaissance was, possibly, at the height of its development and practice in the United Kingdom, that an International Symposium took place in London. The papers from this symposium were edited by David and published by the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) under the title *Aerial Reconnaissance in Archaeology* (1975).

The CBA adopted the symposium committee as its own Research Committee in Archaeological Aerial Photography in 1975 and David was one of its most distinguished members for many years. When the CBA promoted regional committees for aerial reconnaissance, David became Chair of the Committee for the Anglian Region and was instrumental in the establishment of the Aerial Archaeology Foundation and the journal, *Aerial Archaeology*. This journal first reviewed all the photographic archives in the Anglian Region and then, in volume 3, included a 25-page gazetteer of all the known, published, archaeological aerial photography in the region, a task that required meticulous attention to detail and one to which David was ideally suited as senior contributor.

David was a Founder Member of the Aerial Archaeology Research Group (AARG) and he made regular and enthusiastic contributions to both the Annual Conference and the group's *Newsletter*. His role as a catalyst for the publication of books and articles about aerial photography have been equally important to the discipline, and include the splendid *Cambridge Air Survey* volumes published under his evangelical direction during the 1980s and 1990s. His editorial role brought the message of aerial photography to a whole series of new audiences, both in the United Kingdom and around the world.

David was a Founder Member of the National Association of Aerial Photographic Libraries (NAPLIB), Honorary Secretary (1989–93), President (1993–6) and Past President (1996–8) and the driving force behind the publication of the *NAPLIB Directory of Aerial Photographic Collections in the United Kingdom* (1993), and his own *The Care and Storage of Photographs: Recommendations for Good Practice* in 1997. He was a perpetual inspiration to all who care for air photographs and appreciate their irreplaceable importance as sources of information and understanding about the landscapes of yesterday and today.

When Professor St Joseph retired from Cambridge in 1980, David was appointed Curator of Aerial Photography, an increasingly demanding role that combined the traditional skills of aerial photographer, archival conservator, librarian, academic researcher and teacher combined with the unique entrepreneurial ability to ensure CUCAP's survival in an increasingly competitive, modern, university world.

In addition to his editorial role at Cambridge, David's research resulted in a steady sequence of papers on subjects as diverse as Neolithic causewayed enclosures, Romano-Celtic temples, villas, Roman forts and smaller Roman towns. His study of the mechanics of cropmark formation led to the publication of *Air Photo Interpretation for Archaeologists* (1982), subsequently revised and republished by Tempus in 2000. To this day it remains one of the most accessible and helpful introductions to the techniques of aerial archaeology. Though, in David's opinion, this seminal work is now 'out of date in many ways', it has still to be replaced by 'the work of a younger man'.

It was in 1980, shortly after his marriage to Elizabeth Wallwork, whom he met at an archaeological conference in York, that Elizabeth took David by the hand and led him to the dance floor, launching him into his third career, which, like the first two, would again make his name truly international. She introduced him to early dance and the Capriol Society for Courtly Dancing: a move that led him into an entirely new form of activity, first dancing with his beloved Elizabeth, who he research resulted in the production of including *Domenico of Piacenza* (2006), a dance treatise.

David and Elizabeth shared several their lives but she tragically died from years later, in 1997, he retired from University responsibilities allowed dance, which had already been his In the following years, and in addition work that he did for the Cambridge David was instrumental in setting up a Dance for the Early Dance Circle and February 2006, the Early Dance Circle of David's contribution to the study of first ever Peggy Dixon Trophy, awarded Dance'.

In his final weeks, David was hard *Roman Britain 1977–84*, which he had 1987, and had already completed the Rebecca Jones. But he was also striving complete study of the basse danse from the late sixteenth-century volumes of a few weeks before his death, the in the United States of America awaiting publication by Pendragon Press: the final chapter of an invaluable legacy of published material by an internationally acclaimed scholar.



Inset: David Wilson wearing an accurate reproduction of a late sixteenth-century Italian court costume. Photograph courtesy of Hugh Hillyard-Parker.

years that were some of the happiest of metastatic breast cancer in 1993. Four his University work. Freedom from David to dedicate himself to historical principal research interest for ten years. to the very considerable voluntary Cancer Help Centre and other bodies, National Resource Centre for Historical cataloguing their substantial library. In was proud to recognise the magnitude early dance by presenting him, with the for 'Outstanding Service to Early

at work updating *Air Reconnaissance in* first published with G. S. Maxwell in first revision, from 1985 to 1990, with to finish his final *magnum opus*, with its earliest form to the latest, found in Caroso and Negri. Completed only manuscript of this masterpiece is now

