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Alumni Reflections

Fig. 1: Charles Thomas (right), with his co-directors of the Gwithian excavations in north Cornwall, Vincent Megaw (centre) and the late Bernard Wailes (left), in the summer of 1956.

Charles Thomas

Postgraduate Diploma in European Archaeology 1951–53

I'm writing this on a foggy August morning, at home in my native Cornwall, surrounded by grandchildren and feeling a bit like the octogenarian that I am. It's time for reminiscences; out in the hall are various framed certificates, a very large and colourful one, dated 11 July 1953, recording that Antony Charles Thomas is awarded an 'Academic Post-graduate Diploma in European Archaeology – Prehistoric Europe'. This is headed 'University of London'. The Institute of Archaeology at that period stood alone, with about a dozen other independent university institutes. I had no idea that forty years later, after it had moved to Gordon Square and subsequently become part of UCL, I (with others) would be made retrospectively a real Fellow of the great University College London. At the old Institute, we never went near the place.

This week I visited my first-ever excavation, a Bronze Age barrow on Godrevy headland, St Ives bay, north coast of west Cornwall. The barrow was greatly disturbed around 1900 when Trinity House erected a tall wireless mast with concrete stay-platforms right on its centre. As barrows go (or went) an interesting one: no ditch, built of scooped-up turf above a central cremation bonfire, heap of large quartz rocks above this, and the entire surface dotted with hundreds of little white pebbles brought up from the beach. When

we cleared most of a south-west quadrant we exposed an underlying old land surface, rich in Mesolithic flint objects, cores and débitage, and typical Late Mesolithic pebble-tools. Godrevy Barrow is about to be re-excavated as part of a National Trust and English Heritage scheme to 'tidy up' Cornwall's coastal archaeology.

This was back in 1950. When I came out of the army in 1948, I went to Oxford to read law – Honours Jurisprudence – with the idea that I could join the family firm of solicitors. I loved Oxford and still do, but I loathed Law and the idea of being stuck in an office for life, and since childhood had been concerned (apart from youthful carnal pursuits) with an amalgam of archaeology, local history, folklore and language. Cornwall offers the lot in abundance. In summer 1950, when I, my brother and two Oxford pals decided to have a go at the barrow, guided in detail by Richard Atkinson's *Field Archaeology* (1946), it was supposed to be long-vacation revision time for the final degree year. No surprise then that my degree was a poor Third.

At that time it was not possible to take a degree in archaeology at Oxford; if you wanted one, you went to Cambridge and the realm of J.G.D. Clark whose (to me quite wonderful) books, *The Mesolithic Age in Britain* (1930) and *Prehistoric England* (1940), I had bought as an undergraduate. Where I lived and mainly worked, Cornwall's Gwithian-Camborne area, there are at least twenty Late Mesolithic surface sites. I was collecting flints from the age of puberty and fell deeply and irrevocably in love with the Mesolithic. Anyone looking at a record of my professional career might suppose a life devoted to Early Christian and post-Roman studies – actual archaeology, inscriptions, ceramics and so on – but for me the Mesolithic world was sanctified by the teachings of F.E. Zeuner. Here's an unusual instance: once, on an East Anglia field outing, during lunch break, Zeuner raised the question of what *language* was spoken in Mesolithic Britain. None of us had a clue. This is tricky stuff and only recently have some historical linguists proposed that one Neolithic, and pre-Indo-European, language in Britain and Ireland may have been Afro-Hamitic. What came before that? I have ideas, but I'm not voicing them.

During my Oxford time I was sorting objects in a local museum at home (Camborne Public Library) and, because by then I had bought and absorbed some of Gordon Childe's books (e.g. *Prehistoric Communities of the British Isles* and *The Dawn of European Civilization*), I dared to write to him, particularly about a fine greenstone adze supposedly found in the remains of a log-boat under a local valley gasworks. This went on; and in 1951, even more daringly, I managed to talk my way into becoming a student at the Institute. Kindly older friends in the West Cornwall Field Club, such as the late Florence Patchett (Bronze Age pottery expert) who had worked as a recorder with Mortimer Wheeler on a number of sites, pointed out that as a potential paid career archaeology was a poor prospect. Given that it was taught at few universities, there were only about a dozen lectureships, museum work was notoriously underpaid, and freelance digging had hardly started. In fact, after the Institute, I spent four years as a W.E.A. tutor in Cornwall, living at home and earning a pittance, before Stuart Piggott got me into Edinburgh as the replacement for Richard Atkinson.

Never mind. Off I went to London, lodging with a pal in Hampstead – bus down to Camden Town (with our favourite pub frequented by Dylan Thomas and other notable boozers), then walk across Regent's Park to the new Mecca, St John's Lodge. The place, its contents on all floors, and personnel, its daily (and part-nightly) rhythm, were all so completely different from both the physical format and the life-style of any British or Irish university today that a full description would require a novel – preferably by Kingsley Amis. In the early 1950s smog still prevailed. One could cross Regent's Park, in daytime, unable to see six feet ahead, street lamps glowing faintly above. The Inner Circle

might be frequented by a large open limousine rolling along at 5 mph, with the aged Queen Mother out for a drive, and most men doffing their headgear. And in an afternoon's peace and quiet, weird bestial howls floated across from the Zoo.

To be one of the small annual group of diploma students was to experience an unforgettable and rare privilege. As would-be archaeologists, prehistoric, Roman or varieties of Oriental, we were taught just about everything. The lot. A notion that you could go and dig something and then refer most of the finds to 'specialists' (as nowadays) was not on. We were trained to be our own specialists; and this embraced a further stage, conservation of just about anything. The long studio-workshop at the back of St John's Lodge, commanded by Ione Gedye and Marjory Maitland Howard, looked out across acres of grassland towards the Zoo (occasionally, in summertime, containing improper male nudists). We fiddled away with plaster of paris, sculpture-tools and paint. I'm still proud that one of my first attempts, total reconstruction of a colourful Mesopotamian dish, ended up in the British Museum. Ian Cornwall grounded us in skeletal anatomy. I recall learning to re-assemble, from a trayful of tiny bones, the skeleton of a rabbit – most useful later in the field, at sites like Gwithian, because rabbit-bone implied a post-Norman context. We learnt to identify a wide range of mammalian finds from teeth, equally useful.

Life at St John's Lodge was very much *sui generis* (for a selection of contemporary images, see 'From the Archives' in *Archaeology International* 13/14 (2009–2011): 112–113, and below, pp. 127–132). Nothing much happened before 10 a.m., when the dour porter opened up and Childe arrived from his Hampstead flat in his frightful old car, parked by the entrance. The elegant courtyard in front, where one could go out to admire the park's Inner Circle and have a smoke, was a real scenario. I recall things like the shuffling arrival of the great Abbé Breuil; Kathleen Kenyon striding in, dressed as a Red Cross commandant and accompanied by a small barking dog (which Childe loathed because it once stole his tea-cake); and, on a Friday afternoon, Childe himself in what he thought was rustic garb, greeting a tall dreamy lady with a much shorter, darker, spouse and announcing to us all "I'm just for a week-end with Max and Agatha" (Professor Max Mallowan and Agatha Christie). Or ex-brigadier Sir Mortimer ("Rik") Wheeler, when not engaged at Burlington House, Piccadilly – at the British Academy, or the Society of Antiquaries – would march in from his Soho lodgings. Among us youths this could provoke the question of whether or not his impressive vertical stance was because he wore a corset. The Institute's splendid library was, in term-time, almost a home to certain Wheeler disciples: some very senior Indian museum officials, and an Israeli general (Yigael Yadin) who was reputedly a great collector of antiquities.

The daily timetable was, again, nothing like that of the universities some of us had attended. Summer and winter, the (lengthy) formal lectures by Childe, Zeuner and others could begin at 5.30, long after tea; this was to allow attendance by diploma students who were employed, day-time, as civil servants or in the City. Lantern slides, those large monochrome glass squares, helped to keep one awake. For the staff, and some of the other occupants of the place, there was a sort of kitchen and endless tea-making. Students however enjoyed a concession; we could get a (paid-for) lunch in the refectory at the adjoining Bedford College. In my case this worked very well because the college's senior domestic bursar was then my cousin (and one-time sweetheart) Judith, who made sure that we got a nice table and whatever was on offer, bearing in mind that food rationing was still in force.

Group tutorials or seminars, with Childe or Zeuner, could be morning or afternoon. This was when the real learning took place. We referred to Professor Gordon Childe among ourselves as "Uncle Gordon", but

always addressed him as "Sir" or "Professor Childe", and when he remembered them he used our first-names or surnames. Language was a great challenge. Childe read, wrote and spoke Russian; most of us could cope with French; Paul Ashbee alone was fluent in German. One day, studying the Palaeolithic and cave-art in Spain, Childe produced an article by Pericot (in Spanish, naturally). I was told that, in a fortnight, I was to give our tutorial a summary of it. When I said that I couldn't read Spanish, I was instructed to learn it at once. So I slogged down to Foyle's, bought a *Teach Yourself Spanish* and a pocket dictionary and did my best. In fact I succeeded, to the stage where later as a member of the Folk-Lore Society I was able to publish an article on 'Folk-tales from a Spanish cave', in *Folk-Lore* 64 (1953). I seem to recall someone else being commanded to master Roumanian in a couple of weeks.

Then, mainly with Zeuner – author of my later near-Bible, *The Pleistocene Period* (1959) – we had our entertaining term-time outings. One would be on the top deck of a trolley-bus from Hampstead down south almost to the Thames, with Zeuner pointing out the various Pleistocene terraces as we trundled down the long slope (while other, bemused, passengers shied away from us). And visits to the Zoo where Zeuner, as a most important FZS, could take in half-a-dozen students for free (what would that cost today?). This again had a part-Pleistocene emphasis, and was partly a prelude to his later (1963) *A History of Domesticated Animals*. Least welcome were the occasions when we had to admire Zeuner's hand-held crony, a horrible male chimpanzee called Spike. Most exciting were performances by a reindeer, led back and forth so that we could hear the characteristic clicking of its ankles as it walked (and, once, the yowl of Henry Hodges, Fleet Air Arm veteran, as the reindeer trod on his shoe). Longer excursions (**Fig. 2**) might involve a day trip to East Anglia – for traces of Pleistocene shoreline, flints in low cliffs. On one such outing to Dunwich, I picked up the neck of a medieval glazed pitcher; subsequently, under Miss Gedye's guidance, I restored and painted the whole vessel which is now, rather belatedly, in Dunwich Museum.

Outings to Wessex led by Childe, to places like Woodhenge (where at least there was an essential tea-shop), have been adequately described by others. Childe was a terrifying driver. Sometimes during term there would be an interesting evening meeting at the Antiquaries, in Piccadilly, and one had to avoid accepting a lift in Childe's car because of his habit of driving three or four times around Piccadilly Circus, with traffic blaring at him. At that stage, apart from according him a mixture of reverence and amused affection, I don't think that any of us knew much about his early life or background. When I first went up to the Institute (1951) my maternal grandmother Alice Holman, born 1860 in Australia of Cornish-Australian mining background, learnt that VGC was the Director and then, to my surprise, said that she had known his parents. After that she often referred to him as "Reverend Childe's boy", but I was unable to get more from her.

One of Childe's many attractive qualities was his determination to show his pupils 'How Things Were Made'. This did not always work. Chunks of flint, garnered in Wiltshire, were in store, and he liked to give out-doors demonstrations of how to make a hand-axe, which led inevitably to minor bloodshed and finger-plasters. Once, flints having run out, he bought some potatoes in Camden market and, with a table-knife, tried to demonstrate by substitute means – holding up a potato: "Imagine this is a flint nodule".

A postgraduate diploma occupied six university terms, with the spring and summer vacations being largely devoted to excavations in Wessex, or Yorkshire, or somewhere (minimally funded). In its way this was part of the training, though students were on their own. One dug neat square or rectilinear holes, guided by the textbooks of Atkinson and Wheeler; photographed everything, guided by M.G. Cookson, the superb "Cookie"

Fig. 2: Charles Thomas (seated right, with pipe) listening to Zeuner (centre, with sunglasses) addressing a field excursion on site at Swanscombe, Kent, in 1952.

(*AI* 13/14: 103–106, figs 3–4); recorded everything; and of course brought finds back to St John's Lodge for further identification and treatment. Those of us (most of the males) who had served in the armed forces could at least sew, cook, put up tents and huts, and even survey after a fashion. At a personal level, we learned to run things the right way, and it was (notoriously?) a time when engagements, liaisons, even marriages were planned. It was a time, too, when the leading archaeologists of the day, like Stuart Piggott, Glyn Daniel, Richard Atkinson, J.F.S. Stone *et al.*, toured around to visit sites and start to befriend their successors.

How to conclude this, probably incomplete, personal memoir? In 1958, aged 30, I became a Lecturer in Archaeology (at Edinburgh), and subsequently held two chairs (Leicester, 1967; Exeter, 1972), and also examined and advised at about a dozen other British and Irish universities. The practice of archaeology now, adorned as it is with the wealth of dating techniques, new technologies and unforeseen specialisms, bears little relation to the discipline as it was in 1953. But – a profound conviction that my surviving fellow-students, from the days of Childe, Zeuner, Wheeler, Mallowan, Kenyon and the others, are likely to share – is that the two packed years at St John's Lodge, by design or accident, could produce a proper archaeologist (prehistoric, Roman or Oriental) from scratch in a way that has never been matched elsewhere and could not be matched today. Memories of the old Institute of Archaeology and its *dramatis personae*, often comic, usually affectionate and sometimes even bewildering, have never left me. And that's about all I want to say.

Nathalie Cohen

BA Medieval Archaeology 1991–94;
MA Maritime Archaeology 2006–07

It's true to say that I wanted to be a part of the Institute of Archaeology from the first moment I walked in the door. I feel incredibly lucky to have been able to study here; all that I learnt and the people I met during my two degrees have been a huge influence on my life. From my undergraduate days of training with the Field Unit in Sussex, at Beddingham and Bignor, volunteering with the Compton Bassett Area Research Project in Wiltshire, and working in the City on the London Buildings Project, I can directly trace my love of the English landscape and its buildings, in particular medieval churches in London and the South East. From time spent in lectures, seminars and the library – and in meetings as a member of the Society of Archaeological Students – I learnt how to listen, plan, discuss and research. And from probably far too many hours spent in the (then) smoky depths of the Institute Common Room and the third floor of the UCL Union, I made an amazing group of friends, many of whom are now professional colleagues also working in archaeology.

Being a student at UCL also gave me the opportunity to travel: digging at Prague Castle, with the Institute of Archaeology in Prague, and recording an Ottoman fort in Bethlehem and a medieval church in Jerusalem, with the British School. My first job after graduating was on the front desk at the Institute, working as the Receptionist and Undergraduate Admissions Secretary: unlocking the doors in the morning, sorting the post, fixing the photocopier, answering the many weird and wonderful enquiries and being involved with Open Days. After a period working in the East Midlands for the Monuments at Risk Survey, I went to work at the Museum of London on two projects closely connected with the Institute: the Grimes London Archive project, and the Thames Archaeological Survey. Both projects built on the skills that I had learnt as an undergraduate, as did developing and co-directing the Southwark Cathedral Archaeological Research Project, which trained Institute students in building recording techniques.

Fig. 3: Nathalie Cohen on site.

I then worked at Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) for eight years as an Archivist and Senior Archaeologist, before returning to the Institute (in 2006) to read for the Master's degree in Maritime Archaeology. Since then I have continued to be connected to UCL through working on the Thames Discovery Programme (see above, pp. 99–106). It has been wonderful to meet so many current undergraduates, postgraduates and staff members through the project, and I am very proud to have become an Honorary Research Associate at the Institute.

Currently, I have three jobs: as a Community Archaeologist at Museum of London Archaeology; as Southwark Cathedral's Archaeologist; and as the National Trust Archaeologist for Kent and Sussex. All three posts reflect the knowledge which I first gained – and my varied experiences – during my formative student years.

Charles Foinette

BA Egyptian Archaeology 1997–2000; MA Public Archaeology 2000–01

Having been asked to contribute to this issue of *Archaeology International*, I must first confess that, shamefully, I have absolutely no idea where my trowel has gone. It was at one time a tool of which I was quite proud: the usual 'Institute approved' 3½" WHS pointing trowel. By the end of my undergraduate fieldwork, it had just enough wear on the blade to justify (as I thought) my presence amongst the dauntingly experienced 'proper' archaeologists who had to suffer my inexperience on digs. Scuffed boots, an old jumper and a trowel placed artfully in the back pocket of ones tattered shorts was 'the look' to which everyone but Rupert (who always managed to be smarter than the rest of us) seemed to aspire. Sadly, I never carried it off terribly convincingly, which was perhaps explained by the preponderance of rowing kit in my wardrobe.

Ever since, I have felt rather envious of those who have managed to carry the flame forward into 'real life'. I follow with fascination the 'Facebook' updates of those who still dig, conserve and manage. Their current interests are as varied as our choices of module were back in 1997. Peter Ginn has cornered the TV farming market, whilst 'acquaintance spotting' on *Time Team* has kept me amused for many seasons. One friend is fast becoming a leading authority on bladed weapons, ancient and modern. Others work for English Heritage, the British Museum and archaeological trusts various, as diggers and conservators. Yet more persist in academia, as lecturers and researchers. I even bumped into a friend unexpectedly at the Tower of London where she was working as an historical re-enactor. The prize, so far, must go to Lucy, whose letter reached me in a remote corner of Helmand all the way from Scott's Antarctic hut – surely the best-travelled piece of mail of our tour of duty! I am one of the many who, though we might line our shelves with well-thumbed copies of Renfrew and Bahn or Gardiner's *Egyptian Grammar*, can probably no longer be trusted not to trample on the artefacts even if we did manage to find our way onto a working site.

Fig. 4: Charles Foinette.

For those of us lacking the commitment or inclination to remain true to the profession, life has taken an almost infinite variety of directions. In September 2001, I joined the army which was not such an outlandish departure from archaeology as might first be assumed. Such figures as Mortimer Wheeler, Augustus Pitt-Rivers and the great T. E. Lawrence stand in the pantheon of soldier archaeologists. In the age of Empire, the connection was perhaps a more logical one, with archaeology just another line of operation when mounting great expeditions to little known or newly acquired territories. The French, Germans and British all did it with gusto, stocking the great museums of Europe with loot along the way. The logistics of exploration appeal to the military mind, with the impedimenta of men, tools and tents all

readily available – then and now. There is, however, more to it than simple logistics. The British Army in particular venerates its history (even if, on occasion, we seem doomed to repeat it) to a rare degree. No headquarters or mess is complete without displays of artefacts, both obscure and predictable. My own regiment displays everything from the Colours carried in battle at Yorktown to a captured Swastika. Medals, uniforms, weapons, notebooks and pictures document every one of the 362 years since we were raised at Berwick to serve Cromwell's New Model Army. The preserved head of a goose celebrates the bird's warning to sleeping sentries in Canada in 1839 – and a snuff box on the table of the Mess in St James' Palace is crafted from a hoof of Marengo, Napoleon's mount at Waterloo. Each carries a story and, implicitly, a lesson.

'So what?', the reader may ask. That the British Army surrounds itself with reminders of campaigns past is hardly a revelation – Manchester United no doubt does something similar at Old Trafford – the organisation is well capable of teaching the story to those it recruits, regardless of background. To me, the value of my archaeological education lay in the demands for clear expression and critical thought that are intrinsic to the discipline. The likes of Tim Schadla-Hall, Louise Martin, Jon Hather, Gus Milne and John Tait were on hand to challenge lazy assumptions and simplistic analysis at every level. For the over-confident nineteen year-old who arrived at Gordon Square in autumn 1997 the journey was hugely enjoyable, but the serious lessons endure, something for which I am profoundly grateful.

My third day in uniform coincided with the attacks on New York. Six months before, the Institute had been the scene of lively debate, both in seminar room and bar, of the ethics surrounding the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban. At that stage it had seemed safely academic; whilst emotive, the vexed issues of theocracy, deprivation and burgeoning violence seemed a long way away. Subsequent events, I have no doubt, have provoked as much debate and strong feeling in the archaeological world as in the military. Whatever the politics, one cannot escape the relevance and immediacy of history, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the former, the British defeat at Maiwand in 1880 still resonates strongly. The battlefield itself, approximately half way between Gereshk and Kandahar, is close enough to the current British area of responsibility for cultural memory to persist. To Pashtun tribesman it is a source of pride, every bit as powerful as Waterloo; something the visitor is wise to remember. By the same token, it is no coincidence that my Iraqi interpreter gave me, when we parted at the end of a tour in Baghdad, a paperweight carrying the image of the Lion of Babylon. He was very proud indeed of his nation's heritage and, as were many of his countrymen, keen to educate those of us who found ourselves in that beautiful, ravaged city.

As I hope it is with most of those who share the privilege of time spent in Gordon Square, I have a powerful and enduring interest in the past, especially in the ways that it resonates with the present. More than that, however, I count amongst my fellow students some of my most enduring friends.