

News

Obituary: Helen Clarke, 1939–2023

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Helen Clarke (née Parker) was appointed Lecturer in Medieval Archaeology at UCL in 1977, being promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1987 and taking early retirement in 1990, shortly before Medieval Archaeology was transferred from the Department of History to the Institute of Archaeology (see Graham-Campbell 2024 in this issue). In retirement, she became an Honorary Senior Lecturer at the Institute, making regular contributions to undergraduate teaching in medieval archaeology and taking an active part in the postgraduate seminar. She was pictured in *Archaeology International* 15 (Shennan 2012, Figure 4), being presented by King Carl XVI Gustav with the silver medal of the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities for services to Swedish archaeology.

Helen graduated in 1960 with first-class honours in ancient history and archaeology from the University of Birmingham, where she also undertook postgraduate research, with 18 months spent at the University of Lund, Sweden. She was awarded her PhD in 1969, having in the meantime been responsible for carrying out some of the first large-scale excavations in an English port, as Director of Excavations (1963–7) for the King's Lynn Archaeological Survey (see Figure 1), the results of which were published in Clarke and Carter (1977).



Figure 1 Helen Clarke digging at King's Lynn, Norfolk, in the mid-1960s (Source: Giles Clarke)

After two years as Lecturer in Medieval Archaeology at the University of Glasgow (1966–8), Helen became an extra-mural lecturer at the Universities of Birmingham, Leicester, Manchester and London, and was elected FSA in 1972. She was involved almost from the start with the development of the BA Medieval Archaeology at UCL, first as an Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Scandinavian Studies (1975–6) and then as temporary lecturer (1976–7), before being made permanent, with special responsibility for teaching and research in the archaeology of the post-Conquest period and medieval Scandinavia, subjects in which she inspired and fostered the interest of many appreciative students during the years when Medieval Archaeology was based in the UCL Department of History.

Helen also provided much sterling service to the wider archaeological community beyond UCL, including as treasurer and then secretary of the Society for Medieval Archaeology, of which she later became President (1990–2), as Director of the Society of Antiquaries of London (1990–3) and as a member of the Ancient Monuments Advisory Committee for English Heritage. Beyond Britain, in 1991, Helen was awarded an honorary DPhil by Lund University.

Alongside her specialist publications on medieval ports and trade in the North Sea and Baltic, Helen was responsible for writing two landmark textbooks, with *The Archaeology of Medieval England* (1984) being rightly described as ‘the first comprehensive picture of medieval England from the archaeological point of view’, with a second (paperback) edition published in 1986. The other volume, written together with Björn Ambrosiani (Swedish State Antiquary), provided an invaluable survey of *Towns in the Viking Age*; first published in English in 1991, a second revised edition appeared in 1995. A translation into Swedish, *Vikingastäder*, was published in 1993.

The Swedish silver medal presented to Helen in 2012 was awarded in recognition of her more than 30-years’ work as translator and editor of *Excavations at Helgö*, an early medieval site west of Stockholm, which was published in multiple volumes by the Royal Swedish Academy, beginning in 1961. Helen’s involvement with this project commenced in the 1970s and culminated in co-authorship with her good friend, Kristina Lamm, of an indispensable retrospective synthesis, *Helgö Revisited: A new look at the excavated evidence for Helgö, central Sweden* (2017).



Figure 2 Helen Clarke in retirement, when Honorary Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Archaeology (Source: Giles Clarke)

Helen's academically active retirement (see Figure 2) included time spent providing replacement teaching for professors on leave at both the Universities of Aarhus in Denmark and Kiel in northern Germany. Her major new (team) project was to be the study of the town and port of Sandwich in east Kent, from its origins to 1600, which was published in Clarke et al. (2010). From her desire to make history and archaeology accessible to the non-academic public, she produced a spin-off from this volume, *Discover Medieval Sandwich: A guide to its history and buildings* (2012).

Helen contributed to taught courses in medieval archaeology at the Institute until just before the Covid-19 pandemic and continued to supervise at postgraduate level until her final illness. She was a staunch supporter of the Institute of Archaeology/British Museum Joint Medieval Seminar, with her last appearance being at the Sir David Wilson Lecture in Medieval Studies in December 2022. Helen's warm personality and enthusiasm for her subject meant that she made many friends and colleagues across northern Europe, by whom she is inevitably much missed.

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