

# Fifty years of the Bedfordshire Archaeological Council

## *A Personal View*

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It was on a warm autumn evening in September 1959 that a group of individuals with a common interest in archaeology met together at Luton Museum. The meeting had been called by the Curator, Charles E. Freeman, who was worried by the sudden surge in activity that was taking place in the county, often without adequate record.

Bedfordshire had been one of the first counties to have an Architectural and Archaeological Society, founded in 1847, which amalgamated with the Bedford Natural History Society in 1888. By 1890, when it became part of the Bedford Literary and Scientific Institute, archaeology had lost its former dominance, and the Institute no longer represented the county as a whole. By the middle of the twentieth century, the B.L.S.I. had ceased to exist and its library and possessions, which included a number of archaeological items had been dispersed, or loaned to the private Bedford Modern School's Pritchard Museum, run from 1919 by Percy Langdon and then by F. W. Kuhlicke, FSA. At the same time Bedford had a more or less dormant Archaeological Society until it was revitalised in the mid-1950s.

In the south of the county Thomas W. Bagshawe had established a museum in Dunstable in 1925 and another in a room in Luton Library in 1928. Charles Freeman was appointed assistant curator of both. The Luton collection was transferred to Wardown House in 1931, and in 1939 the Dunstable material was also transferred to Wardown, under Freeman's curatorship.

Planned excavation was almost unheard of in the county. Between 1922 and 1929 the University College and Hospital (London) Anthropological Society had dug spasmodically into the Five Knolls barrows at Dunstable under the direction of Daryll Forde, Gerald Dunning and Mortimer Wheeler. What today would be called 'rescue' excavation happened from time to time on a very limited scale in a number of towns and villages

including Leighton Buzzard, Luton, Sandy and was sometimes reported in the local press.

In the 1950s there emerged a public awareness of archaeology, largely as a result of a surge of post-war books for the general reader, like Grahame Clark's *Archaeology and Society* and O. G. S. Crawford's *Man and his Past*, articles in weekly magazines such as *The Illustrated London News* and *The Listener*, and publicity given to it by the new medium of television. With only one TV channel, programmes like *Animal, Vegetable and Mineral* and *Buried Treasure* were seen by everyone and soon caught the popular imagination.

In February 1950 a group of boys at Luton Grammar School formed their own Archaeological Society under my leadership, and then spent two summer holidays on training excavations at Dorchester-on-Thames under the supervision of R. J. C. Atkinson of the Ashmolean Museum. In 1951, with the approval of Charles Freeman, and under my direction, we sectioned a linear earthwork at the foot of Galley Hill, Streatley, believed to be part of the earthwork known as Dray's Ditches. This proved to be nothing more than a medieval field boundary. With a few days to spare, and again with the Curator's approval, we went on to cut a 10 ft. square trench on the edge of a round barrow on the summit of Galley Hill. Almost immediately we uncovered the first of four human skeletons buried just below the ground surface, which attracted national publicity when a photograph appeared in the *Daily Telegraph*. As the site was a Scheduled Ancient Monument and we did not have the permission of the Ministry of Works, the work was suddenly and forcibly concluded, though not until after the appropriate plans and sections had been drawn and photographs taken! However, we were complimented by the Ministry's officers on the professionalism of our work. A week or two later, at F. W. Kuhlicke's request, we went on to section a medieval earthwork at Chalgrave.

In September 1951 the Manager of the Associated Portland Cement Manufacturers of Houghton Regis contacted Charles Freeman and reported the finding of a human skeleton and animal bones on the edge of their chalk quarry at Puddle Hill. Having no archaeologists on his staff, Freeman invited the Grammar School Society to investigate on behalf of the Museum. At the same time, the Quarry manager invited a group of Rover Scouts from Dunstable, led by Les Matthews, to dig on the site. Both groups were soon joined by a number of adults, and out of this emerged two archaeological societies. The Luton group became the South Bedfordshire Archaeological Society and the Dunstable Scouts formed (initially) the Manshead Archaeological Field Club. After twelve months we schoolboys called it a day, having exhausted a great deal of our pocket money on weekly bus fares from Luton to Dunstable. The Manshead Society were to continue digging sporadically on the site until 1966.

In the meantime a number of independent archaeologists were also working in the county. At Tempsford and Eaton Socon C. F. Tebbutt F.S.A. was investigating mesolithic and neolithic sites, and was later joined by Granville Rudd. Richard Bagshawe was tracing Roman roads in south Bedfordshire and north Hertfordshire. Tom Gardner was working at Ruxox, near Flitwick. David E. Johnston, later assisted by Les Speed of the Bedford Archaeological Society, was testing a number of sites revealed by aerial photography in Sandy and the Ouse valley east of Bedford. William H. Manning and the Luton Grammar School Society carried out rescue work at a Roman site around Runfold Avenue in Luton.

Both the South Bedfordshire Society and the Manshead Society were responsible for a number of other excavations. The former carried out excavations at Waulud's Bank, Leagrave; re-examined W. G. Smith's palaeolithic site at Caddington and investigated neolithic ring ditches at Barton Hill Farm, Streatley. The latter investigated numerous sites of many periods in and around Dunstable and Totternhoe. Each produced their own cyclostyled magazines giving accounts of their work, but it was clear that something more permanent was required. To this end Charles Freeman called his historic meeting in 1959 at which the county's amateur and independent archaeologists formed the Bedfordshire Archaeological Council (B.A.C.).

Representatives of the Bedford, Manshead and South Bedfordshire societies were invited to

attend, together with C. F. Tebbutt, R. W. Bagshawe and F. W. Kuhlicke from the Bedford Modern School Museum. In all, about a dozen people sat round the curator's desk, of whom the writer is the last surviving member! Our aim was to form an organisation which would attempt to co-ordinate the work that was going on in the county and produce a permanent record in the form of a properly printed Journal. The first twenty-five years of the Council's existence has been thoroughly documented by David H. Kennet in Volume 17 (1986) of that Journal and there is no need to repeat much of it here.

Most of the inaugural meeting was taken up with discussing the need for a centralised pool of information, and it was proposed that reports of all new work should be deposited with Charles Freeman at Luton Museum, where it would be available for all to consult. The primary aim of the Council was to be the publication of a Journal which would contain excavation reports as well as articles of synthesis. It was proposed that William H. Manning, at that time a post-graduate student at the Institute of Archaeology, London, should be invited to act as editor. Charles Freeman, as the Council's first Chairman, negotiated an agreement with Harold White of the White Crescent Press in Luton to print the first three volumes at a very favourable price, and each Society was charged with the task of guaranteeing at least 25 subscribers. Les Speed of the Bedford Archaeological Society became the Council's first Secretary, and generously offered to underwrite any loss, in the event of the Journal failing to pay for itself. The first volume appeared in 1962 and was greeted with approbation by Nicholas Thomas in his review in *The Bedfordshire Magazine*. It improved and flourished during David Kennett's seventeen years as Editor. This success continued during Evelyn Baker's eight year association with the Journal, and that of her successor Stephen Coleman; although issues appeared less frequently.

Initially, meetings of the Council were held twice a year, their venues alternating between Luton and Bedford. This pattern changed as it was joined by new societies from Ampthill and North Bedfordshire, from across the county boundaries in Letchworth and Higham Ferrers, and by college and school societies.

When the Council formed in 1959 it was composed essentially of amateur groups with a wide and deep knowledge of their individual territories. Excavations had been funded from their own

pockets. The appointment of David Baker as County Archaeological Liaison Officer in 1972 was regarded by many with suspicion. Suddenly archaeology would become available 'on the rates'. Charles Freeman had died suddenly in 1965, and the data base that he and the B.A.C. had set-up at Luton Museum now became the responsibility of David Baker and his staff. Many felt uncomfortable about passing information to Bedford, believing that their individual projects might be cherry-picked by 'the professionals' for more detailed investigation. They need not have worried, money was strictly limited and David and his team soon found themselves inundated with work at numerous 'rescue' sites in the county. It was hoped that the County Unit would be able to provide the societies with professional expertise in exchange for local knowledge and labour.

More recently, Archaeological Contractors from outside Bedfordshire, bidding to dig, proved much more contentious. They often appeared overnight and unannounced, and their failure to consult the locals led to ill feeling and frequent wasted time and resources. One group exploring a line of 'pits' on an aerial photograph spent a week excavating a row of locally known bomb craters!

As time has gone by the place of the amateur in archaeology, for whom the Bedfordshire Archaeological Council was originally set up, has changed considerably. Techniques and equipment have developed beyond belief since 1959. Many amateurs are better informed than they were fifty years ago, but a lot of the enthusiasm seems to have gone. The local societies in the early 1960s were usually driven by a keen individual, like Les Matthews at Dunstable, who was the catalyst, and around whom the whole thing revolved. In the intervening years many societies have come and gone, but today the dedication of leaders like Matthews, who lived and breathed archaeology, seems to be lacking. Council meetings are ill-attended, and finding suitable volunteers with sufficient knowledge, time and willingness to fill vacant posts has become a major problem. It is too easily thought that because the local authorities

employ archaeologists in Bedfordshire to undertake excavations and research, they should also be expected to produce the Journal or organise conferences. It is unfair to assume that they automatically want to take their day-job home with them! These are extra-mural duties that should be shared by suitable members of all the participating societies and the independent sector.

It seems to me that in recent years the B.A.C. has lost a lot of its initial impetus, and perhaps we should rethink its role. At a time of great financial restraints, (although the B.A.C. is not itself short of funds for publication), how can it play a more effective part in recording the archaeology of our county? With plans for the provision of thousands more houses, factories and the related infra-structure, it is inevitable that many sites are going to be destroyed. Perhaps the Council should once again become the co-ordinating body, harnessing the talent of amateurs, independents and professionals for the better good of recording our county's heritage. In addition, many proposed developments, like those for example around Luton, extend across the Bedfordshire borders. It is time that archaeologists in adjoining counties, with a common interest, are invited to become associate members of the B.A.C. again, and that we in turn reciprocate by exchanging crucial cross-boundary local knowledge.

Finally, the Council must do more to make its voice heard. Its Journal and monographs are publications of which we can be really proud. They are what we first set out to produce fifty years ago. With the current interest in archaeology stimulated by television, we need to make sure that they reach the much wider readership that they deserve. In the 1960s annual conferences, open to the general public, brought members together to present accounts of the work they had done during the previous year. Perhaps these should be revived? A real effort must also be made amongst constituent societies to see that properly written-up reports of their field-work are forwarded to the editor for permanent publication, and that their members help to swell the size of the subscribers' lists!