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William Bulmer

1893–1989

William Bulmer, born in Newcastle upon Tyne on 27 June 1893, was descended from a Newcastle family whose forebears had come, about the turn of the eighteenth century, from Skelton-in-Cleveland (then in Yorkshire). From 1908–11 he was at Oundle, in Crosby House, under F. W. Sanderson. A boy's interest in steam locomotives led to training under Sir Vincent Raven, Chief Mechanical Engineer of the North-Eastern Railway, which was followed by posts at York, Darlington, and Ferryhill. Later he would say that three men had greatly influenced his life: these two, and Ian Richmond. In 1922 he married Norah Elizabeth Boyd, the only child of John Stewart and Isobel Boyd of Jedburgh. About 1930, after an accident, he retired to Stocksfield in Northumberland where he lived for the next fifty-six years until entering a nursing home near Darlington in November 1986. There he died, on 29 June 1989, two days after his ninety-sixth birthday. Mrs. Bulmer had died the year before. They were devoted to one another. The writer of this memoir is grateful to William John Bulmer, their only child, for knowledge of his father's early life and career.

William was not yet forty when the consequences of his accident compelled him to retire prematurely. Retirement to Stocksfield brought him near to Corbridge and Hadrian's Wall in a period of active and exciting archaeological discoveries which captured his imagination and stimulated his interest in Roman antiquities. He joined our Society in 1932 and in 1937 the Trustees of the Corbridge Excavation Fund appointed him Honorary Curator of the site-museum, an office which he held for thirty-two years. In the following year our Society elected him Honorary Curator of its Museum in the Black Gate and he held this office for twenty-five years. Four years before relinquishing this curatorship the Society's pre-



Photograph by courtesy of William John Bulmer

Norman collections had been transferred on permanent loan to the new Museum of Antiquities in King's College, Newcastle upon Tyne, then the Newcastle Division of the University of Durham, and in public recognition of his long and diligent curatorships at Corbridge and in Newcastle the University conferred on him in 1963 the Degree of Master of Arts *honoris causa*. For a quarter of a century he had arranged and hand-labelled the displays in the Black Gate and also conscientiously applied his technical knowledge to the cleaning and repair of pottery and metal objects. Scientific conservation was then in its infancy and beyond the reach of provincial museums. This work, carried out "behind the scenes" (in fact at home), went unremarked, but another of his achievements immediately meets the eye of every visitor to the Museum of Antiquities. This is the set of models of Hadrian's Wall and its component structures in which he so successfully combined artistry and practical abil-

ity, knowledge of building construction, and the professional engineer's attention to accuracy and detail. These were commissioned by our Society and completed before 1939 but, owing to the War and its aftermath, it proved not possible for them to be placed on permanent public exhibition until the Museum was officially opened in 1960. The largest, at six inches to a Statute Mile, is a relief model of the Wall itself from end to end. At over forty feet in length it is the longest and largest-scale model of any sector of the Roman Imperial frontier. The others are of the fort at Benwell, Milecastle 48 (Poltross Burn), the turf-and-timber Milecastle 50 (High House), a stone wall turret, a turret of the Turf Wall, and a section of the Vallum. William excelled in model-making and these models are a monument to his talents and industry. He also made three other models for the Museum of Antiquities, which he presented, and others for the museums at Corbridge and Housesteads.

In January 1965 he was elected President of our Society and, on the sixth of May in the same year, a Fellow of the Society of Anti-

quaries of London. He had already long been a member of the Museums Association and of the Northern Federation of Museums and Art Galleries. He served a term as President of the latter body and was elected to honorary life membership in 1975. Our Society also, in 1980, made him an Honorary Life Member.

Although proud of his achievements and honours he was by nature diffident. He enjoyed companionship rather than company in the sense of numbers and was himself an engaging and amusing companion, with a fund of Geordie anecdotes and jokes which he could relate in flawless dialect. The present writer, as his successor in charge of the collections in the Museum of Antiquities and at Corbridge, gained much from his knowledge and guidance, friendship and kindness; and fireside teas with William and his charming wife, in their comfortable home at Stocksfield with its sweeping view up Tynedale towards Corbridge and the Wall, will ever remain a cherished memory.

D. J. Smith