

OBITUARY

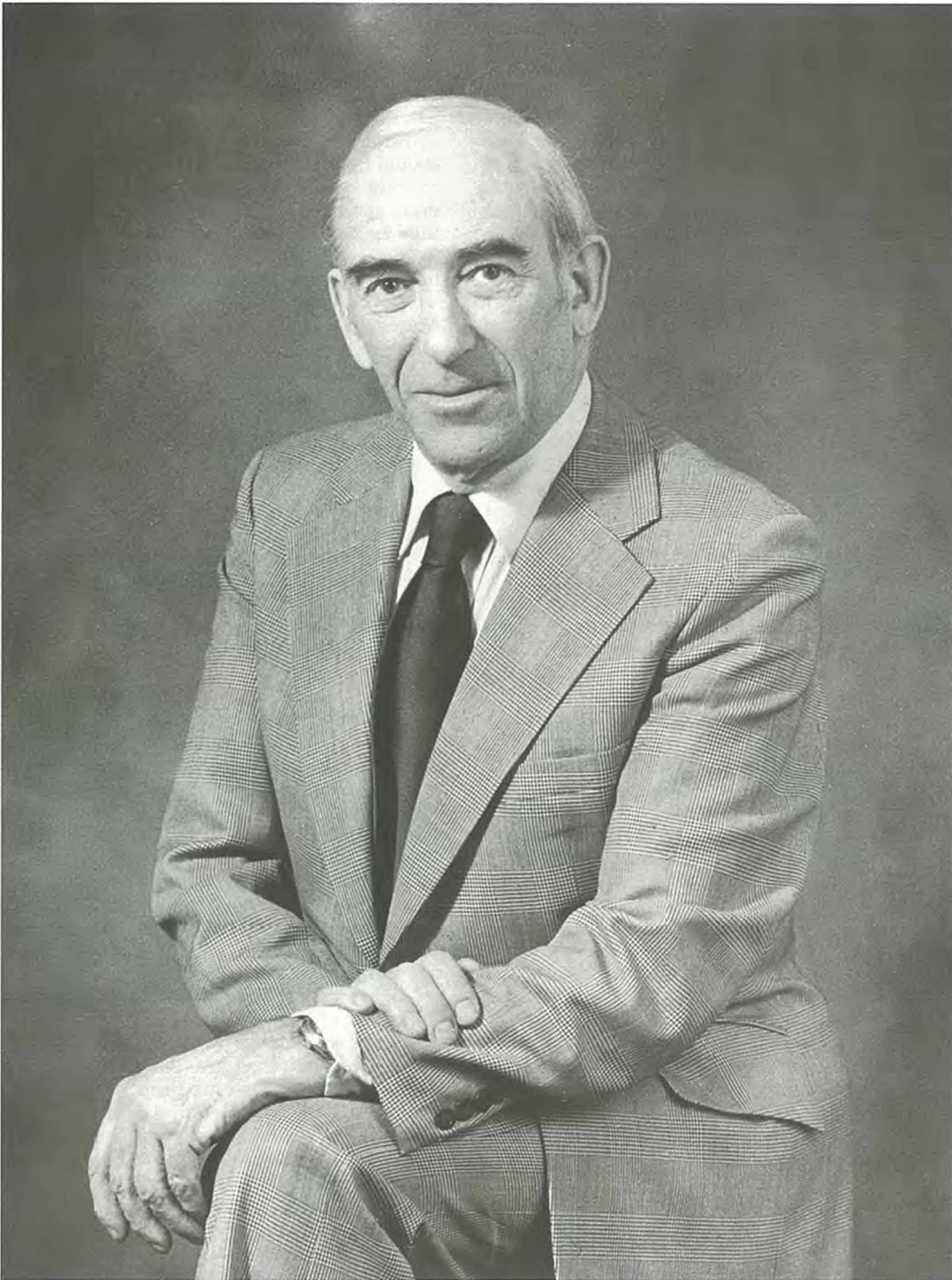


Photo courtesy of Myrtle Bruce-Mitford

RUPERT BRUCE-MITFORD
1914-1994

Memorial Address given at St George's, Bloomsbury on Tuesday 14 June 1994.

Rupert was born on 14 June 1914. This would have been his 80th birthday. Had he been able to look back today with detachment, which being Rupert, I doubt, he would fairly have seen a life well rounded, an odyssey completed with humour, honour, friendship, and the greatest distinction of scholarship.

When we last met for more than a moment, in October 1993, Rupert wanted to talk about what he should do next: should it be something on his forebears, about his parents in Yokohama, or his mother's family in British Columbia? Should he perhaps do something autobiographical? Should he even write, as he put it, 'the secret history of Sutton

Hoo'? What was one to say? The message was clear: the great tasks had been completed, his long pilgrimage to the Early Middle Ages had reached its conclusion. In the time remaining he wanted to reflect on family, friends, and courses run.

The central years of Rupert's intellectual and domestic life lay in the second half of the 40s. The young family, the small top-floor flat, the great commission of Sutton Hoo accepted, the *Provisional Guide* written and produced almost entirely at home, the excavations at Mawgan Porth begun, interest in the Celtic hanging bowls aroused: all these go back to the years 1946-50. In many ways the rest of his life was spent in working out these personal and intellectual strands. But what had brought him to this point? How was the coherence we can now discern originally formed?

Rupert was born in London eighty years ago today, the youngest of the four sons of C.E. Bruce-Mitford and Beatrice Allison. His father had run a school in Yokohama, but was also a journalist, geographer, and vulcanologist. His mother came from British Columbia where her father had been a pioneer rancher and gold prospector. The family returned to London where Rupert was born, but Rupert scarcely knew his father, although he could just remember sitting on his knee, for he was posted to Madras and died there when Rupert was four.

Rupert went in due course to Christ's Hospital, the school of Camden, Sir Cyril Fox, and Sir John Beazley. Typically, Rupert retained contacts with his old school all his life, and his grand-daughter Jessica goes there now. From Christ's Hospital he went up to Hertford College, Oxford, in 1933 as a Baring Scholar, to read history, having changed from classics at school, despite the devoted coaching of his older brother Terence. At Christ's Hospital the Library had provided Rupert with his first entry to medieval art. W.R. Lethaby's *English Gothic Stiff-leaved Foliage* opened Rupert's eyes to the logical evolution of styles:

I suppose the significant thing about it was that the subject that had appealed to me was concrete and visual, I was using my eyes. The pre-requisite for an archaeologist, I was to discover, is a love of objects.

Here at once are two of the great themes of Rupert's scholarship: passionate commitment and the hard art of looking. It was the same again at Oxford where, in his first year, his attention was caught by a manuscript in one of the exhibition cases he passed on his way to and from the Upper Reading Room of Bodley. This was the famous twelfth-century bestiary, MS Ashmole 1511, open at the picture of an eagle shooting up into the sky with a salmon in its claws. After some weeks he screwed up his courage to ask to look at it. Years later he recalled

my awestruck feeling when I was put into a recess surrounded by ancient bindings, looking down through a narrow window into a College garden, and the closed book, containing heaven knows what, was placed in front of me.

He asked for a book to explain it all and was given M.R. James' Roxburgh Club facsimile of another bestiary:

... lunch was totally forgotten, and when I was evicted at the end of the day I remembered every thing I had read, even if I did not understand it all.

Before the age of twenty-one he had somehow also obtained a ticket to the Reading Room of the British Museum by the ruse of applying to see some manuscript or other. Rupert

had his favourite desk, close to that at which Karl Marx had reputedly written *Das Kapital* - note the 'reputedly', here too Rupert was too good a scholar to claim too much. During the intervals from reading he walked round the building, often tacking onto the Guide Lecturers, covering every department, enjoying particularly the Chinese paintings and the Royal Gold Cup.

Little did I think - he later wrote - that one day I should be in charge of this masterpiece and even, after the passing of a special Act of Parliament, take it, with diplomatic passport and police escort, to Vienna, part of the first foreign loan ever made from the British Museum.

Note the range of interests, the love of the dramatic, but also the innovation, the European concern.

After taking his degree, Rupert joined the Ashmolean Museum for a year, 1937-8. The great hole for the basement of the new Bodleian was being dug at the corner of Broad Street and Parks Road, and Rupert was put in charge of watching the site. The soil from the medieval well bottoms was dumped by mechanical excavators onto lorries, and Rupert's job, as both he and Martyn Jope, who worked with him, later recalled

was then to jump on the lorry and sitting on the pile, as it drove through the city to ...Cumnor, pick out all the bits of medieval pottery I could find, put them in a bag, and come back on the bus or in an empty lorry.

The finds had then to be washed, stuck together, studied, drawn, and written up:

It was a taste of rescue archaeology before that term was invented. It was also great fun.

It was also the beginning of the great tradition of medieval archaeology in Oxford, the start in many ways of medieval archaeology as we now know it in Britain. When I came to work in Oxford twenty years later, following up Rupert's 1939 excavations at the deserted medieval village of Seacourt on the line of Oxford's western by-pass, it was to his paper on 'The Archaeology of the Bodleian', published in *Oxoniensia* in 1939, and to Martyn Jope's papers building on Rupert's work that I immediately turned. And it was this work at the Bodleian that would later lead Rupert to set up in the British Museum a National Reference Collection of Dated Medieval Sherds.

So the scholar was being formed. The following year, 1938, Rupert joined the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum. Including the war years, 1940-5 in the Royal Signals, Rupert served the Museum for 39 years, sixteen years as Assistant Keeper, fifteen years as Keeper of the old Department of British and Medieval, six years as Keeper of the new Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities, and finally two years 1975-7 as Research Keeper. After the war the old Department faced appalling problems. Rupert was responsible initially for the post-Roman Celtic and German and Slavonic Collections. He had four bays and three table cases for display in the King Edward VII Gallery, half the then closed Iron Age Gallery for storage, nowhere to lay anything out, and virtually no publicly available catalogues. In a far-sighted appreciation written in 1953 to A.B. Tonnochy, then Keeper of the Department, Rupert set out the scale and nature of the problems facing 'his' collections, their significance, and what should be done. The next year he found himself responsible for achieving the solutions and over the next decade achieved them, creating by 1969 the conditions in which the Department could be reorganised into the separate Departments of Prehistoric and Romano-

British Antiquities and Medieval and Later Antiquities which we know today. The budding medieval archaeologist had become curator.

These were years of extraordinary curatorial acquisition. The Rothschild Lyncurgus Cup, for example, which he showed me in his room just after it had arrived, and the Ilbert Collection of Clocks and Watches. This was perhaps Rupert's greatest coup and the one in which he took immense pride and pleasure. The great Ilbert collection of 210 clocks, 2300 watches and watch movements and many other pieces was about to be sold and split up. The sale catalogues had been printed. The Treasury turned down a request for funds. Rupert turned to the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers who found a donor to buy the clocks. The money for the rest had still to be found. The Company raised some by public subscription, but it was far from enough. With time running out the Court of the Clockmakers Company went as a deputation to the Treasury. As a result the Chancellor of the Exchequer agreed to petition Parliament to provide the money in the form of a special grant. The Ilbert Collection was saved for the nation - the greatest collection of horology in the world - and Rupert became a Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers.

The extraordinary range of the man, his immense capacity for taking pains, become apparent. He was not, of course, always successful. On the morning of 5 December 1960 a note reached the Keeper:

[There is a man] at present over in Manuscripts . . . Mr Lasko is very anxious for you to see an object which he has with him — it appears to be a 2' [foot] Winchester style morse ivory altar cross, carved back and front. He asks if you could go over there — this is the last day the man will be in London. URGENT.

Thus began the story of the great ivory cross, now known as the Cloisters Cross and its owner Mr Topic Mimara of Zagreb. During the course of the next year a file 1½ inches thick grew up as Rupert, with immense care and persistence gradually overcame every obstacle in the way of the acquisition by the Museum of the greatest English ivory of the Middle Ages. The Treasury finally agreed to produce the then unheard-of sum for a medieval work of art of over £185,000, but quite fairly stipulated that Mr Mimara should reveal, at least in confidence, where he had acquired it. This Mr Mimara, having given his word not to do so, was unwilling to reveal, and so the cross went in the end to the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Who can say, in this day of disputed origins, that the Treasury did not take an entirely correct stand? But it was not for want of Rupert's trying that this greatest of objects is not today in London.

These years of connoisseurship, of pleasure and love of objects, of care, persistence, and attention to detail in the running of a great department, were also the years of scholarship. As early as 1940, Thomas Kendrick, then Keeper of Rupert's department, had written to say that when he returned from the forces he would in addition to his other duties 'be responsible for Sutton Hoo. Brace yourself for this task'.

Herbert Maryon began work on Sutton Hoo in the Research Laboratory in November 1944. Rupert returned from the forces a year later.

There followed great days for Sutton Hoo when new, often dramatic discoveries were being made in the workshops all the time. Built from fragments, astonishing artefacts — helmet, shield, drinking horns, and so on — were recreated.

In these words of Rupert's, it is as if we hear Caernarvon to Carter: 'What do you see?' And Carter's reply, 'Wonderful things'.

The next few years were full of Sutton Hoo. Great objects recreated, the *Provisional Guide* written, the display in the Edward VII Gallery installed. But the pace began to slacken. The Research Laboratory had other tasks. Rupert's work as Assistant Keeper was mounting. In May 1949 Rupert reviewed the position for the then keeper, Thomas Kendrick, setting out the urgent need for time and resources, but above all the true scale of the task.

Three large volumes are planned, in consultation with the Research Laboratory. A fourth volume (interpretation) is a possibility. The fullest place will be given to metallurgical analysis and description . . . and to a formidable array of technical reports obtained at my request from outside scientists . . . We hope that the publication will set a new standard in archaeological publication, and be worthy of its material.

All this as early as 1949. Few men can ever have built for themselves so hard a cross to bear, nor nailed themselves to it quite so firmly. Rupert's report was not acted upon for a decade. These were fallow years for Sutton Hoo, but immensely productive for Rupert. His work on the Codex Amiatinus, 'never superseded', the Lindisfarne Gospels, 'a turning point', the collection of material on the hanging bowls, now in this last year brought to completion, the study of the Ormside Bowl, sadly never concluded. And behind and above all this, the rebuilding of the department, the great acquisitions, his active years as Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries. Rupert was much criticised then and later for what were seen as diversions from Sutton Hoo, but this fallow decade, when no real progress was possible for Sutton Hoo inside the museum, was for Rupert a time of preparation and consolidation of the immense scholarly talents that were to be so crucial when things began to move again, as they did in 1960. As Kenneth Painter has said, 'The delays in the publication of Sutton Hoo were in reality a honing of skills.'

In 1960 and afterwards, first Sir Thomas Kendrick, later Sir Frank Francis, as Directors, provided a house for Sutton Hoo in Montague Street, and supported the building up of a team, eventually to a total of thirteen people. Volume 1 of *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial* appeared in 1976, Volume 2 only two years later, in 1978, Volume 3, in two large parts, in 1983. To some at the time this seemed far too slow, and much anguish and tribulation ensued, a battle between Rupert's dogged perfectionism and the understandable impatience of those who did not perhaps always realise quite what was involved. But that is long ago now, and the great volumes stand as testimony to the Museum's support of scholarship, to the many who shared in the work, but above all to Rupert's attention to detail and unmatched breadth of knowledge and sensibility.

Sensibility and high purpose, but also a sense both of drama and of fun. One evening in the early 1970s Rupert was to address the Saschensymposium in London on Sutton Hoo. The meeting was in the Chemical Theatre at University College. Right at the start the lights in the lecture theatre dimmed. Down the side aisle came a small procession. At its head, an acolyte, moved Nigel Williams, bearing a replica of the Sutton Hoo whetstone. Behind him, entering the light as he mounted the stage, followed Rupert, clad in a carriage rug, hands hieratically crossed, as Lesley Webster remembers, wearing the new replica of the Sutton Hoo helmet, never before revealed, and declaiming the opening

lines of Beowulf. Taking off the helmet Rupert laughed self-consciously, enjoying a theatrical joke of the kind in which he delighted.

This was the author of what Dr Arnold Taylor described in his Presidential Address to the Society of Antiquaries in 1976 as 'one of the great books of the century'. Rupert was elected the same year to Fellowship of the British Academy.

Rupert retired from the Museum in 1977 after 39 years service. There then began a long series of travels and new positions. Visits to Australia, which he came so much to love, and where he had friends and cricket to watch, and where he was a Faculty Visitor in the Department of English at Canberra. The Slade Professorship at Cambridge, a Visiting Fellowship at All Souls, and in 1984 Honorary Fellowship of his old college at Oxford, Hertford. There was the excitement of the new campaign of excavations at Sutton Hoo, his friendships to keep up, and the clubs he enjoyed, the Athenaeum, the Garrick, the MCC, the Cocked Hats. But all these years, through good times and bad — saddest perhaps when he found he had to face the sale of his wonderful library — Rupert kept working. First, dealing with Volume 3 of *Sutton Hoo*; then writing up his excavations of 1949–54 at Mawgan Porth, now published by English Heritage, and commuting from Cheltenham to Hailes Abbey, where he was provided with working space in a 'Ministry of Works' hut; and, finally, over the last ten years, bringing to completion his *Corpus of Late Celtic Hanging Bowls AD 400-800*, now in preparation for the Oxford University Press. Those who have it seen it, may think that this last may also be the most satisfactory of all his works.

Rupert was an energetic, romantic man. He often got into difficulties, sometimes avoidable. He drove cars in a somewhat perplexing way. He had a genius for friendship. He corresponded mightily. But behind everything lay that

passion for scholarship and research. Whatever, indeed, might he find within the covers of that bestiary long ago? Throughout his life he encouraged and supported the young in all they did, inspiring and instructing several generations of students, myself among them. His warmth, humour, wit, his courtesy and courtliness he leaves behind him.

Such a man was Rupert. Much as we miss him among us, we can only be grateful for the passionate commitment which saw all his greatest projects brought to their full conclusion. He was an heroic figure in his time, and we all of us are fortunate to have known him and to have been his friends.

Martin Biddle
Hertford College, Oxford

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RUPERT BRUCE-MITFORD'S CERAMIC PUBLICATIONS

Bruce-Mitford, R.L.S.

1939. 'The archaeology of the site of the Bodleian extension in Broad Street, Oxford', *Oxoniensia* 4, 89-146.
1940. 'Medieval tripod pitchers' in 'Notes', *Antiq. J.* 20, no. 1, 104-112.
1949. 'Saxon Rendlesham', *Proc Suffolk Inst Archaeol and Nat Hist* 24, 228-51.
1964. 'A National Reference Collection of medieval pottery' *Medieval Archaeol* 8, 229-30.
1997. 'Pottery' in Bruce-Mitford, R., *Mawgan Porth*, English Heritage, London. 71-80.

Bruce-Mitford, R. L. S. and Jope, E. M.

1940. 'Eleventh- and twelfth-century pottery from the Oxford region', *Oxoniensia* 5, 48.