

Roman archaeology at the Institute: the early years Sheppard Frere

Sheppard Frere was Professor of the Archaeology of the Roman Empire at Oxford from 1967 to his retirement in 1983, but most of his early career as a university teacher and scholar was spent at the Institute, where he was the first full-time Professor of the Archaeology of the Roman Provinces. Here he recalls his years at the Institute, from 1955 to 1966, first at St John's Lodge and later in Gordon Square.

In 1955 Sir Mortimer Wheeler retired from his post at the Institute as part-time Professor of the Archaeology of the Roman Provinces, and I was appointed to succeed him in the full-time rank of Reader. I inherited from him a palatial room at St John's Lodge in Regent's Park,¹ and, as might be anticipated, a very beautiful secretary; but for the rest it was a hard slog to gain the necessary knowledge of the subject and to keep a lecture ahead. At Cambridge I had read classics and ancient history, and my archaeological training had been as an amateur in practical excavation. To have read archaeology would have meant specializing in either prehistory or early medieval archaeology; in those days at Cambridge, Roman archaeology was considered a branch of art history.

At the Institute I was responsible for the supervision of candidates for the MA and PhD degrees, among whom Sonia Chadwick was doing her PhD on the Bifrons Jutish cemetery in Kent, Joan Alcock an MA on Romano-British religion, and Henry Cleere an MA on the Romano-British iron industry.² I also gave a course of lectures on Roman Britain, which was attended by undergraduates, some of them from as far away as Royal Holloway College to the west of London; but my inner circle of pupils was studying for the Postgraduate Diploma, and some of them were as old as I was. We embarked on studies of Roman Gaul and Germany, in addition to Roman Britain. Among the group were two students who later became professors and two who became directors of a British School abroad.³

St John's Lodge was a pleasant and friendly place of work, with the occasional stimulus of an invitation from the Institute's Director, Gordon Childe, to lunch at London Zoo (of which he was a Fellow); the short drive there in his car was an adventure thankfully not too often repeated.⁴ The Lodge's only disadvantage was the occasional descent of thick fog, which after dark made leaving the park a matter of some difficulty.

Coincident with my arrival at the Institute, I was appointed director of renewed excavations at the Roman site of Verulamium at St Albans, Hertfordshire (Fig. 1). They were made necessary by plans for a

new road that would widen Bluehouse Hill and then continue eastwards across the River Ver to join the A5 road, thus cutting a swathe right across the Roman city. These excavations were on a very large scale and ran for about eight weeks each summer until 1961 (Fig. 2). The workforce consisted mainly of unpaid volunteers (Fig. 3); at times over a hundred were present, mainly camping. But a paid force of labourers, including about 15 undergraduates, mainly from Cambridge, were employed to do the heavy work (Fig. 4). Many students from the Institute took part in one or other capacity. Indeed, at the time it was virtually the only large dig in the country where amateurs could gain experience, and many who later became distinguished, even in prehistory or mediaeval archaeology, began their archaeological lives here. Maurice Cookson was permanently on site as our photographer (Figs 2, 6)⁵ and had a laboratory in the Verulamium Museum, and Mr and Mrs Petty assisted Norman Davey in the assembly and study

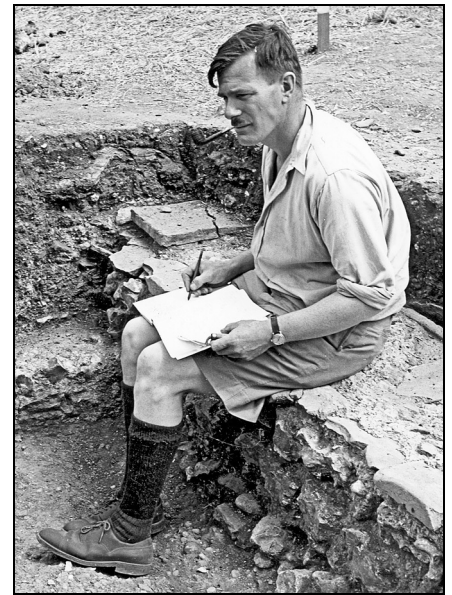


Figure 1 Sheppard Frere on site at Verulamium in 1955.

of the finds of painted wall plaster.⁶ Systematic recovery of frescoes from the ruins of Roman buildings had begun in England only after the Second World War, at Lullingstone Villa in Kent, when G. W. Meates first demonstrated the possibilities and C. D. P. Nicholson pioneered the process of re-assembly. When large sheets of fallen plaster came to light at Verulamium in 1955 and later years, Norman Davey devised new methods of lifting, treating and mounting them, at first using facilities at the government's Building Research Station at Watford in Hertfordshire and later



Figure 2 Excavation in progress at Verulamium in 1958, with Maurice Cookson (left) photographing a mosaic floor.



Figure 3 Students working at Verulamium in 1958; it became the fashion that year to adorn the wheelbarrows with captions – including the “single Wheeler” – which had to be hidden on inspection days.

in a laboratory provided by the Ministry of Works, first at Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire and later in his own gardens at Potterne near Devizes.⁷ With W. S. C. Kennett, he also initiated a new and effective method of raising mosaics for transfer to the museum without having to slice them up first (Fig. 7).⁸

Verulamium was also the scene of one of Martin Aitken’s early triumphs with the

proton magnetometer,⁹ when he traced the entire hitherto unknown circuit of the first-century defences, the “1955 Ditch”, so called from its discovery in that year beneath a house in Insula XX (Fig. 8).¹⁰

The move to Gordon Square occurred in early 1958, and the building was formally opened on 29 April by the Queen Mother as Chancellor of the University of London. We were all drilled in the correct protocol



Figure 4 Paid labourers at Verulamium in 1955; Sheppard Frere at extreme left; the elderly man (front right) had worked for Wheeler (Fig. 5) at Verulamium in 1930–34.

by Edward Pyddoke, Secretary of the Institute; for me the occasion was a little spoilt by the worry of remembering whether one should call the Queen Mother Ma’am or Mam, and that on shaking hands one should not let go her hand before she let go yours. The new six-floor building, which we shared with the Institute of Classical Studies, gave us much more room, was equipped with good storage and laboratory facilities, and made us altogether more professional. For me, one of its advantages was the provision of a room in the Institute for Marion Wilson,¹¹ where she classified huge quantities of pottery from Canterbury and Verulamium, of which she made incomparable drawings; she also made fair copies of some of the field drawings of sections for publication. The pottery drawings were photographically reduced by Cookson, one set being stuck on sheets in a loose-leaf storage book devoted to contexts (layers, pits, etc.) and the other in a book of types. The context dates entered in the latter enabled the lifespan of most types to be assessed.

In December 1958 the Institute’s new lecture theatre was the venue of a very enjoyable Council for British Archaeology conference on problems of the Iron Age in southern Britain. It saw the sudden burgeoning of a romance between Christopher Hawkes and Sonia Chadwick,¹² but probably the most important scholarly result was the inclusion in the published proceedings, which I was deputed to edit, of the comprehensive and detailed catalogues of Iron Age coinage found in Britain that had been compiled by Derek Allen.¹³ These tables were very costly to set up in print, and it was only possible to do so with the aid of an extremely generous subsidy from the late Ivan D. Margary, who readily came to the rescue after I had acquainted him with the problem.¹⁴

The publication of these catalogues generated much new research. Derek Allen was the expert to whom new finds were normally reported for identification; it soon became clear that a photographic record was needed. The reason for this was

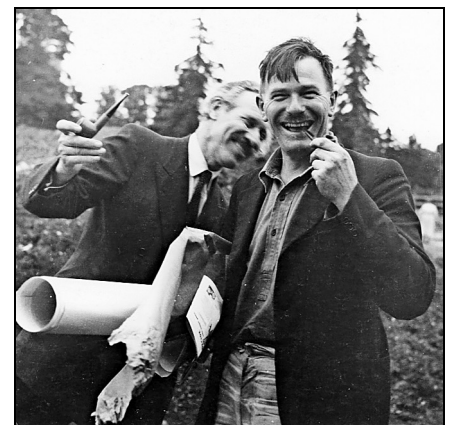


Figure 5 Sheppard Frere and Mortimer Wheeler share a joke at Verulamium, 1958.

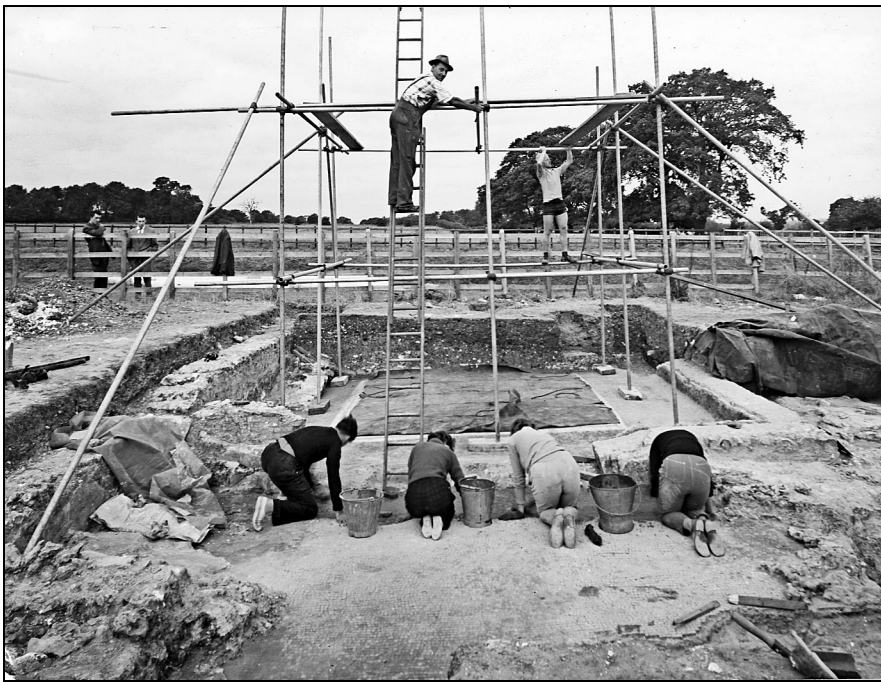


Figure 6 Preparations for Maurice Cookson to take a vertical photograph of the mosaic in *insula XXI*, building 2, Verulamium, 1959.

that the striking of these coins by hand had conferred on each specimen an individuality of its own through small differences in the positioning of the dies during stamping, and consequent irregularities in the spread of the flans (the coins' metal discs); unlike more recent coinages, no one member of an issue exactly resembles any other. Photographs made it possible, as never before, to tie coins to the places where they had been found (their findspots) and they also facilitated recognition of sequences of the dies used in their manufacture. The cards to which the photographs were attached recorded details of findspots, ownership, weights and coin types in terms of Mack numbers,¹⁵ as well as Allen's new classification. At first we also recorded the specific gravities of the gold coins, with the skilled assistance of Ian Cornwall, a lecturer in the Institute's Department of Human Environment. As new finds became available, they were photographed at a scale of 2:1 by Cookson or by his assistant Marjorie Conlon, and from time to time Cookson and I (and later Bob Wilkins at Oxford) made sallies to record existing museum or private collections such as those of H. R. Mossop and R. P. Mack, and so built up the index. Owners were given copies of the photographs without charge, as an encouragement to participate. It happened that the development of the index coincided with a great contemporary explosion of discoveries, both from the multiplication of rescue excavations and from the growing use of metal detectors. The index, which came with me when I moved to Oxford, now has its own curator and has become a much-used facility, even being made accessible on the Internet.

Another photographic initiative of the time was less successful. To assist the identification and study of small finds from excavations, photocopies of published illustrations were attached to large cards, one set being classified by type of object and its material, and the other by findspot. However, the enormous increase in publications of finds eventually made compilation impossible to continue, useful though it might have proved.

At the Institute, practical experience of field survey and excavation was considered important. I remember an excursion

to examine a part of the Devil's Highway, the Roman great west road, where it crosses the heathland northwest of Bagshot in Surrey, and being shocked by the damage done by afforestation to some very interesting cuttings where the road encountered steep gradients along its course. Assuming that the Forestry Commission was responsible, I penned an angry letter to *The Times*, only to be disconcerted on finding that the heath belonged to the Queen!

In addition to Verulamium there were smaller excavations attended by Institute students, for instance at the Bignor Roman villa in Sussex (1956–62), when its successive phases were for the first time revealed and dated,¹⁶ at Dorchester on Thames, (1962–63),¹⁷ and at the hill fort on Ivinghoe Beacon in the Chilterns (1963–65).¹⁸ Expeditions were also made to France with the cooperation of Olwen Brogan and Mollie Cotton,¹⁹ first to the Corrèze, where the small hill fort of Le Charlat near Ussel was examined in 1957 and surveys made of other earthworks in the neighbourhood,²⁰ and later (with B. R. Hartley) to Lezoux, one of the main production centres of samian pottery in the Roman period, east of Clermont-Ferrand. There, in addition to finding a pottery kiln for the manufacture of samian ware, we examined some deep cellars cut in the sand that had walls of terre pisée (rammed earth) and yielded plentiful coarse pottery of a completely unknown type and date (probably early medieval).²¹

In 1966, my final year at the Institute, and in 1967, small-scale excavations were undertaken with B. R. Hartley at the Roman fort at Bowes, Yorkshire.²² The original defences, of Flavian date (AD 69–96), most unusually consisted of a revetment of



Figure 7 Lifting a mosaic in *insula XXVII*, building 3, Verulamium, 1957.



Figure 8 Martin Aitken using his proton magnetometer at Verulamium in 1959 to locate the "1955 Ditch" below the surface.

timber posts fronting a core of enormous river boulders set in clay, which was in turn supported at the rear by a turf stack still 1.5 m high. Later discoveries have suggested the likelihood that timber-fronted ramparts of this date may have been built by the Ninth Legion. Equally interesting was an annexe attached to the north side of the fort, embracing higher ground, which was, nevertheless, kept soaking wet by springs. This necessitated over an hour's hard baling out of our trenches before work could begin each morning. The ditch enclosing the annexe was 2.7 m wide and 1.5 m deep, and its waterlogged filling proved to consist (at the point examined) of heather, brushwood and horse dung, containing seeds, nuts and pieces of leather, together with a sequence of pottery down to AD 130. Greatly excited by this discovery, we persuaded the local undertaker to construct a coffin-like box, which we forced into the side of the cutting to provide a complete profile of the filling. This was lovingly conveyed by car to London by two ladies from the Institute's Department of Human Environment and handed to Professor Dumbleby, the departmental head, in the hope that it would yield a great deal of environmental information, including pollen. I was told that it was being kept damp, but thereafter heard nothing of it. Perhaps the "coffin" still lurks somewhere in the bowels of Gordon Square.²³

The Institute was a major influence in my archaeological development ever since I had become a subscribing member in 1938, which enabled me to borrow books and slides and to attend conferences. I was very fortunate later to become a member of staff during its formative years, gaining the friendship of so many archaeologists and also enjoying the facilities of life in London, including the Society of Antiquaries (in those days a kingpin of archaeology in Britain). But after a tenure of 11 years, and with the prospect of a further 16 in harness, it was time to move on.

Notes

1. St John's Lodge, a handsome Regency mansion, was the Institute's first home, formally opened on 29 April 1937; see J. D. Evans, "The first half-century – and after", *Bulletin of the Institute of Archaeology* 24, 1–25, 1987.
2. Sonia Chadwick was a distinguished Anglo-Saxon archaeologist who taught at Oxford; Joan Alcock was a research student at the Institute of Archaeology, who completed a PhD on Celtic religion in Roman Britain and later taught at the University of the South Bank in London; and Henry Cleere was Director of the Council for British Archaeology from 1974 to 1991 and is now an honorary visiting professor at the Institute of Archaeology.
3. Professors Charles Higham of the University of Otago, New Zealand, and William Manning of the University of Wales, Cardiff; and Chrystal Bennett and Richard Harper, both of whom served as Director of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem.
4. In her article in *Archaeology International* 2000/2001, "Remembering Frederick Zeuner and others at the Institute of Archaeology, 1945–48", Grace Simpson also recalls (on p. 9) Gordon Childe's idiosyncratic and unpredictable style of driving.
5. Maurice Cookson ("Cookie") worked as photographer for Wheeler on his excavations in the 1930s at Verulamium, Maiden Castle and elsewhere. He set up the "Photographic Studio" at St John's Lodge and later ran the Institute's photographic department in the Gordon Square building. He wrote what was probably the first book on archaeological photography: *Photography for archaeologists* (London: Parrish, 1954).
6. Mr and Mrs Petty also helped in other ways: he acted as treasurer of the excavations and she took charge of the finds room on site. Norman Davey was a civil engineer, employed at the government's Building Research Station, who had excavated the St Stephen's Roman cemetery just south of the Roman city.
7. See N. Davey, "The conservation of Romano-British painted plaster", *Britannia* 3, 251–68, 1972; and N. Davey & R. Ling, *Wall painting in Roman Britain*, *Britannia* Monograph no. 3, 1981.
8. See S. S. Frere, "Lifting mosaics", *Antiquity* 32, 116–19, 1958.
9. Martin Aitken of the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art at Oxford University developed the technique of magnetometer survey as a means of detecting subsurface archaeological features. Verulamium was the scene of one of his earliest experimental applications of the new technique; see M. J. Aitken, "Verulamium 1959: the magnetic survey", appendix I in S. S. Frere, "Excavations at Verulamium 1959 fifth interim report", *Antiquaries Journal* 40, 21–4, 1960. He later became Professor of Archaeometry at the Research Laboratory, from which he retired in 1989.
10. The streets and buildings at Verulamium were divided archaeologically, as at other Classical cities with street grids, into blocks known as *insulae*, identified by Roman numerals, within which individual buildings were identified by Arabic numerals.
11. Marion Wilson, who had dug with Wheeler at Maiden Castle, later became my principal on-site supervisor at Canterbury and Verulamium.
12. Christopher Hawkes was Professor of European Archaeology at Oxford from 1946 until his retirement in 1972.
13. D. F. Allen, "The origins of coinage in Britain: a re-appraisal" in *Problems of the Iron Age in southern Britain*, S. S. Frere (ed.), 97–308 (Occasional Paper 11, University of London Institute of Archaeology, 1961).
14. Ivan D. Margary of East Grinstead, Sussex, was a very generous benefactor of the Institute and of Sussex archaeology, and author of *Roman roads in Britain*, vols 1 & 2 (London: Phoenix House, 1955) and *The Roman roads of the Weald* (London: Phoenix House, 1965).
15. So called after R. P. Mack, author of *The coinage of ancient Britain*, (London: Spink, 1953; 2nd edn 1964).
16. S. S. Frere, "The Bignor villa", *Britannia* 13, 135–95, 1982. Work at the Bignor Roman villa has since been carried forward by members of the Institute's Field Archaeology Unit; see D. Rudling, "Bignor Roman Villa and the Institute of Archaeology", *Archaeology International* 1997/98, 16–19.
17. S. S. Frere, "Excavations at Dorchester on Thames in 1962", *Archaeological Journal* 119, 114–19, 1963, and "Excavations at Dorchester on Thames in 1963", *Archaeological Journal* 141, 91–174, 1986.
18. M. A. Cotton & S. S. Frere, "Ivinghoe Beacon, excavations 1963–5", *Records of Buckinghamshire* 13, 187–234, 1968.
19. Olwen (Lady) Brogan became interested in Roman archaeology while studying history at UCL and was supervised for her MA thesis by Wheeler. She excavated extensively in France and was closely associated with the British School at Rome, a connection that led later to many years of archaeological survey in Tripolitania. She was a founder member, first secretary and Vice-President of the Society for Libyan Studies. Mollie Cotton, who had worked with Wheeler at Maiden Castle and in northern France in the 1930s, served as secretary of the Verulamium Excavation Committee, but later moved to Italy, where she excavated and published seminal reports on two Roman villas (Posto and San Rocco) near Francolise north of Naples.
20. M. A. Cotton & S. S. Frere, "Enceintes de l'Age du Fer au Pays des Lemovices", *Gallia* 19, 31–54, 1961.
21. S. S. Frere & B. R. Hartley, "Fouilles de Lezoux en 1963", *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale* 9, 557–63, 1966.
22. M. V. Taylor, "Roman Britain in 1967", *Journal of Roman Studies* 58, 179–80, 1968.
23. Enquiries by the editor of *AI* have, unfortunately, failed to throw any light on the fate of the "coffin", which appears not to have been in the Institute's basement when it was cleared in 1990 to make way for the creation of the Wolfson Archaeological Science Laboratories (see *Archaeology International* 1997/98, p. 5).