

Les Matthews - an appreciation

RON FOWLER

C L R MATTHEWS, FSA (known universally as 'Les') died on 19th February 1989 at the age of 78. A Yorkshireman by birth he was born on 19th March 1910, moving with his family to Dunstable in 1917. Over the years Les developed into the archetypal Dunstablian steeped in its history and its surroundings and fiercely protective of its position in local affairs.

Like many archaeologists of his generation his initial interest was in the countryside itself, its flora and fauna, and he became a knowledgeable ornithologist.

These interests spread to the historical nature of his surroundings settling finally into practical archaeology and ending with his eventual recognition as an expert in excavating on chalk and for his interpretation of the Iron Age occupation sites in the Dunstable area.

In his youth as a Rover Scout in Dunstable he formed the first archaeological field unit from members of his group before World War II, his personal commitment having been fostered when he met the Wheelers who were excavating the Five Knolls on Dunstable Downs.

After war service in the Royal Navy he returned to work at Vauxhall Motors, where he eventually became a Paint Processing Planning Engineer, and also to pick up his archaeological interests forming the Manshead Field Club in 1951. The principal object of this group was to carry out rescue excavations in Puddle Hill Quarry, Houghton Regis, which work continued unabated until the quarry closed in 1966.

The story of how this club developed into a recognised archaeological force is told elsewhere, but recognition should be given here to the enormous support Les had from his wife Kathleen and their two children, Betty and Peter.

Les became one of the most outstanding field archaeologists of his day and as Site Director of the Manshead Archaeological Society of Dunstable he organised a number of important excavations of national significance - Puddle Hill, which became synonymous with Manshead, the Dominican Friary site which produced the Dunstable Swan Jewel and Dunstable Romano-British cemetery. There were many other headline-making activities which all added to the developing jig-saw of information concerning occupation in the Dunstable area from prehistoric times.

Les must also be remembered for his lectures and his writing. His excavations were written up and published in the Manshead Journal - a yearly production of the Society - with certain important finds being published in various learned journals. Les also made his contribution to Dunstable history by writing *Ancient Dunstable*, a popular 'layman's' book on local prehistory, while his principal work, a monograph *Occupation Sites on a Chiltern Ridge* told the story of Puddle Hill.

Les's contribution to archaeology speaks for itself and his work received national recognition when he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in January 1985. Les himself laid little store on academic recognition though he was deeply committed to the necessity for publication of excavation findings. His pride was in the skills he developed in the ability to 'read' a dig and in his gift of being able to 'see' the people behind the occupation evidence they had left behind.

I feel that Les will be happy to be remembered as a caring, warm-hearted man who was deeply involved with the friends who came to dig with him and as someone who wanted to share with them the sense of value and excitement he experienced in his archaeology.