# Obituary

## Professor Roger James Mercer

12 September 1944 – 3 December 2018

Roger Mercer, President of the Society (2005–8) and previously its Treasurer for ten years to 1987 and a Vice-President (1989–92), died at his home in Duddingston in December 2018. Aside from a six-year period shortly after graduating when he worked in England for the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, then based in London's Savile Row, he was to spend his

entire professional life in Edinburgh, first – from 1974 – as a member of staff of the University and then, from 1990 to 2004, as Secretary of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, a body whose work was combined with that of Historic Scotland in 2015 to create Historic Environment Scotland (HES).



Roger Mercer as President of this Society © Society of Antiquaries of Scotland

On retirement he continued to live in his adopted city, where he remained active in archaeology. His major report of one of his later field projects – in Eskdale, Dumfriesshire – was recently published by this Society, and he lectured on his findings and their wider implications in Edinburgh and Dumfries to Society audiences in the weeks before his death.

Roger James Mercer was born in 1944 to Patricia and Alan, a draughtsman for De Havilland. Brought up in north-west London, he survived early ejection from his pram by a V2 rocket blast. A youthful interest in archaeology, encouraged by his grandfather's flint collection, led to participation in a wide range of excavations as a schoolboy. This only increased his interest in a subject which seemed to his father to offer little scope for making a living.

At his grammar school, he preferred the Combined Cadet Force to rugby, and later as a student his organisational skills were honed by a TAVR commission, from 1968 as a Second Lieutenant in the Royal Scots. He was to remain on the Regular Army Reserve of Officers into his mid-fifties; and the soldier's way of getting things done was never to desert him when he was called on to organise all manner of projects in the field or in terms of administration.

By 1963 Roger had ventured north from the London suburbs to study archaeology in Professor Stuart Piggott's department at the University of Edinburgh. In later life he was never quite sure why he had chosen to come to a city and university that were then very different from what they later became. Aside from the teaching programme delivered by Piggott and Charles Thomas, his archaeological skills were further enhanced by vacation fieldwork across Britain – from Wiltshire (with Edwina Proudfoot) to Ardwall Island in Galloway. He was also able to undertake study visits as far afield as Sweden and Yugoslavia, made possible by the local authority grants then available and by his Army bounty, as he gratefully acknowledged. On graduation he stayed in Edinburgh and embarked on doctoral research work on Bronze Age spearheads but, while weaponry and warfare were to remain career-long research interests, the thesis was in effect to be set aside in favour of direct involvement in field archaeology.

His career as an excavation director began in 1968, at Stannon Down on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall. A speculative letter to the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works in London saw the new graduate recruited at the last minute as the replacement director of a project which - as was then common - was staffed by volunteers and local labourers. The latter group was perplexed by the absence of artefact finds in an upland environment marked by a palimpsest of field and other boundaries, roundhouse sites and a scatter of other monuments of kinds that were repeatedly to attract Roger's interest through his career. It was symptomatic of even state-funded field archaeology in those very different days when so little survey equipment was provided that recording the successful outcomes of the project, duly reported in print, was particularly testing.

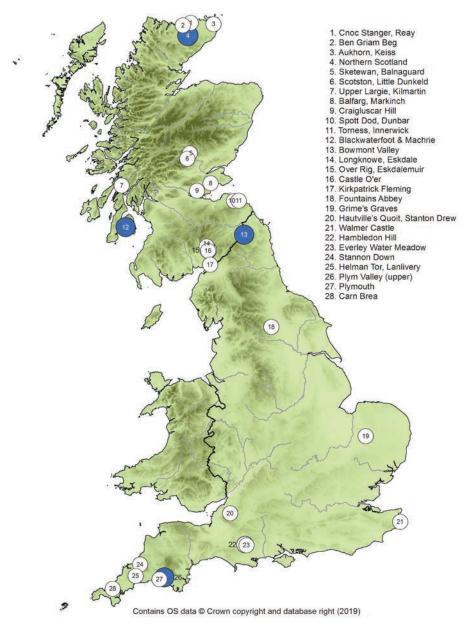
Appointed an Assistant Inspector of Ancient Monuments in 1969, he was at first responsible for south-west England. There he also undertook important excavations, including from 1970 on the tor at Carn Brea, near Redruth, a multi-period site – then without ready parallel - which was demonstrated to have extensive evidence of enclosed Neolithic settlement, but also - from the number of arrowheads recovered - to have undergone an attack during this period. This work, continuing in the field until 1973, was supported by the Cornwall Archaeological Society and fully reported in its journal. As he rose in the Inspectorate he was tasked with renewed excavation, which he conducted with military precision, at an intact shaft within the Grime's Graves flint mines in Norfolk. A visiting royal party had to descend the ladder into the shaft by order of precedence, then regroup and re-emerge in the same order, much to Roger's amusement. The recovered materials at Grime's Graves included a wealth of environmental evidence and half a million flint items, in due course published in 1981 with much assistance from another future President of this Society, the late Alan Saville.

By the time he applied successfully for a lectureship at the University of Edinburgh in 1974, fieldwork had begun on another enclosed Neolithic settlement, Hambledon Hill in Dorset, which was to be central to his research for many years thereafter. As had been the case in the Inspectorate, on campus too his energy and enthusiasm were readily visible, not only in his lectures - illustrated by formidable numbers of 35mm slides – but in his unstinting commitment to excavation and survey exercises, undertaken out of term time and which were to continue at Easter and over the summer throughout this second stage of his career. His students well remember him striding over a variety of – generally upland - landscapes in bonnet, army fatigues and with his walking stick to hand to cajole and encourage them, whatever the weather.

Over his 16-year tenure (promoted to Reader in 1982, he was thereafter the acting head of department until 1987) he was to continue research in south-west England, including the major multi-season excavations at Hambledon Hill, again fully published with his colleague Frances Healy once he had retired from other duties. If, during his university years, there were to be new projects undertaken in England, such as exploratory work at a second enclosed Neolithic settlement at Helman Tor in Cornwall and field survey in the upper Plym valley of Devon, he was later to become fully committed to fieldwork in Scotland, which became his primary focus and where his projects ranged geographically from Dumfriesshire to Arran to the northern Highlands, including – from 1976 – a 13-year survey programme, staffed by his students, in Caithness and neighbouring sectors of Sutherland, much of it published in Departmental Occasional Papers. This was a period when rescue archaeology, responding to natural change and adverse human effects, was coming to the fore. In the mid-1970s his surveys of the land to be taken over for the Torness nuclear power station in East Lothian, as well as of a tract identified for future afforestation on Arran, were among the most pioneering operations of this kind in this country. The Northern Scottish surveys - they too were in some cases pre-afforestation undertakings are, as exercises substantially undertaken in the field by undergraduates, without parallel in their scale. Figure 1 of Occasional Paper 11 maps the areas of Caithness and, to a lesser extent, Sutherland that had been examined by the end of the 1983 season, while the survey method and objectives were set out succinctly by Roger in the opening chapter of Occasional Paper 4. Over these exercises, hundreds of monuments, some of new types and others of categories which had not previously attracted the attention they deserved, were planned, described and accurately mapped, long before the days of global positioning systems.

From his university base, Roger was thereafter to play central roles in various aspects of the development of applied archaeology. This included early active involvement in what has now become the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists, as well as, within the University of Edinburgh and aided by Professor Eric Fernie (then Watson Gordon Professor of Fine Art), the establishment of a highly innovative MSc curriculum in Cultural Resource Management Studies devised and delivered with considerable support from Historic Scotland and English Heritage, among other external bodies. By 1989, just before his appointment to the Royal Commission, he became involved in the initial consideration of archaeological within the new development of environmental assessment in regard to the planning of Shell Chemicals' ethylene pipeline south from Grangemouth to the border and on Stanlow in Cheshire.

Several of his major projects in Scotland have seen definitive publication through this Society's outlets. They enjoyed substantial support from the predecessor bodies of Historic Environment Scotland, not only in the field but also in the post-excavation stages, when Roger's university office in George Square frequently housed one or more research assistants helping to progress these reports (and those of his survey programmes). The accompanying map, and consultation of the bibliography below, indicate the exceptional breadth of his interests and involvement; only a small selection from these projects can be mentioned even in outline here. Excavations began at Long Knowe in



Map of Britain showing Roger Mercer's field projects, both survey and excavation, from 1968 to 1990.

Prepared by Dr Paula Levick

Eskdalemuir in 1976, on an enclosed settlement that had already been damaged by forestry ploughing, but where a complex sequence of later prehistoric ring groove house plans were recognised. In the mid-1980s Roger returned to the Upper Esk valley to excavate on a total

scale at a most unusual (both from its siting and contents) enclosure at Over Rig, and, much more modestly, at the hillfort of Castle O'er and its outer earthworks. It was this work which ultimately led to his 2018 monograph and his recent lectures to the Society, which ranged

widely over the meaning of the results he had obtained in the field. The discussion chapters illustrate Roger at his expansive best - building, for example, on the auditory possibilities of Over Rig, with its ritual connotations and parallels, as a possible meeting place in the early centuries AD. In the case of Castle O'er, with the support of a few radiocarbon determinations intimating the use of the site over perhaps a millennium straddling the change of era, he was able to theorise on the enclosure sequence (here, from palisade to stony dump rampart with external ditch and counterscarp) in later prehistory, and on the function of the annexes as livestock corrals potentially related to the supply of cattle (and perhaps ponies) to the Roman army. Localised, timber-laced, refortification of a gateway and its destruction by fire leading to its vitrification allowed him to review the evidence across Scotland for that phenomenon.

His two major forays into Scotland's earlier prehistory as an excavator were at Balfarg, now within Glenrothes, Fife, in 1977-8 and, ten years later, at Sketewan in Perthshire, where he worked in conjunction with the late Magdalena Midgley, one of his former doctoral students, who subsequently replaced him on the staff of the University of Edinburgh Archaeology Department. Sketewan, examined in advance of its destruction in agricultural improvements, necessitated the teasing-out of a complex sequence of pyre and cist-building events, thereafter surrounded by a well-built ring cairn that was subsequently infilled, largely within the Early Bronze Age. In a sense, Balfarg is a monument to his work there, for after its conclusion Glenrothes Development Corporation decided to leave the site as open green space within its housing provision. Known since 1947 as a cropmark, the site was already substantially degraded when total excavation began. Nonetheless, a very substantial palimpsest of internal features was identified and allocated, after considerable analysis, to one substantial circle of timber posts of varying dimensions, a number of lesser circles of post holes, possibly indicative of scantling, and, more doubtfully, the former existence of two stone circles. A final action on site had been marked by the digging of a substantial pit, and the placing in it of a young adult accompanied by a flint knife and a fine example of a handled beaker. The Balfarg henge now forms an important element of a complex of Neolithic to Early Bronze Age sites on the margins of Glenrothes, including the nearby Riding School site and the stone circle at Balbirnie. Only rarely did a project not deliver what Roger had hoped for: one case was an intermittent cropmark at Spott Dod, East Lothian, which proved to be a later Prehistoric enclosure rather than a – first – Scottish example of a Neolithic causewayed camp, a class of monument on which Roger was to write an excellent introductory Shire guide.

One final and highly unusual project cannot be omitted. This is the anatomy of the parish of Kirkpatrick Fleming in Dumfries and Galloway, made possible by the bequest of Ms Ann Hill to the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society and managed by Roger to its publication in 1997. With contributions from numerous Royal Commission and other colleagues, notably Harry Gordon Slade on the standing buildings, this minutely detailed study is again a testimony to focused survey. This illustrated account is very different from the northern Scotland contributions, but again provides a valuable and unparalleled record and contribution to knowledge.

A very competent field archaeologist, Roger was also conscious that an army marches on its stomach. Catering (sometimes prepared by his wife Susan, whose honeymoon was at Carn Brea) for the volunteers on his field projects was always exemplary, although the living conditions were, on occasion, rather more basic. In terms of his programme of spring field surveys, staffed largely by students and undertaken - importantly - before bracken growth began, he was able to convince the finance staff of SDD (Ancient Monuments) as it then was - that their standard subsistence rate was insufficient in relation to the Caithness climate: modest hotel accommodation was agreed, an arrangement from which other field teams thereafter benefitted.

From his academic post, Roger published and lectured widely on British prehistory, on Prehistoric warfare, the importance of universitybased archaeology and on field survey. In 1990, beginning to be a little irked by aspects of the changing culture of universities, he was offered what he saw as 'the best job in the world': leading the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. The Commission had been changing its approach to survey since the late 1970s. While the slow and meticulous surveys associated with the County Inventories continued, there was a demand from the sector for more rapid survey and, in 1977, a new team was recruited to a project run jointly with the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. Roger was actively involved in the growing archaeology sector calling for such change through conferences and meetings of the day. His active involvement in field survey, particularly the pre-afforestation surveys, with rapid recording and production of results made him an appealing choice for Commissioners as their next Secretary.

When he joined the Commission, Roger felt he was viewed as 'an outsider' in a culture that had a strong family feel, and he was regarded cautiously by staff who prided themselves on their professionalism and who knew his survey methods relied on an army of students with limited experience and on subsistence pay. Roger regarded this as a challenge, enabling him, as instructed by the Commissioners, to take a fresh look at the Programmes of Work. He was also instructed to 'improve the managerial performance, get a grip of the finances, carry out a programme of computerisation and raise the public profile'. Clearly a great deal of change was required! There was no question of Roger's commitment to an organisation that he admired for its field expertise, its scholarship and endeavour, its history and legacy, but which he could clearly see would not survive unless it modernised its approach and better served its constituency of 'stakeholders'.

He started his role in 1990 with three major changes.

First, the delivery of a revised Royal Warrant, which gave a new mandate for the work of RCAHMS, and, for the first time, acknowledged the role of the National Monuments Record of

Scotland (NMRS) as an important repository of information on the historic environment.

Second, the growth of the collections and their inadequate storage facilities had become of major concern. Roger helped to secure the new premises at Bernard Terrace, ensured that they were adequately specified and took great delight in attending the 'topping out' ceremony, which allowed him to wear a hard hat for the photograph. The Commission moved into the new premises in 1992. John Sinclair House was aptly named by Roger to commemorate John Sinclair, the former Secretary of State for Scotland, himself a strong devotee of Scottish culture, who, in 1908, made the decision to appoint a Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Scotland.

Third, Roger tackled the complete reform of the financial management systems of RCAHMS, which he did with considerable energy. It was due to his financial nous and entrepreneurial skills that the Commission was able to accept additional responsibilities, such as taking on the Air Photographic Unit from the Scottish Office, and the responsibility for recording Scotland's Maritime Heritage, both of which arrived during his tenure with no additional injections of cash, but were activities that Roger saw as important additions to the Commission's portfolio.

Of great help in making the budget stretch was the work that Roger and the Commissioners did to achieve Charitable Status for RCAHMS in 1997. This not only helped the finances, but also had the effect of shifting the focus of the organisation to reflect and concentrate on its charitable purposes, which included education and public access. It aligned very well with the charitable purposes of the other National Collections (The National Museum, The National Library, The National Gallery and The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh), with which Roger developed a very close relationship, and it provided the blueprint for HES when that body adopted responsibility for the Commission's activities in 2015.

But these organisational changes underpinned more fundamental change. Tasked by the Commissioners to take a fresh look at the programmes of work, Roger set about changing the whole focus of the Commission's raison d'être from the publication of large imposing Inventories – published county by county since 1908 - to an online database. He laid out his reasoning for this change in a paper that he presented to the Commissioners and to the Society of Antiquaries at the beginning of his tenure in 1990, setting out his vision for 'The work of the RCAHMS at the end of the 20th century' (Annual Review 1991-2, RCAHMS 1992). 'Argyll 7, the last volume of the great series of County Inventories, the zenith of British Royal Commission Inventorisation, will be published later this year. The price will be £120 and it is already, in minor details, out of date. Such a process could not and will not continue. As a monument to the quality of Commission scholarship and endeavour it will stand for many years. But as an itemised record of a specific portion of the heritage it will never shine any brighter than on the day it is published.' He continued 'In that the NMRS is the subject of constant addition, reassessment and development, it is clear that the basic Inventory that needs to be compiled and maintained by the Commission is the National Monuments Record itself.' This essentially formed the basis of his leadership of new programmes of work that focused on a more rapid turnaround from fieldwork to publication and the availability of information to the public through the NMRS. This was revolutionary and, at the time, a brave move to make. Looking back, it was the only way forward and with the delivery of this Inventory online, through a web service called CANMORE, the change was complete.

But in 1990, the Commission was obliged to use the mainframe computer operated by The Scottish Office to house its data. In the days before the Internet this involved laboriously transporting discs holding digital data to and fro. It could not be said that Roger was particularly computer literate, but he could see the importance of computerisation to the organisation, and, more importantly, he realised that this needed to be an integrated and co-ordinated effort across all elements of the Commission's work, to provide another of the building blocks required if RCAHMS was to change the focus of its work. The new building at Bernard Terrace provided

the opportunity to build a computer network to serve the whole organisation and coincided with the Scottish Office withdrawing its mainframe services. How was the Commission to afford its own servers and associated equipment? Roger took an enormous risk by using the underspend from the building work at Bernard Terrace to pay for the new equipment. He records 'I sought permission from the sponsoring department to vire (ie transfer the funds for another purpose than that for which they had been allocated). No reply. The Nelsonian principle of "no signal seen indicates permission" was applied and RCAHMS' first computer base-plate was purchased. A terrible row followed from which we all seemed to emerge intact. I don't like to contemplate what would have happened if that lucky break had not occurred.' His account of this both underplays the risk he took to achieve what he considered to be a fundamental building block for the future and the reprimand that he managed to face down.

In 1990 hardly anyone had heard of the World Wide Web, but by 1998, CANMORE had not only been developed in-house, but was launched as the first online service of its kind in the UK (and possibly in the world), followed by CANMAP in 2001. The two were subsequently combined into the comprehensive service offered today. Roger also encouraged the introduction of cutting-edge technologies in field and aerial survey, and a move to digital photography and Computer Aided Drawing methodologies, which sped up data capture in the field and in the production of results.

These developments freed up a new approach to publication. Roger's view was that 'it was essential to maintain a constant flow of publication that brings RCAHMS and its Archive and Database to academic and public attention'. There was now a series of technical volumes, studies of industrial sites, aerial survey catalogues and catalogues of archive collections. In addition, a series of broadsheets were produced, publishing information, maps, photographs and drawings on a two-sided foldout sheet, some of which were produced jointly with other organisations, as a way of sharing the cost and raising the public profile. More

substantial publications were not neglected, but became more research-based, synthesising and describing the material thematically, rather than providing a published description of each site, which was by then incorporated into the NMRS. South East Perth: An Archaeological Landscape (1994) is an example of this new style, but even though it was published with a soft cover and all the illustrations were in black and white, Her Majesty's Stationery Office still published the volume at £40, putting Roger's efforts to produce more accessible and cheaper in-house style publications in perspective.

Two other programmes of work are worth mentioning because they were new ways of working and required considerable vision and long-term commitment; tasks perhaps only the RCAHMS, with its long-term view of recording the historic environment, could contemplate. Roger welcomed Historic Scotland's partnership for these desk-based projects.

The First Edition Survey Project, which ran from 1997-2002, added some 22,000 medieval and later rural sites to the NMRS record, a type of monument that had previously been omitted from the Inventories, while The Historic Landuse Assessment (HLA) Project, which started in 1996, was only completed in 2015. Using the power of interactive GIS, this latter provides the most comprehensive analysis of the historic landscape in Scotland ever undertaken. Roger's vision, that the HLA map would provide a 'contextually sensitive background' for other data has been fully realised and a detailed analysis and account of this work has now been published: Watson, F and Dixon, P A History of Scotland's Landscapes (HES 2018).

No account of his stewardship of RCAHMS would be complete without mention of his achievement of National Collection status for the large and burgeoning archive. This recognition brought its importance in line with the other National Collections. The first HLF grant that RCAHMS successfully achieved was to fund a project to house and catalogue 150,000 architectural drawings, mostly from Scottish practices. Among the collection there were some drawings from outwith Scotland, and Roger was delighted to find sketch designs for

the De Havilland factory in Hertfordshire, where his father had worked, a framed copy of which was presented to him on his retirement.

Shortly after he was appointed, in 1992, he gave a paper to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, setting out his vision for RCAHMS as it reached the end of the 20th century, and in 2004, in his final report to the Commissioners, in characteristic style, he measured his success against that vision. He had achieved all that he set out to do – and more.

It is not possible here to cover all programmes of work that Roger led during his period as Secretary at RCAHMS, but his work was prodigious and far reaching. He realised his objective to develop RCAHMS into a modern, forward-facing organisation that met the needs of its many users. His progress in that regard is charted in the Annual Reports that started with his tenure in 1991 and provide a fuller guide to his achievements. A full list of publications that were produced from 1990–2004 can be found in the final report of RCAHMS An Inventory for the Nation (RCAHMS 2015).

He was immensely proud of the legacy of the Commission which endures in the archive, maintained now by Historic Environment Scotland.

Roger and his wife Susan (née Fowlie), whom he married in 1970, made Duddingston their home and brought up their children, Katherine and Andrew, there. All three survive him. Elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (1995), he was awarded an OBE for services to archaeology (2004) and was made an Honorary Fellow of this Society in 2012, a few years after completing his Presidency. For 13 years to 2002 he was a member of the Ancient Monuments Board for Scotland. In 1995 he was appointed to an Honorary Chair, which he held for some ten years, at Durham University. In retirement Roger remained active, still lecturing at his old university – where he was an honorary professorial fellow - in the months before his death. A major achievement was his oversight, as Chair of the Steering Committee, of the sizeable collective endeavour which resulted in the online publication of the Scottish Archaeological Research Framework in 2012.

A slightly larger-than-life character with wide interests in art, architecture, literature and music, among other things, Roger had a rich fund of archaeological and other stories he was wont to mildly embroider. All of this made him an entertaining and informative companion. His good humour and readiness to share his wide knowledge will be much missed.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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