
Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

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for 2009



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Mary Desborough Cra'ster, 1928–2008

Editor of the *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*,
1961–1990

John Pickles, Peter Gathercole, and Alison Taylor

With thanks to Colonel J M Craster, Professor D W Phillipson, Professor J M Coles,
Professor Dame M Strathern, Mr G Owen, Mrs M Caroe, and Dr J Moon.



Mary Cra'ster's long association with our Society and with the Cambridge Faculty and Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology won her many friends who were saddened to learn of her death in Northumberland in November 2008 at the age of eighty. She became a member of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society (CAS) in 1957 and served on its Council as editor of the *Proceedings* for thirty years and then for a further four years as Vice-President. No one who has experienced the arduous task of guiding contributors, making their texts presentable, and dealing with printers from copy through proofs to final publication year after year with only modest help will underestimate her importance in the Society's recent history. It was fitting that she was later made one of our very few Honorary Members. But she did much more—for the Museum and Faculty, and for many outside bodies, and all with characteristic good humour and disciplined application.

Mary Desborough Cra'ster was born on 28 June 1928 at Coonoor in the Nilgiri Hills of South India, the only child of a career soldier George Craster (see *Who Was Who 1951-1960*) and his wife Christian. The Crasters of Craster in Northumberland are one of the longest settled families in that county yet many of them have made their mark in the wider world. Her maternal grandfather W D Caroe (1857-1938) was a distinguished ecclesiastical architect of Danish descent of whom an account will be found in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. He had been a member of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society and wrote *King's Hostel, Trinity College* (CAS, new quarto series, II, 1909). The Crasters returned from India by way of Cyprus where they spent a couple of years, and settled in Northumberland at Ilderton Glebe in the late 1930s. Mary was educated at North Foreland Lodge school which was evacuated to Gloucestershire for the duration, and entered St Anne's, Oxford, in

1947. She read Greats and took her BA in 1951 before studying for the Oxford diploma in Anthropology in which she attained distinction in 1952. The Oxford University Archaeological Association made her its excavation secretary in the same year.

Mary dug with Sir Mortimer Wheeler for two seasons at Stanwick in Yorkshire and with Professor Christopher Hawkes at the Lexden dykes at Colchester. Impressed by her commonsense—‘she is completely methodical (without pedantry)’—Wheeler soon promoted her ‘supervisor’; Hawkes found her a ‘most apt pupil’, steady and responsible, who was besides popular with others of all ages. ‘She is not’ he wrote prophetically, ‘one who would selfishly pursue individual research for the sake of purely personal advancement; she would take her own part in teamwork, but take it loyally’. For a year she did voluntary work at Norwich Castle museum, then one of the best regional museums for archaeology under Rainbird Clarke, and so began a long interest in the archaeology of East Anglia. She was appointed from a large field of applicants as Assistant Curator at the city of Gloucester museum at the beginning of 1954, and Hawkes who visited several times described her reorganisation of its exhibitions as ‘tasteful, popular in the best sense, and accurately yet pleasingly informative’.

In January 1957 she was appointed (the only) Assistant to Dr Geoffrey Bushnell, Curator of the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology, as it was then called. There she remained under his two successors, Peter Gathercole (1970–81) and David Phillipson. She became Senior Assistant Curator in 1980. Her curatorial and archaeological work are noticed below, and she also contributed to teaching within the Faculty. For many years Professor Coles collaborated with Mary on a course for first-year students on the ‘Archaeology of Southern Britain’ when her main contribution was to provide artefacts for them to examine and handle. ‘Mary was efficient and purposeful, ensuring that the objects were well-maintained and returned to their respective drawers after use, and she was a mine of information about provenances and discoveries of many pieces that deserved more detailed publication or archiving ... She was always someone who would provide assistance to other members of the Department during the rather hectic terms with a wide variety of teaching approaches and equally wide variety of students’. Students have other memories—of the determined way she brought country life into the building, chiefly in the form of a succession of black Labradors who spent the day in her office (a set of spoof exam papers in the seventies included an invitation to ‘Discuss the relationships of archaeologists to their dogs’), and of inconclusive discussions about how she might be involved with the famous Craster kippers. When the Museum coffee room needed decorating ‘a bunch of us volunteered to teeter on the Maori canoe and other handy footholds to spend a Saturday slapping paint about. You wouldn’t get away with that now. The reward was a magnificent meal at Mary’s won-

derful country house, with unlimited alcohol, and concluding with sloe gin in Chinese horsehair teacups’ (Jane Moon). Few would have guessed that the chatelaine of the Museum—literally so since she wore her keys—had once been a *débutante*.

Mary retired from the University in 1988, an occasion marked by a memorable and well attended party. She finally left Harston for Craster Tower, which she shared with cousins, in 1994. In the early years of retirement, when she was travelling all over the world, she was usually able to find a former pupil to host her at her chosen destination. Religion was very important to her; for a long time she served as Churchwarden of All Saints, Harston and in 1994 received a letter of thanks from the Bishop of Ely. At St Peter’s, Craster, she did not impose her views but was not shy of expressing them. She joined the Alnwick Choral Society and her activity with the Art Club was enshrined in her clear presence in the picture in the Memorial Hall. Mary also contributed much to the Millennium History project for the book *We Can Mind the Time*. As Colonel Michael Craster recalled at her funeral, whether it was plants and gardens, music, art, embroidery, knitting, local history, birds, make do and mend—his father christened her ‘Araldite’—her encyclopaedic knowledge and ability to turn her hand to anything were extraordinary. ‘She could be dogmatic, difficult, thoroughly eccentric ... but she was also wise, kind, generous, compassionate and pragmatic. She was a grand listener, thoughtful and non-judgemental. If you went to her with a problem you always got a fair hearing and a considered response. Above all she was in her element with the young, as her pupils and her god-children can testify’.

The Museum

On becoming Curator of the University Museum in 1970 my first task was to learn the collections. Here Mary Craster’s comprehensive knowledge of the archaeological collections was invaluable. She had then been an Assistant Curator for thirteen years (for the first nine of which the *only* one), during which time she had not only learnt the collections in detail, but also how they contributed to Faculty teaching, particularly in classes for first-year students, when artefacts were handled, which involved her careful choice of the relevant material. She was on good terms with the teaching staff, and her knowledge was vital in helping more advanced students who required access to particular collections.

Mary was effective and to the point on committees. This was important, for example, when she represented the Museum or the University on outside bodies, such as the South Midlands Museum Federation and the Area Museums Service for South-Eastern England. She served for some time on the Council of the Society of Antiquaries, of which she had been elected a Fellow in 1963. And when we had to organise a committee to oversee the rescue archaeology relating to the building of the M11 motorway,

her knowledge of the sites likely to be affected was crucial.

She was very aware of the importance of the Museum within the University as a centre for teaching and research, but she was conscious that the significance of its collections was often insufficiently appreciated by many members of staff. So when we decided that, if this was to be changed, a complete overhaul of the collections (some of which had never been properly accessioned) was required, involving radically improved storage and the reworking of certain well-known displays, she worked tirelessly to that end.

With the late Pat Carter, Assistant Curator, she planned a new archaeological gallery to take up all the ground floor with significant collections from world archaeology; it was unique in Britain, a teaching aid for students and visiting schools of remarkable scope and richness, unparalleled at the time at any other museum in the country. It was opened by the Prince of Wales (who had been a student in the Faculty) at the centenary celebration of the Museum's founding in 1984. Shortly afterwards Mary's role was recognised by a Fellowship of the Museum Association, when the citation referred to her 'self-effacing service over thirty years to her museum, her students and to the profession generally through her academic work and cheerful and efficient help whenever called upon by colleagues.'

Mary was easy to work with. She knew her own mind, and expressed her views clearly, sometimes forcibly. She helped new curatorial staff to settle in. Marilyn Strathern, a junior colleague in the 1960s, has written of Mary's 'immense kindness that made it self apparent without fuss or self-advertisement', yet tempered by a 'sort of brusque minimalism. We were good allies and she allowed me a great deal of elbow room'. Mary later welcomed the recognition within the University of the movement towards equal status for curators and lecturers, including entitlement to sabbatical leave, as an expression of the Museum's increased importance, to which she greatly contributed. Her promotion to the new grade of Senior Assistant Curator was richly deserved. I much valued her as both colleague and friend.

Local Archaeology

Mary was not only responsible for all aspects of the Museum's superb British archaeological collections, she was also effectively the county archaeologist for a lengthy period until I was appointed in 1974. She compiled a prototype sites and monuments record by recording all reported finds (on maps that predated the National Grid but which were invaluable when we created the new SMR), gave advice to planners through the Cambridgeshire Archaeological Committee, opposed the worst threats to sites and historic buildings, and represented archaeological interests on many committees. It was she too who would be called out whenever something 'looking old' was

found by the public, police (for human remains), or builders. Some of these calls led to significant finds and larger excavations which she sometimes directed herself, and many more were noted and described for the benefit of the Ordnance Survey Archaeological Record and for the Museum. Such single-handed rescue work on building sites was an underestimated feature of British archaeology in those years, and Cambridgeshire was lucky to have Mary to take it on. Much would have been lost without such work. She also of course published the results of significant work (see Bibliography), not an easy call when she was also editing each CAS volume.

Mary was also a prototype Portable Antiquities Scheme. She warmly welcomed the public who brought in objects they had found, and her identifications, often with help from colleagues such as Joan Liversidge and Charles McBurney, were of course reliable and enlightening. Finders were made to feel so special that many of the artefacts were cheerfully given to the Museum. Mary herself made the Early Anglo-Saxon period her speciality, perhaps because she was responsible for such outstanding collections of this period as well as being involved in cemetery excavations, and her support for scholars who came to study this material, as well as for students who were inspired by it, helped make the Museum collections of this period the best known in Britain. Once I was appointed as first County Archaeologist for Cambridgeshire Mary gave huge amounts of support and advice whenever needed, also making Museum resources available so that it was possible to set up a new archaeological service from scratch. She was always a fund of local as well as archaeological knowledge, and her moral support was available too, the famous teas held in her room each day being a welcome refuge from a county council environment.

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