

**MICHAEL DAVIES-SHIEL**  
**1929-2009**

**M**IKE Davies-Shiel, who died in July 2009, was undoubtedly Cumbria's foremost proponent of industrial history. A long-time member of the CWAAS, he served on its Industrial History panel. He was an early active member of the Historical Metallurgy Society and in 1972 he was elected Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. In April 2009, he achieved the further distinction of being elected President of the Cumbria Industrial History Society. His work exemplified the parallel and complementary techniques of systematic documentary research and exhaustive field work. His fields of enquiry were many, for his curiosity reached well beyond the industrial and extended to everything environmental. He put his vast accumulated knowledge at the disposal of local history and adult education groups and his skills as a teacher were used to the full when he gave such presentations. He delighted and informed his audiences on a wide range of topics from the multitude of different water-powered industries to iron smelting, potash kilns, alpine flora and Vikings in Lakeland. The pioneer was also the populariser.

Mike was born on 5 June 1929, at Rock Ferry on the Wirral, the second of five children and only son of a geography teacher. He graduated from Birmingham University in 1950 with a BSc in Geology intending to be a mining engineer but shrinking career prospects in that declining industry led him to take a teaching diploma. After two years National Service in the Army Education Corps, he was appointed geography master at the Windermere Grammar School for Boys in 1953. After its closure, he joined the newly-built Lakes Comprehensive School at Troutbeck Bridge. Here, he continued to teach geography and pioneered a new teaching venture in environmental studies, as well as running sailing, chess and geology clubs. He was an outstanding, popular teacher admired and respected by generations of former pupils and his work colleagues.

His relocation to Windermere was the start of a lifetime's investigation and exploration of Cumbria. Some of Mike's earliest fieldwork was focused on the recently discovered Neolithic axe-working sites high on the Langdale Pikes, where he undertook survey and excavation. Soon he was visiting Workington iron and steel works and exploring the practices of traditional woodland management, and in 1959 he began his long association with Backbarrow ironworks. Iron industry technology and woodland industries were closely intertwined fields of interest and strolling through a coppice wood, Mike would hold forth about the differences between bark-peelers' and charcoal burners' huts. Though initially an amateur in industrial archaeology, Mike had two essential talents – the patience and perseverance to trawl through old records and the ability to relate documentary evidence to what he could see on the ground. His own meticulous records included detailed photographs. Their value as a resource can be judged from the fact that many of the working enterprises and buildings that he recorded in the 1960s and 1970s have since disappeared.

Two further features of Mike's *modus operandi* were renowned. The first was always to talk wherever possible to people who actually worked or managed the industrial process under investigation. This ensured survival of the sometimes arcane terminology applied to materials, tools and processes and, equally important, it recorded subtleties of technique – the essential element of 'black art' apparent only to an experienced worker. His second 'iron law' of fieldwork was 'always trespass' while armed with sufficient documentation and information to engage and win over any potentially hostile landowner.

In the 1960s, he volunteered to take part in a land-use survey, pioneering new ways of showing fellside vegetation and surveying most of the then-county of Westmorland, as well as helping to train the co-ordinators for such surveys in Scotland and Wales. The opening of Kendal Record Office was a pivotal point in Mike's discoveries for it led in 1969 to his being asked to record the last nine working bobbin mills. For the next 40 years, he roamed the county recording field evidence for every kind of mill. Combined with archival researches, this led to the identification of prodigiously large numbers of mills, mostly long vanished. One hundred and thirty bobbin mills is an impressive total in itself but it is dwarfed by the 560 corn mills and 650 fulling mills that he also identified.

Mike's best known individual volume is his book *Watermills of Cumbria* (1978) that highlighted the fundamental importance of water power to the county's industrial past. It displays his meticulous attention to the exact workings of machinery and techniques. He also published four books co-authored with Dr John Marshall including the celebrated *Industrial Archaeology of the Lake Counties* (1969). Of his eight research papers, five were published in the *Transactions* of Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, two in the *Journal of the Historical Metallurgy Society* and one in the *Cumbrian Industrial History Society*. These were not intended to be the last of his publications. An updated and expanded version of John Somervell's well-known *Water Power Mills of South Westmorland* (1930) was underway as was a work on iron smelters and iron processing. Alas, this ambition was not to be realized.

Apart from teaching, Mike's interests were legion: sailing on Windermere, fell-walking, and, as an active member of St Thomas's Church, Kendal, he and his wife Noree looked after the garden there for ten years. He leaves his wife Noree, son Simon and granddaughter Brenna.

*Geoff Brambles and Sam Murphy*

The five following articles are presented as a tribute to Michael Davies-Shiel and his contribution to the field of industrial archaeology.