

Collection and Production: The History of the Institute of Archaeology through Photography

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As the UCL Institute of Archaeology celebrates its 75th anniversary, it has begun to probe its role in the development of professional archaeology more seriously, a role illustrated (aptly) by the importance of photography and photographs at the Institute.¹ This short article will explore two facets of the Institute's relationship with photography – the acquisition of photographic collections and the investment made in photographic facilities. Amara Thornton begins with a short personal introduction to a photographic collection in the Institute's archives, and Sara Perry continues with a history of the early years of the Institute's photography department, giving special attention to its founder, Maurice 'Cookie' Cookson, the Institute's first Lecturer in Archaeological Photography.

Collecting Photography: The Institute as an Archive of Archaeology

Amara Thornton

I first began researching in the Institute of Archaeology's archives in 2006. It was photographs, specifically RAF aerial survey photographs of archaeological sites in the Middle East from the 1920s and images from archaeologists George Horsfield (1882–1956; **Fig. 1**) and Agnes Conway Horsfield (1885–1950; **Fig. 2**), showing life and archaeological work in Palestine and Transjordan during the British Mandate period, in the 1920s and 1930s, described elsewhere, that started me on a long and continuing journey into the exploration of the history of archaeology.² The Institute's section of UCL's Special Collections facility holds archives, including

photographs, associated with many famous (and not so famous) archaeologists – Flinders Petrie, Leonard Woolley, John Garstang, Mortimer Wheeler and Veronica Seton-Williams, amongst them. Each has their own box or boxes, stacked neatly, labelled and categorised – a piece of the past preserved for the future.³

A letter from George Horsfield to Gordon Childe, then Director of the Institute of Archaeology, hints at the Institute's role as a receptacle for the history of archaeology. In it, Horsfield wrote that his wife, Agnes Horsfield,

has directed her executors in her will to give the Institute her negatives, photographs and other material concerning Petra and Transjordan. This is now being collected and packed in two boxes without examination and probably some is not of much value but may be of interest to students. It is the material which my wife gathered in her studies for the work published by the ex-Palestine Museum, Jerusalem, in its Quarterly.⁴

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Fig. 1: George Horsfield and an unknown man at Bayir Fort, Transjordan, c.1930s (IoA Horsfield Collection P2008-313; image courtesy of UCL Institute of Archaeology).

Having now examined some of the Horsfield boxes in detail, and with increased knowledge of the circumstances in which their collection was produced, it is clear that the Horsfield photographs fit in with a larger picture of the incorporation of photography into the archaeological process in which the Institute played an important part, as discussed in detail below. Agnes Horsfield understood the power of photography from an early age. Her father, William Martin Conway, later Baron Conway of Allingham, was an art historian who, with a group of other art historians, promoted the collection and organisation of photographs of fine art, architecture and sculpture.⁵ Martin Conway encouraged his daughter to collect and

organise the archaeological elements of the collection.⁶ This encouragement began the work of a lifetime.

As I have noted in a previous article on the Horsfield photographs, the collection bears the meticulous imprint of Agnes's organisational fervour. Many of the photographs are mounted on card with typewritten labels; others are labelled by hand on the reverse sides. Although a significant number of the Horsfield photographs are unlabelled prints and duplicates, the collection itself is a rich but underutilised resource for a variety of subjects, including archaeology, history and geography.⁷ Subsequent research into the Horsfields' documents at the Institute – donated along with the photographs as shown above – and at Cambridge University Library, detailing their life and work in Transjordan, revealed that Agnes Horsfield took great care over her photographs, agonising over the development of her negatives. During the early 1930s she and her husband took many journeys to remote regions in Transjordan. As Agnes believed that the sites she documented with her camera might not be visited again by other archaeological teams, she felt a great sense of responsibility to make the most, photographically speaking, of the opportunities before her as the wife of the Chief Inspector in the Transjordan Department of Antiquities.⁸ Thanks to Agnes, and the Institute's preservation of archaeologists' photographs, a new field of research into the history of archaeology is evolving.

Establishing Photography at the Institute of Archaeology from the 1930s Onwards

Sara Perry

While the Institute of Archaeology's long-standing concern for photography is not unique among archaeological bodies, its original vision for such practice – attentive at once to methodological and conceptual experimentation, conservation, education and professionalisation – was unparalleled and discipline-shifting. This interest in expert photographic



Fig. 2: Agnes Conway, c.1930s (IoA Horsfield Collection, P2008-796a; image courtesy of UCL Institute of Archaeology).

work predated even the institution's official inauguration, with one of the Institute's first prospectuses (for the academic year 1936–37) containing a promotional statement on the availability of photo fieldwork records for the research needs of students and specialists.⁹ By the beginning of the 1937–38 year, an entire multi-faceted laboratory was launched under the direction of the professional photographer Maurice 'Cookie' Cookson (d. 3 January 1965; **Fig. 3**), including a full instructional programme in archaeological photography. Explicitly designed to operate 'under the direction of an expert photographer both for the training of students and to make the Institute a centre to which all needing archaeological photographic work would apply', the Laboratory produced its own *Prospectus* which arguably now reads more as a price-list/service-catalogue than as a pedagogical guide (e.g. the *Prospectus* specifies payment of 10s 6d for a single full-plate photo taken *in situ* 'in the



Fig. 3: Maurice 'Cookie' Cookson (image courtesy of Stuart Laidlaw).

provinces', plus 3rd-class travel for the photographer).¹⁰ Critically, however, the Laboratory's design seems to have been heavily researched, and its mandate one that pushed far beyond

simple rote teaching to students. It was a dense convergence point for the archaeological community, drawing into it major institutions and specialists who invested both intellectually and financially in its highly crafted and formalised visual outputs. As I have documented elsewhere, before the Laboratory was even approved by the university administration, the Institute had already negotiated photographic contracts with such organisations as the Society of Antiquaries of London and the London Museum, as well as the Wellcome-Marston Research Expedition to the Near East.¹¹ In its first and second years of business, the Lab was employed, respectively, by more than 20 archaeological expeditions, and 'a large number of individuals'.¹² Even during wartime, it managed to complete work for 34 expeditions, 4 museums, and 45 individuals; and by the end of the 1945–46 year, it reported contracts with 38 individuals, 5 institutions/schools, 9 museums/ colleges/ universities, 2 government departments and 6 excavation committees, as well as the production of c.1,350 lantern slides for the Society of Antiquaries, private persons and the Institute itself.

This photographic industry had both bureaucratic significance and clear economic consequences for the Institute, so much so that the Institute apparently researched its profitability (via consultation with the Society of Antiquaries) in advance of the Laboratory's establishment. During the 1937–38 academic year, more than 15% of the Institute's reported income was generated through the Photographic Laboratory; the following year it was more than 25%. The Laboratory also seemingly drew in the largest proportion of the Institute's student fees and, between the time of the Institute's official foundation and the early 1950s, it saw more than 150 students pass through its teaching programme (including John Alexander, F. Raymond Allchin, Ken Annable, Paul Ashbee, Collin Bowen, Charles Burney, Sarnia Butcher, Molly Cotton, Peter Gathercole, John Lewis, Robert Sherlock, Charles Thomas and Nicholas Thomas).

Maurice 'Cookie' Cookson

The success of the Institute's photographic programme owes primarily to its director, 'Cookie' Cookson. Well-known for his work with Mortimer and Tessa Verney Wheeler and team at Maiden Castle, Verulamium and elsewhere (**Fig. 4**), Cookson's tutelage and his laboratory are now among the most potent memories of those trained at the Institute in the mid-20th century.¹³ Former students describe him as a pioneer and mentor who drilled into them 'how to take proper archaeological photographs' and 'what constituted a good excavation photograph'.¹⁴ His commitment to full glass-plate photographic technology, and to the relentless pursuit of accuracy and 'clean' pictures is well-remembered by Institute alumni. He was, indeed, the highest paid member of staff at the Institute (pre-World War II), earning just over £300 annually (plus superannuation starting in 1938–39), and the safeguarding of his position during wartime – not to mention in the longer-term – became the subject of many years of debate in the University of London Senate.

Cookson ultimately devoted his career to the Institute, investing himself in everything from picture-taking to teaching, to exhibition-making, lantern-slide projection, and book authorship. What the Laboratory – together with the Institute's overall support – provided him with was the infrastructure to develop his expertise, to elaborate that expertise by way of investment in the latest photographic methods, and then to reproduce such practice through the training of the UK's earliest generations of accredited archaeologists. Cookson immortalised his technique in a series of articles in consecutive issues of the *Archaeological News Letter* in 1951, later published as the groundbreaking *Photography for Archaeologists* (1954).¹⁵ This book arguably stood for nearly 15 years as *the* authoritative text on the topic in the English-speaking world, after which a number of comparable texts began to emerge – some authored by Cookson's own succes-



Fig. 4: 'Cookie' Cookson (under camera hood), photographing Institute of Archaeology excavations at Maiden Castle, Dorset, c.1950s; from a 6cm square conventional negative shot with a twin lens reflex camera (image courtesy of Stuart Laidlaw)

sors, many crediting Cookson for their inspiration.¹⁶ Throughout the late 1940s and into the 1950s, Cookson expanded his laboratory and teaching practice with the addition of a darkroom, a mock excavation unit for practice photography, the mass manufacture and lending of lantern slides, experimentation with colourised photography, the beginnings of film production and, among other things, the curation of student-led exhibitions and the archiving of photographic collections. The scale and comprehensiveness of such operations in a British university environment was exceptional and, in building them up as such, the Institute positioned itself at the frontline of photographic systematisation and advancement in archaeology.

Indeed, the Institute was explicit that its departments – including the Photographic Laboratory – were meant to act as showpieces for London University overall, outputting cutting-edge materials and graduates. Within the archaeological world, the Institute was expressly framed to formalise procedures in a field that was, at the time, still marked by fledgling and unstable practices. The Laboratory provided a perfect means to begin to achieve such formalisation given its self-sustaining nature. It made use of students, the income of established archaeological institutions, and the duplicative media of photography, to populate the archaeological community with specific, crafted visions of the discipline. Many of the Institute's first graduates went on to teach a newly professionalised form of archaeology, including photographic practice, to others around the world – and much of its photographic output remains iconic today.

Situating the Institute of Archaeology in disciplinary histories

The Institute has a distinctive legacy in the training of archaeologists and in the solidification of aspects of disciplinary practice overall. As suggested above, the extant archival record hints at the influence of the production, circulation and cataloguing of the Institute's

photographic outputs on individuals and organisations across Britain and beyond. The Institute was effectively involved in a mass industry – standardising our (literal) views of the archaeological record; and preserving others for posterity. As a training facility, the Institute was the home of the next wave of pioneering archaeological photographers, such as Peter Dorrell, not to mention the seedbed for a generation of new archaeological lecturers in the UK and abroad. Indeed, a not insignificant number of other specialists, including anthropologists and curators, also passed through its programmes. Given this reach, the network of influence encapsulated by the Institute, including – but not limited to – the impact of its Photographic Laboratory, deserves further interrogation.

As we appreciate it, the archaeological archive (for instance, in the form of photographs and related visual material culture) provides a critical tool for rethinking the history of the discipline. It offers a means to stretch beyond typical historiographical approaches to consider the role of often-unexamined resources in facilitating archaeology's institutionalisation. The Institute's programmes and instructors have proven consequential in ways that push much further than the excavation trench alone. Tracing the movements and effects of their outputs allows us an opportunity to construct historical narratives that are not only archaeologically meaningful, but politically, culturally and economically relevant as well.

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