

OBITUARY

David Smith

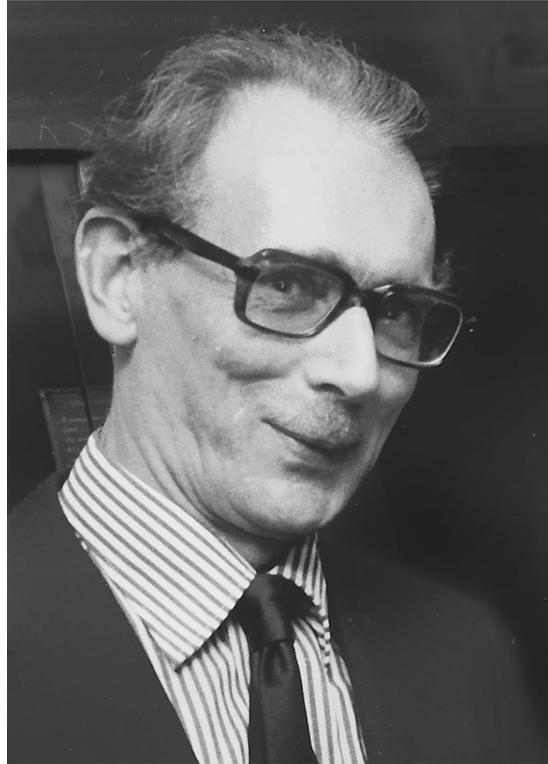
1923–2016

David John Smith was, in the opinion of his academic colleagues, the last of the true scholars and gentlemen. He was courteous to a fault, which meant he was not only a joy to work with but he wrote the most wonderful ‘more in sorrow than in anger’ letter of complaint which no recipient could ignore. He was a talented artist, a wonderful linguist and had an eye for detail which stood him in good stead in his chosen profession of museum curator.

He was born in Gateshead on 22 December 1923 but was brought up in Berwick-upon-Tweed, where he attended junior and secondary school. Curiously, for the man he became, he was not particularly academic at school and left at the age of sixteen to study art at the King Edward VII School of Art at King’s College, Newcastle, lodging with his grandparents in Gateshead. This was at the beginning of the Second World War and he used to recount his experiences as a teenage fire-watcher on the roof of the Hatton Gallery in the freezing cold, the rigours for which he thought his childhood in Berwick-upon-Tweed had been suitable training.

He was called up for military service and served for five years, mostly with the Intelligence Corps. It was during the war that his interest in archaeology was aroused during his postings in Italy and North Africa, particularly in Tunisia, where Roman remains were all around him and proved to be a pleasant distraction from the war.

Returning to Newcastle in 1947, he completed his degree and embarked on a PhD entitled ‘The Development and Affinities of Mosaic Decoration in Roman Britain’. One of his teachers was Sir Ian Richmond who asked him, on completion of his doctorate, to catalogue the material at South Shields Museum in advance of the opening of Arbeia Site Museum. Sir Ian then recommended him to Charles Bosanquet, the Rector of Kings College, as a bright young man with much promise and, as such, just the person to oversee the cataloguing of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle’s archaeological collection in the Black Gate and Keep and its transfer to the new Museum of Antiquities at the University. David was appointed Custodian and Secretary of the Collections.



There were no training courses for would-be museum curators in those days so, to help him with the task, he was sent off for a six-week tour of twenty-six museums in France, Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The cost of this extremely useful if arduous Grand Tour was £98. 2s. 2d.

He was employed by Newcastle University for the rest of his working life, first as Professor Richmond's Research Assistant, then as Keeper of the Museum of Antiquities, becoming a member of academic staff when the Department of Archaeology opened in 1972. When he retired in 1987 he had risen to the ranks of Senior Lecturer and is remembered fondly by his old students as an unfailingly kind, patient and inspiring teacher.

Whilst teaching and running the museum, he was also a noted field archaeologist. His North African experiences had given him a fondness for that area of the world and he spent many seasons working with Olwen, Lady Brogan, John Gillam and Charles Daniels in Libya. This led to some definitive publications, particularly *Ghirza: a Libyan Settlement in the Roman Period* (with Olwen Brogan) published by the Department of Antiquities, Tripoli in 1984. He also excavated on Hadrian's Wall at the Shrine of the Nymphs and the *genius loci* at Carrawburgh (AA 4th series, 40 (1962), 59–81).

The Society is particularly indebted to him for instituting and editing 'Museum Notes' in *Archaeologia Aeliana* from 1963 to 1987. Many of these notes he wrote himself, drawing the attention of members and the public to the richness of the Society's archaeological collection, but also encouraging others to contribute; for many postgraduates this gave them a much appreciated opportunity to appear in print for the first time. He was clear that a museum should be active in research and publication and this led to the Museum of Antiquities producing a series of catalogues and small publications for general readership, including Charles Daniels' useful work on Mithras. A short publication on Hadrian's Wall by David Breeze and Brian Dobson encouraged them to expand their work into the seminal *Hadrian's Wall*, published by Penguin and now in its 4th edition.

However, David's own research interests remained in the field of Roman mosaics and it was ironic that he spent his academic career working with a collection and in a region that had no mosaics. That did not stop him, however, from publishing widely — over 200 publications — and becoming one of Britain's foremost authorities on the subject. Indeed, his recognition of a number of 'schools' of mosaicists, particularly the Corinian School, led to a complete reappraisal of the study in Britain and abroad. He was a founder member of AIEMA (l'Association internationale pour l'Etude de la Mosaïque antique) and founded its British branch (the Association for the Study and Preservation of Roman Mosaics). From 1979 to 1984 he edited the Bulletin of the latter organization.

For people in the North of England, however, his legacy is his museum work. Following on from his achievement in setting up Arbeia Site Museum, he also completely reorganized the Antiquities Museum at Alnwick Castle for the Duke of Northumberland and supervised the museums on Hadrian's Wall at Chesters, Corbridge and Housesteads. He served on many local museum and archaeology committees, ensuring professional practices were followed in the region long before Museum Studies was a taught course at any British university. It was through his gentle but persuasive efforts that a full time curator was employed to look after the Wall museums and also that a proper archaeological conservator was employed in the region to attend to the many objects that his colleagues were excavating. As his successor as Keeper of the Museum of Antiquities I never ceased to be grateful for his careful and thorough work in setting up the museum. This solid basis meant I was able to forge ahead

and didn't have to keep stopping to check everything. By the time the university museums at Newcastle were amalgamated into one Great North Museum, the museum he had established was equated with the Ashmolean, the Fitzwilliam and Manchester University Museum as one of Britain's foremost university museums.

David could be a very private almost reclusive person and he would have been very surprised how many people remember him with great affection and feel they owe him a great deal. For those of us who worked closely with him, however, his dry sense of humour and sudden shafts of wit were a constant joy. Once, when he had cracked a particularly thorny academic problem, he turned to me and said 'There are times when I think I verge on genius'. I must have looked startled because his moustache twitched and he continued 'but that thought doesn't usually last long'.

David was an internationally renowned scholar and a gentleman of the old school but also a really kind and lovely man who will be greatly missed by all who knew him. He died on 24 November 2016.

Lindsay Allason-Jones

