

## OBITUARY

JOHN NEVILLE HAMPTON, OBE, FSA, 1922–2019

John Hampton, one of the Society's Honorary Vice-Presidents and a member for over 50 years, died on 4 October 2019 at the age of 97. He is probably best known to current members for his work on the site of the Ashtead Roman villa and tileworks, but he also played important roles on this Society's Council and committees (which he and his wife Peggy often hosted) as well as being a leading aerial archaeologist at the head of the Air Photography Unit of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, which he set up in 1965. John was also active on more local committees, notably as Chairman of the Epsom Protection Society, where he helped to guide that Society's responses to the large-scale developments then being undertaken in Epsom, and other threats to historic buildings within the borough. He gave freely of his time for all of these activities but unfortunately this meant that he did not have the opportunity to publish as much as he would have liked (but for Surrey see Hampton 1996; Hampton & Hawkins 1983; Hampton & Palmer 1977, 187–91). This included a final report on his work at Ashtead, although he made sure that the records and the finds were in order and passed them on in good time to be included in the forthcoming report on the excavations of 2006–13 and reassessment of earlier work on the site.

An only child, John grew up in Kingston upon Thames. Early visits with his father to visit his paternal grandparents in Ashtead involved walking across the Common and may have led to his later interest in the archaeology of the area. Apprenticeship as a toolmaker was perhaps the obvious vocation for someone with John's practical skills but working in this reserved occupation prevented him joining the navy during the War as he had wished. In 1948 he joined the Ordnance Survey at Chessington, training to become a surveyor before moving to the Archaeology Division in 1953 and studying for a diploma in archaeology.

In 1962 John began an archaeological survey on Ashtead Common from the triangular earthwork across to and including the large Roman clay pit (quite possibly still the largest yet recorded in this country). Having joined this Society in 1963, he carried out excavations at Ashtead from 1964 to 1966 and in 1969, identifying an enclosure wall for the villa complex as well as finding and testing the sites of possible buildings and kilns. His wife Peggy and daughter Caroline were involved in the dig and the latter has memories of this activity that will strike a chord with any of those involved in the more recent excavations:

Excavating in the woods during the 1960s and 70s was far from a "walk in the park", there was no vehicular access, and everything including fencing to stop walkers falling into the trenches, buckets, spades, trowels, and large heavy duty plastic sheeting which was rigged up as a shelter, scout style, should it rain, had to be carried, pulled and pushed a mile, often through thick yellow clay, into the centre of the wood. Typically John style, the wooden pegs to align the trenches were hand-made by him, Peggy's wicker shopping trolley was pressed into use, the small wheels designed for pavement use being replaced with large 12 inch diameter wheels to get through the mud, and even Peggy's red nail varnish was used to mark trowels and buckets so they weren't lost amongst the dirt and bracken. At the end of the day, all finds, including the heavy Roman tiles, had to be carried back the mile through the narrow woodland paths, along with everything that had been taken up for the day.



John Hampton on his retirement in 1985  
(photograph courtesy of Caroline Northfield)

Brief accounts of this work were published in two village histories (Hampton 1977; 1995), the second with some revision and restoring the references that had been supplied but were omitted in the earlier version. John's work on Ashted Common was of considerable importance especially as it kept alive interest in this very important site and acted as a bridge between Anthony Lowther's and Arthur Cotton's dig of the 1920s and the more recent excavations. Indeed, the Society's annual reports and unpublished documents show that for part of this time Lowther was chairing the Excavations Committee of which John became a member, and in 1962 Cotton was still Lord of the Manor, giving permission for the new work to start.

Of particular importance was the preservation, following Lowther's death, of background documentation about the 1924–9 excavation, while the new survey and excavations were of great help both in the planning of the further work that was undertaken in 2006–13 and as an aid to

tackling a site mostly covered by dense vegetation in 2006. The high quality of the survey can be seen by comparison with the LiDAR data now available.

In 1965, John was appointed as head of the Air Photographic Unit at the RCHM(E). This gave him the opportunity not only to become a librarian for a huge collection of aerial photos of archaeological sites, and arrange for new photography, but also to foster understanding of the process of mapping from aerial photographs as well as initiating the development of digital mapping from these photos.

When the Society established the post of County Archaeologist in 1972 John had already arranged an embryonic SMR for Surrey and was always ready with assistance where such records were concerned and of course on aerial photographic matters. He readily shared information; a good example concerns Stane Street (Hall 2008, 248), which was a longstanding interest. It was unfortunate that Surrey is not the best place for aerial archaeology: too many trees, too many people, less than ideal subsoils and Britain's two largest commercial airfields on the doorstep. It was, however, typical that he was able somehow to gain permission for a quick survey of the site at Stanwell, just the other side of the Heathrow boundary, so long as he did just one pass at about 6.00 am (which turned into a quick circuit). This was of considerable value when Martin O'Connell tackled the site with its unexpected Neolithic feature, then interpreted as a cursus and now better known from work further north. Stephen Nelson recalls that 'In the 1970s and 80s RCHM(E) was in the same building as the old Ancient Monuments Department where I worked. In 1986 Bourne Hall Museum undertook the rescue of the Saxon cemetery at Headley Drive, Tadworth. I went and saw John, on the floor below me. He was interested and said he would pop up and have a look. I assumed he meant he would visit the site. Actually, he meant he would go up in his plane and take a photo – which he duly did and produced a print the next day'.

John retired in 1985, although in practice this meant continuing considerable involvement with local societies. He devoted some of the time to working on his archaeological legacy and ensuring the safe deposition of the finds. It was always a pleasure to meet John and he always seemed to be good-humoured. It was particularly pleasing that he was able to visit the site of

the recent Ashtead excavations, even in 2013 when he was over 90, and see the two-period tile kiln that was eventually tracked down. Although it was not possible to complete a final report on the Ashtead villa and tileworks before his passing, at least some short papers have been published that among other things pay tribute to his work.

I am very grateful to Caroline Northfield for information about her father's life that has helped to round out this obituary.

DAVID BIRD

#### References

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