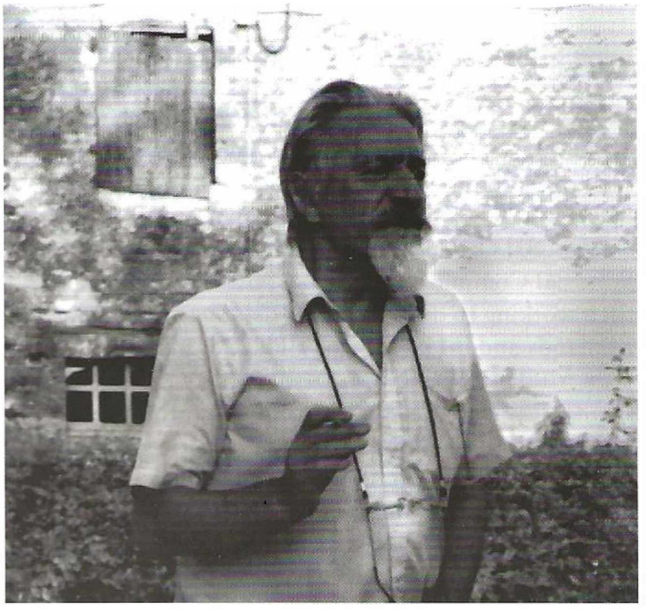
Robert Graham Thomson 1932–2005



Bob Thomson belonged to a rapidly diminishing generation of archaeologists who brooked no nonsense in the pursuit of knowledge. For him and his colleagues, archaeology was more important than politics and town planning, and he never let politicians or planners forget it, or developers for that matter. At the height of his powers, Southampton, where he performed a variety of roles through the 1970s and '80s, crackled with his abrasive certitude, and was all the better for it.

Bob was born in Coventry on the 26th April 1932. His father, Robert James Thomson, was a founder member and former chair of the local Labour party, and his mother Elsie became Mayoress of Coventry in the same year. His parentage showed in his principles and beliefs. Bob left school at sixteen to become an apprentice electrical engineer at BTH Coventry but by 1960 found himself at Hawker Siddley. Archaeology had always appealed to him and when he was made redundant in the early 1960s he found work digging for the Ministry of Works. Those were heady times, when everything seemed possible, and archaeology too had an impetus and urgency that fitted well with Bob's huge appetite for life.

Bob came to Southampton in 1968, on the recommendation of Ken Barton, who had met him in Bristol and had been impressed by the way he'd organised a protest group against the demolition of a timber-framed building in Coventry. The two of them formed a lasting friendship that left its mark when both the Medieval Pottery Research Group and the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology were formed. They worked together in the Channel Islands and the Saintonge, attempting, with mixed results, to grasp some understanding of the origins and influences of Southwestern French medieval ceramics. This was a problem that occupied Bob right up to the end.

In Southampton, meanwhile, Thomson was battling to rescue archaeology in the face of rapid redevelopment. He took on responsibility for digging, following Colin Platt's successful programme, before the founding of the Southampton Archaeological Research Committee (SARC), which conducted major excavations in the Saxon and medieval towns. He maintained his interest in pottery, introducing a ceramic recording system and writing short notes and identifications. Bob soon realised that he would never have the time to do justice to the large assemblages that SARC had recovered, and although he'd conducted preliminary sorting and recording, a full programme of post-excavation work, funded by the Department of the Environment, was initiated in the early 1980s. Two pottery specialists were appointed, one to work on the Saxon material, and the other to work on the medieval. I arrived in September 1982 to assume the latter responsibility. Bob died on the 23rd anniversary of my first day in post.

Between my appointment and starting work Bob had been moved sideways. He was now curator of the archaeology museum, rather than managing the post-excavation programme, but he took this on with as much energy as ever, overseeing new permanent Saxon and medieval galleries that are still in place. For the last few years of his service with Southampton City Council he was Ancient Monuments Officer, a position that gave him great scope to cajole, pester and badger anyone and everyone whom he felt needed an application of boot to rear to stand up for Southampton's architectural heritage. I don't think he was ever very happy in the committee rooms, and he conducted a lot of business socially, bending ears in private. Through the 1980s this approach became less effective, and although he achieved notable success in making the town walls more accessible to the public, by the time he retired in 1994 he was despairing of the new breed of political animal, a view that became increasingly critical with the rise of 'New Labour'.

In a profession where publication is regarded as the most significant measure of achievement, Bob's legacy is difficult to pin down. He'd produced a handful of publications when I first met him, and although several more followed his retirement, many of us will feel that we will never receive the full benefit of Bob's experience and understanding. What Bob brought to archaeology, and especially to the field of pottery studies, was intuition. Even if he did not know what a particular pot was, he could tell you what it was not, and that, for him, was the first step towards understanding. One of the greatest lessons he taught me was to recognise what I did not know. For all his bluster and twinkle-eyed curmudgeonliness, he maintained a suitably humble attitude towards the people of the past and the evidence they left behind. His legacy is less in the publication of his ideas, and more in the idea itself of a future for archaeology that he had helped form. I don't know if this was a deliberate aim, but it is his influence that

testifies to his contribution as an archaeologist. He gave generously of his time, his knowledge and his experience to anyone whom he felt would benefit, and he gave everyone a chance to do so. It didn't take him long to sum you up, and if he was happy with you, then you had whatever he could offer. Many people passed through Southampton in the '60s, '70s and '80s and went on to greater things thanks to the opportunities Bob gave them. Thomson was also a popular figure at conferences, never hesitant in expressing his opinions, and if necessary, deflating arguments. For me, Bob is exemplary of that post-war generation from whom further education was denied (although I'm not sure it would have appealed to him anyway). He got on with the job, which everyone was faced with, of rebuilding our society, and taught himself along the way. He didn't much care for laziness, either of thought or deed, and he had no time for pomposity. The imperatives of archaeology were clear to him, and without his generation much would have been lost to the frantic redevelopment programmes of the '50s and '60s. When we assess his contribution we cannot separate him from the times in which he grew up and worked.

There were many other interests, especially gardening, wine, jazz, shooting, ale and motor racing, but his insatiable curiosity led him into plenty of other areas. The emphasis was always on discovering more, on improving his knowledge and understanding. As his fitness dwindled his reading increased, and he was always talking about new books he'd found. In his final years he rarely strayed far from his own table or his customary seat in the local. In either location we'd engage in long conversations that started and ended nowhere in particular, but were always instructive … if only I could remember them. He would probably not have characterised himself as the world's best husband, but his family and home were important to him. The death of his son Robert, early in 2005, was a severe blow, and his last few months were spent trying to avoid hospital. Eventually he had to admit defeat, which was uncharacteristic of him. Even then, he only died when he was ready to do so. Many people miss him, not least his wife Patricia and son Jeremy. There are many colleagues and friends who miss him too, and we all salute an indomitable presence in the field of medieval ceramics.

Duncan H Brown

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