

John P Gillam

John Pearson Gillam died on New Year's Eve 1986 aged 69. He was born on 10 July 1917 at Chesterfield in Derbyshire and educated at Chesterfield Grammar School. He went to St Chad's College, Durham, as an ordinand, graduating in history in 1938, and gaining a diploma in theology in 1939. But he had already developed an interest in archaeology. His first paper, on Roman-British Derbyshire ware, published in 1939, looked back to his origins and forward to his main preoccupation within archaeology, the study of Roman-British coarse pottery.

In January 1940 John enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps. In 1942 he was commissioned into the 14th Punjab Regiment, and served in India, North Africa and Europe, ending the War with the rank of major. In 1942 he had married Marie Watson, a fellow student from Durham.

John returned to Durham in 1946 to take up a research studentship under Eric Birley. He was appointed lecturer in Roman-British archaeology in 1948. On Ian Richmond's translation to Oxford in 1956 John was raised to Reader in Roman-British history and archaeology at King's College, Newcastle upon Tyne, later the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, a post held until his retirement in 1982. He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1958.

Following the war John soon established himself as one of the foremost authorities on Roman pottery in Britain. His *Types of Roman Coarse Pottery Vessels in Northern Britain*, originally published in *Archaeologia Aeliana* in 1957, and subsequently twice revised, has become a classic and an essential tool for all involved in Roman pottery studies in Britain. This study was supported by a stream of pottery reports, many on material from Scottish sites, from Carzield in 1946 to Barburgh

Mill in 1974. His wide knowledge of Roman pottery from northern Britain enabled him to play a leading part in the discussions which led to a re-assessment of the date of abandonment of the Antonine Wall. John's own report on the coarse pottery from Kenneth Steer's 1958–60 Mumrill's excavation was a significant step on this path for the date he advanced for the coarse pottery differed by 20 years from that offered for the samian and *mortaria* from the same deposit, thus highlighting the problem. In 1970 John restated his position, but two years later he saw the way out of the difficulty: the crux was the supply of black-burnished ware up the east coast from Essex. John accepted that he had hitherto dated this too late, linking its arrival with the beginning of the second Antonine period, not the first, as he now proposed. The re-dating had the effect of bringing all the ceramic evidence into line with a date for the abandonment of the Antonine Wall in the 160s rather than the 180s. This was a simple solution but one which had hitherto eluded other specialists in the field. John characteristically stated his public rejection of his earlier views in straightforward language. Perhaps no other episode so clearly reflects John Gillam's open mindedness and his mental agility which left colleagues struggling to catch up with the implications of his re-dating.

John was always concerned to place his pottery in a wider context than the excavation reports which formed the bed-rock of his work. Thus these reports were supplemented by a series of discussion papers. The first such article was published in the *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society* in 1950 and they continued to be produced throughout his working career. No one could accuse John Gillam of not explaining how he dated coarse pottery, nor what the implications of his dating were.

In 1947 John Gillam took part in the first post-War excavation at Corbridge Roman site, the beginning of a long and fruitful partnership with Ian Richmond and Eric Birley. John continued to co-direct the Corbridge training excavations until the last season, 1973. Here, and on the training excavation at Great Casterton, he demonstrated his great gifts as a teacher, inspiring many to take up archaeology. John also found time to excavate on, and write about, Hadrian's Wall. This was reflected in a series of excavation reports, and also papers on the history of the Wall and the northern frontier in general, all written in a simple but elegant style. He also excavated in Switzerland, Germany and North Africa, and was a regular attendee at the Congresses of Roman Frontier Studies from their inception in 1949 until his last Congress at Stirling in 1979.

John Gillam was an inspired thinker. In 1973, at a conference in Newcastle upon Tyne, he predicted the location of a hitherto unknown fort at Corbridge to general disbelief. The following year excavation triumphantly proved him right. In 1975 he put forward a new theory for the building of the Antonine Wall. As part of his theory he proposed the existence of a primary series of fortlets along the Wall, a total of 31. At that time only four fortlets were known and the theory met some scepticism. But subsequent excavation has raised this number to nine, with each fortlet having the relationship to the Wall which John predicted, and led to the widespread acceptance of John's hypothesis.

John Gillam was a stimulating teacher and lecturer. He was also available for discussion, to all from the first year student to senior colleagues. Although he published no major work, the series of thought-provoking papers on the northern frontier, most published in the traditional manner in county journals, remains as a memorial to one of the most colourful and lovable characters in Roman–British archaeology. His students and colleagues responded to his stimulation by the presentation of a *Festschrift* on Roman pottery in 1979 while the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies dedicated their volume of *Britannia* to him in 1985. A bibliography of his papers appears in that volume.

David J Breeze