

Philip Rahtz, Archaeologist

Philip Rahtz (1921-2011) was “the 20th century’s most important archaeologist in Somerset”(Mick Aston, PSANHS, Vol. 155, P. 317). On Saturday 2nd February 2013 a day conference was held in the King’s of Wessex Academy, Cheddar to celebrate his life and work.

“ Its all in the Bibliography” was the title chosen by Lorna Watts, Philip’s widow, referring to the long list of his publications which she had compiled. Philip lived up to his belief that excavation is destruction unless followed by analysis and publication by finally publishing reports on all his major excavations. Lorna traced his career, starting as an enthusiastic amateur with no formal training to his appointment as Professor of Archaeology at York in 1978 and beyond. She spoke about his practical, pragmatic attitude to excavation, his belief that the excavator was best qualified to interpret the site and the development of his theoretical work on the principles and ethics of excavation. His ability to inspire others through personal contact and through media, always accompanied by a wry sense of humour, made him an outstanding advocate for archaeology.

Mick Aston followed with some personal reflections on Philip. He met him in 1964 when Philip was Lecturer in Medieval Archaeology at Birmingham University. Meetings with other students at Philip’s home in Serpentine Road, rescue archaeology in the Midlands and at Deerhurst were inspirational to Mick and many of the contributors to Philip’s Festschrift (1993) edited by Martin Carver.

Professor Roberta Gilchrist of Reading University, who had studied under Philip at York, spoke about the contrast between the excavations of Raleigh Radford and Philip Rahtz at the early medieval monastery at Glastonbury. Radford used outdated methods in his excavations within the Abbey grounds and his conclusions were influenced by romanticism. Philip had developed more modern techniques for his excavations at the Chalice Well (1964), Glastonbury Tor (1964-65) and at the Beckery Chapel (1974) and his conclusions were empirical (while not ignoring myth and legend). Combining the work of both archaeologists, Professor Gilchrist attempted to draw her own conclusions about the whole of the Glastonbury area in the early medieval period.

After lunch Bob Croft and Mick Aston showed us the site of the palaces of the Kings of Wessex which are marked out by concrete pillars in the school grounds. Philip had excavated the Norman palace overlying the Saxon palace and the surrounding area here in 1960-62, perhaps his most famous excavation.

At the start of the afternoon session John Page introduced two films showing Philip at the Kings of Wessex site. After this Bob croft showed us some of Philip’s photographs relating to the archaeology of Somerset; portraits of Professor Tratman and Dina Dobson, shots of his own excavations and those of others such as Leslie Alcock’s at South Cadbury and a cartoon by Ian Burrow. Bob also read a tribute from Ian Burrow who was Philip’s first PhD student.

Professor John Blair of Oxford University spoke about ‘Cheddar and other Cheddars’ comparing similar royal sites in England. After reading Philip’s Cheddar report and visiting Taunton to read the site archive he challenged Philip over his dating and the two became friends. Professor Blair considers that Cheddar is one of a series of large, high status sites dating from 600-750 AD which were used as hunting lodges and temporary palaces where the King would enjoy his outdoor pursuits and conduct his royal business. Sites similar to the Saxon palace at Cheddar have been

found at Yeavinger in Northumbria, Stotfold (Beds) and several in the Midlands and Kent. Cheddar is the furthest South West and one of the latest in date.

Bob Croft rounded off the day with some more pictures and cartoons. Many thanks to the Somerset Heritage team for organising a memorable, thought provoking and to many of us a nostalgic experience.

David Baker

References;- PSANHS, Vol. 155 Obituary

Living Archaeology. Philip Rahtz. Tempus. 2001