

## IN MEMORIAM

**Eric Birley (1906-1995)**

Chairman of Council 1947-51; Editor 1948-57, President 1957-60; Member 1926; Hon Member 1965.

The death of Eric Birley, at his home at Carvoran, on the 20 October 1995, marked the end of an era of Roman scholarship which laid the foundation for an understanding of Hadrian's Wall and its hinterland, and shaped the thinking of all scholars of the Roman north to the present day. His death also deprived the Society not only of its longest serving member, and senior Past-President, but of one who had been involved in, and had influenced, all of its spheres of activity, and had remained actively interested in its welfare until the end of his life.

He was born at Eccles, Lancashire, on 12 January 1906, and educated at Clifton College and Brasenose College, Oxford. His interest in the Roman army began at school, but took flight at Oxford under the influence of Michael Holroyd, and R. G. Collingwood who pointed him in the direction of Wall studies. He joined this Society when an undergraduate, and was digging at Birdoswald in 1928 when he heard that he had achieved a first in Greats. After a brief interlude engaged in watching briefs in the City of London, he returned to the north and took up a teaching post at Durham University (first at Armstrong College, Newcastle, and then The Durham Colleges). After that he never left the Wall and its hinterland, nor Durham University.

In 1929 he bought the fort at Chesterholm/Vindolanda and after his marriage to Peggy (Margaret Goodlet) they and their two sons, Robin and Anthony, lived there until 1950, when they moved to Durham. The pre-war years were busily filled with excavations at Birdoswald, Housesteads, and Birrens, and *Transactions* received regular contributions on these sites and on the wider implications of Samian pottery, and Roman inscriptions. A short article in the 1935 *Transactions*, "A Note on the Second Cohort of Tungrians", is a typical example of his detailed knowledge of the Roman army and of the way in which he could put together a picture of its workings from scraps of evidence. It was typical also that the extensive footnotes were full of interesting asides, which in others might have been inflated into a whole article.

His abilities were put to a punishing test in the Second World War when he served in the Military Intelligence Research section, and ended as the Chief of the German Military Document section whose task was to predict the strength and the movements of the German forces. After the war he was able to confirm that his predictions had been phenomenally correct, but perhaps it was not until Milton Schulman's article in *The Standard*, 24 Nov 95 that it was widely realised how crucial his role had been. For Schulman, who worked with a Canadian Intelligence team MI14, Birley was "an almost legendary figure", and was "pre-eminent among those who gave our commanders the information needed to defeat Hitler". Members of our Society will remember that when in 1993 the Society gave a lunch in Eric Birley's honour, in his reply to the toast he explained how he had been spotted for his important war work: he had written on the recruitment form in which he had to put down any relevant qualifications, . . . "and know something about the Roman army". It is a rare gift to a scholar for his esoteric knowledge to be recognised as of such substantial value. After the war what he had learnt in studying a contemporary army fed back into a stream of papers on the career structure of the Roman army (some of them at odds with received opinions), and in *Transactions* he published a notable series of articles on the current state of knowledge of eleven Roman forts in Cumberland and Westmorland. Much of his best work was published

in local rather than national Journals, but all of the topics covered addressed wider issues than the merely regional.

He passionately believed in the value of the work of Local Societies, recruited for them amongst his colleagues, and joined in their varied activities enthusiastically. In our Society he was an able Editor from 1948-1957, and a member of the Excavation Committee from 1930-1973, of the Prehistoric Studies Committee from 1932-1969 and of the Parish Register Committee from 1948-1980. This last may seem surprising, but he was keenly interested in antiquarian studies, and indeed one of his most important works is *Research on Hadrian's Wall* (1961), the text of which he had prepared for the 8th Hadrian's Wall Pilgrimage, in 1959. This should have been a high point for him : he was the President of both the Cumberland and Westmorland, and the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle, and was looking forward to welcoming his friends from far and wide, but in the event he was carried into the gathering for a mere half hour on the last day. He wrote with rueful humour to the Councils of the Societies, "I have often heard the shifting of books described as a back breaking job, but it was only last Sunday that I realised how dangerously near the truth that was. The upshot was a slipped disc . . . But our chain is strong enough to draw you *per lineam valli* even though one of its links has been removed for repairs".

Nevertheless, he survived to address the 1989 Pilgrimage at Birdoswald - the scene of his first excavation, and the links that he established with continental scholars interested in Roman Frontiers have been of abiding value. In 1949, in the bitter aftermath of war, he inaugurated The Congress of Frontier Studies, bringing scholars from all over Europe to Newcastle, and in 1974 he was elected its Honorary Life President. He maintained a lively international correspondence until his death, and never ceased to contribute to scholarship. He had many honours: he became an MBE in 1943, was awarded Polonia Restituta in 1944, and the Legion of Honour in 1947. He was an FBA from 1969, and he was made an honorary Dr Phil at Freiberg in 1970, honorary D.Litt at Leicester in 1971 and honorary Dr *honoris causa* at Heidelberg in 1986.

This recognition gave him pleasure, but he himself said that his greatest satisfaction derived from the achievements of his students (both inside and outside the University). At Durham he founded an Archaeology Department which has grown and prospered ever since. His students in the joint Colleges of Durham and Newcastle included such notable figures as John Gillam, George Jobey, Michael Jarrett, Brian Dobson and David Breeze, but a host of other students and colleagues connected with his department or from Hatfield College, where he was for a time the Master, benefitted from his generous gifts of research materials, access to his magnificent library, and most of all access to his time and personal interest in their career development. As happily his colleague for sixteen years, I appreciated very much his unstinting encouragement, patience, and interest in a field of work very different from his own, and this was the experience of many. He was never bored by the young and their half digested ideas, and he was willing to look at new ways of spreading interest in his subject until the end of his life. In the quiet years he spent in retirement, his son Robin's discoveries at Vindolanda, together with the development of the museum and the two educational centres at Vindolanda and Carvoran, were a source of great interest and pride, while in a different way the appointment of Anthony Birley to a Chair in a German University seemed also to be the natural extension of his life's work. His ashes are fittingly buried in the garden at Chesterholm.

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