

Obituary

Elizabeth J E Pirie

14 September 1932 – 1 March 2005

Elizabeth Jane Elphinstone Pirie, ‘Liz’, as she was known to those who knew her well, was born in Malta, the only child of Revd James E Pirie and Ethel, neé Stewart, a schoolteacher. She was born nine years after the marriage of her parents when her father was a Royal Naval chaplain and minister of St Andrews Scots Kirk in Malta. Trips to Britain during her early childhood were infrequent, but fortuitously she returned to Britain with her mother in 1939 just days before war broke out. Her father remained on the island during the war, but he returned to the UK once hostilities were over, taking up various posts as directed by the Navy, from Portsmouth to Rosyth, moving his family with him.

Despite the rather fractured education resulting from this, spread over no fewer than eight schools, she matriculated and eventually attained an MA degree at Edinburgh University, where she studied classics before switching to archaeology after two years. An archaeology diploma at Cambridge followed, and between 1952 and 1955 she took part in many archaeological excavations and expeditions.

Her professional career began at Grosvenor Museum in Chester where, in November 1955, she was appointed assistant curator. She became an Archaeological Assistant at Maidstone Museum in March 1957 and moved to Leeds City Museum as Keeper of Archaeology in 1960, where she remained until retirement in 1991. Most of her books and articles were written during her time in Leeds, where her early interest in archaeology gave way to a passion for Northumbrian numismatics, and it was at Leeds that she became familiar with stycas and sceattas. In 1982 she wrote her first specifically styca-related article. From then

on her knowledge grew until she was widely recognized as the expert on the subject.

She was a member of several learned, archaeological, and numismatic societies. She was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1957, the same year that she became a Fellow of the Royal Numismatic Society. When she moved to Maidstone, she became a member of the Kent Archaeological Society and the Kent Numismatic Society. In 1960 she joined the British Numismatic Society and also the Yorkshire Numismatic Society as she had moved to Leeds. She acted as editor of the *Yorkshire Numismatist* from 1962. From 1966–9 she served as a council member of the Yorkshire Numismatic Society, in 1968 she became its BANS delegate and vice-president, and in 1970 she was its president. In 1966 she was awarded the silver medal of that Society for services to numismatics. In 1978 she was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. When she retired and moved from Leeds to Edinburgh, she became a member of the Edinburgh Numismatic Society, and she was its secretary from 1996 to 1999.

Elizabeth Pirie was responsible for many publications, archaeological and numismatic, but will be especially remembered for being the author of two *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* volumes, and several other books, particularly those on the sceats and stycas of Northumbria. A third volume in this series should have followed, but conflict with the editors of the *Sylloge* committee meant that she withdrew the manuscript for the planned volume. She was not a stranger to controversy nor shy of it and was always prepared to voice her ideas, often against the tide of then current academic opinion.

Sometimes she was right, though not always, but whether right or not, her arguments had always to be taken seriously as they were never less than cogent and well-reasoned. In 1996 her opus magnum, *Coins of the Kingdom of Northumbria*, was published; and this was followed in 2002 by a shorter and more accessible publication *Coins of Northumbria – An illustrated guide to money from the years 670 to 867*. This is a handy reference guide to thrymsas, sceattas and stycas for archaeologists, curators, collectors and metal detectorists. Until shortly before her death she was writing reports on stycas found during various excavations.

Her retirement was a busy period. She bought a flat in the Marchmont area of Edinburgh, overlooking The Meadows, and moved there from Leeds. She joined the Marchmont St Giles kirk and made herself a useful member and citizen. She was concerned that community events should be recorded and put her camera to good use. She campaigned for personal interests, especially against the ‘wheelie bins’, fighting an active campaign against the city council who wanted to introduce them after minimal consultation with the public. She even appeared on television in this cause.

Her daily activity, apart from Sundays, commenced with strong coffee, crossword puzzles and word games. She bought two newspapers, not for the news but for the crosswords and for her other major hobby – spotting grammatical and spelling errors. She was proud to be a pedant, and her copy of *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* is annotated with corrections. She loved writing and her letters were never less than long, informative, interesting and amusing, and always hand-written, often in a variety of coloured inks, for added emphasis, and there were frequent marginal notes. She cared little for elegant clothes, owning a coat, fur-lined boots and woolly hat for the winter and a coat and shoes for the summer. Her only jewellery consisted of her various badges or brooches for being a blood donor of which she was very proud.

Shortly before her life ended, she performed an exceptionally kind act which reflected an event which had happened to her at the beginning of her life as a student. One morning she had been called to the university office where her professor asked her if she would like to own a set of the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*. The owner had no further need of them and had approached the university to see if there was a student who would make good use of them. Indeed there was, and Liz was recommended to receive them. She kept the set up to date and when, recently, she moved, and no longer had room for them in her new retirement flat, she approached the university and offered to give them to a student who would make good use of them. Her set of *SCBI* was similarly disposed of. Her negative files and her research notes are being made available for students of the subject for study. Elizabeth Pirie did not marry, but only because she never met a man of the right calibre. She is survived by an aunt and a small number of cousins, scattered to the four corners of the world, and many sorrowing friends.

Paul Withers

BOOKS BY ELIZABETH J E PIRIE

Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles 5. Grosvenor Museum, Chester. The Willoughby Gardner collection of coins with the Chester mint-signature. 1964.

SCBI 21. Coins in Yorkshire Collections. The Yorkshire Museum, York; The City Museum, Leeds; The University of Leeds. Coins from Northumbrian mints, c 895–1279; Ancient British issues and later coins from other English, Irish and Scottish mints, to 1279. 1975.

Catalogue of the Early Northumbrian Coins in the Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle upon Tyne; Newcastle, 1982.

The York Hoard, 1831; Llanfyllin, 1994.

Coins of the Kingdom of Northumbria, c.700–867; Llanfyllin, 1996.

Thrymsas, Sceattas and Stycas of Northumbria: an Inventory of Finds recorded to 1997; Llanfyllin, 2000.

Coins of Northumbria; Llanfyllin, 2002.