

OBITUARY

DENNIS JOHN TURNER, BSc, CEng, FSA, FSA (Scot) (1932–2013)

It was with sadness that we learnt of the death of Dennis Turner on 17 January 2013 following a long illness. He was a longstanding and much-valued member of the Society over many years, having joined in 1948 at the age of 16.

Although he was born in Middlesex, Dennis's parents soon moved to Croydon and he spent most of his life in Surrey. Dennis left the Whitgift School in Croydon at the age of 16 to work for the London County Council library under Ida Darlington, where his interest in archaeology was first aroused. Perhaps presaging the future, he endeavoured (in his own time) to monitor the site clearance next door for the Festival of Britain exhibition, but was refused permission. His National Service, between 1950 and 1952, was spent with the Royal Air Force in Canada, where he trained as a navigator – a role he much enjoyed. He then returned to the LCC, but before long left to join the BBC at Bush House, where he studied for a BSc in electrical engineering and went on to become a Chartered Engineer. He worked initially in Outside Broadcasting, before moving to the Engineering Research Department and finally until retirement with the Secretariat.

Dennis was actively involved in London archaeology, especially those parts of historic Surrey now incorporated within Greater London and in 1962 he directed, with Peter Marsden, an excavation at 199 Borough High Street, continuing investigations begun in 1947 by Kathleen Kenyon, a former President of the Society.

He was elected a member of the Society's Council in 1961 and was soon urging publication of a monthly newsletter. A trial period was agreed and he and his wife were appointed Joint Editors, a role they fulfilled between 1965 and 1969; the *Bulletin* continues to this day. He served as Honorary Secretary between 1969 and 1976, was appointed as a Vice-President of the Society in 1977 and President from 1990 to 1994.

As Secretary of the Society in 1972, he recognised the need to meet the challenge of motorway construction in Surrey and together with the President, John Nevinson, fought hard to secure funding for archaeological survey and investigation on relevant parts of the M23 and M25. This led to the appointment of David Bird (later to be transferred to Surrey County Council as County Archaeologist) and the establishment of two full-time professional archaeological units working in the county, which he administered until the units were eventually taken over by Surrey County Council and the Museum of London. During this period, in order to protect the Society's legal liabilities, Dennis steered it into becoming a Company limited by guarantee.

Dennis was also one of the four people who in 1992 set up the Standing Conference on London Archaeology with their own money in response to the turmoil over the Rose Theatre discoveries. For more than a decade, this body provided a unifying voice in a fragmented archaeological sector of curators, contractors, consultants and societies following the abolition of the Greater London Council in 1986.

The major part of Dennis's energies was devoted to understanding and protecting every aspect of Surrey's historic past and in furthering his particular interest in the medieval period. His knowledge of the history and landscape of Surrey was unparalleled, partly as a result of early explorations with his parents who were keen cyclists.

He contributed chapters to *The Archaeology of Surrey to 1540* (1987) and *Aspects of Archaeology and History in Surrey* (2004). As the *Collections* and *Bulletin* testify, he excavated widely in historic Surrey, undertaking numerous excavations, ranging from preliminary excavations to locate the site of Merton Priory, to two moated sites near Reigate, and Bletchingly Castle. Latterly

he described himself as an historical geographer, which led to his seminal essay, *The origins and development of Surrey's villages* (*Bulletin* 347, March 2001) and the formation of the Village Studies Group which, to date, has published four studies, with two more nearing publication.

He was passionate in his defence of Surrey's historic landscape and engaged energetically with the Heritage and Countryside divisions of Surrey County Council and the CPRE (Surrey) to identify and protect Areas of Special Historic Landscape. His concern was always to ensure that the historic environment was recognised and protected when and wherever possible. Inevitably, this was not always popular and he did not win all his battles: his comments could be acerbic when he felt those in official positions had not fulfilled their roles adequately.

Holidays were spent in Scotland, which allowed him to pursue his interest in medieval castles and the archaeology and history of the Western Highlands. In the 1960s and 70s he excavated Breachacha Castle on Coll and Achanduin on Lismore and was elected a member of the Society of Antiquaries (Scotland) in 1967. Outside Britain, he had a fascination for the Burgundian Romanesque and he developed an interest in all aspects of the 'tower-house', which led him to draft various (unfinished) papers on this and other subjects that the editor of the Castle Studies Group Journal plans to bring forward to publication.

As a result of his tireless energy and wide experience, he was much in demand and became a Trustee of Merton Priory, the Surrey Historic Buildings Trust, The City of London Archaeological Trust and the Council for British Archaeology. He was also a valued member of many other societies and organisations in Surrey including the Carew Manor Group, the Reigate Society, the Domestic Building Research Group (Surrey), the Wealden Settlement Group, CPRE (Surrey), and the Castle Studies Group of which he was a founder member.

In 1969 Dennis was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London and in 1997 he was awarded a (recently instituted) medal by the Society, and the following are extracts from the President's address: 'It has been said that if you look closely at any archaeological organization in London you will find Dennis Turner, either in person or else the seat still warm. He has appeared as a witness at Public enquiries [...]. And has the very special, but rare talent of being a good listener and, following from this, a brilliant facilitator'.

Dennis often sadly observed that sometimes we spread ourselves too widely and fail to achieve what had been hoped for: a failing he recognised all too keenly in himself. His untimely death has inevitably resulted in his leaving a vast corpus of essays, papers, drafts for books on subjects from 'Box Hill Writers' to 'Poverty and Sickness in Victorian Bermondsey', some of which are being edited by friends and colleagues for publication. His unfinished excavation reports are also being completed for publication.

Dennis was a modest and private man, with an innate sense of justice. He had a mischievous sense of humour, which enlivened many meetings and conversations: a master of irony – often missed and seldom appreciated. To those who sought his advice he was generous with his time and in offering support and guidance. Many have commented that it was at an archaeology class or excavation he led that first caught their imagination, leading some to a career in archaeology and others to a lifetime's absorbing hobby.

For over 50 years Dennis served the Society in many roles, resigning his Vice-Presidency when he felt unable to contribute as he would wish, and was appointed an Honorary Vice-President not long before his death. His advocacy and stewardship have played an important role in promoting and safeguarding the historic landscape of the county. The Society has lost a good and true friend, and he is much missed.

AUDREY MONK