

Professor John Davies Evans (1925-2011)

Director of the Institute of Archaeology: 1973-1989

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Throughout his long career John Evans made outstanding contributions to the investigation of Mediterranean prehistory and also to the development of academic and professional archaeology at the Institute and elsewhere.¹ He pioneered the systematic study of prehistoric Malta, excavated the Neolithic foundations of the site of Knossos in Crete, and after he became Director of the Institute of Archaeology in 1973 oversaw much of its gradual transformation from a small exclusively postgraduate research institution to the largest university department of archaeology in Britain (**Fig. 1**).

John Evans grew up in Liverpool, the only son of Welsh parents. He attended Liverpool Institute High School, where French and Spanish were among his chosen subjects and, at the age of 17, gained an open scholarship to Pembroke College, Cambridge, to read English. His first year was interrupted in 1943 when he joined the code-breaking team at Bletchley Park as a linguist before undertaking his National Service in Singapore. Returning to Cambridge in 1947 he completed Part 1 of the English Tripos and, already fascinated by archaeology, changed for Part 2 to Archaeology and Anthropology, graduating after one year with a First Class BA. He received a state studentship for doctoral study and, hoping to specialise in Mediterranean prehistory and having learnt Spanish at school, was encouraged by Glyn Daniel to follow up an idea of Gordon Childe's about early contacts

between Spain and Anatolia. He first visited Spain, followed by Turkey in 1951-52, when he held a fellowship at the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara.² In 1953 he returned to Pembroke College as Research Fellow. He had been appointed in 1952 by the Archaeological Survey of Malta to prepare a corpus of the island's prehistoric antiquities and in 1956 he completed his PhD.³ His long engagement with Maltese archaeology led to the publication of a series of papers and two books.⁴ While at Cambridge he tutored an undergraduate, Evelyn Sladdin, whom he married in July 1957 just after she completed her degree.⁵

John's career took a decisive turn in 1956 when he succeeded Gordon Childe as Professor of Prehistoric European Archaeology at the Institute. Then, in 1958, he accepted an invitation from Sinclair Hood to take charge of excavating the Neolithic foundations of Knossos on Crete started by Hood the previous year. In three seasons, from 1958 to 1960, John excavated deep Neolithic levels beneath the Bronze Age 'Palace of Minos' and, assisted by Evelyn, undertook detailed quantitative analyses of the pottery (**Fig. 2**).⁶ He worked again in the Aegean in 1964 and 1965 when, with Colin Renfrew, he excavated Neolithic deposits on the islet of Saliagos between Paros and Antiparos,⁷ and in 1969 he undertook further excavations at Knossos on the extent of the earliest settlement.⁸ Many years later it gave him great pleasure to be invited to speak about his pioneering research at Knossos at a meeting on the Cretan Neolithic held at Sheffield University.⁹

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Fig. 1: John Evans at his desk in the Institute of Archaeology (1989).

The next phase of John's career began in 1973 when he succeeded W. F. ('Peter') Grimes as Director of the Institute, a position he held until his retirement in 1989. During this long period at the helm, he steered the Institute through increasingly challenging years of financial cuts and bureaucratic obstacles which culminated, in 1986, with the Institute's incorporation as a major department in its large multi-faculty neighbour, University College London. The Institute had already in 1968 admitted its first undergraduates for the full-time BA, followed by the inception of a BSc in 1969. This fundamental change from its role as a small research institute was soon reinforced by the replacement of the former postgraduate diplomas by MA and MSc one-year degrees, and it ushered in a major increase of students and staff that accelerated under John's stewardship.

From its pre-war foundation by Mortimer Wheeler the Institute had promoted field archaeology at home and abroad and the scientific analysis and conservation of excavated

materials, and these activities were strengthened and expanded during John's directorship. In 1974 he helped establish the Sussex Field Archaeology Unit, whose director later joined the academic staff of the Institute. Then, during the 1980s and despite financial stringency, the Institute succeeded in gaining, in national and London University competitions, new lectureships in archaeobotany, ceramic technology, quantitative techniques, and African archaeology, the latter complementing existing positions in Latin American and South and Southeast Asian archaeology. John also introduced postgraduate training in museum studies in 1986 in association with established teaching and research in archaeological conservation.

Outside the Institute John was active in many national organizations. Elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1973, he chaired its Archaeology section and contributed to its oversight of British Schools and Institutes abroad. He was President of the Prehistoric Society, the Council for British Archaeology

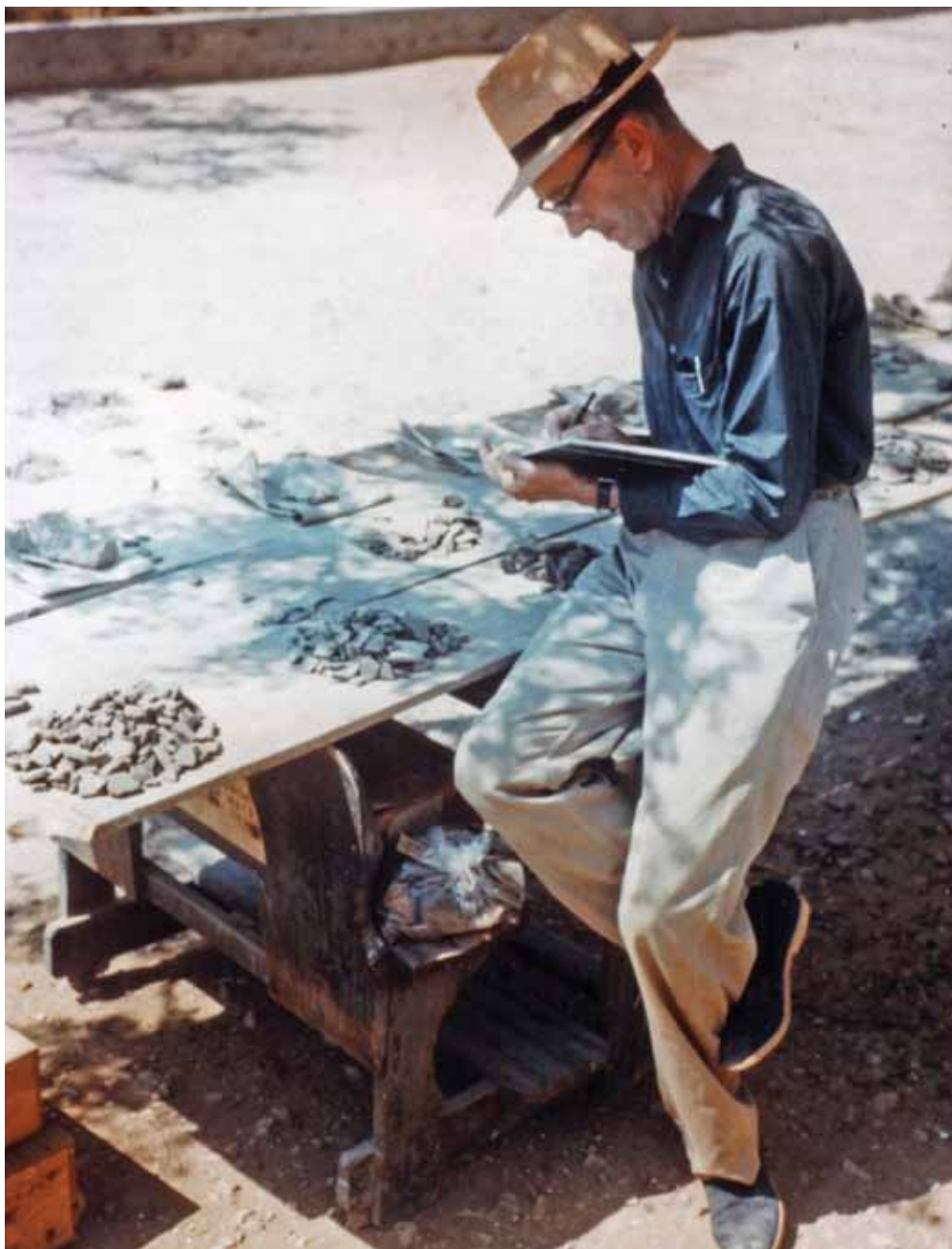


Fig. 2: John Evans sorting Neolithic pottery at Knossos (c.1960).

and the Society of Antiquaries of London, and chaired the Treasure Trove Reviewing Committee of the Department of National Heritage, for which he was appointed OBE in 1996. His scholarly distinction was recognized abroad by an honorary doctorate from

the University of Lyon 2 and election to (full) membership of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut and the Istituto Italiano di Preistoria e Protoistoria. He was also a Council Member of the International Union of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences (IUPPS) from

1979 to 1982, when as chair of the National Committee that was to run the next IUPPS Congress, in Britain in 1986, he became its President. A major international controversy then arose when the National Committee adopted an anti-apartheid policy which would ban South African and Namibian participation in the Congress. The International IUPPS Committee refused to endorse such a ban – and John then resigned the presidency.¹⁰

As he approached retirement John and Evelyn moved from their London flat to Shaftesbury from where they continued to visit London until Evelyn, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease, had to move to a nursing home. John then devoted much of his time to her care until her death in 2009 – and was even recruited to the home's Board of Trustees, which enabled him to help both the residents and their relatives. He was unfailingly considerate towards friends, students and Institute colleagues, and modest about his scholarship, his impressive command of European languages, and his many years of service to a multitude of professional organizations. But above all, through his long career at the Institute he encouraged and enabled a host of young people to become archaeologists and helped to make it the internationally renowned centre of archaeological research and training it is today.¹¹

Notes and References

1. See, for example, two of his papers in the *Bulletin of the Institute of Archaeology*: 'Archaeology as education and profession' (1975) 12, 1–12; and his account of the early history of the Institute, 'The first half-century – and after' (1987) 24, 1–25.
2. During the winter closure of the Ankara Institute he gained valuable experience of excavation by joining Kathleen Kenyon's first season at Jericho, and back in England he participated in Grahame Clark's final season at the Mesolithic site of Starr Carr.
3. His PhD was entitled 'Aegean-Anatolian and indigenous elements in the cultures of the western Mediterranean in the second millennium B.C., with special reference to Malta'.
4. *Malta* (in the Ancient Peoples and Places Series), Thames & Hudson (1959), and his definitive *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands*, Athlone Press, 1971.
5. In 1954 Evelyn (who had previously met Kathleen Kenyon) was offered places at both the Institute and Cambridge to study archaeology. She chose Cambridge because the Institute did not then offer an undergraduate degree.
6. See his reports 'Excavations at the Neolithic settlement of Knossos, Part I' and 'Neolithic Knossos, 1957-60, Part II, summary and conclusions' in the *Annual of the British School at Athens* (1964) 59, 132–240, and (1988) 63, 267–76.
7. J.D. Evans and Colin Renfrew (1968), *Excavations at Saliagos near Antiparos*, British School of Archaeology at Athens and Thames & Hudson.
8. 'Neolithic Knossos: the growth of a settlement', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* (1971) 37, 96–117.
9. See his autobiographical essay (2008), 'Approaching the labyrinth', in V. Isaakidou and P.D. Tomkins (eds), *Escaping the Labyrinth: the Cretan Neolithic in context*, Oxbow, 11–20 (in which he also recalls his earlier work in Malta).
10. The ban led to the creation of the first World Archaeological Congress, organized by Professor Peter Ucko, who had initially acted as the National Secretary for the IUPPS meeting. The congress was held in Southampton in September 1986 and attracted nearly 1000 participants from all over the world. The IUPPS also met in 1986 in the German city of Mainz.
11. I thank Evelyn's niece Judith Conway and my Institute colleagues John Wilkes and Todd Whitelaw for assistance in the preparation of this article.