

Obituary

Kenneth Arthur Steer

12 November 1913 – 20 February 2007

Because he enjoyed an unusually long life, and spent the last three decades or so of it in retirement in Gloucestershire, Kenneth Steer's name is not as familiar to the present generation of archaeologists as it should be. Yet during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s he played a leading role in the post-war expansion of Scottish archaeology, gaining distinction not only as an administrator and policy maker, but also as a field archaeologist and excavator.

The son of a Yorkshire headmaster, Steer went from Wath Grammar School to Durham University to read history, staying on as a Research Fellow in 1936–8 to complete a PhD on *The Archaeology of Roman Durham*. Here he first made the acquaintance of fellow-scholars such as Ian Richmond and J K St Joseph, who became such good allies in later years. In 1939, Steer was appointed to a post in Edinburgh as Assistant Archaeologist to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, in whose employ he continued, initially as an Investigator and latterly as Secretary (Chief Executive) until his retirement 40 years later.

Before Steer was able to get fully into his stride with the Commission, however, war intervened. Following a short period of secondment to the Civil Service at St Andrews House, he was called up in 1941 and served for four years as an Intelligence Officer. He saw action in the Italian campaign and was twice mentioned in dispatches before moving for a further year to post-war Germany in their Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Office, North Rhine Region. Based in Düsseldorf, one of his main tasks was the procurement of



building materials for first-aid repairs to historic monuments damaged during the bombing. Amongst these was Cologne Cathedral, the ruins of which were thus secured for the building's eventual restoration.

During the 10 years or so that elapsed between his return to the Commission and his appointment as Secretary, Steer's main task was the completion of the archaeological survey of the Border counties. Working along lines already mapped out by Angus Graham, and

in tandem with a newly appointed colleague, Richard Feachem, he introduced new and more systematic methods of field recording, some of which reflected his own recent military experience. One important innovation was the routine scrutiny of aerial photographs, leading to the discovery of large numbers of previously unrecognized prehistoric and Roman monuments. Reaching these often remote sites on the ground at a time when staff were expected to rely mainly on public transport was another matter, but the problem was quickly solved by the acquisition of self-drive cars, including an ex-army jeep. Another new departure was the carrying out of selected archaeological excavations to throw light on structures whose date or function was uncertain. Here, as in the deployment of aerial photography, Steer demonstrated his ability to work closely and congenially with other leaders in the discipline, both in this country and abroad, a gift that was to stand the Commission in good stead when he became its Secretary. Further afield he played a prominent part in the foundation and development of the Scottish Regional Group of the Council of British Archaeology.

Steer's two main achievements during his lengthy period as Secretary (1957–78) were firstly to progress and enhance the long-standing county inventory programme and secondly to broaden the Commission's remit in response to changing needs. So far as the inventory was concerned, work was completed in Stirlingshire, Peeblesshire and prehistoric and Roman Lanarkshire and a start was made on the vast and relatively uncharted county of Argyll. There had been a steady advance in standards of research, field survey and book production since the end of the Second World War and Steer built on this to ensure that the published volumes of the 1960s and 1970s kept Scotland in the forefront of archaeological and historical building recording. As well as making his own contribution to these volumes, he exercised general editorial oversight and quality control, not least by insisting, like Graham before him, that his staff presented

their findings clearly and succinctly in readable English prose. Although Steer set high standards, he ran the Commission with a fairly light touch – impromptu cricket matches during the lunch break were a welcome feature of official excavations – and his ready sense of humour helped to put people at ease.

Although the Commission had hitherto seen its task almost exclusively in terms of the production of county inventories, additional survey work had occasionally been undertaken to meet specific emergencies, such as the threat posed to historic buildings through enemy action. After the War the nature of the threat changed but losses among historic buildings continued to mount. Accordingly, the Commission began a programme of selective architectural recording from about 1959 onwards. This was eventually put on a statutory footing by the Town and Country Planning Acts of 1969 and 1972, which gave the Commission a remit to carry out a countrywide survey of historic buildings threatened with demolition. The move into rescue recording was not confined to historic buildings. Already by 1950 Steer had persuaded Commissioners to suspend inventory work on prehistoric monuments for several years in favour of a national survey of sites on marginal land that were threatened by afforestation and agricultural development. The results were particularly rewarding in southern Scotland, where the discoveries included a considerable number of Roman sites, many revealed through aerial photography of cropmarks. During the 1970s, Steer responded to renewed threat by creating two additional archaeological posts and facilitating the establishment within the Commission (1977) of a rapid survey team sponsored by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

Important as these developments were, it was the assumption of the responsibility for the Scottish National Buildings Record that ultimately exerted the greatest influence upon the Commission's future course. During the lengthy negotiations that led up to its transfer

(from the Ministry of Works) in 1966 the Commissioners, and perhaps Steer himself, were less than enthusiastic about taking on so novel and challenging a task. Once a decision had been made, however, Steer worked with his customary efficiency to ensure that the National Monuments Record of Scotland – the change of name reflecting its wider functions – was adequately staffed and resourced. Thenceforward the focus of the Commission's work began to change, with the inventory increasingly being construed not as a series of published volumes, but as an expanding database and archive that could be made more accessible to the growing number of users through advances in information technology.

Quite apart from his role as manager and director of the Commission's operations, Steer's individual contribution to archaeology, especially in his own area of academic research, is particularly worthy of notice. It finds apt illustration in the excavations of various Roman, or supposed Roman sites, and their subsequent non-Inventory publication, where his analytical, interpretative and expository skills were most conspicuously on display and most rewardingly applied. The earliest, in 1939, examined two stone-walled homesteads of Iron Age date at Crock Cleuch in Roxburghshire, primarily to aid the categorization of such monuments for the relevant county inventory. Excavation showed that the sites, which belonged to a class widely represented between Tyne and Forth, had been occupied between the second and the seventh centuries AD, thus roughly 'spanning' the Roman period in North Britain. It would be wrong to say that this discovery alerted Steer to the importance of viewing the Roman military presence in Scotland in the context of the contemporary native society, but it must have strongly reinforced an understanding of that relationship already acquired from fellow-workers in adjacent fields.

The general run of Steer's excavations, on his return to Commission service after the war, had a single, well-defined objective: to provide a definite identification of an individual site's

category and date; or to furnish contextual material for an entire category of sites. Thus, the discovery during fieldwork of a penannular ditched enclosure on the summit of Eildon Hill North, overlooking the great Roman base at Newstead but within the native oppidum that crowns the hill, made it desirable to determine whether the enclosure represented the remains of an Iron Age timber house or a Roman signalling-tower. Excavation in 1952–3 not only demonstrated a Roman origin, but also indicated that the extensive relay of towers to which the site belonged was specifically designed to provide communications facilities for the fort at Newstead, additionally underlining the strategic importance of the latter.

A similarly well-directed programme of excavation was mounted in 1953–5, during the survey of the monuments of Stirlingshire, to address a problem comparable with that encountered at Eildon Hill North. The prominent position of a circular ditched enclosure at West Plean and its proximity to the Roman road south of Stirling had led to it also being identified as a Roman signal station. In this case, however, excavation revealed no evidence of Roman occupation, the remains being those of an early Iron Age homestead of two periods, in each of which a central timber house was enclosed within an outer work; in the later phase an enclosing ditch and wall probably replaced an original palisade. Here too, the results were extremely rewarding for the work had added to the record an exceptionally fine example of a prehistoric homestead, and that in an area where the type had not previously been recognized. More significantly, the excavation laid down a marker for the future discovery, in the Forth and Teith valleys, of further native dwellings embracing both stone-walled duns and timber houses.

As archaeological prospection techniques improved and multiplied, many other worthy targets presented themselves; being more numerous, they imposed upon the excavator the correspondingly greater burden of selection and archaeological cost–benefit analysis – a

challenge with which Steer was by nature ideally suited to deal. The earliest of these, the survey and sampling of the Roman fort and temporary camp at Oakwood, Selkirkshire, in 1951–2 (jointly undertaken with Feachem) resulted from their discovery on vertical air photographs taken by the RAF in the immediately post-war years. Here the bonus accruing from excavation was the discovery that the fort was of late first century date, opening up the possibility of gaining a detailed understanding of the first Roman penetration of Scotland, as well as the ability to distinguish by superficial appearance alone between the military structures of the different periods of occupation and conquest. The latter perception sprang from Steer's decision to carry out a detailed examination of the fort's inturned gateways, whose striking appearance matched that of the entrances in the adjacent temporary structure; both would eventually be seen as reliable indicators of date in their respective category.

The remaining excavations, at Easter Happlew and Lyne in Peeblesshire (1956 and 1959–63), and also those of specific structures on the Antonine Wall in Stirlingshire, efficiently followed the same well-defined trajectory as already described, supplying the needs of the relevant inventory survey programme: an assessment of the site's date, character or function. The work at Bonny-side East (1957), examining the nature of a small 'expansion' or platform abutting the inner face of the Antonine Frontier, recalled the subtly analytical treatment of West Plean with its total excavation and its capacity for application to reviews of a variety of Roman frontier installations. The published

report is noteworthy in another respect: it was the last occasion on which the illustrations were executed by Steer personally. It may seem a trivial point, but Steer's draughtsmanship was a telling representation of the man himself – deploying a clear, beautifully controlled line, which, with force and economy, presented to the reader a straightforward, totally comprehensible narrative.

Steer's research interests were not confined to the prehistoric and Roman periods and the Commission's inventory survey of Argyll led him to undertake, jointly with John Bannerman, a study of the late medieval monumental sculpture of the West Highlands, published 1978. His scholarship was widely recognized. A corresponding member of the German Archaeological Institute, he was invited in 1963 to give the Horsley Memorial Lecture in the University of Durham and in 1968 the Rhind Lectures to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, of which he was president in 1972–5. Steer was elected FSA in 1947 and appointed CBE on his retrial from the Commission.

Kenneth Steer's first wife, Rona Mitchell, died in 1983. His second wife, Eileen Nelson, also predeceased him. He is survived by his daughter, Penny.

John G Dunbar and Gordon S Maxwell

The authors are grateful to Penny Steer for her assistance in the compilation of this memoir, and also to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland for permission to reproduce the accompanying illustration.