

JOHN GILBERT HURST (1927–2003)

John Hurst, formative figure in the development of medieval archaeology, doyen of the archaeological study of medieval and post-medieval ceramics and of medieval villages and Assistant Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments, was one of the founding fathers of the Society for Medieval Archaeology, Treasurer for its first twenty years, Vice-President 1977–80 and President 1981–3.

The son of a geneticist father and botanist mother, he was born on 15 August 1927, brought up in Leicestershire, Cambridge and Sussex, and educated at Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge. At Cambridge he read Archaeology and Anthropology, following early interests in Near Eastern archaeology confirmed when national service in the Intelligence Corps let him visit relevant sites. Archaeology at Cambridge in 1948 meant prehistoric archaeology, with fieldwork in due course at Grahame Clark's Star Carr mesolithic settlement in Yorkshire. Hurst was already interested, however, in applying the disciplines of modern archaeology to the Middle Ages. With a fellow undergraduate from the Cambridge University Archaeological Field Club, H. T. Norris, he began excavations in 1950, to go on for twenty years, at Northolt Manor, Middlesex. The rapid first report records post-medieval and medieval ceramics of kinds that were to become a consuming interest. Collaboration with academic consultants including Gerald Dunning and other national experts was the beginning of a network of contacts that John Hurst eventually extended round the globe.

Hurst quickly realised the importance of pottery for medieval archaeology and began post-graduate research on ceramics in East Anglian museum collections while continuing to excavate both at Northolt and, with his Cambridge contemporary Jack Golson, in Norwich. In 1952, however, within a year of graduation, he was appointed Dunning's assistant in the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments within the then Ministry of Works. Ceramics thereafter had to become a side interest, but one which quickly produced a defining study of Saxo-Norman pottery in East Anglia and subsequently embraced most fields of English and Continental medieval and post-medieval pottery.

He and Golson had perceived that an understanding of medieval rural life could be obtained by excavating medieval villages and in 1952, while Golson went to Denmark to experience Axel Steensberg's methods of village excavation, Hurst visited the historian Maurice Beresford's excavation at the deserted village of Wharram Percy on the Yorkshire Wolds. The Deserted Medieval Village Research Group resulted, involving historians, archaeologists, geographers and building historians. Beresford and Hurst's *Deserted Medieval Villages* (1971) summarises the first nineteen years of consequent research. The Medieval Settlement Research Group still continues the programme; the methods and approaches are used Europe-wide. The 1952 visits also led Hurst to join Beresford in a collaborative project of village excavation and landscape analysis at Wharram that continued for 40 annual seasons, the most comprehensive investigation of a medieval village yet achieved. He adopted the then controversial but now standard Steensberg method of open-area excavation to disentangle the flimsy buildings and thin stratification of the chalkland site and developed techniques for studying the landscape setting. Wharram proved a congenial training ground for generations of medievalists, not least because of Hurst's cheerful but firm leadership, infectious enthusiasm and transparent and readily-shared erudition. Eight volumes of *Wharram: A Study of Settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds* appeared under his co-editorship, with more planned by the team to whom responsibility now passes.

John Hurst's entire professional career was spent in the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments. Inspector from 1964 and Principal Inspector from 1973, he was Assistant Chief Inspector from 1980 to 1987 in what became English Heritage. Charged with the promotion of rescue archaeology and the excavation of medieval sites, he identified, recruited and by judicious patronage supported a cadre of able consultant excavators, early among them Philip Rahtz and students of potential such as Martin Biddle and Peter



John Hurst (centre) with Maurice Beresford (left) and Chris Taylor (right) at Wharram Percy in July 1989 on the occasion of the presentation of the Festschrift *The Rural Settlements of Medieval England*.

Wade Martins. A recruiting expedition in the company of Beresford involved one personally being summoned out of a school French lesson by a surprised headmaster to 'show this Inspector from the Ministry some excavation that you are apparently carrying out'. The visit led to employment on a string of Ministry projects. Hurst quietly developed research themes he thought of interest by deploying his recruits to medieval archaeology on carefully selected rescue excavations, practically determining the course of English medieval archaeology in its growth period in the 1950s to 1970s. He was one of the small group that promoted the foundation of the Society for Medieval Archaeology in 1957, and with David Wilson contributed the innovative 'Medieval Britain in 1956', the first of many, to the first volume of *Medieval Archaeology*. The 1980s saw him, as Assistant Chief Inspector, attempting — ultimately unsuccessfully — to create a comprehensive archaeology service for England out of the fast-professionalising rescue archaeology community.

Hurst's travels as an Inspector gave him the opportunity not only to visit and record a vast number of England's deserted village sites but also to see and record pottery from excavations and museums nationwide. A flow of papers on both subjects resulted. The visits enabled him to meet those interested. From such contacts and from students he educated in medieval archaeology and ceramics at legendary evening classes at Goldsmiths' College, University of London, emerged the Medieval Pottery Research Group and the sister organisation for post-medieval ceramics which subsequently became the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology. He was President of both. His growing interest in imported pottery led him to extend his visits to the Continent. The resultant prolific publications culminated in *Pottery Produced and Traded in North-Western Europe 1350–1650* (1986), co-authored with David Neal and H. J. E. van Beuningen, and his work on medieval and post-medieval ceramics was honoured with a Festschrift *Everyday and Exotic Pottery from*

Europe in 1992. Another Festschrift *The Rural Settlements of Medieval England: Studies Dedicated to Maurice Beresford and John Hurst* (1989) marked his work on medieval settlement. Research continued in retirement at Great Casterton, Lincolnshire, whence part of his vast research archive will go to the British Museum.

Elected F.S.A. in 1955, Hurst was Vice-president in 1969–7 and was awarded the medal of the Society of Antiquaries, presented posthumously, in 2003. He was elected F.B.A. in 1987, M.R.I.A. in 1991 and received an honorary doctorate from the University of York in 1995. In 1955 he married Gillian Duckett, archaeological helpmate and the perfect extrovert foil for his somewhat retiring personality. She died in 1971. They are survived by their two daughters. John Hurst himself died aged 75 on 29 April 2003 from injuries sustained in a violent attack some weeks before.

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