

James Curle (1862–1944) and Alexander Ormiston Curle (1866–1955): pillars of the establishment

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ABSTRACT

James Curle and Alexander Curle, the sons of a Melrose solicitor, and themselves trained lawyers, made substantial contributions to Scottish archaeology through excavation, survey and writing. Both undertook service in other and sometimes unexpected aspects of public life in the Borders and in Edinburgh. Both brothers worked assiduously with the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, serving in many capacities in the course of their long association with the Society. James Curle's excavations of the Roman fort of Newstead, Roxburghshire, were published in a report, based on his own Rhind Lectures of 1907, a study that shows a breadth of comparative material and sets the fort in broad context. His knowledge of continental museums helped to introduce more modern conservation techniques into the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. Alexander Curle is the only person to have held the senior position in three Scottish institutions: as Secretary of the newly founded Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions of Scotland; as Director of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland; and finally as Director of the Royal Scottish Museum. His approach to each task was different. For the Commission it was in the recording of field monuments and the presentation of information economically. His very solitary role in Queen Street was to maintain the collection during times of economic difficulty and war. With the Royal Museum he faced financial stringency, but also the need for new displays. His excavations at Traprain Law, East Lothian, and Jarlshof, Shetland, were undertaken with all the shortcomings of the day, but were published promptly and contained some remarkable discoveries.

INTRODUCTION

The archaeology of the first half of the 20th century in Scotland does not traditionally get a good press. In 1905 The Honourable John Abercromby expressed his dissatisfaction with the archaeological methods used by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in their official excavations, and his subsequent bequest to the University of Edinburgh to create a chair of *European Archaeology* may be seen to be the result of that unease (Piggott & Robertson 1977, no 90). The contribution of the first holder of that Chair, Gordon Childe, was to

set the prehistory of Scotland into broad, indeed sometimes provocative, contexts (1935; 1946), but he did not pretend to enjoy excavation (Trigger 1980, 77). Stuart Piggott, the second holder of the Abercromby Chair, in an essay of reminiscences, wrote that he had been unprepared when he arrived in Scotland in 1946 for the degree to which the active development of field archaeology in England up to the outbreak of war had been ignored in Scotland, where techniques of excavation, recording and publication were lamentably out-of-date (1983, 35).

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However the exigencies caused by two world wars and very tight fiscal measures meant that archaeological work was undertaken within a very different framework from today, and the absence of any professional structure meant that those active in fieldwork or excavation lacked formal training as we now understand it. What *was* achieved is thus all the more remarkable. Institutions were maintained and public awareness of the new subject aroused and extended. The subjects of this lecture are well-known figures to Fellows of this Society: James Curle and A O Curle, the former as the excavator of the Roman fort at Newstead, in Roxburghshire, with its rich assemblage of military artefacts, and his younger brother as the discoverer of the Traprain Law Treasure, in the course of the excavation of the East Lothian hillfort. They are, perhaps, in today's terms, 'Establishment figures'. The subject of another paper in this series (Ritchie 2002, below) is Ludovic MacLellan Mann, a Glasgow accountant who devoted much of his life to archaeology. He certainly had some odd ideas, but he contributed regularly on the subject to the popular press, and through exhibitions and lectures brought the archaeology of Scotland and Scottish material culture to the attention of a much wider audience than before. He was also involved with what we would now think of as rescue archaeology and experimental archaeology. Mann's approach was very different to that of James and A O Curle. (To avoid bibliographic clutter Curle initials have not been inserted in the text; the context should make it clear.)

THE CURLES

James Curle (illus 1) was born in 1862, the eldest of three brothers and four sisters. Alexander Ormiston Curle, now thought of as AO, was born in 1866. Their father, Alexander Curle of Morrision and Priorwood, was a solicitor in Melrose, and his father had been Sir Walter Scott's man of business. James was



ILLUS 1 James Curle, 1935. (Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland)

very proud of this connection and was President of the Sir Walter Scott Club in 1936. AO was later to remember that the firm of Curle & Erskine was said to be one of the larger country firms in Scotland (*Journal*, April 1953), a firm which has extensive family and factorial connection in the Borders and was also agent for the British Linen Bank (*Border Telegraph*, 7 March 1944). James and AO were educated at Fettes College, Edinburgh, AO recalling later James's fine singing voice at school (*Journal*, March 1944).

The antiquarian interest of their father certainly fired the two brothers and forges a link with one of the great figures of the 19th century, Joseph Anderson, the subject of the paper immediately preceding this (Clarke 2002, above). 'Our father', AO recalled:

though one could hardly term him an Antiquary, yet possessed a great interest in the subject and when he had a day in Edinburgh

rarely failed to spend some time of it in conversation with Dr Joseph Anderson, then the distinguished Curator of the National Museum of Antiquities, at that time occupying the foremost of the two galleries on the Mound. As we boys had often rather unwillingly to take part in such visits, we grew up with an elementary knowledge of the bases of modern archaeology, which, in consequence, we never required to learn, we had in fact absorbed it among the Museum cases in these early days of our lives (*Journal*, March 1944).

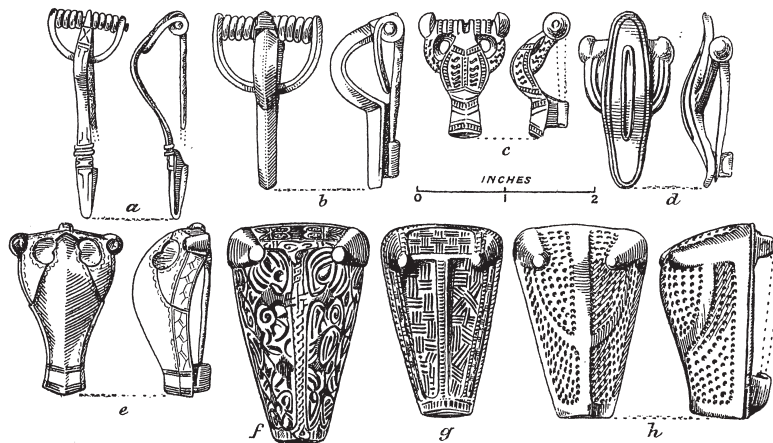
They made the usual sort of youthful collections: James coins and AO early tobacco pipe-bowls. James gained his legal training at Edinburgh University, was apprentice to William Stuart Fraser, and became a Writer to the Signet in 1886. AO was dispatched to Cambridge, to Trinity Hall, gaining a BA. AO was apprenticed to John Philp Wood and William Babbington and became a Writer to the Signet in 1892. James, after passing his law exams and before entering the family firm at Melrose, was sent to travel in Italy for several months with an uncle, where they visited 'most of the principal towns, viewed the interesting objects in galleries and museums and all in a thoroughly intelligent matter' recalled AO later (*Journal*, March 1944). We will remain with James for the moment as his initial archaeological contributions come earlier than those of AO.

JAMES CURLE

In 1888 James travelled with his two brothers to Gotland in the Baltic and began to make a collection of Gotlandic antiquities. Indeed he visited Gotland on a further six occasions between 1889 and 1903, though these were by no means his only foreign travels, for he also visited Berlin, the Auvergne and America. His collection of Gotlandic material has been described as the most important collection of Nordic Iron Age objects outside Scandinavia. This aspect of his life has been examined in detail by Dafydd Kidd and Lena Thunmark-Nylén (1990) and Kidd (1994). He contributed a short paper to the *Proceedings* in 1895

on three early Iron Age brooches from Gotland. In the present context the Gotlandic bronzes illustrate his interest as a collector, his tenacity in building up a truly representative series, and also his care in studying his artefacts. Curle was in correspondence with the distinguished Swedish scholars Bernhard Salin and Oscar Montelius and showed them his collection at Priorwood in Melrose. His collecting activities were thus open and systematic. Charles Hercules Read at the British Museum was another correspondent, and the Museum maintained a long interest in obtaining the collection, Read achieving the purchase just before his own retirement in 1921 (Kidd & Thunmark-Nylén 1990, 159–60; Kidd 1994, 97). There were questions about the final arrangements of the sale, but AO suggested that James 'felt that it was more suitable for a public, than a private collection. The price paid did not exceed by much, if at all, the cost of making the collection and its value was, probably, greater' (*Journal*, 1944). The collection was mentioned in the 1923 British Museum *Guide to Anglo-Saxon and Foreign Teutonic Antiquities*. The typological development of one type of brooch is illustrated by examples from the collection (Smith 1923, 165–7, fig 221) (illus 2). As well as Gotlandic antiquities James collected books and autograph letters, with, as the basis, a number of letters in the handwriting of Sir Walter Scott.

James became a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1889, and his first contribution was in 1898. In a letter written with Robert Romanes to the Secretary, he presented the silver chain known as 'Midside Maggie's Girdle' to the National Museum of Antiquities, with notes upon the girdle and its owners, 'as a Memorial of the late Alexander Curle, Esq [of Morriston], Priorwood, Melrose, who took such a keen interest in the Society'. There was the clear feeling that this 17th-century silver girdle should be in the National Collection (Romanes & Curle 1898).



ILLUS 2 Evolution of the boar's head brooch as illustrated in the Curle Collection in the British Museum (*British Museum Guide to Anglo-Saxon Antiquities*, 1923, 167, fig 221).

He contributed descriptions of the brochs of Bow and Torwoodlee to the *Proceedings* with careful plans and a well-informed discussion of the objects found there (1892). But his name will rightly always be linked to the excavation of Newstead, at the foot of the Eildon Hills near Melrose, a Roman fort dating to both the Agricola and Antonine periods, which produced a remarkable series of finds including parade-helmets, pottery and leatherwork.

NEWSTEAD

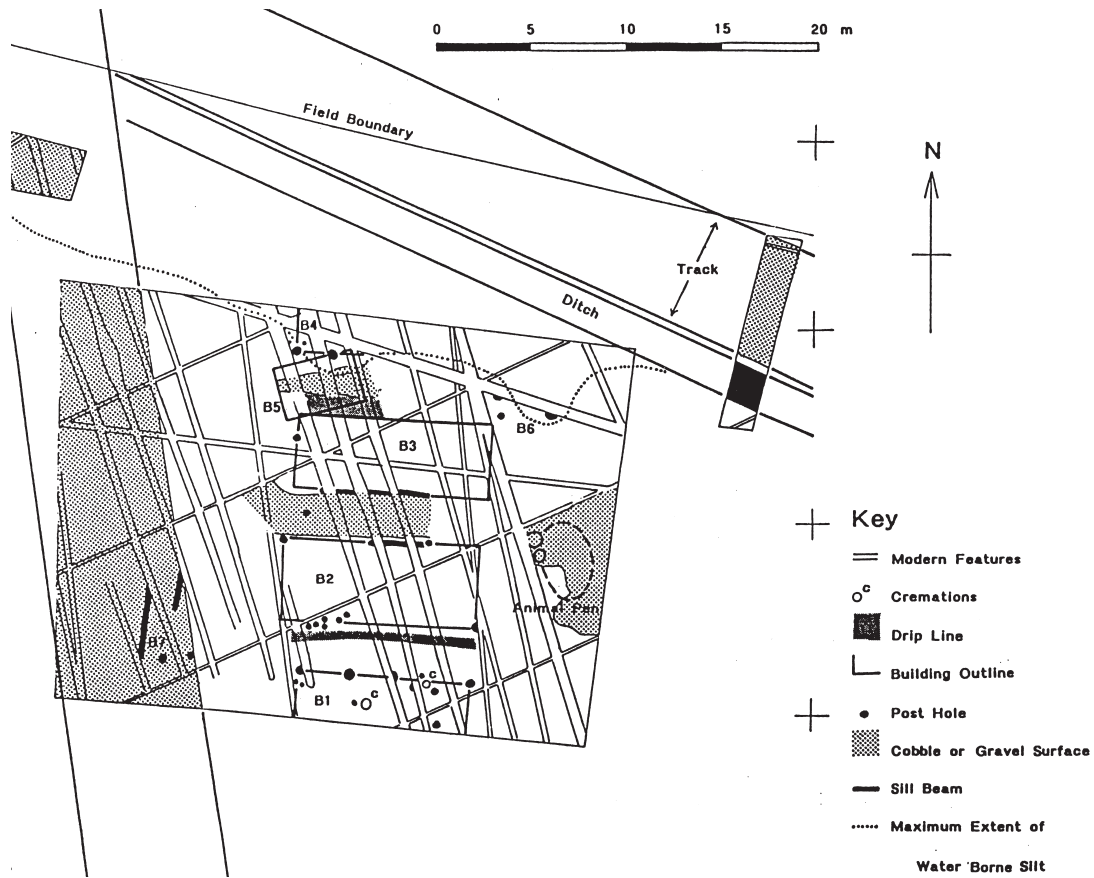
The discovery of Newstead is well documented. In 1904 Mr Roberts, proprietor of fields at Newstead known as Red Abbeystead then farmed by Mr Porteous of Leaderfoot Mill, decided to lay a series of field drains. James suspected that there might be a Roman camp, and AO and his wife, who were staying at Priorwood at the time, 'arrayed in putties and armed with a spade. . . made a trial dig'. A mass of sooty soil and stones was discovered in what was later found to be the area of the baths, but interrogation of the farmer brought forth the information that in parts of the adjacent field it was impossible to drive posts into the ground. It was guessed that these marked the position of roads. AO made a

collection of surface finds from the fields and laid them before the Council of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, which resolved on the excavation of the site (described in his *Journal*, 1944). AO recalled his brother's remark after these preliminaries, 'If you are going to excavate at Newstead you will have to find someone else to look after it, for I am not going to trudge down there every day'. But in the end James agreed to take on the task. A foreman and workmen were engaged.

James Curle sets the scene in his *Introduction* to the report (1911, vii–viii):

When in the Spring of 1905, I undertook at the request of the Hon John Abercromby, then one of the Secretaries of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, to superintend on behalf of the Society the excavations about to be undertaken at Newstead, and to embody the results obtained in a report, I little dreamt how large an undertaking lay before me, and into how many byways of archaeology it was to lead.

The excavations were begun on 13th February, 1905, and continued without interruption until 19th May, 1909. After an interval of some months, work was resumed on 22nd December of that year, and finally brought to a close in the middle of September, 1910. During these periods of work my residence within a mile of



ILLUS 3 Newstead excavations 1992 undertaken by Professor R F J Jones, showing the layout of Curle's trenches. (Courtesy of Professor R F J Jones)

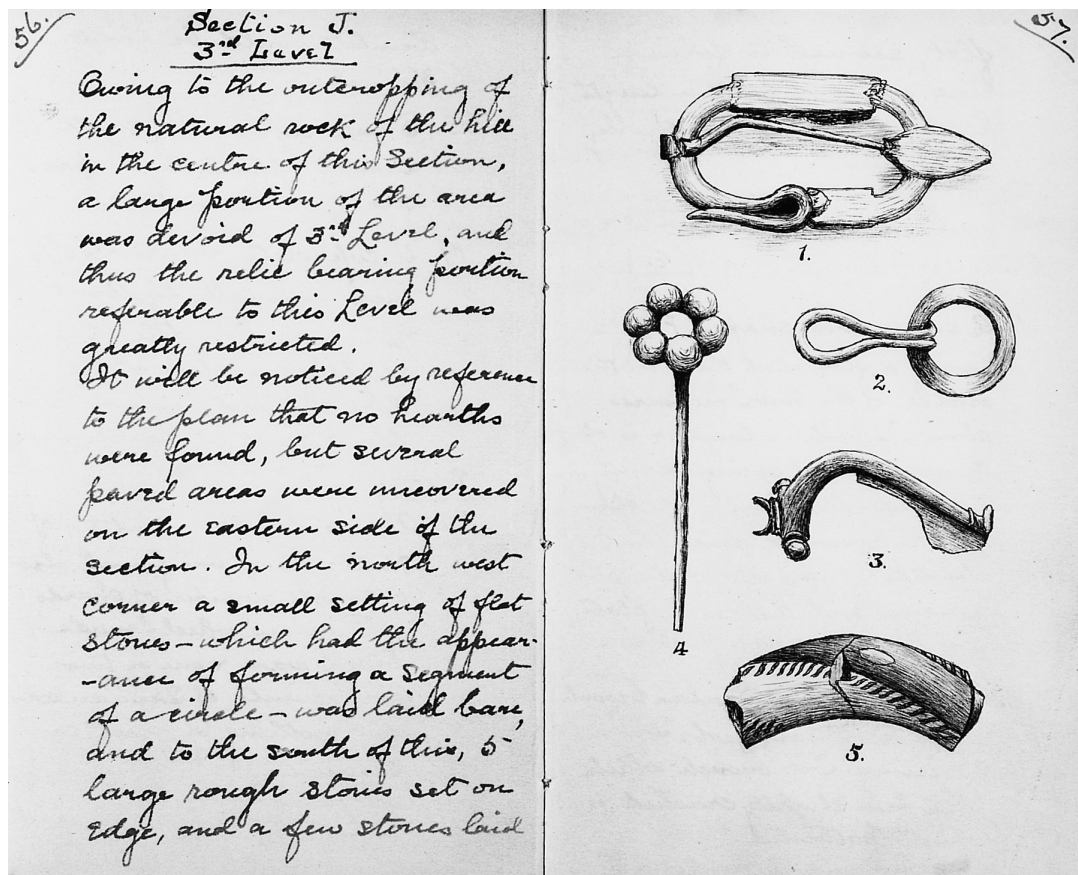
the site enabled me to make frequent, and often daily, visits to follow the progress of the digging, and to carry home the smaller objects found, thus giving opportunities for study that would not have been possible had they been at once dispatched to the National Museum.

Throughout the whole period of our working, Mr Alexander Mackie acted as Clerk of Works. Mr Mackie had gained experience under the Society in their excavations at Birrenswark, Inchtuthil and Lyne, and also at one or two forts on the Antonine Vallum, and was thus able to render valuable service in working out the problems of the site. He stuck to his post undeterred by weather, and by his shrewd observation contributed in no small measure to the success

of the undertaking. The photographs of the foundations were all taken by Mr Mackie.

In the preparation of the plans, Mr Thomas Ross, LLD, gave us with ungrudging liberality the benefit of his experience, making many journeys to the Fort, and spending much time on the necessary survey.

He acknowledges too George Macdonald's contribution to the preparation of the report. Sir George Macdonald's contribution to the study of archaeology of this period was very great, and James contributed a full memoir to the pages of the *Proceedings* (1940). In a short note accompanying AO's *Journal* his



ILLUS 4 Pages from one of James Curle's Newstead notebooks. (Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland)

daughter-in-law, Cecil Curle, recalls that Sir George and AO walked every morning together as far as the Scottish Education Office. His tremendous scholarship seems to have been balanced by a lighter side to his character, as James's daughter remembers that Sir George had the unusual gift of making his ears wiggle, which was useful in entertaining the children of the family.

The method of excavation was by narrow trenches, and it says a great deal about the skill and observation of Curle and Mackie that so much could be worked out. A trench opened in the 1992 excavations shows the dramatic contrast between excavation methodology: the narrow trenches are Curle's set within the area

excavation of Professor R Jones (illus 3). Mackie's contribution has been documented by Stevenson (1981, 177-9). The excavation notebooks show Curle making careful descriptions of the findings with ink drawings of the more important artefacts (Kidd & Ritchie 1988) (illus 4).

The presentation of the Newstead volume is a crucial aspect of its lasting importance. James Curle was invited to give the Rhind Lectures about the site in 1907. The formality of the occasion is revealed in a letter to Reginald Smith, 6 March 1908, 'I give my fourth Rhind Lecture this afternoon so I shall soon have the job over which I shall be glad of. Coming into Edinburgh three times a week

with a top hat on is a nuisance'. He used that research for the lectures in setting the results of the excavation in a wider context as the basis for his report. The very layout stands back from the description of trenches and pits to the broader considerations of pottery and equipment. Thus the distillation of the material for the lectures had shown Curle what the important elements of the work were, and the clear focus of presentation is one that any modern monograph might hope to emulate. The elucidation of the separate structural periods was a considerable feat in the face of the reduced state of preservation of the successive forts (Stevenson 1981, 179). Sir Ian Richmond has resounding praise for the publication:

Anyone who reads the sections of his volume which describe the structures and the pottery, and then compares them with previous work, will see how James Curle's accurate and unflagging sobriety of description marked a new epoch in the study of the subject. His discussion was marked and illumined throughout with an astonishing grasp of comparative material, and, be it added, by a broad and leisurely humanity wholly lacking in the Continental works on which it drew but did not depend (Richmond 1944, 146).

H Dragendorff, the eminent German archaeologist, reviewed the volume in the *Journal of Roman Studies*, 1 (1911), 134–7, and is full of praise, 'Few of our forts in Germany have been so completely and so continuously explored; none has been published so quickly and so well'. Curle is seen as an ideal combination of a Maecenas and an antiquary, and published the results with his personal knowledge of British and continental museums. In 1911, while at Homburg, James had an audience with the German Emperor, who had a great interest in Roman archaeology and the restoration of the fort at Saalburg, and asked many questions about Newstead. In the same year some of the Newstead finds (including the helmets, illus 5) were shown at Holyrood Palace to King



ILLUS 5 Parade helmet, Newstead, one of the objects presented at Holyrood in 1911. (Photo: Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland)

George V and Queen Mary, 'who displayed great interest in them and put many questions' (*The Border Magazine*, October 1912, 218).

The discovery of a range of perishable material at Newstead convinced James and AO of the need for up-to-date conservation facilities in the National Museum of Antiquities (Stevenson 1981, 184). Gordon Childe in his Memorial to A J H Edwards puts this forcefully:

At the time of his [Edwards] appointment [in 1912] our Museum was faced with new tasks, or rather through the foresight and energy of James Curle and his brother, had been awakened to a fuller realisation of its function. It fell to Edwards to organize the laboratory, the minimum equipment for which the Curles' persistence and enthusiasm had extorted from the Treasury, and to preserve for all time the superb collection of perishable iron and leather relics yielded by the excavation at Newstead (Childe 1944, 150).

A new era in the preservation of Scotland's antiquities was initiated. Richmond underlined James's advocacy for conservation, mentioning his considerable knowledge of continental museums, in particular Namur. Thus James Curle's continental travels enabled him to build up a knowledge not only of comparative material, but also of what would now be described as 'best practice' in museum conservation. His correspondence shows that he wished to keep abreast of continental thinking, asking Read, for example, to put a point to Joseph Déchelette if he were to meet him in France. Travel in Germany in 1913 allowed James to obtain photographs of samian ware and he used these to illustrate a paper on the subject in 1917.

LATER ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

James maintained his Scandinavian interests and published Norse material from Oronsay (1914) with notes on the development and chronology of oval brooches. He also contributed on more local topics such as the boundary of Melrose monastery (1935a; 1935b).

In April 1925 James was conferred an honorary degree of LLD by the University of Aberdeen. The *Aberdeen Press and Journal* records the laureation address by Professor A Mackenzie Stewart, Dean of the Faculty of Law:

Mr Curle is, by general consent one of Scotland's prominent antiquaries, and for many years he has devoted himself to the study of questions connected with the Roman occupation of Britain . . . As a striking example of a distinguished passion for research, he has established a special claim to the regard of his fellow countrymen, and we welcome the opportunity of sharing our appreciation of his labours in the field of Scottish history.

The phrase 'one of the most learned papers that the Society has ever produced' is praise indeed, but this was how Ian Richmond summed up James Curle's contribution to our

Proceedings in 1932, 'An Inventory of Objects of Roman and Roman Provincial Roman Origin found on Sites in Scotland not definitely associated with Roman Constructions'. Curle brought together finds from 92 sites. The sense of assembling information and organizing its presentation, among the most important aspects of archaeological research, is evident throughout James Curle's paper. This is far more than a card index of objects. The artefacts are illustrated as fully as possible, with comparanda and some in colour. The distribution map uses a cartographic base from John Bartholomew & Son and must surely be thought of as a precursor to an Ordnance Survey map of Roman Scotland. The paper and its illustrations show graphically the distribution of Roman finds. James is credited with being a most engaging after-dinner speaker and his *Proceedings* paper is one that would surely have been entertaining to hear. He begins:

The Roman occupation of Caledonia was never very secure nor was it of long duration. No towns sprang up under its shelter. The villas and farms common in Southern Britain are absent (1932, 277).

And concludes:

But with the fourth century in Britain. . . of that stormy time we could have no more eloquent reminder than the silver treasure found on Traprain – a pirate's hoard, with its splendid vessels hacked in pieces, crushed and doubled up ready for the melting pot, telling plainly that there lies before us a relic of that time of travail, when the barriers were giving way, and the flood of barbarian peoples was sweeping across the Alps, when Britain had said farewell to the Legions, and Rome was itself abandoned (1932, 350).

To take the year 1931–2 within the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland we have Gordon Childe on Council, Gerard Baldwin Brown as a Secretary for Foreign Correspondence

(Breeze 2001), James Curle one of the Curators of the Museum, and AO as Librarian. Four of the subjects of this series of Rhind lectures were working to maintain archaeological and historical research in Scotland, although they may well have had very different viewpoints.

In 1902, aged 40, James married Alice Mary Blanchette only daughter of Colonel H A T Nepean, of Midfield, Hawthornden, a member of the Indian Staff Corps, and they had three daughters. James Curle's contributions to public service go beyond the archaeological themes of this memoir, but they should be mentioned as showing the breadth of his interest and calls upon his time. From 1889 to 1929 he was a Councillor on Roxburghshire County Council. For many years he was chairman of the Melrose Unionist Association and was treasurer of the Roxburgh Unionist Association. He was a Trustee of the National Library of Scotland, Member of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (1925–44), and a Member of the Ancient Monuments Board for Scotland. His standing on the Continent is indicated by his Membership of the Archaeological Institute of the German Empire. He was admitted to the King's Body Guard for Scotland, Royal Company of Archers in 1897. He died on 1 March 1944 aged 82. His obituary in the *Southern Reporter* (9 March 1944) remembers him as a Borders man with a deep sense of history and duty. A large part of his library was donated to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland by his daughter Mrs C Pitman (*Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 80 (1945–6), 162).

ALEXANDER ORMISTON CURLE

THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE ANCIENT AND HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF SCOTLAND

In an earlier paper in this series, on Gerard Baldwin Brown, David Breeze outlined the

stages by which Ancient Monuments legislation was passed in the later 19th century (Breeze 2001). The need was increasingly apparent for considered survey on the ground to identify what survived. Baldwin Brown had made in 1905 a strong case for the compilation of a national inventory of ancient monuments. The suggestion that a Royal Commission be set up to undertake the task found favour with the then Secretary of State for Scotland, Sir John Sinclair, later Lord Pentland. The Royal Warrant was signed in February 1908. Sinclair discussed the matter, identified suitable Commissioners and a Chairman, Sir Herbert Maxwell, who had been the first landowner to come forward to offer monuments into State care after the 1882 Act, and who was at that time President of our Society. Thomas Ross and Baldwin Brown were also Commissioners. But who would undertake the actual work? They could hardly appoint a Civil Servant as their Secretary; they needed someone with experience on the ground. A O Curle was the ideal candidate, his published papers were wide-ranging (1896; 1904; 1905a; 1905b; 1905c; 1906; 1907a; 1907b; 1908a; 1908b; Ewart & Curle 1908), and he had shown himself to be, at 41, of stout constitution, indeed Graham describes him as 'a tall and powerful man of splendid physique' (Graham 1981, 217–18; Dunbar 1992, 16–18).

In many ways the material relating to AO is even fuller than that for his brother James. His daughter-in-law, Cecil Curle, recalled his habit of sitting at a writing table after dinner to bring his journal up to date or to prepare an archaeological paper. Any project that he undertook was properly docketed, written up and published. The breadth of his published legacy is remarkable. In 1898 AO married Katharine Wray Tancred and their children were Alexander (Sandy) and Mary, but Katharine sadly died in 1906, and in 1909 he married Jocelyn Butler. Jocelyn died in 1925 and AO had a long period of widowhood.

In August 1908 he began work in Berwickshire and started to compile:

The Private journal of a wandering Antiquary.
[NMRS MS/36/2]

1st Aug 1908

Having started on my course of inspection of the ancient monuments of Scotland I have deemed it advisable to keep a journal wherein I may record my various experiences and adventures as such may from time to time befall me. This evening I arrived at St. Abbs a little fishing village on the Berwickshire coast, a mile South of St. Abbs head. A row of unpretentious villas adjoins a straggling village of fisherman's houses. Here we have taken the 'Anchorage' for a month as a base for me and a sea-side holiday for the children.

3rd Aug 1908

Another lovely day but with a strong wind blowing out of the W. I strapped on my surveyors rods to the top of my bicycle and with my canvas bag containing note books, clinometer, tape-line and map took the road to Coldingham about 9.40. The rods at first were rather uncomfortable but I managed to arrange them more comfortably as the day went on. Getting my cyclometer fitted wasted the best part of an hour at Coldingham but that accomplished I set off for Eyemouth.

I had a passable lunch at the 'Home Arms' recommended by the chemist, but dear enough as country inns are. From there to Chester Hill 2 or 3 miles away was an easy ride with the wind behind me. Here on the top of a grassy hill whose side seaward is fairly precipitous I found that the site of the O.S. map justified greater attention. I had procured the services of a small boy from the farm and with his assistance made a rapid survey. I have serious doubts now whether I obtained the correct dimensions. It is so difficult to get a right angle to the central diameter. However my measurements are something better than the word 'site'. On my return from the hill top the farmer asked if I had observed the rocks, which he described in such a way as to suggest vitrification and forced me to again mount the hill. It was conglomerate – natural.

Fieldwork was completed in November.

7th Nov 1908

And so ends my first experience as the wandering antiquary of the Ancient Monuments

Commission. I have inspected over 200 objects in Berwickshire, and written up notes on them. My bicycle has carried me almost 300 miles, five times only have I hired a trap and twice a motor car, the number of miles I have tramped by moorland and meadow I have no reckoning of but they are many. It has never been anything but the most intense pleasure to me even when I stood on Raecleughhead struggling to make my notes behind an umbrella which every moment the wind threatened to blow to pieces. The memory of the bright October days among the Lammermuirs when the birches were spangled with gold and the brackens a deep russet will long live with me. I shall oft recall

'oh wild and stormy Lammermuirs'
The Muses of thy many streams
In the birchwoods far away.

The Berwickshire volume was published in 1909. Curle created a framework for the recording of monuments in the field and the publication of results that was to be enlarged upon and extended with the addition of plans and photographs as work went on in Sutherland and Caithness. Fuller introductions were written. Curle undertook a little rudimentary excavation at Achaidh, a chambered cairn, but was also planning hut-circles (1910a; 1911). His interest in the settlement sites of the north was thus aroused.

Between 1911 and 1913 fieldwork was undertaken in Dumfriesshire and Galloway, an account of which has been published by Geoffrey Stell (1983). The countryside captivated AO and the antiquities cried out to be recorded. As in Berwickshire the bicycle was his preferred mode of transport, but this could be linked in to the then rail network. Curle's bicycling proficiency, in what was by then his later 40s, was certainly greater than that of his assistant (Stell 1983, 89). In the course of this work he embarked on the excavation of the fortification known as the Mote of Mark near Rockliffe, Stewartry of Kirkcudbright (Curle 1914a). His son Sandy recalled that AO would set off from the site on fieldwork having briefed the workmen and leaving Sandy himself with

the excavating team, to return in the evening to see what had been found. Sandy remembered his own discovery of the metalworking debris that is such a diagnostic feature of the site. Of course this style of excavation makes today's archaeologists weep, as the contexts of finds are inevitably uncertain. But the results were undoubtedly dispassionately and correctly reported in the manner of the time. The discipline was new indeed. Angus Graham recorded Curle's belief that it was excavation that would take the subject forward (1981, 216), and this was the theme of the final paragraph of AO's Rhind lectures of 1919. But the very presence of such archaeological undertakings in rural parts of Scotland could help to bring earlier finds to professional attention, as with the Drumcoltran hoard (1914b).

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES OF SCOTLAND

On 5 May 1913, while on fieldwork in Dumfriesshire, AO received a letter from the Secretary of State offering him the position of Director of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland following a recommendation of Council. Dr Joseph Anderson was by then 81 and had been in post for some 44 years (Stevenson 1981, 182–4). The Museum had since 1891 been housed in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Queen Street, which was to remain its home for over a century. AO's Dumfriesshire Journal for the period is quoted in full by Stell (1983, 91):

On Saturday 10 May [1913] I left Dumfries and returned to Edinburgh having finished my survey work of the Ancient Monuments. On Tuesday I endued Mr J Graham Callander with my mantle, and sent him forth with my camera and satchel that I had carried so far and so frequently as almost to regard them as parts of my clothing . . . In a few weeks I shall be ensconced in Dr Joseph Anderson's chair as Director of the National Museum of Antiquities. Amen! (NMRS/36/47)

AO started a new journal with some despairing remarks:

I sent in my resignation as Secretary to the Ancient Monuments Commission last Friday, and this Monday morning [23 June 1913] officially entered upon my duties as Director of the Museum. It is not an inspiring job. In the Director's room are cupboards and chests of drawers crowded with papers, portfolios, and sketches, of which there appears to be no register or record. Dust lies thick over all, for, I understand, the dusting of my room is only done by courtesy of the upper gallery attendant . . . Bundles of letters . . . tumble out of cupboards when the doors are opened, and endless photographs, drawings and 'pulls' of blocks mingle in the confusion.

Curle set about organizing the Museum, the regular cleaning of the apartments, and an audit of the collections. The security of the collections and accessioning procedures were improved. A conservation laboratory was created in accordance with information that Edwards had gathered from an exploratory visit to Berlin. Iron objects that had lain for too long neglected were being conserved with excellent results. By March 1914 the Treasury had at last passed the estimates for reflooring and fireproofing the Museum (Stevenson 1981, 184). Curle's organizational abilities were to be fully tested with the necessity to transfer the whole of the collections into the Portrait Gallery while this work was carried out. The objects were transferred to their temporary quarters during April 1914 with careful note being taken of the location of every object. He was, as ever, alert to the responsibilities of the Museum and the collections as the incident related in the paper on Ludovic McL Mann (Ritchie 2002, 52, below) shows.

In the same year excavations began on Traprain Law with James Cree shouldering much of the supervision (Curle 1920, 54). This work, conducted in 1914–15 and 1919–23, was concentrated on the western terrace and large numbers of artefacts were discovered,

although by today's standards recording was rudimentary. The reports appeared regularly in the *Proceedings* with area drawings in many cases by Cree (1915; 1920; Curle & Cree 1916; 1921; Cree & Curle 1922). Curle records that the use of the riddle is an indispensable tool and that it is thus important to wait until the weather has become fairly settled (1920, 54). Latterly the excavations were directed by Cree on his own (1923; 1924).

The 1914–18 War left Curle to look after the Museum, now closed, almost single-handed, still continuing the conservation methods begun by Edwards. Stevenson records that he placed the valuable exhibits in the cellar, had to dismantle the library (and later reassemble it in 1917) as well as the comparative gallery (1981, 186). The vital reconstruction of the fabric of the Museum was delayed by the need to concentrate on the war effort, but under-floor fire proofing continued as well as re-flooring, though rather later. Curle was a Special Constable during the War, with duties of lining the streets during parades, but every third Sunday taking a regular policeman's beat for four hours. As bombing raids began, his duties took him to scenes of devastation which he recorded graphically.

ROYAL SCOTTISH MUSEUM

In April 1916 he received the first semi-official intimation that the Secretary of State intended to offer him the post of Director of the Royal Scottish Museum, and he journeyed to London for a meeting with Sir John Struthers at the Scottish Office. As the Treasury was adamant that his own post should not be filled he agreed to look after both museums as a temporary measure, visiting each museum twice each day. Some impression of his energy may be gauged by his decision to work on munitions in the Museum workshop from 3.30 to 7pm three days a week. They had a staff of about 14, with the exception of four all

amateurs, and nine lathes. Curle relinquished his duties in Queen Street in September 1919.

By January 1918 Curle had become a Sergeant in the Special Constables, which involved visiting every man in the Division on his beat, walking from Torphichen Street to Goldenacre and on to Gorgie, a not inconsiderable distance.

But there is little to report in the museum world, except a new display in the Ceramic Gallery in Chambers Street. He was placed on a committee of the Royal Scottish Academy to advise local committees in regard to the choice and erection of war memorials. But he did not think that much would be achieved 'as there are some fiery elements, in it and rather a lack of common sense'.

In March 1919 he delivered the Rhind Lectures to our Society on 'The Prehistoric Monuments of Scotland'. He was diffident about the lectures, describing them as an incubus and wishing that the other demands on his time had allowed more extended work, but he was gratified by the large attendance and the fact that the series was deemed a great success (*Journal*, February–March 1919). He had already undertaken fieldwork in many parts of Scotland and was thus able to put his experience of a wide range of Scottish archaeology to good use; there was a précis for the newspapers.

With the return of peacetime conditions, excavations could resume on Traprain. On 12 May 1919 Curle was surprised to receive a telephone message from the foreman asking him to go to East Lothian on the following morning. Unaware that there was a degree of urgency, he completed some duties in the morning and got the 1.40pm train to East Linton and strolled up to the hill taking the odd photograph. 'Imagine my surprise', he wrote, 'on reaching the site of the digging to see, ranged against the bank at the edge, a great collection of what appeared to be strange, battered and broken vessels of silver, much tarnished though in places still bright, and even in places gilded' (*Journal*, May 1919;

1920, 102–3). ‘It transpired that a work-man was loosening the surface soil when his pick came in contact with something strange. He put in the pick, and brought up a silver bowl on the end of it’ (news-cutting, unprovenanced, of Curle’s address to East Lothian Antiquarian Society, 12 May 1934).

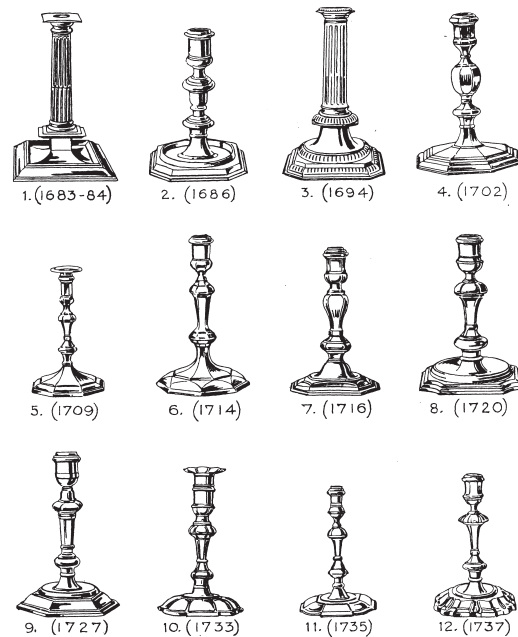
Arrangements had to be made to move the Treasure to Edinburgh. Pringle, the foreman, had got boxes ready, and a car was ordered, and the boxes were carried down to the roadside. But the car was delayed and Curle sat by the roadside with the boxes for nearly two hours before being driven to Edinburgh. Over 20kg of silver was recovered, representing the remains of a hundred vessels, spoons, dishes and plates, along with four silver coins dating to before or around AD 400 (illus 6).

The excitement among the Antiquaries was considerable. The excavation continued throughout the summer with AO going down every Saturday to keep an eye on the work. His procedure was ‘to rise at 5.45 – have a cup of tea and a slice of bread and butter, then catch the 7 o’clock train to East Linton . . . a good breakfast at the inn there and drive out to the hill in a car’ (*Journal*, June 1919).

Museum duties included the purchase of a collection of Oriental Ceramics, the reorganization of the glass collection and that of china



ILLUS 6 Part of the Treasure of Traprain. (Photo: Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland)



ILLUS 7 Candlesticks from A O Curle’s paper in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 60 (1925–6), 212, fig 17.

and pottery. The active collecting of 18th- and 19th-century glass in the Museum is credited to AO (Evans 1999), and in 1925 he made an important donation of 65 drinking glasses to the Museum in memory of his second wife Jocelyn. He made further donations of glass between 1926 and 1952, and eventually bequeathed to the Museum a further 39 pieces. Curle’s important paper on domestic candlesticks from the 14th to the end of the 18th centuries, which was published in the *Proceedings* in 1926, is still cited with respect (illus 7). The introduction to the paper gives a good impression of Curle’s methodical approach: he examined the collections in certain museums in Britain, Paris and Amsterdam; he studied paintings and engravings by old masters representing interiors or still-life groups; he built up a card-index over a number of years of illustrated advertisements of dated hall-marked silver candlesticks. Lastly he created his own collection ‘in the course of travels here and abroad’; the NMRS holds a small

notebook in which AO recorded his candlestick purchases and sometimes the price he obtained if he parted with one.

The most important contribution of these years is the publication as a monograph of the *Treasure of Traprain* (1923). There is of course a degree of luck in the discovery of something as dramatic and unusual as a silver hoard, but it is with the publication of the material in a scholarly way that the lasting contribution is made. We may assume that AO had little detailed knowledge of Classical silverware before the discovery, but by 1922 he records that the work is far advanced, with proofs revised and several pages of introduction written. Again the help of Sir George Macdonald is acknowledged. AO has interesting remarks about publication:

Of such a work fortunately the illustrations are the most important part and as in these there will be reproduced practically every detail of ornament, as well as actual vessels and fragments so that scholars may form their own opinions, my descriptions and conclusions do not matter much. Messers MacLehose of Glasgow are the publishers. Mr Craig Annan is producing 21 photogravures and there are numerous line blocks and some half tones as well. Mr John Bruce of Helensburgh, who has taken great interest, and given much help in the excavation &c, has agreed to subscribe at least 200 copies at £2. 2/- each, to be presented by the Soc of Antiquaries of Scotland to the more important libraries of the world.

John Bruce, a Vice-President of the Society, was also instrumental in another venture concerning the Treasure. Anxious that people in the west of Scotland should have the opportunity to view the silver, Bruce commissioned a set of replicas of the more important items from the firm A J S Brook, which had been involved in the restoration of the originals (Curle 1923, viii, 100). The replicas were put on display in Kelvingrove Museum, before reverting to the Bruce family, and many are now on loan to the National Museums of

Scotland. Further replica pieces were made for commercial purposes, the triangular dish particularly, and a fee was paid to the Society for permission to undertake this work (George Dalglish, *in litt*; Stevenson 1981, 187).

In July 1920 King George V, Queen Mary and Princess Mary (later Countess of Harewood) visited Edinburgh. AO as a Special Constable was involved in lining the streets and commented on the reactions of the crowd. He was also being received at Holyrood, (with James Curle in attendance as a Royal Archer) in the course of which he was told that their Majesties were to visit the Museum the following day to view the Treasure, currently in Chambers Street. The visit was a success, and later Princess Mary asked to see the Treasure. In an informal visit she saw the silver, and afterwards looked at the china and glass. She learned that her mother had not seen this part of the Museum and felt sure that she would like to. Indeed AO was rung up the following day to be informed that Queen Mary was to visit the Museum again at 11 o'clock. 'She looked interestedly at every case', he wrote, 'admired the Venetian glass and asked if it was our own or on loan' (*Journal*, July 1920).

As a museum curator (illus 8) he was pleased with the visit, for the rearrangement of the cases and display in the Ceramic Gallery had been of his own doing. The range of activities being undertaken by the Museum, building works and security, within Treasury constraints, may be gauged by dipping into the Annual Reports that he prepared for the Scottish Education Department. AO's successor, Edwin Ward, sums up Curle's achievements as Director:

Mr Curle's tenure of office was marked by a notable increase in the attractiveness of the museum. In selecting any object for acquisition he adopted a very high standard. It was not enough for him that an object would fill a gap in a series or illustrate a line of development: the first consideration was that nothing should be acquired that was not definitely good of its kind and worthy of a place in a national



ILLUS 8 A O Curle in his drawing room, the public servant. (Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland)

collection. He also developed the employment of guide-demonstrators and promoted the use of the Museum by school children, students and members of social clubs. By these and other measures, including the judicious weeding out of inferior exhibits, he did much to make the Museum more useful to the general public and to strengthen its appeal to the serious student and the connoisseur (*Report for the Year 1931* by the Director of the Royal Scottish Museum, 3–4).

In hindsight, the ‘judicious weeding’ may not always have been to the collection’s advantage.

AO’s knowledge of the Scottish countryside was extensive both through fieldwork and excavation and also through holidays in the Highlands. Excavations in Roxburghshire, Caithness and Sutherland occurred early in his career (1910b; 1912a; 1912b). A more artefact-related report resulted from the discovery of a padlock at the Mote of Ingleston (1912c).

More short notes on objects were prepared for the *Proceedings* than can be listed here (for example 1924). In 1916 AO supervised work at the broch of Dun Telve in Inverness-shire for H M Office of Works, with a careful description of the structure and plans by J Wilson Patterson, the architect in charge of Scottish monuments (1916). In 1920 he supervised the final stages of the work at the broch of Dun Troddan. Most of the interior had been cleared before his arrival, but he identified an inner ring of post-holes and found the central hearth. His account of the discovery is engagingly frank, but aspects of his interpretation were not taken up for many years:

The purpose of these holes was obviously to hold posts intended for the support of the front of a roof, the back of which rested on the scarcement which, as mentioned above, ran round the inner face of the wall at a height of about 6 feet from the ground. A corridor or gallery was thus formed around the court, leaving an area in the middle open to the sky (1921, 91).

Between 1923 and 1928 AO and George Macdonald excavated at Mumrills Roman Fort on the Antonine Wall, at a period when both were still full-time civil servants. John Bruce of Helensburgh made an initial donation to allow the work to progress. Conditions were clearly far from ideal with more than the usual acknowledgements to the endeavours of the workmen and the surveyor, G P H Watson, from the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. The final season was to last 15 months and the supervision cannot have been close, nor the survey of the complex remains easy (Macdonald & Curle 1929). The published photographs are certainly not reassuring, though there are some very innovative poses in the people thus captured. The plan of the fort prepared by C S T Calder from Watson's surveys is published in four period colours with the foundations of the stone buildings recovered, including the



ILLUS 9 A O Curle at Jarlshof, 1935, the outdoor archaeologist. (Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland)

headquarters building, granaries and the commandant's house.

RETIREMENT AND JARLSHOF

From 1931, shortly after retiring from the Royal Scottish Museum, he began excavations for the Office of Works at Jarlshof in Shetland and these continued until 1935 (a period when the Royal Commission was also working in Shetland) (illus 9). He uncovered a large part of the earliest settlement on the site. Jarlshof is a remarkable site in that the settlement remains span the late Neolithic to medieval periods. The Iron Age and Norse periods are particularly well preserved, indeed the Viking houses were the first to have been excavated in Britain. To the visitor today it is not an easy site to understand; it was also a challenging site to excavate piecemeal. Yet AO produced regular reports in the *Proceedings* (1932; 1933; 1934; 1935a; 1935b; 1936b; 1936c); many of these

are substantial, with a large number of illustrations. The Office of Works appears to have provided survey assistance. The experts on whom AO could call may be suggested by one of his acknowledgements, that of 1933, where he cites a range of artefactual, anatomical and metallurgical advisors on the final report, including Graham Callander, his successor at the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. This is not to suggest that AO as the excavator with the approaches of the 1930s could have brought together the distilled text that J R C Hamilton achieved, incorporating the results not only of Curle's excavations, but also those of Childe and Laidler, Richardson and Hamilton himself. Hamilton must have agonized over levels and find locations and inadequate documentation of all the earlier work (1956, 7). But in Curle's defence it must be remembered that the work was carried out almost single-handedly with the Office of Works surveyor and his trusted foreman, who also kept the finds register. His son Sandy also assisted in periods of leave from the Army, 'For many weeks my son, Mr A T Curle, attended daily and washed the numerous relics as they were recovered from the soil' (1934, 312). How many site supervisors and context sheets would be needed today, with no guarantee of eventual publication? In 1934 he was joined by Miss Cecil Mowbray, who not only helped in the field, but made the remarkably accurate drawings of the graffiti' (1935b, 321; an acknowledgement that also makes mention of a study tour to Norwegian museums). Cecil Mowbray was also present at Wiltrow and undertook the planning (1936a, 139). She also undertook excavations herself at Ness of Burgi on the adjacent headland to Jarlshof (Mowbray 1936). In 1938 Sandy Curle married Cecil Mowbray, a pupil of the Abbé Breuil, and a redoubtable archaeologist in her own right. The Curle name is continued in her own substantial contributions to Scottish archaeology on Early Christian sculpture and the finds from the Brough of Birsay, Orkney (1940; 1982). It was through knowing Cecil that the present writer

came to understand more of the contribution of her father-in-law to archaeology in Scotland.

In 1941 AO lectured in London on the site of Jarlshof to the Royal Institution of Great Britain (1941b). AO's resumé paper for the Viking Congress is elegant, and shows that he was fully aware of the importance of the site as an exceptional sequence of settlement archaeology (1954a). Later work at Freswick and the Wag of Forse in Caithness show his continuing interest in the settlement structures in the north of Scotland, an area of research that he himself felt was his major contribution (1939; 1941a; 1946; 1948; 1954b). By now he was in his 80s. At both Jarlshof and Freswick he showed the potential of sites that have been later more fully excavated and recorded (Hamilton 1956; Morris et al 1955); he left a clear enough account of the Wag of Forse for the periods to be reinterpreted in the light of modern knowledge (Baines 1999, 77–80).

In 1935 James and AO decided to present their individual collections of documents to the Scottish Record Office (GD111). The contents of AO's presentation include writs relating to Border Counties and Wigtown: 38; to properties in Lanarkshire: 27; in Perthshire and Lanarkshire: 29; Highland Papers: 25 and Miscellaneous: 17. James's presentation is described as writs of lands in Darnick and others in sheriffdoms of Roxburgh, Berwick etc: numbering 19. In the same year James presented two autograph letters from Henry, Cardinal York, dated to 1802, and the Countess of Albany, dated 1809, to our Society (*Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 69 (1934–5), 323).

Over the years the Curle family were generous and significant donors to the National Museum in ways that are now difficult to imagine. AO donating glassware, candlesticks, and a wide range of other material, in all some 876 objects; James made 112 donations including Scandinavian artefacts; Sandy, AO's son, made 76 donations including material from East Africa where he was stationed for many

years; Jocelyn made nine donations in her own name and Mary five.

Uniquely AO had held three important offices, the Secretaryship of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland, the Directorship of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, and that of the Royal Scottish Museum and went on, in the years of his retirement, to make significant contributions to archaeological research. AO retired from the Royal Scottish Museum in 1931 on his 65th birthday. In 1930 King George V had conferred on him Companionship of the Royal Victorian Order. The University of Glasgow honoured him with an LLD in 1935. The notes of the laureation address record that he 'has contributed more to our knowledge of Scottish Prehistory than any one of his generation' (Glasgow University Archives ACC 44/08). Like James his public service was wide ranging. He was for a period Vice-Chairman of the board of Edinburgh College of Art, and served on the board of management of the Orphan Hospital. He was for a time President of the Scottish Rock Garden Club. He was the longest serving Commissioner on the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, from 1913–51.

AO was modest about his achievements in his *Journal* (October 1939):

I do not intend to write up my biography. My life has not been sufficiently interesting . . . I have done much excavation since I retired, in Shetland, and in Caithness. The pages of the *Proceedings* will bear ample testimony to my energy, and discoveries, so I need not go into the matter here.

And indeed the pages do, sometimes mulled over and reinterpreted by later archaeologists, or put into different contexts, but the reports bear testimony to vigorous archaeological inquiry and a great deal of information is clearly presented. He did not write works of synthesis, preferring the practical to the abstract. Angus Graham outlines AO's service

to the Society of Antiquaries continuously from 1905–1942 in some capacity or another with intermittent spells thereafter (1956, 236). He was presented with an address by Fellows in recognition of his service to the Society in 1951.

Of AO's later years in Edinburgh and Melrose there is little to say, but we should note his pleasure in his garden in Barnton Avenue, especially in the propagation of unusual plants. Angus Graham amusingly describes his greenhouse, 'containing whole battalions of small inconspicuous plants, quite uninteresting to the layman, all lined up and ticketed like a case of fine flint arrowheads' (1981, 216). Graham was to remember his continuing keenness and vigour and that he walked to the top of Rubers Law, Roxburghshire, at the age of 79 to show the position of the Roman building-stones, of which he alone had knowledge (1956, 235). He continued to give lectures and was delighted to be invited to attend the Viking Congress in Lerwick in 1950, aged 84, where the group photograph has him, as befits an elder statesman, in the front row. He was, as Stuart Piggott recalled many years later, particularly welcoming to Piggott when he arrived as a new professor with new approaches to Scottish archaeology. Graham also commented on AO's support for progressive ideas of all sorts and his condemnation of insular approaches. Later retirement to Melrose with his daughter Mary shows a life that has turned full circle. He died on 7 January 1955 aged 89.

ASSESSMENT

I have of course been making the plea that we recognize the contributions of our archaeological and antiquarian predecessors. In so many cases the breadth of their experience, built up in the most casual of ways, is almost impossible to emulate today. James and A O Curle had an ability to observe and record, to collect and organize information that enabled them to produce exceptional results. Did their legal

training help in this? I suspect that they both also had excellent memories. AO might be deemed ‘a good committee man’ or ‘a safe pair of hands’, but it is remarkable to think that his archaeological or curatorial career did not take off until his 40s. His organized mind is well illustrated by his notebooks and even his greenhouse! Excavations in the 1930s and 1940s may not have reached what might be described as Wheeler standards, indeed many of the photographs make one despair, but they were thoughtfully observed and the reports followed promptly. We may ponder on how much information has been lost and wish that a monument had been left untouched for scientific examination with the array of environmental and chronological expertise at our current disposal today. James and A O Curle presented the archaeological record of their discoveries in Scotland in published form in a variety of ways: the monograph; the paper of distillation; the interim report; the report of a season’s work on a long-term excavation. All the material James and AO collected is available in published format. The experience of the foremen and surveyors on excavations is perhaps one of the least understood aspects of archaeological work of the period. In all his excavation reports AO’s acknowledgements to his foremen and workmen are generous; most striking in this respect is his obituary of his Traprain foreman, George Pringle, who died just at the point that the 1920 season was being published (Curle & Cree 1921, 206). James is unstinting in his acknowledgement to Alexander Mackie, who was perhaps Scotland’s first professional excavator, and AO recorded his thanks to Simon Bremner, a Corresponding Member of the Society, on many occasions. Sometimes the plans result from the presence of a friend who could be prevailed upon to help and are prepared for publication by Charles Calder of the Royal Commission. The breadth of knowledge of James and A O Curle in a wide range of fields meant that *Newstead*, *The Treasure of Traprain* and papers such as ‘Roman Finds from Non-Roman Sites’ in many

respects are models still. Their contributions in other areas of public service are equally remarkable for their range of involvement and for the high regard in which they were held.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & SOURCES

Apart from their papers and books, and shorter notes, which have not been included in the references, there are also James’s journals of the Newstead excavations, copies of which are in the National Monuments Record of Scotland. AO kept journals while he worked with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, now held in the National Monuments Record of Scotland and a journal kept intermittently from 1913 to 1954, listed in the *References* as *Journal*. These are further illumined by notebooks deposited by the Curle family in the National Monuments Record of Scotland and by photograph albums held by his grand-daughter Mrs Christian Curtis. Information was kindly provided by the Scottish Borders Archive and Local History Centre. I am grateful to all the family members for their assistance and to colleagues in the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland for discussion, notably Lesley Ferguson, Iain Fraser, Miriam McDonald, Peter McKeague, Kevin MacLaren, and the long suffering members of the Photographic Department. Professor David Breeze, Historic Scotland, gave advice on Roman matters. Within the National Museums of Scotland, Godfrey Evans gave advice on A O Curle as a collector of glass, George Dalglish on the production of the Traprain replicas, and Alison Sheridan provided information on the Curles as donors of objects to the collections. Susan Youngs, Daffyd Kidd, and Barry Ager, Department of Medieval and Early Europe, British Museum, provided information on objects in their care. I am grateful for the advice of Anna Ritchie and Matthew Ritchie in the preparation of this paper.

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