

OBITUARY

PHILIP RAHTZ

On 2 June 2011 one of the best archaeological excavators in the country and the 20th century's most important archaeologist in Somerset, Philip Rahtz (*see* frontispiece), died at his home at Harome in North Yorkshire.

Philip was born in Bristol in March 1921 and much of his formative period in archaeology, in the 1950s and 1960s, was spent excavating sites in the north of Somerset. A look along my bookshelves demonstrates his importance as an archaeologist for the study of the county, especially for the early medieval period. There were major excavations and important publications for the Chew Valley, Cheddar, Glastonbury, Cannington and Congresbury.

After serving in the RAF in the Second World War, Philip was a school teacher and photographer in Bristol but in the early 1950s, as an amateur, he began his archaeological career excavating a windmill mound (which he thought was a barrow) at Butcombe. As he later told me he had a trowel in one hand and a copy of Richard Atkinson's *Field Archaeology* (1946) for instruction in the other. He says he was unsure of what he was doing or what the site was, and it was suggested by a visitor that perhaps the broken mill stones on the spoil heap might be a bit of a clue! In 1953 he joined Ernest Greenfield, whom he had met in the RAF, in the excavation of sites which were to be inundated with the construction of the huge reservoir at Chew Valley Lake. This was his first professional excavation for which he was paid. Years later he told me of how he would row over to the 'island' at Denny to finish the excavation of a nunnery there, as the waters began to rise. His inflatable dinghy blew away on one occasion leaving him stranded!

Philip went on to dig many other sites which were threatened with development or erosion all over the country. He worked for the Ministry of (Public Building and) Works, the distant forerunner of English Heritage, being commissioned by one of their inspectors, John Hurst (later associated with Wharram Percy in Yorkshire and the study of deserted villages) to carry out excavations. John Hurst found him endless work digging 'rescue' sites, with paid workmen who were not archaeologists. This involved Philip living away from home for many months at a time in a tent or a caravan out in the countryside. He would dig in the summer, and write up and give lectures in the winter. He became

a very experienced and accomplished extra-mural tutor to several university departments.

Over the ten years 1953 to 1963 he worked all over England, leaving his wife Wendy and growing family in Bristol, and when I met him for the first time in 1964 he said he had dug every type of site of all periods except a medieval abbey. He went on, of course, to carry out a long campaign of research at the Cistercian abbey of Bordesley near Redditch in Worcestershire. In 1963, a year before I met him, Philip had been appointed as a lecturer in archaeology in the History department at Birmingham University. He was living in a lilac-coloured caravan on the south car park of the university before he was found a university house in Serpentine Road; there was much speculation on the campus at the time as to the identity of the 'hermit' in the caravan in the car park! His was a unique appointment as Rodney Hilton, the great Marxist professor of medieval history at Birmingham, decided it would be useful to have an archaeologist explaining material culture to his students who thought they would be looking at the history of the Middle Ages solely through documents.

By 1963 Philip had already excavated at Cheddar, the site of a succession of Anglo-Saxon and medieval palaces, now occupied by the Kings of Wessex School and this was the basis of his MA degree (he had no first degree). He was also involved with excavations at Chalice Well, on the Tor and at Beckery in Glastonbury and with Ernest Greenfield's excavations of the Roman temple at Henley Wood in Yatton. He told stories later that while digging on the top of Glastonbury Tor he was told by a local witch that he was the wrong man at the wrong time and he was digging in the wrong place! Years later workmen at the sewage farm near Beckery were still talking of Philip photographing naked women on the site when he was excavating the early medieval cemetery of a possible early monastery.

In 1978 Philip moved to York University as the first professor of the new department of archaeology there. He established an exciting new course with lots of 'themes' and field work. I remember being invited to go to York to teach there for a couple of days only to find the place deserted. All the students had been taken in mini-buses to see the excavation of a local church, an opportunity Philip thought they should not miss.

Philip's contribution to the archaeology of Somerset is vast and has not been developed or exceeded since. His particular contribution was to the early medieval period in an area where society was essentially still Romano-British with connections to the eastern Roman and Christian Byzantine empire. The key sites he excavated were, in addition to Glastonbury and Cheddar, the great cemetery outside the hillfort at Cannington, and, with Peter Fowler and Keith Gardner, the complex hillfort at Congresbury – now known as Cadbury Congresbury. At each site extremely careful digging and recording was combined with rigorous theoretical and intellectual discussion and a great deal of humour. Many scholars, involved in Somerset's archaeology, Ian Burrow, Peter Leach, Ann Woodward, James Bond and others will testify to the enjoyment of working with Philip. To me it was like an apprenticeship – you leaned by example and from his experience – all with good humour and good stories (if poor jokes), with evenings of good conversation over pasta and copious quantities of red wine.

We who work on the early medieval period in Somerset owe Philip Rahtz a great debt. Not only for the vast amount of fieldwork he undertook on sites of this period but for his legacy; everything is fully published, a remarkable record. In Somerset we could best honour his memory in two ways. There should be a monument to him at Cheddar on the site of the Anglo-Saxon palaces, along with a new and better display that indicates the importance of that site. But more importantly members of *SANHS* should build on his fieldwork and ideas with a campaign of research into the early medieval period (the so-called 'Dark Ages) in the historic county of Somerset. I'm sure Philip would have appreciated that.

Philip published an autobiography in 2001 called *Living Archaeology* (Tempus, Stroud) and there was a festschrift published for him in 1993 *In Search of Cult. Archaeological Investigations in Honour of Philip Rahtz* (University of York Archaeological Papers and The Boydell Press). His funeral was in some ways a happy occasion with much good humour, held on 10 June 2011 at St Gregory's Minster, Kirkdale, scene of one of Philip's last excavations and where he is now buried. Obituaries appeared in the *Times* 14 June 2011, the *Guardian* 30 July 2011, *Medieval Archaeology* 55 2011, 281–3 and in *British Archaeology* September/October 2011.

His main research in Somerset and the sites excavated include (in alphabetical order):

Barrow Mead, Bath

J. Woodhouse, 1976. *Barrow Mead, Bath 1964: Excavation of a Medieval Peasant House*, BAR 28, Oxford.

Beckery, Glastonbury

'Beckery Chapel, Glastonbury', 1974, Glastonbury Antiquarian Society.

Butcombe, Chew Stoke

(with M.H. Rahtz) 'T40; barrow and windmill at Butcombe, North Somerset', *Procs Univ Bristol Spelaeological Soc* 8 (2) for 1957–8, 89–96.

Cadbury, Congresbury

(with others) 1992, *Cadbury Congresbury 1968–73 A Late/Post-Roman Hilltop Settlement in Somerset*, BAR Brit Ser 223, Tempus Reparatum.

Cannington

(with S Hirst and S Wright) 2000, *Cannington Cemetery*, Britannia Research Monograph 17, London.

Cheddar, Kings of Wessex School

The Saxon and Medieval Palaces at Cheddar; Excavations, 1960–2, BAR, British Series 65, 1979.

Chew Valley Lake

(with Ernest Greenfield 1977 (but published 1979) *Excavations at Chew Valley Lake*, DoE Archaeol Rep 8.

Glastonbury Chalice Well

'Excavations at Chalice Well, Glastonbury', *SANH* 108, 1964, 143–63.

Glastonbury Tor

'Excavations on Glastonbury Tor 1964–6', *Archaeol Journ* 127, 1971, 1–81.

Maes Knoll

(with K.J. Barton) 'Maes Knoll Camp, Dundry, Somerset', *Procs Univ Bristol Spelaeological Soc* 10 (1) for 1962–3, 9–15.

Pagans Hill, Chew Stoke

(with L.G. Harris) 'The Temple Well and other buildings at Pagans Hill, Chew Stoke, North Somerset', *SANH* 101/102 for 1956–7, 15–51.

Yatton, Henley Wood

Lorna Watts and Peter Leach 1996, *Henley Wood Temples and Cemetery Excavations 1962–69 by the late Ernest Greenfield and others*, CBA Res Rep 99.

see also (Philip Rahtz and Lorna Watts with Bob Croft) 2003 *Glastonbury Myth and Archaeology*, Tempus, Stroud.

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