

News

Obituary: George Davies, 1952–2024

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Andrew Reynolds and Bill Sillar

George's passing in February 2024 came as a complete surprise and a deep shock for his many friends in the Institute (see Figure 1). Born in Paisley, Scotland, in 1952, he was one of five children. He worked in the dockyards of Glasgow, but as a young man left for the USA to travel and play football, a game for which he had a phenomenal talent and a lifelong passion. His football ambitions were thwarted by asthma, certainly not by will-power, and he returned briefly to Scotland, before moving to London in search of work. In London, he took to fitting out and maintaining buildings, and rapidly became a permanent employee of NatWest, working demanding night shifts, including in the NatWest Tower when it became the target of an IRA bomb. He also became a season-ticket holder for Fulham FC and an active coach for young footballers in later life.



Figure 1 George Davies out walking in the countryside, one of his favourite pursuits (Source: Clare Davies)

In 1998, George became Buildings Officer at the Institute of Archaeology, finally retiring in 2019, a year later than he had envisaged as he stayed on to assist another colleague through a challenging time. His fervent wish was that a younger person would gain a job through his retirement, and it is a great loss to the Institute that we no longer have a dedicated person for building maintenance and support. George was legendary for many things, not least his boundless energy for conversation and all things physical, including a fist fight on the roof of the Institute at 6 a.m., when he was attacked by a squadron (technically a colony) of furious seagulls – a scrap from which he emerged the victor. Humour was always high with George; both incoming and outgoing, he appreciated a jibe. In his professional duties, George was literally a ‘mover and shaker’. He knew everyone in the Institute and more people across the university than most others, and he belonged to a network of great people in similar posts who together could fix or arrange virtually anything, without the fuss of the systems and procedures that he found so tiresome.

George came into work early, travelling from Brentwood, Essex, often arriving by 5 a.m., and took great pride in making sure everything was functioning at the Institute for the start of the working day, responding rapidly to any requests for help – not unusual in a building prone to leaks and pipe blockages. He moved folk into and out of offices, a physically demanding job that he did with tact, as well as looking after the Institute’s ‘wheels’ (the minibus). His capacity to cut straight to the heart of a matter in no uncertain terms will be fondly remembered by those who knew him and spent time with him, as both of us (AR and BS) did.

Not a man for email, meetings or bureaucracy, nor in fact any kind of nonsense that he perceived as managerial/institutional froth, he turned out to provide frontline support when other members of staff found themselves having to battle with difficult situations, both practical and emotional. He had a strong sense of a duty of care, not in an institutional way but as a sensitive and caring human being aware of people around him, their successes and their woes. He had a phenomenal capacity to cut straight to the chase and to provide a crystal-clear analysis of pretty much any situation that he found himself or others in. His concern for the well-being of others was very much characterised by sound and forcefully argued advice. Having started work in the early hours he usually left the office in the early afternoon, and frequently invited colleagues to join him for a late lunch or beer in the pub. For many years, he took the Institute’s administrative staff out for an all-expenses paid Christmas lunch; there can be few departments of anything, anywhere, where this kind of thing happened. As members of the Institute past and present found out at George’s funeral, his generosity and concern for others knew no bounds. Those who met George socially outside the Institute will recall never being allowed to pay for anything, finding yet another drink on the table after a ‘comfort break’ and eventually pleading that the very last ‘one for the road’ came without a whisky (Scottish spelling) chaser.

We offer a few recollections below that we hope will give a sense of the spirit of the man and that we suspect will resonate among colleagues who knew him.

I used to find refuge in George's workshop at least twice a week (with compulsory boiling-hot tea with milk powder and 'on the turn' digestive biscuits), principally for grounded conversation with someone free from – or at least able to withstand – the endless tidal wave of stuff that comes at one working in any institution. We levelled on account of our solidly working-class backgrounds and manual trades. On one occasion, after shutting the door and being told to 'set doon' in the strongest Glaswegian accent, George got his tape measure out and extended it to about 80 inches and said, 'This is all you've got. Where are you at? About here?' He was of course referring to age and wanted to know what I'd done to secure a future outside work. He knew far more than I'll ever know about what to do with pensions and the like, but his lesson was about the 'here and now', no time to lose, don't be asleep, just get on with it; all somewhat sobering, but an encounter I often bring to mind.

On another occasion, I turned up at George's workshop – a day before leaving in the minibus for fieldwork in Spain – to ask if he had any idea where I might find some benches for a field canteen. He said he'd give it some thought and, less than half an hour later, he turned up at my office door and said he'd sorted it. I asked him where I needed to collect them from and he said, 'They're on the roof of the minibus.' I found out much later quite where they were 'borrowed' from, which will remain a secret, but it summed up his A-B approach to everything. No forms, no applications, no permissions or anything like that, just straightforward help and support offered in an instant.

Andrew Reynolds

I came back to the Institute as a postdoc in 1999, moving into a room just along the corridor from George's workshop. On my first day George asked me in for a tea (yes, with dried milk and a digestive biscuit), something we continued to do about once a week from then on. For me his Glaswegian accent was a comforting reminder of home, but even I occasionally had to ask him to repeat things I'd not understood. Although he was a proud Scot, George loved London, its buildings and history, but also the energy and opportunities the city provided.

He was always thinking of the future and cared deeply about making sure that the students had a fulfilling experience, eagerly helping to source materials for practical classes or to use for ArchaeoTech, and giving work to students in need of financial support. He followed politics with a critical eye and had no time for self-aggrandisers who did nothing to help people. He was astutely aware of what was happening in the Institute, and often gave a gentle nudge to talk to people that he felt might be struggling. He shared advice, which always focused on family, health and work, in that order. He cared deeply for Mandy, his son Andrew and daughter Clare, as well as for his sister-in-law Sally, who had Down's Syndrome, and was distraught when Sally died during the Covid-19 pandemic. He could be loud and exuberant, and his wide experience meant that he could talk to anyone, but George kept some facets of his life private or told very few. After he retired, we stayed in touch and met occasionally for beer, food and long conversations and had been planning to walk Hadrian's wall together, potentially to raise funds for IoA students. On one such occasion I was on the train home when I found he had slipped the pub's whisky glass into my bag – so I'm raising a toast for George.

We miss his humour, thoughtfulness, sharpness of mind and foresight. He stood up for and cared deeply for others and helped make the Institute a better place to work.

Bill Sillar