

LAWRENCE BUTLER †

By PAUL STAMPER¹

with contributions from family, friends and former colleagues

Lawrence Butler, who died on 10 December 2014, was one of the pioneering first generation of medieval archaeologists. His research activities and expertise focused primarily on castles and churches, and between 1964 and 1972, with Phil Mayes, he excavated Sandal Castle (Yorks). In Wales, he excavated the little-understood Cistercian Maenan Abbey near Conwy, the equally overlooked remnants of the Augustinian abbey of St Kynemark's near Newport (Monms), as well as the magnificent Cistercian house at Valle Crucis.

Perhaps most notably, from 1981 to 2000 he directed annual excavations for Cadw at Dolforwyn Castle in Montgomeryshire, a structure of great importance as the last castle built by Llewelyn ap Gruffudd, in 1273. Over two decades, students spent each summer gradually revealing the entire plan of the castle, hitherto completely engulfed in fallen masonry, thereby allowing Cadw conservation staff to repoint the standing fabric for display. Butler maintained his interest in Wales, authoring the chapter on the country's medieval sites in the volume on *Deserted Medieval Settlements* edited by Beresford and Hurst in 1971, the first synthesis on the subject to be compiled and still highly regarded.

Lawrence published and reviewed extensively on subjects including medieval castles, monasticism and grave slabs. He revealed the importance of 'grave-covers' through his seminal 1964 article in the *Archaeological Journal* (based on his PhD thesis); church monuments continued to fascinate him throughout his life and he published regularly on them. He also edited several county volumes of Sir Stephen Glynne's 'Church Notes', which often describe churches just before Victorian restorers began their scrapings. He served on the Cathedrals Advisory Commission for over ten years and for many years was Consultant Archaeologist at Lincoln, Wakefield and Sheffield Cathedrals, as well as York Minster.

In the 1960s he was one of the pioneers of medieval village studies, although for reasons that remain unclear, he never served on the committee of either the Medieval Village Research Group or its successor, the Medieval Settlement Research Group, despite the fact that he knew Maurice Beresford and John Hurst well. Having observed the bulldozing of medieval settlement earthworks at Langton-by-Spilsby (Lincs) in 1959 on behalf of the Ministry of Works, Lawrence went on to direct excavations on an upland *hafod* in the Aber Valley (Caerns) in 1962 and of a long hut near Bwlch-yr-hendre (Cards) in 1963, and with Peter Wade-Martins on the deserted village site at Thuxton (Norf) in 1963–1964,

before turning his attention to rescue excavations at Faxton, in central Northamptonshire.

Once a large and sprawling village, still with 32 houses in 1729, Faxton rapidly shrank in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the final villagers moving away in the mid-twentieth century to nearby places like Old with amenities such as buses and Post Offices. Parts of Faxton's extensive earthworks were scheduled, but this gave only a short stay of execution when, in 1965, the landowner announced his intention to bulldoze the site as arable farming expanded. The Ministry of Works commissioned Lawrence to excavate sample tofts, and three summer seasons of work followed over 1966–1968. This was only a year after he had made the move into academic life and joined the University of Leeds (where Maurice Beresford was based) as a lecturer in medieval archaeology, having previously been employed with the Welsh Royal Commission for Historic Monuments in Aberystwyth.



Figure 1 Excavations at Faxton in 1967 (Faxton excavation archive). Lawrence Butler is the figure on the left in bobble hat.

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In 1967 *Current Archaeology* reported how his 'brilliant excavation technique' was revealing medieval house plans. Faxton, however, was a tricky site, located on clay, with houses built variously with earth-fast timbers and of cob, and a further report in *Current Archaeology* in 1968 showed a row of four tofts (dug in 1967) overlaid with a huge array of Wheeler box-grid squares – this more than ten years after open-area excavation became the norm at Wharram Percy. The site was also reported locally and nationally in *Medieval Archaeology*.

A third report on Faxton appeared in *Current Archaeology* in 1969, and in time Lawrence prepared a partial draft of an excavation report, intended for publication as a Society for Medieval Archaeology monograph. But by then – the late 1980s – the report's length was seen as a problem, and some of the contributions were felt to need substantial updating. Lawrence put the project to one side, intending to return to it in retirement. Sadly, however, he died on 10 December 2014, ten years short of what he hoped to be his allotted span, with Faxton among projects left incomplete. With great generosity Christopher Gerrard agreed to take on the task of publication, and over the past three years has undertaken a thorough reappraisal of Lawrence's work (with some additional sponsorship from Historic England and the MSR), and it is anticipated that the Faxton monograph will finally appear in 2019.

Born in Nottingham in January 1934, Lawrence attended Nottingham High School, then Peterhouse, Cambridge, where he read History. From 1955 to 1958,

National Service in the RAF within Fighter Command was spent tracking high-flying Russian aircraft; simultaneously he worked on his PhD on medieval sculpture. As already noted, from 1959 to 1965 he served as an investigator with the Welsh RCHM in Aberystwyth before moving to Leeds University to be its first lecturer in Medieval Archaeology and later Head of Department. When that department was closed he transferred to York University as Senior Lecturer and Head of Research in the Archaeology Department, where he remained until retirement in 2001.

While on casual acquaintance a reserved man, all who worked with or were taught by Lawrence soon got to know a jolly man, who was active, often as officer, in numerous groups and societies, which included the Society for Medieval Archaeology, the Castles Studies Group, the Society for Church Archaeology, the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology, the Cambrian Archaeological Association and the Yorkshire Archaeological Society. A lifelong devout Christian, on retirement with his wife (who predeceased him) to Swaffham Bulbeck (Cambs) he became much involved in church life and in the investigation and archaeological management of the church itself. Cultured and erudite, he sang, danced and acted, and from boyhood onwards remained a keen supporter of Nottingham Forest football club.

A shorter version of this notice appeared in Newsletter 53 of the Society for Medieval Archaeology (Spring 2015).