

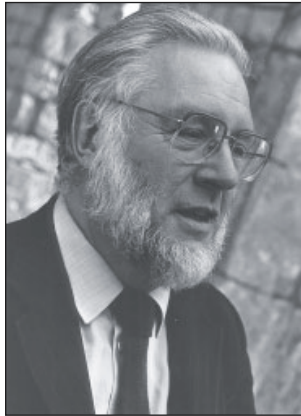
Obituary

JOHN HURST
1927–2003

John Hurst, FBA, FSA, a founding father of British medieval archaeology, died on April 29, 2003, aged 75.

John was born on 15 August 1927. His father was a plant geneticist, his mother a botanist. John thus grew up with an academic background, where he would be familiar with the importance of recording and classification. He was educated at Harrow, where he developed a life-long interest in Middle Eastern civilisation, far from his later career in medieval archaeology. His national service was in the Intelligence Corps in Palestine. He later graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge, with honours in archaeology. The courses there were exclusively prehistoric, and his first experience of excavation was at the Mesolithic site at Star Carr in Yorkshire with Grahame Clark. His first appointment was as an inspector in the then Ministry of Works (later the Department of the Environment, and since 1984 English Heritage), organising excavations on threatened medieval sites in the post-war reconstruction.

He also began excavating, professionally at Norwich, and at weekends with a team of amateurs at a moated site at Northolt in Middlesex. A famous anecdote illustrates the lack of resources available even to inspectors. At Norwich, John found pieces of medieval shoes, well-preserved in waterlogged soil. Always pragmatic, he put them in water in a chamber pot in the hotel where he was staying, to prevent them drying out. But, the hotel maid



threw them away, thinking they were ‘something nasty’.

It was in these excavations, and in others where he was responsible, that he began to take an interest in medieval pottery, in close collaboration with Gerald Dunning, then the foremost expert in England. I first met John when he was sent down to Somerset in 1952 to inspect the excavations that Ernest Greenfield and I were

directing in the Chew Valley, where a new reservoir was being constructed for Bristol. We had dug a number of prehistoric and Roman sites in the large area to be flooded. He persuaded us to dig the medieval sites as well – a moated grange and the earthworks of a shrunken medieval village. He suggested that we should abandon the grid method that Mortimer Wheeler had perfected, and dig the medieval sites in open areas, a method he and Jack Golson had observed on the digs being done by Axel Steensberg in Denmark. Steensberg had developed this technique because the medieval sites he was examining did not display clear stratification; house plans could be found only when large areas could be opened at one time, with no baulks to obscure fine detail. John was very influential in persuading a number of archaeologists to try this method.

He went on to develop his own excavation techniques at the now-famous deserted medieval village of Wharram Percy in Yorkshire. He and Maurice Beresford, a

historian, started a long-term dig in 1952, which continued for forty seasons. John was in charge of excavations (increasingly with him trying to understand every excavation rather than actually digging), Maurice the organiser. Over the years, peasant houses, the ruined church, a watermill site and other structures were examined.

In the 1950s John and Maurice also embarked on the identification and mapping of deserted medieval villages (DMVs) over the whole country, totally thousands of new sites. They formed the Deserted Medieval Research Group. John was also very involved with the Society for Medieval Archaeology, founded in 1957; he was its president in 1980-1983.

Parallel to all these activities, John became best-known as the British principal authority on Anglo-Saxon, medieval, and post-medieval pottery, including pieces imported from Europe and the Far East. He gave a series of lectures at the Goldsmith College in London for 25 years, thus training new generations of pottery experts.

John married Gillian Duckett in 1953. She was a rescue archaeologist, and as such she had come to Chew as an assistant (she died in 1971).

He was elected as a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1958 and of the British Academy in 1987; York gave him an honorary MA in 1990. He received a *Festschrift* in 1992, which listed 146 papers and books he had written, mainly on pottery.

His official work was as an efficient Inspector for the Ministry of Works, making very numerous friends; he always replied to letters by return of post and helped many people by identifying pottery.

John and I formed a close friendship over the decades, and I joined him in 1978 as co-director of the Wharram Research Project from my new base in York. The social history of this excavation has not yet been written, but John, although not gregarious by nature, joined in pageants and other notable 'happenings'. In one of these he was dressed up as King Egghurst, amid much laughter. His and Maurice's daily morning talk to the diggers (often exceeding a hundred) were memorable, closing with John's 'Everybody on site, please'.

I tried with my students to develop modern archaeological theory at Wharram, as part of their training, but John took no interest in this – he only said with a smile that it would be better for everyone to get on with their work – which is what he did. He showed that archaeology still needs more than just theory!

John also had a remarkable memory, remembering all the detail of the 40 years at Wharram, a mental archive, whose loss is a major tragedy with the synthesis of Wharram still in progress.

After his retirement in the 1990s, he continued with ceramic studies from his home near Stamford (Lincolnshire); and travelled widely in Europe and beyond.

His end was a tragedy and a dramatic loss to British archaeology. He, an impeccably gentle man, was violently attacked near his home, and died seven weeks later in hospital, aged 75. He was to have been presented with the Society of Antiquaries Medal at the 2003 Anniversary meeting. The medal, in the event, was received by his son-in-law Bob Croft on behalf of his two daughters, Francesca and Tamara.

His premature death has robbed us of a quiet and self-effacing man, a much-loved friend, and a great scholar.

PHILIP RAHTZ