

The Manshead Archaeological Society 1951 - 1991

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In September 1951 a skeleton dropped from the quarry face into the Houghton Regis chalk pit. News of this reached the curator of Luton Museum, Mr Charles Freeman, and he invited the Luton Grammar School Archaeological Society to investigate. News, however, had also reached Les Matthews in Dunstable. Unaware of Luton Museum's involvement, he obtained permission from the quarry manager to excavate with his friends. So, through no-one's fault, began a rivalry, and sometimes an unfortunate hostility, between two groups of amateur archaeologists which it took all Mr Freeman's tact to smooth over.

Les Matthews' introduction to archaeology had been through the excavations on the Five Knolls during the 1920s, when he was a lad living nearby. The interest then kindled was pursued through the 1930s with the help of fellow Rover Scouts, and finds from their investigation of a Bronze Age site at Totternhoe quarry required identification at the British Museum. Here Les met Mr Christopher Hawkes, a meeting that began a lifelong friendship.

The war interrupted Les's regular observation of the quarries near Dunstable, but he resumed after returning from naval service. So it was that he and his friends were ready to investigate the archaeological site revealed in 1951 at Houghton Regis.

There was no doubt of the urgency of rescue action on the site, which became known as "Puddlehill". It began with a race against the mechanical digger, working in wintry conditions, and Mr Freeman was anxious lest enthusiasm and haste might be leading to destruction of recoverable evidence. He wrote to Les (8th November 1951): "It needs very careful handling indeed and I am asking the University of London Institute of Archaeology whether they could send down a supervisor to give advice on the work. It will probably involve the Luton Corporation in considerable expenditure, but it seems to me the only way to get a real picture of the happenings on that site."

Les replied (9th November 1951) "I am sure that you are quite correct about the importance of the site at Chalk Hill and I feel that it should be investigated by competent authority and that you have taken the

right action... A mechanical navvy is no respecter of prehistory and the method we have adopted has been to remove as much evidence as possible before the whole thing was swallowed up. At present quarrying progress, all the 'digging area' so far undertaken will have vanished within the next fortnight and I feel that the results in my possession so far justify our methods. Notes and measurements have been taken, a plan based on the Ordnance Survey map has been produced and all the pottery from the site is packed separately and numbered for location. I consider this to be a far more satisfactory state than to have four pegs in the ground but all the evidence underneath churned into cement.

"I will inform my companions of the changed circumstances and will ask them to suspend digging until I get more information from you."

C E Freeman to C L Matthews (12th November 1951):

"I did not mean to delay you or your companions as far as digging is concerned. Obviously it is desirable to take advantage of what little fine weather we are likely to get before the site disappears."

The Puddlehill operation was expected to be over within a few weeks, but in fact co-operation from Mr Cox, the quarry manager, and the number of sites, from Neolithic to Saxon, which were exposed as time went by, meant that archaeological work was almost continuous on Puddlehill for fifteen years. On several occasions during that period Les believed that "we have virtually finished there now and can begin preparing the final report", but each time something fresh turned up.

No London expert was found willing to take over supervision of the site. By March 1952 it was evidently felt that the *ad hoc* digging group should become an organised society and the inaugural meeting of the "Manshead Field Archaeology Club" was held. The name of the Manshead Hundred of Bedfordshire was chosen to embrace the intended area of activity: it included Dunstable, Leighton Buzzard and neighbouring districts, but not Luton.

Mr Freeman continued to support both the groups working on Puddlehill. He sent equipment and advice: "I think it would be a very good idea to

keep a complete record of the club's activities in the form of a journal right from the beginning of its foundation. You may be intending to do this but, if not, you will find that such a journal in future years is invaluable from many points of view - identifying finds, providing the history of the club, and as something to show interested people from time to time."

On 7th April 1952 Les sent him the duplicated interim report of the winter's investigations. They covered Early Iron Age, "Belgic" and Roman features. Les also asked "Have you any further news of the 'life' that has been granted us? If we now have plenty of time we propose to 'clean up' the site - Partly as appeasement to the other party."

Mr Freeman suggested affiliation to the Council for British Archaeology and in May 1952 he wrote "I hope everything will go smoothly now because there is no real reason why it should not, and the Lord knows, there is enough work in many areas in South Bedfordshire for a dozen archaeological societies, much less two!"

Throughout the summer up to a dozen workers were digging at weekends and in the evenings. They

had the use of tools etc. lent by Luton Museum and stored at the Cement Company premises, since the club had as yet little property or storage space of its own. A member with a cine camera made a short black and white film, which includes the excavation of a girl's skeleton found lying in an Iron Age ditch. It was several years before the next film, now in colour, was made. From then until about 1980 excavations, post-excavation work and outings were intermittently filmed, a valuable record now transferred to video tape. The increasing expense of filming brought these records to an end, but with members acquiring camcorders, filming has begun again.

Photographs were, of course, always part of the record, but dependent on the presence of a skilled photographer. It was not until the late 60s that Les acquired a good camera and could keep his own site record, and in 1986 the Society itself purchased a camera. There are now well over 2000 slides in the archive.

The Puddlehill site was partitioned between the Manshead and the group which was now constituted as the South Bedfordshire Archaeological Society.



Puddlehill 1964: Young members excavating Saxon Building 4. Les Matthews and Terry White are standing on the far baulk, and Ray Harris is on the left of the picture.

Since the sections of ditch allotted to each turned out to be part of the same enclosure, it was not surprising that demarcation disputes and disagreements over method sometimes threatened in what John Morris once called "trench warfare on Puddlehill". However, at the close of the 1952 season, the South Bedfordshire Society withdrew from the site, leaving the Manshead in sole possession, and Mr Freeman suggested (23rd September 1952) that they should "carry on independently" of the Museum. "That is not to say that I am no longer interested but merely that you will be freer agents."

The excavators felt their need to learn, and applied to the Workers Educational Association for a tutor. Mr Jacques at Cambridge took immense trouble to find the right person, consulting several eminent archaeologists. The first Manshead students enrolled in October 1952 for Prehistory with Miss Isobel Smith. The Manshead has had reason to be very grateful to the WEA, the Cambridge Extra-mural Board and their tutors. Prehistory was followed by the Romans and then the Dark Ages, so beginning the association with Dr John Morris, which lasted until John's death in 1977. Soon after taking over the Dunstable class he wrote to Mr Jacques about plans for them (25th November 1953): "I think that giving [the opportunity of an archaeological summer school] to them might with luck lead to the establishment of a permanent nucleus and a sound archaeological tradition in S Bedfordshire, which would be a permanent gain to the future of early history." In the summer of 1954 the Cambridge Extra-mural Board arranged for Dr John Alexander to conduct a training excavation on Puddlehill. Over the years John Morris's courses changed from pure instruction to collaboration in the preparing of a report on the Puddlehill site. More recently Dr David Trump has helped the Society to keep up to date with techniques and thought in archaeology.

In March 1953 a second interim report on Puddlehill appeared. Les wrote: "Scarcely an evening has passed during the summer, without some members being present on the site and as many as 15 have been working together at week-ends".

Finds were displayed at a hobbies exhibition in Dunstable in October, attracting much interest and bringing in new members, including Ernie Hawes, Secretary of the Society from 1955 to 1968. The Associated Portland Cement Co asked for a similar display to be mounted at their works.

Several members, including Les, joined the

Nottingham University training excavation at Great Casterton in 1953.

In the late summer of 1954 Les wrote (12th September 1954) to John Morris: "I think I've found a Roman Villa in the middle of a cornfield at Totternhoe. I visited the site at the invitation of the farmer who told me that his plough hit the flint walls of a Saxon Church and sure enough whacking great flints lie about on the surface. By probing I hit floors at different levels... A borrowed spade and a little rabbiting produced a tiled floor - a mortar spread of yet another and loads of Roman pottery... The site is situated in a lovely setting - surrounded by hills and on good grain producing land - just the place for a wealthy house." A short season of excavation began, and the first cuts found a concrete floor so close below the surface that in the dry weather it was possible to brush the topsoil away and expose it. Soon after, the remains of hypocausts were uncovered. There was great local interest. Les reported again to John on 21st September: "I'm afraid the locals have had a Roman holiday on our work - hundreds of people have walked and jumped all over it."

The brief season left many questions unanswered, and in 1956 a further investigation was made. It was hoped that other seasons could follow, but this has never proved possible.

In 1954 the first of a series of popular "Brains Trusts" was held in collaboration with the South Bedfordshire Preservation Society. Dr Ashton, who, with Mrs Ashton, had given much support to the Society, was asked to become President, a position he held until 1982. In December the official title was changed to its present form: "The Manshead Archaeological Society of Dunstable".

During 1955 Dr Morris introduced a radio series on "The Dark Ages". It took the form of a discussion among experts of different aspects of the topic, with Les Matthews representing the interested layman. The starting point was the finding of the Totternhoe villa.

The new Secretary, Ernie Hawes, inaugurated winter lectures, a dinner and dance and a coach outing. The latter started a tradition by being very enjoyable and losing money.

The Society still had no premises of its own. When Les was asked in 1962 to speak to the British Association for the Advancement of Science on "The Problems of the Amateur Archaeologist" he recalled "The amount of material now being discovered began to become embarrassing, and it became a problem where to keep it. The tools went

out of the garden shed, the coal came out of the coal bunker on to the garden, the front room became littered like a Victorian parlour, there were skeletons under the bed, and there were perpetual rows - if you don't remove those old bits of bricks, I shall throw them on the fire...! It became essential to acquire a headquarters where site drawings and the classification of pottery could be carried out." Feelers were put out to see if Dunstable Council could provide premises for a museum, including rooms where Society members could work on the finds, and in 1955 the Town Clerk wrote that at present nothing could be done, but that when the Civic Centre was built, room for a museum would be provided at Priory House.

The search for a work room continued, and in December 1956 Dunstable Borough Council offered a condemned property, 22 West Street, at a nominal rent. The Manshead had an HQ at last. It was timber-framed, gaslit and with an open fire. Old crates were collected from the market to build fires of alarming size and ferocity. Few members owned cars, and for the grand removal of 5 years' accumulated finds from the Site Director's house to the new HQ, the rag-and-bone man's horse and cart were hired, members following on foot. Post-excavation work could now be carried on throughout the winter evenings.

A meeting place regularly open to members (Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays are Manshead nights) has been very important to the vitality and success of the Society. It means a thriving social life as well as the opportunity to work on finds and reports. There is space for the ever-expanding library and to store equipment, and members and visitors can see and handle examples of local finds. When No. 22 was to be demolished, in 1963, Dunstable Council, after a period of anxious uncertainty, provided another property, slightly less ancient and quirky. After the demise of Dunstable Borough, South Bedfordshire District Council assumed the role of provider. The Society is extremely grateful for this support given by the local authority to archaeology. Since 1956 we have occupied six different premises. The moves are always stressful, with some loss and damage to material almost inevitable. We are therefore very glad to have been undisturbed and unthreatened by demolition since 1977.

By 1957 the membership numbered 61, and the subscription was doubled, to ten shillings. Some Luton members formed a sub-group, under Terry White. This was to deal with a Roman site revealed

by housing development at Gooseberry Hill, and the group ceased its separate existence after excavation there finished. Another housing site, at Marina Drive on the border between Dunstable and Totternhoe, exposed skeletons of a Saxon cemetery in its foundation trenches. The jewellery and other grave goods were deposited in Luton Museum, who contributed £10 towards the cost of the excavation, along with £15 from Luton Corporation.

Les was as interested in the countryside as he was in archaeology, and in May 1957 he inspired the first of what became a regular, semi-official, Society event: the Dawn Chorus. On this legendary occasion ten members met before daybreak on Totternhoe Knolls to listen to birdsong, and saw a ghost.

In January 1958 Les proposed approaching other Bedfordshire archaeological societies to discuss forming a County society. This was the first move towards the creation of the Bedfordshire Archaeological Council, but the Manshead has always been fiercely independent and its committee was divided on the idea of this link. It was not until 1959 that the membership (with three opposing) agreed to the proposal. This led to the formation of the BAC.

The Society was always conscious of the importance of publication. Puddlehill was on its conscience, but it was impossible to produce a report while the excavation continued. The Marina Drive cemetery was a different matter: the production of a report, with the assistance of John Morris, became first priority.

To issue interim reports on excavations, and to keep members in touch, the first Manshead Magazine (price 9d) was rapidly produced in October 1958 - too rapidly and light-heartedly for its critics. However, the editor, chastened, introduced No. 2 in January 1959, writing "we cheer ourselves with the thought that the criticism of the last number is a good healthy sign and means that the Society is very much alive. It also raises the issue of the form that this magazine will take in the future. Is it to be a magazine containing occasional frivolous articles or are we to appeal to a wider public and to produce an archaeological magazine containing only serious studies?" By 1965 the Magazine had increased its solid content and adopted the title of Manshead Journal. No. 31 appeared in 1991. Because some members found the contents heavy going and regretted the absence of less serious items, a Newsletter, usually appearing twice a year, was instituted in 1966.

During 1959 membership reached 100. John

Morris's WEA class began card-indexing all archaeological sites and finds in Bedfordshire, beginning work in the Luton Museum archives. These records, expanded over the years, ultimately formed the nucleus of the Sites and Monuments Records at Bedford.

The early 1960s saw the end of an era in the Society: the top of Puddlehill, with its concentration of archaeological features, had gone. Winter digging was no longer necessary and members went field walking, or scrub clearing on Totternhoe Knolls. The end of excavation on Puddlehill, often falsely predicted, really seemed in sight at last. Other sites were investigated and rescue excavation switched for a while to Totternhoe quarry and even across the county border to Pitstone. This latter was really rather far from Dunstable to maintain regular digging, but the Manshead returned there when necessary, co-operating with Aylesbury Museum and the Pitstone Local History Society.

Quarrying at Puddlehill switched to the SE face of the pit and interest rose again when Neolithic pits and a Saxon village and cemetery were found. In 1965, however, quarrying ceased, and 15 years of

archaeological excavation on Puddlehill ended in 1966.

Membership included up to 20 "students", some of them girls from Queen Eleanor's School, Dunstable, working for a Duke of Edinburgh's Award. The average age of members was very young, most of the active adults being in their 20s and 30s. John Morris, describing the Society in 1964 wrote of "an unusual archaeological society in Dunstable; unusual because its large membership is mostly made up of weekly wage-earners; very largely of young people... and because they thoroughly enjoy each other's company, and attain a very high academic standard." Catering for the youngest element was sometimes seen as a problem, either of discipline on site, or of providing occupation and instruction at the HQ. Students complained that they arrived ready to work, but no-one had time to show them what to do. For a while Friday was "students' night" to try and solve this problem, but it tended to recur whenever there was an influx of young members.

1962 saw the publication of the first *Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal*, containing reports on the



Friary Field, Dunstable 1965: Les explaining the site. On the left: Bill Pilkinton, Maxene Miller, Andrew Amos, Molly Pilkinton, Ernie Hawes. Behind Les: Eric Michell, Richard Pilkinton, Ray Harris.

Marina Drive cemetery and the Saxon finds from Puddlehill. The Society had hoped to produce a cheap, popular booklet on Marina Drive for local consumption. The academic articles in the BAJ, and its price of 35 shillings did not fit this description. An independent publication was therefore planned, to coincide with Dunstable's charter celebrations in 1963. Its scope was expanded to cover local archaeology from earliest times up to the pagan Saxons. Les wrote the first draft in six weeks, urged on and assisted by Jean Collins, editor of the Magazine since 1960. *Ancient Dunstable* was published in May 1963. Donations and advertising made a price of 5 shillings possible. It was sold at the Dunstable pageant, (in which Society members took part), from market stalls, in local shops and by members in person (all Les's friends and workmates were expected to buy copies) and the first print of 1500 went within a week. Another 1500 were printed, finally selling out by 1970.

A pointer towards things to come was the excavation in 1963 of a well under a Dunstable High Street shop: this contained much Roman, as well as medieval, material, and when redevelopment in Dunstable began in 1964, rescue work showed there could no longer be any doubt that the Roman settlement of Durocobrivis had lain near where Watling Street and Icknield Way still cross in Dunstable town centre.

The Society had been formed for rescue excavation and by the 1960s had built up a stock of experience and practical expertise. With Puddlehill finished they were therefore faced with the problem of maintaining momentum and keeping their hand in. There was much post-excavation work to be done, but without a current excavation general interest might flag and membership fall away. This would not only be a pity for those concerned, but would also mean that if a call came to a threatened site there would be no pool of practised excavators to answer it.

As redevelopment progressed, it was plain that eventually most open sites in the town would be built over. Permission was therefore obtained from Mr Stevens, owner of the Friary Field, to begin excavation there, and in 1965 a new phase of Manshead history began.

Puddlehill veterans shared a language of catch-phrases, nicknames and in-jokes. They look back with strange nostalgia to the bracing bleakness and wide horizons of the hill. Les, in his acknowledgements in the final report, wondered "Why on a Sunday morning with an icy wind

blowing frozen snow into drifts, could I follow cycle tracks up the hill to be greeted by a young man without coat or gloves who told me that I was 10 minutes late? Why do people do this? Why not stay at home and look at icicles hanging by the wall from the comfort of the fireside? Is it a sense of duty we have to these faceless, nameless people who have gone before us and, by handling their pottery, looking again at the holes they dug, making them live again in memory? Perhaps saying thank you for giving us the chance to hear the larks singing, to watch the plover weaving in the sky, or to glory in the colour of wonderful sunsets and to sit on the hill after a hot summer's day and watch the ragworts begin to walk in the deepening dusk. They experienced these same things in this same spot and no doubt they gave them the same pleasure."

The pleasures of Friary Field were more genteel: tall trees, lush grass, privacy; a new generation of excavators grew to feel at home there, grateful guests of Mr Stevens for the next 15 years.

The foundations of the domestic buildings of the Dominican Friary were gradually exposed as digging continued. It was, however, within 3 weeks of work commencing a new member, Maxene Miller, made the Society's most famous find: the "Dunstable Swan Jewel", now celebrated as one of the British Museum's medieval treasures. A treasure trove inquest followed and a visit from a TV crew.

As excavations progressed, Romano-British features succeeded monastic walls, and a specialised team, including Bob Paton, a trained skin diver, was formed to excavate a 28 m deep Roman well.

Mysterious cross-shaped pits were discovered, in regular rows. They remain a mystery. When skeletons began to appear, buried on the same alignment, it was thought that the whole might have been some great building incorporating foundation burials. It became apparent, however, that while the skeletons were late Romano-British, the crosses were medieval and presumably linked in some way with the Friary.

A road scheme threatened the Friary Field in the early 1970s and the Manshead, feeling their resources were insufficient to carry out a complete excavation in a limited period, invited Dr Ian Stead, with a team from the Department of the Environment, to work there in 1972-3. Manshead diggers did not feel they were welcome in the visiting team, so they instead carried out small excavations elsewhere in 1972, and in 1973

arrangements were made with Dunstable Borough Council for a major excavation on the future SW Quadrant car park. Full-time work was necessary to cover the site in the time available, and for the first time money, provided by the Council, was paid to a member to act as site supervisor throughout the week and to co-ordinate the volunteers. There were pits, ditches and wells, Roman and medieval, and the most surprising find was the skeleton of a barbary ape buried in a 2nd century pit. It was in 1973 that the Society received an award from Dunstable Rotary Club for their work for the community

In the later 1970s (the road scheme having been abandoned) digging resumed on the Friary Field and its Roman cemetery. The Society entered the BBC Chronicle competition for independent archaeologists in 1979. As one of six finalists we were visited by judges and a TV team. House building was now imminent on the Field and excavation was drawing to a close, but fresh cuts had to be made for the cameras to film, and on the

appointed Wednesday unprecedented numbers of members appeared; some had not been seen on the site for 10 years. "It's like finals day at Wimbledon" the director said. The entry was unplaced in the Chronicle contest, but was a runner-up in the Legal and General Silver Trowel for enterprise in archaeology (£150).

Interesting excavations permanently available in the centre of Dunstable were good for membership, which in 1975 rose to a record 137. Social activities flourished, including barbecues, firework parties, tramps' suppers, even gymkhanas. There were two memorable Open Days, with fete, held on the Field in 1974 and 1975. Not every fete offers the chance to be photographed beside a skeleton still lying in its 4th century grave. The social events attracted still more members and an uneasy feeling grew that perhaps archaeology was being swamped. At the 1975 AGM the Chairman (from 1959-1985) Ron Fowler warned of a "dichotomy" developing, and the factions were referring to each other as "socialites" and "eggheads". An enthusiastic



Dunstable 1974: A winter excavation of a Roman well on the site of the new police station. In the background Molly Pilkinton is frying sausages to sustain the diggers. Standing on the right: Joan Schneider and Barry Horne.

organiser with a genius for fund-raising was filling the grateful Society's coffers, but doubts were expressed as to the ethics of half the profits going back into subsidised parties. In 1976 finances were brought under central control and the social activities, along with membership, declined again. This was sad in some ways, but unity was restored and interest in archaeology was once more the main reason for joining.

The Puddlehill Report, the culmination of many years' work by many people, was published as *Occupation Sites on a Chiltern Ridge* by British Archaeological Reports in April 1976, with a section by Professor C Hawkes.

Some members broke new ground in 1978-81 with the construction of an "Iron Age House" at the Chiltern Open Air Museum, based on one excavated at Puddlehill.

The Second Age of the Manshead drew to a close when the Friary Field was taken over for house building in 1980. Local archaeology had changed a great deal in the 1970s. There was now a professional county unit, and the large-scale redevelopment of Dunstable was over. The

Manshead was uncertain of its future role. A backlog of material awaited publication (though interim reports had appeared in the Manshead Journal) but this could not occupy everyone. As in 1965 a "digging society" was looking for a dig, and throughout the 80s a number of sites were investigated prior to building or road development. Between times the Society kept its hand in at Sewell, not far from Puddlehill.

Building material ploughed up in a field near Bidwell was investigated in 1984 and revealed an odd late Roman structure with walls supported on wooden piles in the waterlogged clay subsoil. This was Les's last season as Site Director, a position he had filled almost continuously for 33 years. He was now 74 and felt it was time someone younger took over. Dave Warren therefore became Site Director in 1985. Ron Fowler, Chairman since 1959, also retired, his successor being Dr Vivien Jones. Friends of Les had long felt he deserved some recognition of his services to archaeology and in 1985 he was elected Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

Memories of the Friary Field were revived in 1988 when an adjacent area was redeveloped and



Bidwell 1984: Excavation begins on a Roman building. L to R: Clive Bates, Dave Warren, John Hitchcock, Vivien Jones, ?, Ray Field, Ron Fowler, ?, Roy Goodchild.

members worked with the professionals from Bedford, exposing the foundations of the monastic church.

Les Matthews died, after two years of failing health, in February 1989. Without him the Manshead Archaeological Society would never have existed, nor would it have become an effective force without his personality at its head. Though not always tactful, he could nearly always turn away wrath with cheerful charm. His dogmatic statements occasionally caused offence, but he welcomed argument and was prepared to be converted by good evidence. He set out his approach to his workforce in the 1977 Newsletter: "We all like finding things, even the Site Director, and the only way to encourage new members into the team is to let them feel the thrill of excavating a piece of pottery...Of course long-standing members also like to find things and I will try to see that everyone gets a chance at the more interesting jobs. But I must make it quite clear that there will be no such thing as 'my hole'. We are a team." When members gathered at the HQ on a winter evening and Les was not there, they tended to stand about aimlessly, chatting. Within ten minutes of his arrival everyone was happily at work.

Andrew Selkirk, in his obituary of Les in the *Guardian*, wrote: "He was a dynamic and forceful lecturer and many a somnolent conference has been woken up when Les strode to the lectern. Love him or leave him you certainly couldn't sleep through him." In a voluntary group someone who can inspire enthusiasm is probably the most important ingredient for success and this, as well as his own knowledge, experience and ability to read a landscape or a section, was what Les provided. There were periods in the Society's history when it would probably have faded away if Les had left, but by the end of the 70s a core of experienced members had built up and membership steadily increased in the late 1980s, now standing at about 100.

In recent years field walking has been organised more rigorously, surveying the routes of new roads and systematically covering agricultural land in S Bedfordshire. Concentrated flint scatters have revealed Mesolithic activity as well as Neolithic and Bronze Age, while pottery of the Late Iron Age and Romano-British periods in particular have drawn attention to several previously unknown areas of occupation.

Publications in the 80s included the Roman Cemetery, Saxon Puddlehill (with the help of Mrs Sonia Hawkes) and short reports in *South Midlands Archaeology*. Les had hoped to see his report on the Totternhoe villa published, but failing health and energy prevented him undertaking the necessary revisions, so that has had to wait till now. *Ancient Dunstable*, long out of print, was thoroughly revised to include the work of the years since 1963 and re-published in 1989 in memory of Les.

Many people and organisations have been generous to the Society with their money, time and expertise, and we are grateful: professionals, academics, landowners, farmers, quarry managers and workers, local authorities and councillors.

To celebrate forty years of the Manshead Archaeological Society a conference has been organised for 24th October 1992, to be held in Ashton Middle School, Dunstable. The distinguished list of speakers includes two Vice-Presidents of the Society: Mrs Sonia Chadwick Hawkes and Dr Ian Stead, and also other good friends of the Society: Dr Peter Reynolds and Mr Roy Friendship-Taylor, and to chair the morning and afternoon sessions Mr Andrew Selkirk and Mr Ron Fowler (Vice-President and former Chairman).

After forty years the Society can review its record: at the least, much archaeological evidence has been recorded which would otherwise have vanished without trace. All sorts of people have discovered the fascination of the past and made lasting friendships working together on a common interest. There have been rows, disappointments, problems, but all in all we look back with pleasure and forward with optimism.

Sources and acknowledgements

This account has been compiled with the help of Manshead Society minute books, correspondence and other documents in the files of the Society and also at Luton Museum, where thanks are due to Dr R Holgate for providing access and assistance. Thanks also to the officers of the WEA Eastern District for allowing access to relevant records and for their help. For the years before 1963, when the writer joined the Society, she is grateful to early members, in particular to Mr E C Hawes, for sharing their recollections. This account is a personal one, and the writer takes responsibility for any views expressed.