

Obituary

Gordon Stirling Maxwell MA FSA FRSE FSAScot

21 March 1938–19 November 2024

Gordon Maxwell was not just a Roman archaeologist of distinction, but a pioneer in the development of aerial reconnaissance for archaeology in Scotland, his aerial revelations transforming the understanding of our Lowland archaeological heritage. His discoveries of Roman forts in the early 1980s even prompted a cartoon in *The Times*, the original proudly displayed on the wall of his study at home in Aberdour.

Born in Edinburgh, Gordon was brought up in Corstorphine, then an outer suburb of the city. The son of Alina (née Smith) and Edward Maxwell, a stockbroker's clerk, he was the second addition to the family, joining an older sister, Dorothy. Early schooling was local, but he soon won a place at Daniel Stewart's preparatory school, moving on in due course to Daniel Stewart's College (now Stewart's Melville College). A bursary then took him to the University of St Andrews in 1955, where he read Classics.

Gordon showed an early interest in the themes that were to play such a prominent part in his later life. Living near the flightpath to Turnhouse aerodrome, as it then was, he developed a passion for aircraft and flying. He joined the air cadets and experienced his first flight in a Tiger Moth, a 1930s biplane with two seats and an open cockpit. Despite suffering from severe air sickness, which he endured throughout his life, his enthusiasm for flying remained undimmed. Along with a like-minded friend, he also had an early brush with post-medieval archaeology as they investigated the remains of a physic well near his home, collecting and reconstructing pottery from the site.

Gordon thrived at St Andrews and enjoyed university life to the full. In his third year he took the opportunity to combine his love of the



ILLUS 1 Gordon with Lawrence Keppie and Angus Lamb, the photographer, in front of a Cessna light aircraft at Inverness airport in 1986. (SC1521168 © Crown Copyright: HES)

Scots language with his love of Greek by persuading one of his lecturers, the poet and prominent Scottish Nationalist, Douglas Young, to translate Aristophanes' comedy *The Frogs* into Scots verse. Gordon both produced and appeared in the 1958 première of the resulting play, *The Puddocks*, at the Byre Theatre, St Andrews. He also co-designed the cover of Young's self-published text, an early demonstration of Gordon's excellent artistic and graphical skills. His study of Classics fostered his love of languages more generally (he spoke both French and German and had a working knowledge of Russian).

Having joined the University Archaeology Society in Fresher's Week, Gordon found that vacations provided an opportunity to expand his archaeological experience. He undertook his own fieldwork, visiting sites of all periods and making observations and sketch drawings, and volunteered on various Roman excavations.

The latter were primarily located in Scotland, at Cramond and on the Antonine Wall at Rough Castle and Bonnyside East, but he also seems to have ventured south to the long-established Durham University training excavation at Corbridge.

In his final year at St Andrews much of his energies were spent catching up with essay writing and reading set books, but that did not discourage him from masterminding the entertainment for the autumn ball at his hall of residence. He became so engrossed in that task, however, that he neglected to find a partner for himself. At the last minute a friend found one for him, the roommate of his own girlfriend, a Londoner reading French by the name of Kathleen King. They hit it off so well that Gordon proposed within a few months, though the marriage was delayed, at the insistence of Kathleen's father, until after she too had graduated in 1961.

After attending Moray House College of Education in Edinburgh, Gordon returned to St Andrews in 1960 to teach Classics at Madras College senior secondary school. There he was able to develop his love of archaeology even further, whether by taking pupils to visit the Antonine Wall or digging in his spare time. Anne Robertson, then Under-Keeper of the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, seems to have taken him under her wing and he joined her at the Training School for students run by the Scottish Field School of Archaeology at Birrens Roman fort in Dumfriesshire. This began in 1962 and Gordon is named as one of several assistant directors in the final report. The previous year, with Anne Robertson's practical assistance, he took charge of a small trial excavation at Crawford Roman fort in Lanarkshire as part of a training course in archaeological techniques for pupils from Fife Schools. This was Gordon's first experience of directing and the work proved sufficiently successful to continue on the same limited scale for a further two years, this time with the help of pupils and staff from the Lanarkshire Education Authority, before being adopted by the RCAHMS after Gordon's appointment (below), where it was regarded as part of the preparatory work for the Inventory of Lanarkshire.

Meanwhile, in 1962, he set up his own excavation locally at Drumcarrow unenclosed Iron Age settlement near St Andrews. He co-directed the work with his new wife, the workforce this time being provided by pupils and staff from Madras College. Kathleen has fond memories of the two of them cycling out from the city at weekends to work on the site, though things did not always go smoothly. On one occasion a beautifully laid out picnic was trampled into mud by the bullocks with whom they shared the hilltop.

Given his various initiatives and increasing range of archaeological experience, it is not surprising that Gordon was the successful candidate when the opportunity arose to join the staff of RCAHMS as an Investigator early in 1964. It is the tradition of RCAHMS not to attribute specific authorship in its Inventories to its staff members, so much of Gordon's academic writing is not explicitly attested. It was, however, extensive. He contributed to the Inventory of Peeblesshire, published in 1967, and played a key role in the production of the Inventory of Prehistoric and Roman Monuments in Lanarkshire, which appeared in 1978, one of the first to feature the results of his aerial reconnaissance. He also played a major part in the production of the multiple volumes of the Inventory of Argyll, which appeared between 1971 and 1992. The periods he spent examining monuments in the field there seem to have engendered a particular affection for the area. He continued to work on later Inventories such as those for North-east and South-east Perth, published in 1990 and 1994 respectively, but in an increasingly editorial capacity as he rose in seniority – he was appointed Head of Archaeology in 1991. On his retirement in 1995, somewhat hastened by ill health, he was particularly acknowledged by the RCAHMS for his editorial skills.

These skills had been recognised by this Society at a much earlier stage of his career. Having become a Fellow in 1965, Gordon immediately became editor of the *Proceedings* (1965–9), eventually becoming President from 1993 until 1996. He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1969, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in



ILLUS 2 Gordon at the presentation to him of *From the Air* in 2005. (© Rebecca H Jones)

1998, and he was appointed as an Honorary Professor in the School of History at St Andrews between 2011 and 2013, where he had been the longstanding (2004 to 2012) President of the University Archaeology Society.

After the Second World War, when aerial survey for cropmarks began to establish itself as the single most important method of discovering new archaeological sites, Scotland benefited from annual reconnaissance visits by J K S St Joseph, the Cambridge-based doyen of the methodology. He would fly in lowland areas of Scotland each summer searching particularly for Roman sites, one of his primary research interests. Gordon accompanied him each autumn to help with the subsequent ground checking and selective minor excavation of any new Roman discoveries. This relationship started shortly after Gordon joined RCAHMS and continued for some 16 years. The high level of mutual respect involved is indicated by the fact that the volume of papers on aerial reconnaissance edited by Gordon in 1983 was dedicated to St Joseph, while Gordon was appointed to be St Joseph's literary executor after his death in 1994. This close working relationship provided Gordon with the necessary expertise and knowledge to establish RCAHMS's own programme of reconnaissance

when, with considerable support from Kenneth Steer, Secretary of RCAHMS, funding became available in 1976. Gordon continued to direct and expand that programme until his retirement.

Gordon made so many important new aerial discoveries in the course of his career that he had a dramatic impact on the archaeological record, particularly for the prehistoric and early historic periods, completely transforming our understanding of Scotland's Lowland heritage. A Romanist at heart, he discovered a dozen or more Roman forts or fortlets and twice that number of Roman temporary camps. But no aerial surveyor should be entirely period specific. Gordon Barclay, a former Principal Inspector of Ancient Monuments at Historic Scotland, comments:

The aerial survey programme led by Gordon had perhaps the greatest impact on our understanding of Scotland's prehistoric and early historic periods, until then perceived as a largely upland and stone-built phenomenon. The earliest years of the survey, in the summers of the mid-1970s, showed a staggering wealth of sites in the Lowlands, now showing only as the cropmarks of ditches, palisades, sunken-floored houses, post-holes, ploughed-down burial mounds, often of types not hitherto recognised, in arable land. The aerial survey of RCAHMS and subsequently HES continued to build on his pioneering work.

Gordon Maxwell's substantive contribution to the archaeology of Lowland Scotland was rightly celebrated by the dedication to him in 2005 of a volume of papers entitled *From the Air: Understanding Aerial Archaeology*.

But finding archaeological sites from the air is more than just a question of being in the right place at the right time – though even that is not as straightforward as it sounds. Gordon did not just find new sites, he identified new types of site not previously recorded in Scotland, such as square barrows and pit-defined cursus monuments. The recognition and analysis of cropmarks is as much an art as a science, and Gordon soon established himself as a master of that art. There are numerous examples of his ability to discern significant patterns in extremely ephemeral cropmarks, such

as the Roman fort at Doune, the temporary camp at Househill Dunipace, or the minor enclosure at Buchley and the fortlet at Summerston, both on the Antonine Wall.

Gordon not only found new sites, but put them into their academic context, particularly in relation to the Roman conquest and occupation of Scotland, on which he established himself as an authority. He had been one of the founding members of the Roman Northern Frontier Seminar, set up by Charles Daniels of the University of Newcastle in 1971 ‘to discuss new work, old problems and new interpretations’, contributing to seven of the first ten meetings for which records survive. Membership was by invitation only, as it required a high level of expertise and familiarity with the evidence, and participants frequently used it to test new hypotheses before they might appear in print. The papers presented, along with the discussion that followed, were then privately circulated. Similarly, he was a regular contributor to the International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies, presenting papers at six Congresses held between 1972 and 1989, and he convened the organising committee of the Congress held in Stirling in 1979.

Gordon is perhaps best known academically for his co-authorship of what remains a standard text on Rome’s most northerly frontier, the Antonine Wall, published in 1983. This was written with this author following their fruitful collaboration in fieldwork and research over several years. This was followed by the sole authorship in 1989 of a more general book on the Romans in Scotland and a detailed consideration of the evidence for the battle of Mons Graupius in 1990. The latter offered the perfect marriage of Gordon’s classical knowledge of the text of Tacitus with his aerial survey work on temporary camps.

On noting a possible T-junction in the Roman road line at Elginhaugh near Dalkeith that seemed to hint at the presence of a Roman fort there, Gordon said nothing to this author, who happened to be sitting beside him in the aircraft, but waited some months until he could access the site and open a few hand-dug trenches to confirm the identification. This principle,

of only making his Roman discoveries public when he was certain of them, had been acquired through working with St Joseph. He would go out on his own, or with whatever assistance he might be able to muster, including his family, to dig and record small sections across ditches or other features, bringing to bear both his excellent eye for detail and his well-honed draughting skills.

Gordon’s wry and somewhat mischievous sense of humour was legend – he was a big Monty Python fan. Even the brief official recognition of his retirement by the Secretary of RCAHMS, Roger Mercer, noted how his ‘subtle, if never far distant, wit’ would be sorely missed. The twinkle was never far from Gordon’s eyes, nor the *bon mot* from his lips. He took particular pleasure in choosing place-names for some of his Roman discoveries that his English colleagues might find more difficult to pronounce, such as the forts at Drumquhassle and Inverquhar. On one memorable occasion, when confined with RCAHMS colleagues in a small Land Rover during a lengthy period of particularly inclement weather while undertaking fieldwork in Argyll, he combined both his sense of humour and his background in Classics by exchanging jokes with Alistair McLaren in Latin and Greek.

Gordon is universally remembered by his colleagues as an erudite and very kindly gentleman who made staff feel valued no matter how junior their position. He was particularly helpful to those in the early stages of their careers, whom he fostered and trained, and from whom a simple query would often end up as a masterclass in aerial photographic interpretation. Rebecca Jones, former colleague at the RCAHMS and now Keeper of Scottish History and Archaeology at the National Museum of Scotland, acknowledges her indebtedness to Gordon in her book on Roman camps in Scotland ‘for nurturing and expanding my interest in the subject, introducing me to aerial survey, generously giving me numerous books and always being on the end of a telephone’. Similarly, Kenny Brophy, also a former junior colleague, now a Senior Lecturer in Archaeology

at the University of Glasgow, who co-edited the volume on *From the Air* dedicated to Gordon, comments:

My memories of Gordon are of a man who was generous with his time and supportive of early career researchers. Even though he was semi-retired when I worked at RCAHMS, he mentored me in a way that their senior staff at the time did not.

In his spare time Gordon was to become a dedicated, accomplished and knowledgeable gardener. In response to Kathleen's expressed desire, while they were living in Balerno in the 1970s, to be able to walk around their house on their own land, he identified a suitable semi-derelict, half-acre or more plot in Aberdour, Fife. On this they then set about building a home for themselves and their two daughters, around which they established a large garden. Many a happy weekend was spent slashing and burning, while the children ran about, hidden by the remaining undergrowth. Large bonfires were needed, whose sites eventually became the foundations of three herbaceous island beds, and a rock garden was constructed to revet the soil on the steeply sloping ground. Every pathway they created led you further around this magic garden which they populated with trees, shrubs, plants and bulbs so that there was something of interest to see throughout the year. The end result was a garden that has been described as a 'plant lover's paradise'. It had its own website, was opened to the public for a few days each year through the 1990s and early 2000s to raise funds for charity, and even featured on BBC Scotland's *The Beechgrove Garden* in 1999. Gordon and Kathleen then named a wheelbarrow, bought with the small fee they received, after its presenter, Bill (Torrance).

Gordon remained passionate about archaeology long after he had retired. He continued to undertake aerial surveys for RCAHMS for some three years and would give occasional lectures in relevant courses at the University of Glasgow. In 2004 he took part in a Time Team survey and excavation project at Drumlanrig, one of the Roman forts he had discovered in the



ILLUS 3 Gordon with Tony Robinson, Rebecca Jones and Marilyn Brown at Drumlanrig in 2004 during the Time Team investigation of the site. (SC2506442 Crown Copyright: HES)

1980s. He even opened some new areas of investigation exploring oddities recognised from the air. By the 1970s, the supposed Roman frontier earthwork in Perthshire, the Cleaven Dyke, had begun to be questioned and, perhaps as a result, quietly ignored by Romanists. Gordon noted that it lacked the expected regularity of a Roman work, as he demonstrated by more detailed survey. Subsequent excavation in collaboration with Gordon Barclay proved it to be the best-preserved Neolithic bank barrow in Britain.

Gordon was always very active in the local Aberdour community. He played Santa Claus at Christmas parties for the youth club and once appeared at the front of a village sports day parade dressed as the bright yellow BT mascot, Buzby. He also continued to share his passion for archaeology through lectures, community talks and school visits.

It is particularly fitting that an obituary for Gordon should have first appeared in the Scottish edition of *The Times* (Monday 2 December 2024), as it was his newspaper of choice. He

bought the paper daily when commuting by train from Aberdour, priding himself on being able to finish the crossword before reaching Edinburgh. To speed up the process he would fill in only the first and last letters of each word.

In his final years, however, Gordon had to live with the effects of dementia. These he managed stoically and with typical derogatory humour, being cared for at home until he neared his final days. He is survived by his wife, Kathleen, his two daughters, Amanda and Rebecca, and his grandson, Thomas.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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