

Obituary

JEAN COOK



Jean Mary Cook, B.Sc., B.A., F.S.A., was an Anglo-Saxon archaeologist of distinction who used her considerable gifts as a pioneer administrator in museums and higher education. Born at Walmley near Birmingham in 1927, she attended Sutton Coldfield High School for Girls, where she concentrated on science. Her first degree, at Royal Holloway College, was in botany. On graduating she trained as a teacher and taught botany, while in her spare time she studied for a B.A. in English at Birkbeck College, with archaeology as a subsidiary subject. Her archaeological course tutor at Birkbeck was Vera Evison. This introduction to archaeology was to be a turning point and henceforward archaeology became the central enthusiasm of her life. She excavated with Vera Evison at Great Chesterford in 1954 and spent a season at Helgö in Sweden, and in 1955 conducted the excavation of a small Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Broadway Hill in Worcestershire for the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works.

Jean began her distinguished second career in museums in 1954 when she went to work at the Guildhall Museum under Norman Cook. At the same time she completed her part-time B.A. and began to work for a higher degree, on the down-to-earth subject of the wooden buckets sometimes found amongst the grave goods in Anglo-Saxon burials. She continued to collect material on these all her life, with a particular interest in the technical details of their manufacture. After completing a Museum Diploma in 1959 she was promoted to the curatorship at the Royal Museum, Canterbury, where she set about modernising the collection, and then in 1962 she was appointed the curator of the new museum in Chichester where she built up the collection from scratch.

The Chichester experience was to prove valuable when in 1964 she moved to the challenging post of first Director of the Oxford City and County Museum. Oxford University's Ashmolean Museum had effectively served as the local museum, but the need for a specifically Oxfordshire museum had long been recognised. Jean set about the task of establishing a model museum with energy and enthusiasm: collecting representative objects for display and establishing an excellently equipped conservation laboratory under Brian Arthur, capable of handling not only delicate archaeological objects, but also farm machinery. Pride of place went to the typical red and yellow Oxfordshire farm wagon restored by David Smith, which became one of the centrepieces of the early display at Fletcher's House at Woodstock. The museum opened its doors on 15 October 1966. As at Chichester the Director lived 'above the shop' in a small flat created for her in the attics of Fletcher's House.

Two aspects of the museum deserve special mention. Jean was a strong advocate of the need for the museum to be accessible to schoolchildren. Jeff McCabe was appointed Schools Officer in 1965 and a Schools' Loan Service was quickly established. Stacks of red-painted boxes containing a treasure trove of material for children to handle in their own schools were one of the familiar sights of Fletcher's House. Even more pioneering was the



Jean Cook at the Oxford City and County Museum with David Smith (at back) and Ald. Jack Peers, first chairman of the joint committee which established the museum. (Photograph by kind permission of Oxfordshire County Council: Museum Service)

establishment of the Field Department under its first Field Officer, Don Benson, who shared Jean's belief that the new museum should be actively involved in research through excavation. This led to the excavation of the Neolithic long barrow at Ascott-under-Wychwood, and eventually to the display of part of its burial chamber in the museum. But even more significant was the creation of the first County Sites and Monuments Record which provided Oxfordshire with an accessible record of its archaeology (stored on optical coincidence cards in those pre-computer days), available not only for research but as a tool in planning. Following the pioneering Oxfordshire example, County or District Sites and Monuments Records are now ubiquitous in the UK.

A spin-off of this activity was the authorship by Don Benson and Jean Cook in 1966 of *City of Oxford Redevelopment Archaeological Implications*. The report was an attempt to provide basic information for those directly concerned with planning in the city and it succeeded admirably in its aim. This publication was the first in what became a national genre of implication surveys and is the ancestor of the Urban Archaeology Databases and Strategies

and Extensive Urban Surveys currently being promoted by English Heritage.

Jean Cook realised that the scale of excavations necessary in Oxford would require resources that might not be available to the County alone, and she actively promoted the formation of the Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee, a rare example of the City, the County and the University coming together in a joint project to rescue Oxford's buried past. The success of the excavations in Oxford was to lead later to the formation of similar archaeological committees in the county and ultimately to the creation of the Oxford Archaeological Unit, on whose committee she later served.

The creation of a new museum was an exciting enterprise for all those associated with it, and Jean became a highly respected figure in the museum world both locally and nationally as a member of the Council of the Museums Association. A glowing report in the *Museums Journal* commended Jean Cook's zeal, the team-working, the new thinking and the new museum image which had been created. The museum appeared to be going from strength to strength, its future was assured and proposals were in hand for a branch museum in Oxford, a farm museum and a permanent site for storage. But budget cuts increasingly threatened the initial momentum, and to her colleagues' deep regret Jean resigned from the museum in 1970. It was to be left to her successor, Richard (later Sir Richard) Foster, to carry forward the work that she had so ably begun.

Jean Cook left the Woodstock museum to begin a new career as a university administrator, working as Assistant Regional Director for the South Region of the newly founded Open University. Crucial to the success of those pioneering years of the OU was the need to secure the active co-operation of numerous organisations, especially local education authorities and institutions of higher, further and adult education. Jean set up local study centres and arranged tutors, counsellors, registration, examinations and summer schools for the students under her care; but perhaps more importantly, her regional office was there to make the OU more personal and less a faceless institution for students studying at home. Her own previous experience as a part-time student qualified her especially well for this work. Jean Cook brought to the OU a unique combination of professional experience, administrative skills, enthusiasm and warm personality in helping to meet these challenges.

She retired from the Open University in 1983 and once again became actively involved in archaeology in Oxford. In the first instance she brought her considerable talents to assist Trevor Rowley at the Oxford University Department for External Studies in developing his extensive archaeological programme for continuing education students. As an Associate Tutor of the Department she helped to bring a new rigour to the embryonic certificate courses in archaeology. In particular she forged links between the Department and the Open University that made possible the creation of a course structure ranging from intermediate to post-graduate level. A lasting legacy of this period was a volume of essays, *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region*, which she edited with Grace Briggs and Trevor Rowley. An important part of Jean's role in this collaboration was to cajole reluctant authors into completing publishable texts based on what were originally University Extension Lectures, given in 1980. The resulting book provided an important benchmark for the region's archaeology and has fulfilled the editors' intention of providing a synthesis that has survived into the 21st century. A similar co-operation with Trevor Rowley led to *Dorchester Through the Ages* in 1985. Other local studies followed of buried Oxford, Old Headington (with Leslie Taylor), Sutton Courtenay (building on the research of John Fletcher and Christopher Currie), and Great Marlow which was compiled with the help of an adult education group. Jean Cook was the driving force behind these publications which made archaeology and local history available to a wide audience.

At the same time, and also with Grace Briggs, Jean was assisting Dr. J.N.L. Myres to bring to fruition the final volume of *The Oxford History of England*, entitled *The English*

Settlements. The trio collaborated again, this time with the addition of Dr. John Mason, to produce *The Building Accounts of Christ Church Library 1716-1779*, published by the Roxburghe Club in 1988. Dr. Myres described Jean Cook as his 'Girl Friday', a title which was even more apt when she established her allotment in the grounds of the Myres' manor house at Kennington.

In addition to all her other work, Jean Cook found time to be involved with archaeological societies at a local and national level. She was Honorary Secretary of the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society from 1985-90 and President from 1992-4, and brought a new sense of energy to its administration; a new membership leaflet brought an influx of new members, the Society's meetings were moved from the Ashmolean to Rewley House, and Jean also organised the Society's 150th birthday celebrations in 1989, including a notable joint meeting with the Cambridge Antiquarian Society in Stamford. She had high expectations of her fellow committee members, but was always willing to work just as hard herself.

Jean had been a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London since 1967, and in 1996 she agreed to become the Society's Honorary Secretary, the first woman to hold this post. In her typically forthright way she announced that she would hold the post for three years only, but during those three years she certainly made her mark. She took a particular interest in the welfare of the Society's staff, and made the Society's library at Burlington House her special concern. After her three years' service she retained her connection with the Antiquaries through her active involvement with the research project on the evolution of the landscape around Kelmscott Manor in Oxfordshire. Typically Jean was anxious to involve and inform the residents of Kelmscott and to make the work of scholarship relevant to them.

Jean Cook was a grave and private person, full of integrity and deeply devoted to her family. She applied rigour, timeliness and high standards to everything that she undertook. But above all she was selfless and always put others first. She cared about people and cared for them, and she was a skilled enabler who helped other archaeologists and historians to bring their work to fruition. Held in great affection and respect, Jean was sustained in her final illness by her strong Christian faith and by the support of her friends and the local community of St. Ebbes. She died in Oxford on 24 July 2001.

TOM HASSALL