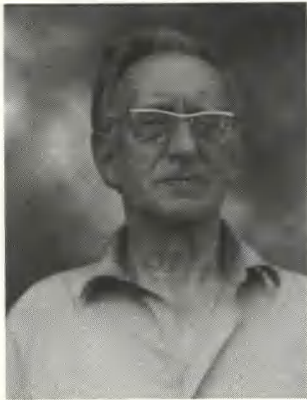


Obituary

Les Speed, Archaeologist, Natural Historian and “Balloonatic”

LESLIE AUGUSTUS SPEED, 1906 – 1995



There will be many people throughout the county of Bedfordshire, and beyond, who will remember Les Speed with affection, gratitude and respect, for his seventy years of stalwart work with the county's Natural History Society, the Bedford Archaeological Society and the Bedfordshire Archaeological Council. For those unfortunate not to have known him, this small tribute will explain why he has won his place in Bedfordshire and national history, and why he will be so greatly missed by those who shared his companionship in so many fields of activity.

Professionally he won international fame for his work at Cardington in the pioneering days of airships. When he retired he was head of the drawing office. He worked on the design team for the R101 from 1925 until its destruction in 1930 (with Les apparently attributing the disaster to the huge amounts of whisky taken on board). He continued in the Cardington drawing office, working on, among other projects, the barrage balloons and blimps which were such an important part of our nation's defence during the second world war. This interest in things aeronautical extended to a passion for kite flying, and demonstrations of his skill led to a number of television appearances, including a Blue Peter adventure on Dunstable Downs.

As a person he was indomitably enthusiastic and energetic, with no problem so great that it did not have a solution somewhere. Hugely practical, he

had his own workshop where he could “run up” any tool or implement to fit the bill. Unusually for a man, he was an expert embroiderer and even made his own shirts.

Les was active during the main era of society digging that James Dyer called “*those halcyon days of amateur archaeology*”. Dyer reports that he “*stirred the Bedford Archaeological Society into action, and in the 1950's brought Bedford into line with Luton, Dunstable and Ampthill to cope with the huge amount of crucial rescue archaeology that was necessary as a result of the post war construction boom. In an indirect way he paved the way and proved the need for setting up County Archaeological Officer posts and professional units. He organised the practical arrangements for rescuing sites in advance of the bulldozers, enthusing bands of volunteers during evenings and weekends. Many a youngster was encouraged by him and his constant good humour – and although archaeology was done on a shoe-string then, compared with today's budgets, Les often dug deep into his own pocket to fund the work.*”

He was far sighted enough to realise that these important discoveries required reporting to a wider audience, and was a force behind the founding of the Bedfordshire Archaeological Council and the birth of this, its journal, in 1962, then *The Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal*. Indeed, typically generous, he under-wrote the first three volumes, thus ensuring the future of the journal as an important part of the Council's responsibilities, a major contribution to the county's rich archaeological heritage.

Les, a kindly, sensible, down – to – earth character lived to a ripe and very active old age, walking out vigorously on the day he suddenly died, 16th March 1995, aged eighty-nine. We owe him a huge debt of gratitude.

Evelyn Baker 13 May 1996

Thanks are due to James Dyer, David Johnston and Richard Wildman whose obituaries for Les I have mined. The photograph was kindly supplied by The Airship Heritage Trust.