

## Life at the Institute of Archaeology, 1957–59

Charles Higham

*In the two previous issues of Archaeology International, life at the Institute in the 1950s was recalled by a former student, Peter Gathercole, and a former member of staff, Sheppard Frere. Charles Higham (Fig. 1), who is now Professor of Anthropology at the University of Otago in New Zealand, studied for the diploma in Roman archaeology at that time. He provides a student's counterpoint to the article by Professor Frere, based on impressions recorded in his diary, including the Institute's move in 1958 from Regent's Park to its new building in Gordon Square.*

A couple of years ago, while sorting the contents of our attic in England, I came across a box in a dusty corner. It contained my diaries for the years 1955 to 1964. I have no idea how they survived there for nearly 40 years, but on opening them I was reminded that I had at the time kept a daily record of my life. The diaries included the two years I spent at the Institute of Archaeology, where I studied under Sheppard Frere, then Mr Frere but subsequently at Oxford as Professor of the Archaeology of the Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> As I referred to him then as Mr Frere, I will continue to do so here. Opening my diary for 1957, I found that on 1 June I received a small blue envelope from St Catharine's College, Cambridge, offering me a place to read archaeology and anthropology. Like all my friends at school, I had prepared myself for two years of national service in the armed forces before going to university, but in the late summer the government announced that national service was to cease and that anyone born on or after the 1 October 1939 would not be required. I missed the call-up by 19 days.

Unexpectedly, I could now look forward to two years free of military service. So, my parents did some detective work and found that the Institute of Archaeology offered a two-year postgraduate diploma course. An appointment was duly made, and we took the train from Wimbledon to Regent's Park and so to the impressive Regency building on the Inner Circle of the park, known as St John's Lodge. There we were ushered into the office of Mr Pyddoke, the secretary, to discuss my immediate future. He could see no reason why I should not be given the opportunity to study for the diploma, and an interview was arranged with the director, Professor W. F. Grimes. I returned on 23 September, and my diary records: "I had an interview with Professor Grimes at the Institute today, and I am to study Roman Britain, photography, technology, draughtsmanship and surveying". The mix of the academic and the practical, on which the Institute's founder Mortimer Wheeler had insisted, was already in place. And so, aged 17 and without a first degree, I began my postgraduate studies.

My recollection of the Institute then, as I began a daily trek from Wimbledon on my small motorbike, is of its intimacy and welcoming atmosphere. The main entrance gave way to a large hall, in front of which was a common room. The teaching staff occupied spacious offices, but tucked away in the basement lay the photography studio, ruled over by Maurice Cookson, whom everyone knew as Cookie. There was also a small conservation laboratory, run by Ione Gedye with the assistance of Henry Hodges, and a studio for the preparation of plans and other drawings, where Harry Stewart had his office. Joan du Plat Taylor was the librarian, ably assisted by Gerry Talbot.<sup>2</sup>

Gordon Childe had retired as director only the previous year, but his presence cast a long shadow. John Evans, who was in due course to succeed Peter (as he was always known) Grimes as director, had taken over the teaching of European prehistory from Childe, whose death in Australia soon after I enrolled came as a profound shock. Frederick Zeuner taught Palaeolithic and environmental archaeology, assisted by Ian Cornwall, and Max Mallowan was actively involved in his excavations at Nimrud in Iraq. On 24 October I noted: "I have identified Professor Mallowan (Mr Agatha Christie)".<sup>3</sup> The formidable Kathleen Kenyon, who taught Palestinian archaeology, was at the height of her powers, and we followed her disputes with the American archaeologist Robert Braidwood over the primacy of Neolithic Jericho or Jarmo in documenting early agriculture.<sup>4</sup> Occasionally we glimpsed the archaeologist we all knew of – Mortimer Wheeler – in the library or tea room.

And so my first term began. On 14 October I received a bill for my fees: 24 pounds, 12 shillings and sixpence for the year. Wheeler's insistence on practical training was evident in the structure of the course. Our small band of students would congregate in Cookie's studio to learn how to take proper archaeological photographs. In his first lecture he regaled us with tales of working with Wheeler at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa in the Indus Valley and at Maiden Castle in Dorset, while he instilled in us the importance of cleaning to a shiny finish everything for photographing before



**Figure 1** Charles Higham at work on a rich Bronze Age burial at the site of Ban Non Wat, Thailand, February 2005.

opening the camera case. His cameras consisted of ancient mahogany boxes with a lens hood, and half-plate cut film. He told us once how he had used glass plates on an early excavation, and dropped his precious cargo on the railway platform before they could be developed. He could be very critical of our earnest efforts at photography, including developing our films in the dark room, but his sharp tongue was offset by the kindly Marjorie Conlon, who worked loyally as his assistant. We learned surveying from Harry Stewart, who took us out of the Institute to plan its outline with a level, a tripod and a drawing board.

Conservation was also a vital part of our education. We were required to try to restore a broken pottery vessel, and fill in the missing parts with plaster. I was quite hopeless at this task, my ineptitude magnified by the skill of Ekpo Eyo, who later became the head of antiquities in Nigeria. On 17 October I noted: "I have spent the day in the technical department, piecing together a pot, it is a bit of a brute". Another task was to try and cast a metal object using the lost-wax technique. There were lectures too, on the chemistry of bronze disease and on how to restore rusting iron artefacts.

The start of my academic coursework led to my first meeting with the only other student taking the diploma in Roman archaeology that year, John Ellison, who had come from Oxford with a classics degree. The first seminar the two of us had with Mr Frere was for me a salutary experience. Evidently, we were to concentrate



**Figure 2** The new conservation laboratory at the Institute in Gordon Square in 1958. Then, as now, it attracted students from overseas; from left to right: Litko Zoll-Adanic (Poland), Ben Brobby (Ghana) and Babin Deilakis (Greece).

on Roman inscriptions. He entered the room and placed a sheaf of texts before us. "Translate the first one Higham" came his imperative. Having only just passed Latin at ordinary level at school, I was totally flummoxed by the irritating Roman habit of abbreviating everything in order to save marble. So I stared long and hard at the first letter, a capital L. I think that it was actually an abbreviation of someone's name, such as Lucius, but after a long delay I blurted out, hopefully, "50?". "Oh glory" I heard him murmur.

However, the situation did improve. After a long gestation, I produced an essay on Hadrian's Wall. On 19 November I noted: "Mr Frere was very pleased indeed with my map of the forts on Hadrian's Wall and said that he ought to put it on a slide, most interesting, well done". This praise may have engendered my concluding comment on the day: "I am really pleased with the success of the Institute of Archaeology, and realise just how lucky I am to be able to fill in these two years so very profitably and enjoyably. Fancy learning what I am for 24 pounds a year. The smallness of the fee is fabulous."

Lectures were held at about 5.00 p.m. and, much to my relief, they saw an influx of students from various London colleges, so there was anonymity in numbers. Mr Frere was a formidable lecturer. On 9 October, my diary records: "I went straight to a heavily detailed lecture on Roman Britain in Mr Frere's room. He really does speak rather fast!" A fortnight later: "Mr Frere was on form in the Iron Age lecture, leaping from twig to twig in alarming fashion,

but at least there are no Iron Age inscriptions to translate!". And so we learned about the later Iron Age in southern Britain, as a prelude to the conquests of Caesar and later Claudius, and of the four legions that came with the latter, the names of which still echo in my memory: the XX Valeria Victrix, XI Hispana, XIV Gemina and, later, the VI Victrix Pia Fidelis. We learned much else about Roman Britain, including how Hadrian's Wall was built and the various cohorts that occupied its forts, before turning to other provinces of the empire. I greatly enjoyed Mr Frere's lectures, which were illustrated by glass lantern slides.

During the first three months of 1958, we were all preparing for the big move from Regent's Park. A splendid new building, on the north side of Gordon Square, was nearing completion. Its six floors, copious offices and seminar rooms, and large conservation laboratory (Fig. 2), were in stark contrast with the homely atmosphere to which we were accustomed at St John's Lodge. On 28 April we were all required to be at action stations for the grand opening the following day by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother. A representative from Clarence House, with an important looking clipboard, traced her intended course, and gave us all instructions. Her Majesty, she said, would enter the conservation laboratory (where I was to be stationed) at 2.30 p.m. precisely, and spend four minutes with us. We were told to address her as Ma'am, and if she were to ask a question we should answer briefly, and not engage her in conversation. The

following day, she entered the laboratory, looking radiant, but late, accompanied by a posse of officials, including, as I noted: "The Vice-Chancellor and Sir Mortimer Wheeler turned up, as did many doctors splendidly decked out in their scarlet robes". As it happened, she chose me as her target and asked what I was doing: "restoring some Roman iron ma'am". It seemed that she was not keenly interested in Roman iron, but she looked up and brightened. "Aren't the trees looking lovely in Gordon Square?" "Indeed they are ma'am", and, my momentous brush with royalty over, she moved on to the next room.

The lecture theatre gave way, in summer, to excavations. Sheppard Frere was then directing fieldwork at the Bignor Roman villa, and a major programme at Verulamium.<sup>5</sup> On 11 July, I pitched my tent "within the Roman city, 100 yards from where St Germanus repulsed the Saxons". I look back on my time under Mr Frere's tutelage as vital training for my own excavations much later in Thailand and Cambodia (see Fig. 1). At Verulamium, he opened large areas rather than the relatively small squares laced with baulks excavated, for example, at Maiden Castle, and he devolved responsibility for excavation units on site supervisors, while keeping a watchful eye on the whole. After Verulamium, I progressed to the excavation of an Iron Age hill fort, Dane's Camp near Tewkesbury, directed by Nicholas Thomas, who had been a student at the Institute; then on to Pembrokeshire where Professor Grimes was excavating another Iron Age site, near Littlehaven (Fig. 3). I had keenly anticipated working with the director, but it was disappointing. As I noted at the time: "One gets the impression that this is a holiday and not an excavation for Grimes". In fact we hardly saw him on the dig.

In addition to lectures and seminars, the



**Figure 3** Charles Higham excavating near Littlehaven in Pembrokeshire, an Iron Age site that was being examined by Professor Grimes, summer 1958.



**Figure 4** On the ramparts at the Camp du Charlat in 1959; left to right, Charles Higham, William Manning, Richard Harper, Richard Higham and John Ellison.

beginning of my second year involved assisting with the analysis of some of the finds from Verulamium. Most of our effort was spent on the many bags of pottery (Samian ware). In the bitterly cold days of January 1959, before term began I went up to the Institute to help with the huge task of examining all our Samian sherds. Brian Hartley, the acknowledged expert, sat at the end of a large table while I undid bags of the sherds and laid their contents out before him. After some days of this, and the job completed, I noted that "Mr Frere and I seem to get on very well together at the Institute nowadays – he certainly has plenty of jobs for me and is suitably grateful".

In contrast to the iron curtain I would later experience in the Cambridge department, which separated undergraduates from the staff in their tea room, the Institute was refreshingly egalitarian. I shared a table with Kathleen Kenyon one afternoon, when an incredibly ancient woman came in and sat nearby. "Who is she, I asked". "She is Margaret Murray" came the reply. "She worked with Flinders Petrie in Egypt". Dr Murray was then 96, and in 1963 she published her autobiography, *My first hundred years*.<sup>6</sup> Thus, I came in contact with the very beginnings of archaeology as an academic discipline.

One of my fellow students was Gladys Pike, who later helped to establish archaeology at the University of Reading. She was studying prehistoric archaeology under John Evans, and one day she told me that the Italian government had invited archaeology students from Edinburgh, Oxford, Cambridge and London to visit the Lipari islands, off the northern coast of Sicily. I decided to see if I could be included in this trip, although I was not studying prehistory. John Evans listened sympathetically to my plea, and I was allowed to join the London contingent, provided that I could

raise the necessary 30 pounds. I did, and on 18 March our London group met the rest of the party at Victoria Station. Stuart Piggott (Edinburgh), Glyn Daniel (Cambridge) and John Evans added their distinction to the group, but I recall most clearly the effortless aura of superiority that emanated from the Cambridge undergraduates. We rapidly crossed France by train, and sped by night through Italy to Rome. Another day by train brought us to Milazzo, whence we crossed by boat to Lipari. I shall never forget opening the shutters of our hotel and breathing in the perfume of orange blossom, in stark contrast to the dusty east wind and grey chill of March in London.

The Lipari islands feature prominently in the saga of Odysseus. The Straits of Messina have often been identified with the maelstrom Charybdis, and the island of Stromboli with Polyphemus, the one-eyed giant who hurled stones at passing ships. As we sailed past the island of Panarea, we surmised that it had been the home of Circe. On 23 March we set foot on Stromboli and climbed a narrow path to the summit of the volcano. Stuart Piggott and Glyn Daniel retired to a viewing platform half way up, but we edged to the volcano rim, and looked down at three vents, spouting lava. Two days later we visited the obsidian deposits that made the islands so important in the Neolithic period in this part of the world. After visiting the main archaeological sites, we were assigned topics for presentations. I noted the nerve-racking experience of having to "get up and declaim on the Neolithic of Lipari before an audience containing four of the most illustrious scholars of the day on this subject". The following day our sailing boat took us back to Sicily, where we visited the site of a Greek city, rock-cut tombs and the ancient theatre of Taormina.

Back in London, we faced the prospect of examinations. They began on 8 June and

lasted for three days. The paper on the Roman provinces was all right, but that on Iron Age and Roman Britain was testing. Looking back, I am surprised to read that, still only 19, I had to attend a viva examination in front of Sheppard Frere, the director Peter Grimes, Kathleen Kenyon and an external examiner Ian Richmond. I cannot recall any part of what must certainly have been a daunting experience. Evidently they "flung bone, pottery, coins and brooches at me to identify, and asked me about points that arose from my exam answers". A few days later, Mr Frere told me that I had passed. But the paradox remained that I had evidently passed the postgraduate diploma exam but was not a graduate. So I had toiled away for two years, working as a labourer during holidays to pay my fees, suffered the stress of the examinations, but had no piece of paper at the end of it.

However, a diploma was not really the point. My two years at the Institute had been great fun and they were not yet over, for that summer I joined Mr Frere's excavations at the Camp du Charlat in central France. We students camped in the lee of this large Iron Age fort (Figs 4, 5), while Mr Frere and his colleagues, including Olwen Brogan and Mollie Cotton,<sup>7</sup> stayed in a hotel in the nearby town of Ussel. It was an idyllic setting, and, when not digging, we whispered around the area in Mr Frere's stately Rolls-Royce, or proceeded nippily in Ann Grosvenor-Ellis's sports car. After the dig was over, Ann drove us to Lascaux, then down to Provence to visit Carcassonne, Arles, Nimes and Orange before we headed home for another season at Verulamium.

After my first season at Verulamium, I had pinned my hopes on being asked to be a site supervisor, but the invitation never came. However, Mr Frere did admit me to a small corps of paid workers, each of whom received three shillings and sixpence an hour. This, to my dismay, meant that I was at first given the boring jobs while volunteers were uncovering mosaics and hypocausts. But I was soon given more interesting assignments. I recall working in what had been the back room of a shop that had once faced Watling Street. The owner had swept refuse into the corner and periodically covered the floor with a fresh layer of clay. A pit in the corner contained many coins, and as we cleaned the surface of each new find we tried to name the emperor whose face was stamped on one side. The next-door house had a well in its back garden, and one morning Professor Friend<sup>8</sup> emerged from its depths clutching the bronze statuette of Minerva that now takes pride of place in the Verulamium museum.

One day Sir Mortimer Wheeler himself came to visit. We were all on our best behaviours Mr Frere escorted him around the dig. When they reached my square, Mr Frere reached into my pot-herd tray for a large piece of Samian ware. "There is a



**Figure 5** The camping ground at Camp du Charlat. John Ellison and Charles Higham peel potatoes, while Richard Higham wrestles with the primus while talking to the three children of the local farmer. Note the dormant rugby ball.

fresh break on this piece, Higham, where is the other half"? I looked up in horror, as he rummaged in the dirt that filled my wheelbarrow. "Here it is, take more care next time". I think I detected a slight hint of sympathy on Wheeler's face as they went on their way.

I worked on at Verulamium until the autumn. A low mist would hang over the site as September advanced towards October and the day I would leave London for Cambridge to embark on my undergraduate career. Looking back, I recall only with pleasure the time I spent at the Institute. Among many happy memories is a field trip to Stonehenge, where one could walk around the site, unhindered by tourists or fences. I learned lessons that I still value in my professional life, and still think of Cookie whenever I take an archaeological photograph, particularly his insistence on cleaning everything, trimming away rootlets, and stopping down to the maximum for depth of focus. I was constantly reminded that publication of full site reports is as vital as unravelling stratigraphy, and that typology, before the advent of radiocarbon dating, was a central concern. And I still write to Mr Frere, whom I now call Sheppard, and visit him in his home at Marcham, near Oxford, to reminisce.

## Notes

1. Professor Sheppard Frere FBA was educated at Lancing College and Magdalene College, Cambridge. During the period covered by this article, he was Reader in the Archaeology of the Roman Provinces, and in 1963 he was appointed to a chair at the Institute. In 1966 he was elected Professor of the Archaeology of the Roman Empire at Oxford University, and a Fellow of All Souls College.
2. For more information on St John's Lodge and the staff of the Institute in the 1950s, see the article by John Evans published on

the occasion of the Institute's Golden Jubilee in 1987: "The first half century – and after", *University of London Institute of Archaeology Bulletin* 24, 1–26, 1987.

3. Sir Max Mallowan (1904–78) married Agatha Christie in 1930 and was appointed Professor of Western Asiatic Archaeology at the Institute in 1947. He was knighted in 1968.
4. Excavations at the Neolithic sites of Jericho in Palestine by Kenyon and at Jarmo in Iraq by Braidwood were at the time yielding the earliest known evidence of agriculture. See K. M. Kenyon, "Jericho and the origins of agriculture", *The Advancement of Science* 66, 118–20, 1960, and R. J. Braidwood, "The agricultural revolution", *Scientific American* 203, 130–48, 1960.
5. See the articles by David Rudling in *Archaeology International* 1997/98 (pp. 16–19) and by Sheppard Frere in *Archaeology International* 2002/2003 (pp. 10–13) concerning, respectively, Bignor and Verulamium.
6. M. Murray, *My first hundred years* (London: William Kimber, 1963).
7. Olwen Brogan, who studied history at UCL and whose MA thesis was supervised by Mortimer Wheeler, became a noted Roman archaeologist. She worked in France, Italy and Libya and was the wife of Sir Dennis Brogan, the historian. They lived in Trumpington Street, Cambridge, and I visited them regularly when I was an undergraduate there. Mollie Cotton worked with Wheeler at Maiden Castle and in northern France in the 1930s, and served as secretary of the Verulamium Excavation Committee.
8. Professor William Frend FBA is a prolific author on the early Christian church; his many appointments culminated in the chair of ecclesiastical history at the University of Glasgow. At the time of his involvement at Verulamium, he was a fellow and director of studies in archaeology at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. I remember him as a very cheerful and enthusiastic digger.