

Graham Webster

OBE, MA, DLitt, FSA, AMA, MIFA

Curator of the Grosvenor Museum 1947–1955

by D J Robinson BA, MPhil

One of the great archaeologists of the twentieth century and a man with close connections with Chester, Graham Webster, passed away after a long illness on 21 May 2001. His funeral took place nine days later in Swindon.

Graham Webster was born in Stamford, Lincolnshire in 1913. Although trained as a civil engineer, he clearly felt little enthusiasm for the profession and found much more enjoyment in his hobby as an archaeologist, working in his spare time at both Canterbury and Lincoln. In 1947 on the recommendation of Ian Richmond he was appointed the first professional curator of the Grosvenor Museum, with a brief to thoroughly modernise the building and its displays. The museum had just been taken over by the Corporation from the Chester Archaeological Society, and putting Graham in the job was seen very much as a gamble by both parties, as he was to admit himself in later years.

At Chester he continued to develop his archaeological career, for amongst his other responsibilities the new position made him the successor to Robert Newstead, whose excavations had done so much to put Roman Chester on the archaeological map before the Second World War. He worked with Richmond on the legionary headquarters building (*principia*) in Goss Street, and at various points on the circuit of the Roman defences. However, not all of the archaeology was so formal — some discoveries were made by accident. When the first fragments from what was to become known as the Castle Esplanade hoard were brought to him in November 1950, he immediately rushed to rescue everything which still remained in the service trench where they had been discovered a few days earlier, ironically only a short distance from the front door of the museum. By careful detective work he also tracked down most of the workmen and schoolchildren who had made off with handfuls of what were later to prove to be Saxon pennies. By this quick response he had saved one of the most important Viking-age coin hoards ever found in England.

Above all else Graham Webster's particular talent was in communicating his love of the past to others. In Chester this can be seen in his lasting legacy to the city — the renovation, expansion and redisplay of the Grosvenor Museum between 1947 and 1954. Inevitably he

will be remembered best for his two new Roman galleries. The Newstead Gallery, named after his predecessor, told the story of the Roman army and Roman Chester in a unique style which has survived, with minor improvements, to this day. Graham's little secret — which he freely admitted — was that he had very little original Roman material to work with: the style of the new displays, heavily reliant on graphics, was not the result of a great vision or design but dictated by a dearth of real objects. About half of the great collection of Roman tombstones and sculptures amassed by the Society at the end of the nineteenth century was redisplayed in the adjacent room, where the design and building of the supports for the stones was a chance to use his old engineering skills.

However, there was much more to his work at the museum than the Roman galleries. He incorporated a seventeenth-century house, No 20 Castle Street, into the complex, filling it with period rooms which are still a feature of the museum today. New displays about the Civil Wars and the medieval port of Chester were also put into the King Charles' Tower and the Water Tower respectively. Nor were publications ignored: three popular booklets were written about Roman Chester, the city's Roman inscriptions, and the Roman army. This was a tremendous amount of work, achieved in a very few years and with the help of a very small staff. Among the latter were two promising young men called Brian Hartley and Ken Barton, later to become respectively the doyens of samian and medieval pottery studies in Britain. By the early 1950s Chester's museum was one of the most modern and admired in the country, and this was largely due to Graham Webster's energy and imagination.

By 1954 his work in Chester was drawing to a close and he was to leave the city to take up a research fellowship at Birmingham University, where he spent the rest of his working life. Graham Webster will always be associated with the Roman city of Wroxeter, where he ran a training excavation from 1955 until 1985, encouraging and inspiring a whole generation of young archaeologists with his enthusiasm for Roman Britain. He became an acknowledged expert on Romano-British pottery and also a respected historian of the earliest years of the Roman conquest, with books such as *Rome against Caratacus* and *The Rebellion of Boudicca*. His other specialism was the study of the Roman soldier, and his best known book, foreshadowed by the booklet he had produced for the Grosvenor Museum in 1956, was the seminal *The Roman Army*, first published in 1969 and still in print today. It is a fitting memorial to his stature as a scholar that it remains the standard work on the subject.

In his retirement Graham was closely associated with the formation of the Roman Research Trust, latterly the Association for Roman Archaeology, a sign of his continuing absorption in the study and excavation of the remains of Roman Britain. He was Honorary President of the Association at the time of his death.

His last visit to Chester was in June 1992 when he attended the opening by HRH The Prince of Wales of the latest reinterpretation of the museum's Roman stones collection. Graham was the guest of honour on a day which saw the new displays officially given the name 'The Webster Gallery' to celebrate and commemorate the enormous debt which the city and its museum owed to him for his work in Chester.

Note

Graham Webster's own account of his years in Chester can be found in 'Reflections on archaeology and the creation of the Grosvenor Museum 1947–55', *J Chester Archaeol Soc* new ser **72**, 37–47. *Archaeologist at large* (London: Batsford, 1991) is a collection of papers spanning his whole career, including his time in Chester.