

BEN EDWARDS: An Appreciation **1934 – 2011**

BEN EDWARDS, who died on 24 February 2011, after a short illness, was Lancashire's first County Archaeologist (based in the County Record Office in Preston), a post that he held from 1963 until his retirement in 1995. He always took pleasure from the fact that his was the first appointment in the country to such a post.

Ben was brought up in Colchester, where early on he gained a taste for rediscovering the past; the family home was not far from the Roman site, and the garden yielded Roman artefacts which Ben dutifully recorded. He was educated at Colchester Royal Grammar School and, in 1953, won an Open Exhibition to the University of Durham to read Geography. At Durham, he became a member of Hatfield College, of which the late Professor Eric Birley was the Master. Ben was later to contribute a paper on 'Roman Lancashire' to the *Festschrift* presented to Eric Birley to mark his sixtieth birthday.

It was at this time that two important opportunities came his way – encouragement to become involved in archaeological excavation, and the chance to work, as an illustrator, on the doctoral research project of the late Michael Jarrett. This eventually led to the first of Ben's many publications – a paper in *Archaeologia Aeliana*, produced jointly with Jarrett, on the medieval and other pottery from Finchale Priory in County Durham. Indeed, his bibliography shows that Ben's initial specialism was firmly located in the field of medieval pottery.

Ben graduated with an Honours degree, in which he had been taught, among others, by Eric Birley, which left him with a lifelong love of Hadrian's Wall and its interpretative problems and opportunities. After graduating, Ben was called up for National Service, in which he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Royal Army Service Corps. Following this, in 1961, he applied for and was awarded a postgraduate Sir James Knott Fellowship at King's College, which was then still part of Durham University. His formal postgraduate work was, however, cut short in 1963 by his appointment to his post with Lancashire County Council.

The post of County Archaeologist, however, was well suited to a man of Ben's enquiring disposition and determination to solve problems; it provided an opportunity to initiate and oversee a wide range of archaeological work; it also ensured that Ben's interests would broaden, as is shown very clearly by the chronological span of his excavations, research and publications – from aspects of geology and landscape to the effects of man on the local environment, from the glacial elk at Poulton-le-Fylde to Roman forts, roads and artefacts, from the Vikings and the Cuerdale hoard to medieval and post-medieval sites and finds. His perceived early success in his new post was demonstrated clearly and deservedly by the fact that he was elected a Fellow



of the Society of Antiquaries of London in January 1968, less than five years into his appointment with Lancashire.

A particular and long-lasting ‘Lancashire-commitment’ of Ben’s was to the Roman site at Ribchester, for which he rewrote the *National Trust Guidebook* (1972) and composed a booklet on *The Ribchester Hoard* (1992). He later produced his own *The Romans at Ribchester: Discovery and Excavations*, which was published (2000) as an Occasional Paper by the Centre for North-West Regional Studies at Lancaster University. Indeed, Ben was a long-standing and active supporter of the Centre as well as a frequent contributor to events it organised; this aspect of his life was recognised by the award to him in 2005 of an Honorary Research Fellowship of the Centre. He also co-edited (with Peter Webster) three volumes of *Ribchester Excavations*, which brought together the results of many years of archaeological work, together with appropriate specialists’ reports, arising from excavations in the village up to the late 1980s. Throughout his time in the North West, Ben served as a Trustee of the Ribchester Roman Museum, and a member of its Management Committee.

Ben’s writings were an object-lesson: his research was meticulous and detailed, and his expression of it clear and precise. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in those publications in which he was writing to resolve problems of an antiquarian nature – for example, his tackling of the ‘mystery’ surrounding the origin of the Mithraic figure, which was claimed by some to have come from Wigan, but which Ben was able to show had actually originated in Chester. It illustrated a maxim that Ben was often able

to justify: ‘The truth is out there for those prepared to look for it!’ Readers of such papers were always keenly aware that they were being guided through the subject-matter by a fine and precise scholar and an exemplary communicator. Unsurprisingly, Ben was a frequent and popular contributor to conferences and one-day schools.

Ben saw it as an integral part of his duties at Lancashire to ‘spread the word’: no matter what the weather or the time of year, he would travel the length and breadth of the North West to lecture to groups, large and small, which were fostering an interest in regional archaeology and history. Indeed, he was responsible for the establishment of the Lancashire Archaeological Society, of which he was made President for Life. He also attempted to solve the long-standing problem of publishing archaeological work in Lancashire by launching the *Lancashire Archaeological Bulletin* and the *Lancashire Archaeological Journal*, the latter of which was sadly short-lived for the lack of adequate funding; a satisfactory outlet for the publication of articles on Lancashire’s archaeology remains elusive.

Ben did not treat retirement as a process of ‘winding-down’: quite the opposite; always firm and active supporters of this Society, he and his wife, Margaret, now became much more closely involved in the work of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, particularly in its publications – Margaret as editor over many years of the *Newsletter*, and Ben himself as the first Series Editor of *Cumbria Archaeological Research Reports*. Ben was a member of the Council (2000-3) and of the Publications Committee (2007-10), and was in 2007 made an Honorary Fellow of the Society, only the fifth person to be acknowledged in this way. The award was a double recognition, both of Ben’s long-standing work on the Society’s behalf and of the quality of his scholarship, of which many important and typically stimulating examples were published in *Transactions* in his later years. He especially enjoyed his involvement in the decennial Hadrian’s Wall Pilgrimages, and was co-author (with David Breeze) of the Report on the Twelfth Pilgrimage of 1999.

In 2008, Ben and Margaret moved from Preston to Levenshulme in Manchester; again, this was not in search of relaxation, as in no time they both became involved with the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society and with their ‘local’ South Trafford Archaeological Group. Again, Ben’s writing and lecturing continued undiminished.

Ben will be missed by the very large circle of friends and acquaintances that he made through his archaeological and historical work, as well as by those who simply enjoyed his and Margaret’s company, appreciating both their great kindness and sheer good company. Ben was a man of wit and wisdom, always ready to offer help to others, whether practical or in the form of sound advice. The North West and its archaeology have lost an irreplaceable figure, though happily the memory of much that he did will live on through his publications.

On a personal note, I have many good memories of Ben and Margaret, but none more typical of them both than the occasion in 2004 on which my wife and I were with them at Langwathby, studying the Roman milestone which had recently been discovered there: Ben was crouched under an umbrella in the pouring rain, photographing and

drawing the milestone, whilst at the appropriate moment, Margaret threw open the boot of their car to reveal an impeccably-arranged picnic for four. That was Ben and Margaret.

For his part, Ben Edwards was a scholar in the finest tradition of the ‘greats’ of this Society. Not only this, however; he was, in every sense, a gentleman.

David Shotter

B. J. N. Edwards: Bibliography of Published Works

1961

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In addition to the above, Ben Edwards was the author of numerous articles and notes in the *Bulletin of the Colchester Archaeological Group*, *Lancashire Archaeological Bulletin* and earlier volumes of *Contrebis*, all in duplicated typescript, together with many contributions to the *Newsletter* of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society.