

Obituary

Leslie Alcock

24 April 1925 – 6 June 2006

Professor Leslie Alcock will probably be most widely remembered for his book *Arthur's Britain* – which made a lasting impact on the scholarly community and was hugely popular – and for his excavations at the hillfort of South Cadbury-Camelot, Somerset, which attracted world-wide media attention. These were the popular highlights of a career that had a major influence on the practice of archaeology in Britain and on the study of early medieval Britain in particular. As a native Mancunian he counted himself among the *Gwŷr y Gogledd*, ‘men of the north’, and consequently developed a lifelong interest in Celtic history and archaeology, which he pursued first in Cardiff and latterly in Glasgow, where he was the first Professor of Archaeology (1973–89). The contribution Alcock made to Scottish archaeology in the second half of his career may turn out to be his most substantial intellectual legacy. A Fellow of the Society since 1973, he served as President from 1984 to 1987 and became an Honorary Fellow in 1994.

Leslie Alcock won a scholarship to attend Manchester Grammar School (1935–42), after which he served with the Gurkha Rifles in India, reaching the rank of Captain. His Indian experience had an anthropological dimension (probably not intended by the army!); not only did he become fluent in Urdu and Punjabi, but his close involvement with non-western culture influenced his understanding of archaeological evidence. Army service may also have kindled his interest in the study of ancient warfare, one of his favourite themes.

After World War II he won a scholarship to Oxford, where he read Modern History at



Brasenose College (1946–9). Archaeology was not taught at Oxford at that time, so like many of his generation he pursued this interest through the Oxford Archaeology Society, which he served as President. He met his future wife, Elizabeth Blair, a student of English at Oxford with archaeological inclinations, on a climbing holiday at Glen Brittle, Skye, and they were married in 1950. She went on to become his most important scholarly collaborator. The marriage to Elizabeth, who was from Dunbartonshire, established a lifelong link with the west of Scotland.

On his return to India in 1949 he gained his most valuable archaeological training, working as Sir Mortimer Wheeler's deputy on the large-scale excavations at the ancient city of Mohenjo-Daro on the Indus River. On the basis of this experience he was appointed the first Director of the Archaeological Survey of Pakistan (1950), but he returned to Britain after not being paid for some time. In addition to providing an apprenticeship in archaeological fieldwork, India also fuelled his lifelong love of mountaineering and hillwalking.

He worked as curator at the Abbey House Museum, Leeds, for a year (1952), before being appointed to a junior lectureship in

Archaeology at the University College of Wales, Cardiff (1953), where he developed a fluent and engaging lecturing style. He was to remain in Wales for 20 years, eventually becoming Reader, during which time Cardiff developed into one of the leading archaeology departments in Britain. His first significant archaeological breakthrough came at the department's training excavation at the small hillfort of Dinas Powys, Glamorgan. His report, published virtually single-handedly in 1963, has become a classic of archaeological reporting, its clarity a hallmark of his later work. The clear analysis of the stratigraphy and insightful assessment of the finds, particularly the imported pottery and glass and metalworking evidence, were supported by a robust assessment of the social and political significance of this early medieval (fifth-seventh centuries AD) stronghold. Particularly innovative was the use he made of historical evidence, including the early Welsh law tracts. So compelling was his discussion of the archaeology that traditional historians took notice.

Following this success, Alcock launched an ambitious assault on South Cadbury, an Iron Age hillfort identified by Tudor antiquarians as King Arthur's Camelot. Five seasons of excavation began in 1966 with the support of the British archaeological establishment. The excavations were astonishingly productive and revealed a sequence of British Celtic archaeology spanning 1200 years, including a major post-Roman phase. The dig was conducted on an unprecedented scale involving hundreds of volunteers attracted from around the world. The excavations were covered widely in the press and on television, not least because of the deliberate emphasis of the Arthurian connection. Methodologically, the scale of the open area excavations marked an important advance from the Wheeler method, as was Alcock's early use of geophysical survey techniques. A popular account, *'By South Cadbury was that Camelot'* (1972), appeared at the conclusion of the dig, but the richness of the excavations exceeded all expectations and his final publication on the site, *Cadbury Castle*,

Somerset: the early medieval archaeology, did not appear until 1995.

Alcock's most influential book, *Arthur's Britain* (1971), appeared at the height of interest in South Cadbury and offered an archaeologically informed account of British society in the post-Roman centuries (fifth-seventh centuries). It dealt in detail with the historical evidence for Arthur, which attracted some resentful criticism from historians, but the most remarkable feature was the balanced discussion of both the native British and the invading English. The confident command of a range of source material, the effective integration of the historical and archaeological evidence and, above all, his willingness to cut across the Celtic/Anglo-Saxon divide have ensured that it still remains in print today. Scottish material features prominently in *Arthur's Britain* and one can already see a developed interest in what he would later call 'Early Historic fortifications'. This interest was cultivated by R B K Stevenson, Keeper of Archaeology in the Museum of Antiquities, who in an important sense served as Alcock's Scottish mentor.

In 1973 he was appointed to the newly created Chair in Archaeology at the University of Glasgow and thus drew a line under the Arthurian phase of his career. While the move to Scotland allowed him to shift the focus of his research northwards, he could never escape Arthur and throughout his Scottish career was pestered with enquiries about Arthur. He certainly lost enthusiasm for the topic; not only did he refuse to revise *Arthur's Britain*, but the prefaces he wrote for the later editions were increasingly disparaging about the contents. He did, however, revisit some of the themes and material from *Dinas Powys* and *Arthur's Britain in Economy, Society and Warfare among the Britons and the Saxons* (1987).

Once in Scotland he initiated a series of reconnaissance excavations at places in the north mentioned in early historic sources, including Dumbarton, Dundurn, Dunottar Castle, Urquhart Castle and Forteviot. These targeted, small-scale

excavations had a major impact in Scotland, where there had been relatively little scholarly interest in ‘Early Historic’ archaeology. The material was similar to that which he had been examining in western Britain, but he invested it with a Scottish resonance by emphasizing that the archaeology complemented Scotland’s earliest contemporary historical sources. In addition to the fieldwork programme, he set about building up the Glasgow department and revitalizing Scottish archaeology. He was a great champion of archaeological science and made it an important feature of the Glasgow curriculum and he was instrumental in establishing a radiocarbon laboratory in Scotland. It was his personal reputation that did the most to elevate Glasgow’s position, particularly through attracting research students, many of whom have gone on to occupy key posts in universities and the heritage services.

Leslie Alcock played a larger public role in Scotland than he had while in Cardiff and helped to redefine Scotland’s leading archaeological institutions. He served on the Ancient Monuments Board for Scotland, on the Royal Commission for the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, and as President of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. He took his leadership responsibilities seriously and instigated significant changes across all of these institutions. Much of this of course took place behind the scenes, but his belief in the value of open and frank debate led to the Society opening the lectures up for questions and discussion during his presidency. He cut a memorable, if slightly comical, figure when chairing these discussions from the too large president’s ‘throne’ in the old Antiquaries library. It was also during his tenure that the format of the Rhind Lectures was changed to the compressed weekend programme, which was intended to attract larger audiences. As a Royal Commissioner he helped to frame the fieldwork agenda for the RCAHMS in the post-Argyll Inventory era. He was a committed member of the Ancient Monuments Board, who thought it

only natural that the national heritage agency should seek the advice of academics.

Alcock’s archaeological leadership was epitomized by his fieldwork, but he contributed more widely to the intellectual health of Scottish archaeology. His comments on ‘Excavations and publication: ...’ in vol 109 of the *Proceedings* was a typically focused contribution to the publication debate, which has worn well when one considers how the microfiche solution has fared. He was committed to improving the



application of scientific dating, as can be seen in his work at Dumbarton and Dundurn. Less well-remembered was his provision of a home in Glasgow for the first Scottish Burgh Survey and his management of a small team of scholars which included his long-time collaborator, Sylvia Stevenson.

Alcock came to Glasgow at a time of expansion in archaeology in higher education with the remit to consolidate a department which

had been carved out of Geography. He shaped it into a department with a British perspective and a Scottish focus, which engaged with the entirety of human occupation in Scotland, from earliest prehistory through to the Clearances. His personal research activities were confined to Scotland, which reinforced this Scottish perspective in his research students.

The significance of his programme of reconnaissance excavations, all of which are published in the *Proceedings*, should not be underestimated. Although the scale of the excavations was modest, the benefits were immense because they revitalized Dark Age studies in Scotland and inspired a new generation of archaeologists. The excavations were short digs focused on revealing the nature of settlement and providing a robust ‘multi-disciplinary chronology’ for the earliest historically documented sites. The results varied from stunning at Dundurn to the disappointing at Forteviot, but they all brought significant advances in our understanding of these sites. They also showed what might be accomplished by a well-considered, sustained programme of fieldwork.

The reconnaissance excavations were conducted as student training excavations involving a dozen or so undergraduates, the odd postgraduate and an occasional friend, frequently Jean Comrie. These well-organized (largely by Elizabeth), family-style digs made a lasting impression on a generation of Glasgow archaeologists. Not least because it was in the field that Leslie Alcock was at his best – relaxed and full of fun. Whether it was a teaching fieldtrip or on excavation, being out of doors brought out the jovial and expansive aspects of his character.

Alcock managed to fund his Scottish fieldwork through a local network of sponsors including the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, the Hunter Archaeological Trust and the Russell Trust, which is a good measure of how well he integrated into the Scottish scene.

In the year before his retirement he drew the results of his Scottish research together in the

Rhind Lectures for 1989, which had much of the synthetic character of *Arthur's Britain*, although they were less confident in tone. The publication of these lectures was delayed by health problems and by caring for his wife Elizabeth in the years before her death. Always scrupulous about publishing his fieldwork, he placed his outstanding excavation reports before the Rhind Lectures, which did not appear until 2003 as the much expanded overview of the Early Historic North, *Kings & Warriors, Craftsmen & Priests*, which included his most sustained discussion of the early Church.

In many respects Leslie Alcock lived for archaeology. He found it endlessly stimulating and long after his retirement was a welcome and lively figure in the Glasgow archaeology department. However, his greatest recreational interests were hill-walking and mountain climbing. Apart from his family, his main social contacts were scholarly. He was fond of early jazz and a good dram. He was devoted to Elizabeth, who made substantial contributions to the Scottish work once their children Penny and John were grown up. Following Elizabeth's death, he developed a deep religious interest and became a well-known figure at his local church, St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral. This late religious interest is a marked feature of *King & Warriors, Craftsmen & Priests*.

During his career he accumulated numerous honours and in 1991 was awarded an OBE. Perhaps his main intellectual legacy is that he dragged scholarship on early medieval Britain out of the Dark Ages through his willingness to bridge the Celtic/Anglo-Saxon divide and his facility for integrating historical and archaeological evidence. There is no question that his work redefined archaeological scholarship of the early Middle Ages. This is particularly true for Scotland where his Early Historic terminology heralded a renewed interest in the archaeology of the Picts, Scots and Britons. The success of the second – Scottish – half of Alcock's career means that he has had a particular influence in Scotland. He can be

credited with establishing the international reputation of the University of Glasgow's Department of Archaeology, which proved a sound platform for development in the past 15 years. To celebrate and build upon this legacy, the Leslie and Elizabeth Alcock Centre for Historical Archaeology (<http://www.gla.ac.uk/archaeology/alcock>) was established in 2005. It houses the Alcock library and a collection of

papers, photographs and notes. It was founded to promote research into historical archaeology, which it is hoped will be an effective memorial to his scholarly vision.

He is survived by his son John Alcock and daughter Penny A Parkes.

*Stephen T Driscoll
Professor of Historical Archaeology
University of Glasgow*