

OBITUARY
WILLIAM JAMES WEDLAKE

William James Wedlake of Camerton, Hon. M.A., F.S.A., member of this Society since 1947, member of Council since 1956, President in 1974-5, and Life Member since 1988, died on 17 July 1989 at the age of 85.

'Somerset archaeologist extraordinary', the Orator declared him to be when he was presented for his honorary degree at Bristol University in 1986; and few members of our Society today will know quite how extraordinary. His career as an excavator, working first in the name of this Society in 1926, spanned a remarkable sixty-three years; and as a collector of surface finds from the fields beside the Fosse Way at Camerton, went back to the days before circumstances forced the young Bill Wedlake to leave the village school for farm work in 1917. His life spanned the years in which great strides were made in archaeological studies, first in terms of technique and later when amateur gave way to professional; and but for the Second World War Bill would surely have joined the ranks of those in the Government's pay who cared for and interpreted our heritage. Instead, work for the Admiralty in Bath from 1940 until 1972 kept him strictly an amateur and firmly at home, to the very great enrichment of the archaeology of the county he loved so well, and of his native parish, itself a splendid training ground for the great field archaeologist he was to become.

Bill Wedlake always acknowledged the debt he owed to two members of our Society, who recognised his talents and harnessed his enthusiasm: Fr. Ethelbert (later Abbot) Horne of Downside and Dr Arthur Bulleid of Glastonbury. The former involved him from 1926 in our Society's excavation of the Saxon cemetery at Camerton. Work in that parish continued on other sites, in the event, for thirty years, and with admirable despatch so seldom found among his professional contemporaries, Bill's own Camerton Excavation Club published his story of the Roman town beside the Fosse way in 1958, two years after work had finished.

In 1928 Fr. Horne translated Bill to Glastonbury Abbey, where he led a small team of labourers until 1939. The work was under the general direction of Sir Charles Peers, Sir Alfred Clapham and Fr. Horne. Peers and Clapham came down not more than twice each season, Fr. Horne once a week. Their interim reports are the sole published record of those important excavations, but Bill kept his own private record and was working on his notes and on the interpretation of Fr. Horne's superb photographs within a few months of his death. The publication of his conclusions, based now upon his vast experience of other sites, will serve as one of many of his memorials. The Abbey appropriately provided the opportunity for his last excavation, the Abbot's guest hall, in 1978-9, where he recovered the plan of an important part of the late-medieval precinct and incidentally came upon the massive foundations of the fire-affected buildings of Abbot Henry of Blois.

During the 1930s Bill was also in demand on other sites in the county, including Meare Lake Village, Combe Beacon at Combe St Nicholas, and Burrow Mump, where again he worked on Society-sponsored excavations - all significant sites where he widened his experience and increased his skill under St George Gray, W.E.V. Young and Arthur Bulleid. Their recommendation of his work now took him into a wider world, not far away at first in physical terms but into a new epoch in archaeology. First as foreman but soon as trusted right-hand man, Bill became an essential part of the team led by Dr (later Sir) Mortimer Wheeler during that vast undertaking at Maiden Castle, acting as day-to-day director after the end of each season. He was with Wheeler's team in 1938 on excavation and survey work on hillforts in Brittany and in 1939 in Normandy, and Bill would recall, in his own

inimitable way, how they left Dieppe in great haste and just in time at the end of August 1939.

Safely back in England he worked on some rescue sites and for De Novarro at Snailwell before joining the Admiralty. After the War he founded the Camerton Excavation Club (now the Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society) and while continuing work in his native parish and in the city of Bath, he began to study the diaries of a 19th-century rector of Camerton, John Skinner, who, far in advance of his time, was a remarkable field archaeologist. Bill's edition of the archaeological material from the diaries must be another memorial to his dedication.

In 1951 Wheeler persuaded the Admiralty to release Bill for work at Stanwick in Yorkshire, which he was undertaking as part of the Festival of Britain celebrations. Five years later, with digging at Camerton over, Bill began work on the Romano-British temple site at Nettleton Shrub, beside the Fosse Way near Castle Combe. This work, published as a Research Report by the Society of Antiquaries in 1982, marked the end of his most significant undertaking.

Archaeological tours to the Continent and the Mediterranean, on one of which the writer was privileged to be invited, widened Bill's experience and informed his understanding of the sites on which he worked – and, incidentally, provided the many diggers who delighted in his company with entertainment on those days when rain descended and work was impossible.

Bill was the natural first Chairman of the Avon Archaeological Council, formed in 1974, but he never lost his deep loyalty to our own Society, which he served for so long. The annual reports of the Bath and Camerton Society in our *Proceedings*, are a measure of the work he continued to do, making him a second Skinner in the Mendip region and beyond.

For those who knew him well it was no surprise that during his final illness he was received into the Roman Catholic Church, and at his confirmation took the name Ethelbert, in memory of the man who had first recognised his talent. And it was entirely fitting, first that his Requiem Mass should have been sung by one who had once worked for Bill as a volunteer digger, and in the medieval barn-church at Midsomer Norton which Abbot Horne had known so well; and second that he should have been laid to rest in the churchyard at Camerton which he now shares with Parson Skinner and the descendants, perhaps, of those Saxons whose remains he had studied so many years before.

R.W. DUNNING