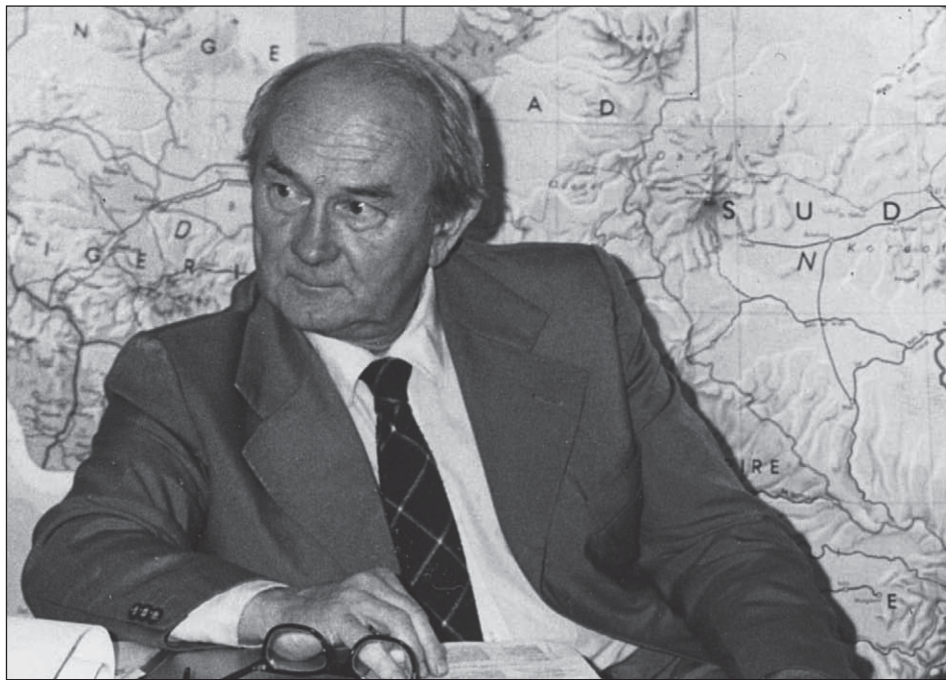

Dr John Amyas Alexander: 27/01/1922 – 17/08/2010



Professor Graeme Barker's comprehensive obituary notice for John Alexander, published in *The Times* (18/12/2010) fully describes John's war service, his contributions to teaching and archaeology in Africa, and his many important activities in British archaeology. Our collective obituary here provides but a brief synopsis of this remarkable life, but concentrates more on some personal views of those who knew him well, who gained from his teaching, and who shared his local fieldwork.

Many readers of the *Proceedings* will be familiar with at least some of John Alexander's activities. An Honorary Member of the Society he was its Director of Excavations in the 1970s and 1980s and the Society acknowledged the value of his work in the *Proceedings* Volume LXXXVIII, for 1999, which was a monograph 'Roman Cambridge: Excavations on Castle Hill 1956-1988' by Alexander and Joyce Pullinger.

Just after the war, John read history at Pembroke College Cambridge. Thereafter teaching history in the Sudan Education Service, he became active in archaeology, excavating with Peter Shinnie, and writing a textbook on the archaeology of the Sudan. Returning to Britain, John studied the postgraduate diploma in European Prehistory at the Institute of Archaeology in London, under Gordon Childe. Returning to Pembroke College, his PhD thesis was completed on the Yugoslav Iron Age. In 1958 he was appointed Staff Tutor in Archaeology at Cambridge University's Department of Extra-Mural Studies where he remained until 1965, after which he became Staff Lecturer in Archaeology, and the first full time lecturer in archaeology, in the Department of Extra-Mural Studies at the University of London. There he developed a highly successful range of Certificate and Diploma courses that encompassed all aspects



of British and world archaeology, a programme far wider than found in any 'intra-mural' department of archaeology at that time.

John was active in his excavations of threatened sites in and around Cambridge, notably Arbury Camp, Castle Hill/Mount Pleasant, Clopton, Grantchester, Great Chesterford, and Great Shelford. With a general shortage of dedicated funds, many of these excavations were done as training digs, involving generations of extra-mural students from both Cambridge and London, among whom a goodly number went on to work within archaeology.

In 1974, John returned to Cambridge as a University lecturer teaching European prehistory, becoming a Fellow of St John's College in 1976. During that period he also undertook major excavation campaigns at Qasr Ibrim in Nubia; his landmark contributions to African Archaeology and visiting professorships in Africa.

Tony Legge writes:

I first met John in 1962. Archaeology had been a long standing but unsystematic interest of mine, and I felt that this needed putting into order, so I joined a Cambridge University Extra-Mural class, taught by John. Our course ranged widely, with the emphasis on a comparative understanding of human physical and social evolution. In his classes we journeyed from the Olduvai Gorge of East Africa to the hand-axes in the Traveller's Rest gravel pit at Girton, and from the Roman Camp at Arbury Road to the widest reaches of the Roman world. John's archaeology was of immense humanity, presented as a vital route to human knowledge and understanding. Implicit in his teaching was that all in the group were part of the process of discovery. The entire proceedings were suffused with the quiet expectation that each of his audience would do what had to be done – and it invariably was.

With John's encouragement, I applied for admis-

sion to Churchill College, where I arrived as a mature student in 1966, and always had his support in the following years. John was now at the University of London Extra-Mural Department. His Certificates and Diplomas there offered a great choice to his adult students. These were conducted and marked with academic rigour, drawing on the expertise of teachers from the British Museum, the Institute of Archaeology, and other like organisations. The sum of teaching hours probably exceeded all other university archaeology departments in Britain when combined. All of this fulfilled John's vision that archaeology must serve the public or it was nothing. Few outside the Adult Education system can grasp how innovative and important his approach was, and this system was copied throughout Britain and, indeed, elsewhere in the world. In 1974, by a curious stroke of fate, I replaced John at Extra-Mural Studies in London, a situation he viewed with delight. During my time as Head of Department there, I met delegations from many European and Asian countries who came to learn how this worked, and who carried John's ideas away with them.

I worked with John in the field over many years, organising training excavations jointly with the Cambridge Extra-Mural Department as did others of his friends who have contributed to this obituary. This did not always go smoothly, as is the nature of excavation anywhere, and John's fieldwork sometimes met unexpected problems. Even so, John's wry sense of humour always carried him through. Everyone has their favourite John Alexander story from fieldwork, remembered with fond affection. As an inexperienced volunteer in 1963, I worked briefly with John at the Clopton Deserted Medieval Village in Cambridgeshire, where John had planned to dig a Medieval peasant's house, an ephemeral structure, then largely unknown. He selected a suitably smooth terrace on the Clopton hillside on which to place his trenches, but found instead the robbed-out church



footings, and the graveyard. Within a very few days there were human skeletons in great multitude, at all levels, some laying not far below the turf. John was quite unperturbed by this change of direction, and he encouraged visits and participation from all in the locality, and many came up the hill to see what we were doing. His well-intentioned efforts soon, however, resulted in a delegation who demanded an end to excavation. He had uncovered a death pit! The plague would be released among them! John soon placated the delegation with the voice of sweet reason, though another problem soon followed. The deserted village is really Clopton *with* Croydon, the two parishes amalgamated following depopulation at the enclosures of the mid 17th century. The churchyard was, of course, still consecrated, and the Vicar of Croydon politely explained Again, John's patient charm and negotiation soon resolved the problem, proper permission was obtained, and work was allowed to continue.

John was also active in the support of those with an amateur interest in archaeology, always dear to him, especially the Cambridge Antiquarian Society and the Cambridge Archaeology Field Group, where there will be many among the members who will have their own memories of John.

Tony Legge was formerly Lecturer in Archaeology, Head of Centre, and then Professor of Environmental Archaeology at the University of London Department of Extra-Mural Studies, latterly the Birkbeck College Centre for Continuing Education, from 1974 to 2005. He is now a Senior Fellow at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge.

Harvey Sheldon writes:

Through the educational programmes he pioneered and delivered, John Alexander became one of the most influential figures in post-war British archae-

ology. The Diploma programme that he created and managed at the University of London created unprecedented educational opportunities for a generation or more of adult learners. Experience in fieldwork was always an important aspect of studies for the Diploma and – as early as the summer of 1954 – John had carried out a training excavation on Wye Down in Kent, as part of the London University Extra-Mural summer school. The students even had the benefit of a site visit from Mortimer Wheeler, with whom I think John dug, as a schoolboy at Maiden Castle in the 1930s!

During his time as the Staff Tutor in Archaeology in the Cambridge Adult Education Department John developed an annual programme of residential summer training excavations. These became a magnet for other amateur archaeologists seeking training in excavation and a resource for youngsters, often still at school, who were considering reading the subject as undergraduates.

John's awareness of the actual and potential threat to archaeological sites led him to become a leading member of the group campaigning to alert the public and to bring pressure on government to provide resources to meet the challenge. One major step in this campaign, for which John worked tirelessly, was the foundation of 'RESCUE' in early 1971 as an independent body established to keep the issues, the challenges, the successes and the failures in the open for public debate.

John was a remarkable man, anchored by his devotion to Yvonne and his children.

Harvey Sheldon is a former Director of the Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee, Head of London Archaeology at the Museum of London, and Lecturer in Archaeology at Birkbeck College.

Morag Woudhuysen writes:

I met John when I first applied to the Cambridge Extra-Mural Board, to join an excavation. Despite being slightly puzzled by the instructions, which suggested I might bring a hat 'for the garden party' and a tennis racquet, I joined a dig on what turned out to be a Medieval brickworks. The first part of my archaeological education, as for so many us, came within minutes of going on-site when John informed me, 'you've bought the wrong sort of trowel!'

On site the atmosphere was quite formal as we were addressed by name and title, with the site notebook (which could only be written up by those of sufficient experience) recording the happenings in terms of, 'Mr Brown continued removing layer A' and 'Miss Smith did X ...'. But looking back, I realise that I had come into archaeology just at the point where it was about to shed old ways of working and become a much more mainstream subject.

Much of the credit for those changes must go to John. He set up courses which were of a high academic quality and which brought into archaeology a far wider spectrum of students, and their talents, than universities could. He also anticipated the archaeological consequences of the rapid redevelopment of land and town centres which were starting to be apparent in the late '50s and the need – which could not be met by university-trained students – for skilled, local amateur archaeologists who could watch, excavate and record at a local level.

In Cambridge the excavations on Castle Hill and elsewhere, reflected these changes. The Phoenix Garden excavations of 1962 took place on the last open space on the hilltop. There, John excavated a grid of trenches with a large and diverse labour force made up of paid labourers from the Labour Exchange, about-to-be-released prisoners, undergraduates, extra-mural students, school students, paid volunteers (we each got £1 a day), local people who became intrigued by the dig, members of archaeological societies, and anyone else who expressed the slightest interest.

This was a teaching excavation of its time, and John followed Mortimer Wheeler's dictums about on-site management and protocol. But while some of this would remain, the practice of archaeology was poised to change and the Cambridge excavations soon began to use open-plan excavation in place of small trenches, earthmoving machinery to clear topsoil and new technologies to better recover remains. John readily took to any new technology, technique or piece of equipment that would 'do the job better'.

Behind the on-site work there was a well thought-out structure to the training which meant students were rotated through different areas of work – digging, surveying, pottery washing and identification, section and plan drawing, and so on. A book-box provided relevant background material. On one afternoon a week John would do the 'milkround' when students were taken off-site to look at local archaeological monuments and their landscapes – annoying golfers as we visited the barrows at Royston Heath, admiring the grave of the Godolphin after doing the

banks of Wandlebury and then scrambling up the Devil's Dyke at Reach. Work did not stop at the end of day as there was a full set of evening lectures. While some were delivered by John and other on-site directors, academics also came in from the University and Museum of Archaeology which gave students immediate access to well known names, fresh ideas and a sense of being part of a body of people all engaged, at whatever level, in a common venture.

John continued to work on excavations in and around Cambridge for over thirty years. Often the urban areas available for excavation were small, but the continuity of his direction and knowledge allowed even tiny sites to contribute to the larger whole. It was also due to his encouragement that much of the later excavation was done under the auspices of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society – a triumphant justification of John's belief that local people could and *would* undertake the care of their local archaeology. The eventual publication of all the years of excavation, by the CAS, gave him great pleasure.

On moving back to Cambridge in 1974, John soon acquired a reputation amongst students for his disorganised study and his forgetfulness. Yet, above all else he was known for his care and consideration. Many benefited from numerous acts of kindness and generosity. He was generous with lending books and offprints, and philosophical when they did not come back. I can remember him smiling and saying that as long as the book was being well used somewhere, that was what really counted. He had a talent to do gentle kindnesses in such a way that one did not feel burdened by accepting them – a rare gift.

For all his life John worked in so many ways with a gentle but determined zeal to promote archaeology. He had a deep conviction that we are all first and foremost defined by being human beings. He believed that archaeology, with its concern for the human past, was the only medium where all peoples could meet on the common ground of humanity and through which they could come to understand themselves, our human history and the interrelationship of us all. Those of us who knew him will remember a man who lived his life by this conviction and whose work bears witness to it.

Morag Woudhuysen worked with John for many years at his excavations around Cambridge, acting as Finds Officer.

Christopher Evans writes:

I first got to know John through the Cambridgeshire Archaeological Committee (CAC) during the course of Haddenham's fieldwork in the early 1980s. Always generous with his vast local knowledge, over the years he steadfastly supported the development of professional fieldwork within the County and, particularly, the formation of the University's Unit in 1990. He would regularly visit our excavations, dispensing both brilliant bits of insight and reminiscence. Often he would use this as an opportunity to deliver boxes of his site archives relevant to the immediate work at hand. As a result, working with him we wrote up a

number of his sites for publication (Great Wilbraham, Arbury Camp and Shelford). Although such exercises can often prove personally trying, this was never the case with John and, accordingly, this was why we dedicated our 2008 South Cambridge Archaeology/Borderlands volume to him.

Let's not though beat around the bush, John could be terrifically disorganised, misplacing lecture slides and site plans with equal measure. It always seemed a little ironic that, with his Indian Army background (and well-expressed in his *How to Direct Archaeological Sites* of 1970), in his University fieldwork teaching John thought of himself as training archaeology's officer corps. (When he delivered Wilbraham's archives, quite a lot of Sudanese material had got mixed in with it and I like to think that, by the same token, that someone someday in Khartoum will stumble upon the still missing bits of Wilbraham's). Here I'll indulge in an anecdote. The first time I met John was when driving him back from a CAC meeting with Ian Hodder in 1982. The late summer afternoon was beautiful and John duly invited us into his garden for drinks. Laying on a tremendous spread, the hours passed pleasantly. At one point when Hodder was taking nuts from a bowl and, just about to pass these into his mouth, a glint had obviously caught John's eye and he deftly lent over and pluck something from Ian's lip-poised hand, remarking (as he saved Hodder's life) 'Ah, my cuff-link, I wondered where I put that'. With his generosity, perpetual good-nature and deep charm, you could forgive John anything – he was simply one of the nicest people you could hope to know and his company was always a pleasure.

His achievements were many. The quality of his early Castle Hill excavations (once you get over his use of Wheeler boxes) was very high. Aside from his key role in the CAC, he was a uniquely inspiring teacher. Indeed, however much he supported the County's archaeology, this pales in relationship to what he did in Africa and, over the decades in the University's Department of Archaeology, he fostered generations of young African archaeologists; that's a truly great thing and something he did right until the end.

John was simply a lovely man and a staunch colleague, and we shall certainly miss him.

Christopher Evans is the Executive Director of the University's Cambridge Archaeological Unit.

John Alexander: Supplementary Bibliography John Pickles

The bibliography of John's publications in his *Azania* Festschrift (No. 39/2004, 337–41), is thorough and largely accurate. It omits, however all but one of his numerous reviews after 1953. The list below is in two parts: his further original articles and notes, including a few missed by the compilers of the previous bibliography and an account (for the record) of reviews of his two books by others.

Articles

- 1958 Addington: the Chestnuts megalithic tombs, *Arch. Cant.* 72: 191–192.
- 1961 Excavations in Northampton, 1961–2, *Journal of the Northants NHS & FC* 34: 127.
- 1964 The origin of penannular brooches, *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 30: 429–430 + 1 fig.
- 1972 [Report on the 1971 Belgrade Congress of prehistoric and protohistoric sciences], *Antiquity* 46: 218–221.
- 1985 Qasr Ibrim 1984, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 71: 66–70. With B. Driskell.
- 1988 Qasr Ibrim report on the 1985–6 season, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 72. With Driskell & Connah.
- 1994 Preface (pp. 3–4) to *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 13 (1) on the theme 'Archaeology out of Africa'.
- 1997 Qalat Sai, the most southerly Ottoman fortress in Africa, *Sudan & Nubia* 1: 16–20.
- 1999 Jack Martin Plumley [obituary], *Sudan & Nubia* 3: 90–91.
- 1999 Remembrance: Sir Laurence Kirwan, *African Archaeological Review* 16: 197–199.
- 2004 The Ottoman empire in Nubia ..., in Yusuf F. Hassan (ed.), *History of the Ottoman empire: some aspects of the Sudanese-Turkish relations* (Khartoum), 19–39.
- 2005 Francis Geus, 1941–2005 [obituary], *Azania* 40: 159.
- 2007 The shaping of the modern Sudan, in Peter G. Hopkins (ed.), *The Kenana handbook of Sudan*, 131–142.
- 2008 Glencairn Balfour-Paul (1917–2008) [obituary], *Sudan and Nubia* 12: 106–107.
- 2009 Ottoman frontier policies in north-east Africa, 1517–1914, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 156: 225–234.
- 2011 Saving the African heritage is a global priority: how can a new subdiscipline of rescue archaeology aid it. [Editorial published posthumously online in *African Archaeological Review*, March].

Reviews of Dr Alexander's books

- 1970 *The directing of archaeological excavations*. (London & New York).
Reviewed: Frank Hole, *American Anthropologist* 74 (1972), 135–136; R. J. C. Atkinson, *Antiquity* 45 (1971), 235–236; Peter Fowler, *Encounter* 37 (Oct. 1971), 71; by J. du Plat Taylor, *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 2 (1973), 409; John Coles, *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 38 (1972), 451; Roger Summers, *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 27 (1972), 87–88; [Peter Levi], *TLS* 1 January 1971, 16.
- 1972 *Yugoslavia [Jugoslavia] before the Roman conquest*. (London & New York).
Reviewed: Alan McPherron, *American Anthropologist* 75 (1973), 1107–1108; Donald W. Wade, *American Historical Review* 82 (1977), 69; John Nandris, *Antiquaries Journal* 53 (1973), 91; R. Ross Holloway, *Classical World* 66 (1972), 187; Borislav Jovanovic, *East European Quarterly* 8 (1974), 231–234; M. Gimbutas, *Slavic and East European Journal* 16 (1972), 514–515; Robert K. Evans, *Slavic Review* 33 (1974), 593–594; M. Garasanin, *Starinar* 24/5 (1973/4), 243–248.

Editor's note

Regrettably, principally for reasons of economy, contributions from all the authors were edited for length. Their original contributions are to be posted on the Cambridge Antiquarian Society's website.