

OBITUARY



CHARLES THOMAS 1928–2016

The eminent archaeologist Professor Charles Thomas CBE, who died in April 2016, was a great authority on the Early Christian period in Britain, with a special interest in islands and a longstanding membership of the Lundy Field Society. A Cornishman, educated at Winchester, Oxford and London University Institute of Archaeology, he had been Lecturer in Archaeology at Edinburgh (1958–67), Professor at Leicester (1967–71) and Professor of Cornish Studies and Director of the Institute of Cornish Studies at Exeter (1972–91) universities. The extensive range of interests and expertise of this exceptional modern polymath is indicated in obituaries already published in *The Times*, *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian* and will be further demonstrated by those penned for a number of national and regional societies.

Charles Thomas' early work had included excavations on Early Christian sites on Ardwall Island, Iona, and Tean in the Isles of Scilly and led to *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* (Oxford University Press 1971) – a ground-breaking publication in its day. In the late 1960s his attention turned to the presumptive Early Christian cemetery at Beacon Hill on Lundy, where the polygonal wall surrounding the recent graveyard was considered likely to have its origins in the Early Christian period. Four inscribed memorial stones dating back to the 5th or 6th centuries are still present within it, a situation unmatched elsewhere in Britain. Charles conducted an excavation in summer 1969 with the backing of the LFS and revealed a large number of granite-lined and -capped long cist graves and an intriguing central structure, on which he published an interim report (*LFS Annual Report* 20, 1969). His researches continued on the Early Christian Church elsewhere in Britain for the next two decades and led to an interpretative publication of the Lundy evidence in the 1991 *LFS Annual Report* (42). The central focus of the cemetery had been a cella or orthostatic small enclosure around a single grave, the enclosure infilled with small stones, and subsequently disturbed by later graves. The grave was suggested to have been that of St Nectan and the disturbance attributed to the Saint's translation to Stoke St Nectan at Hartland. Charles leaves his identification of St Nectan with the early Welsh quasi-historical figure Brychan for a chapter in his publication *Shall These Mute Stones Speak: Post-Roman*

Inscriptions in Western Britain (University of Wales 1994) where his conclusions are supported by a wide range of linguistic and documentary sources. This long process of interpretation and publication is typical of Charles' use of wide-ranging scholarship, with the focus on intellectual excitement of discovery across the years, and he was not a scholar who produced regular final excavation reports.

Charles' interests were extensive across time but tended to focus on western Britain and Cornwall in particular. He played a very active part in the study of the Isles of Scilly throughout his life, promoting rescue-related projects and supporting new research. He considered his best piece of work to be *Exploration of a Drowned Landscape: Archaeology and History of the Isles of Scilly* (published by Batsford in 1985). Like all his publications this is highly readable, although inevitably new research invalidated some of the conclusions drawn.

On the Cornish mainland he is best known for his long sequence of excavations at Gwithian in West Cornwall, with sequential Bronze Age and Early Christian settlements within developing sand dunes. These led to a long series of interim reports and interpretative papers, but no final report. It is not unusual for energetic archaeologists of his generation to have reached retirement with a large number of unpublished projects, and Charles was never interested in the minutiae of stratigraphy but in its interpretation. However, his special respect for scholarship is shown by his approach to his unpublished work. He was energetic in obtaining funding for projects which would lead to its publication and an active supportive mentor for those engaged in working on these projects. I had known Charles since my student days and, working for the University of Exeter, our paths ran parallel for over 40 years. But it was only when I became a member of the team working on Gwithian that I began to truly experience the value of his friendship and the generosity of his help. At this time, in the early 2000s, I was engaged in preparing a report for the National Trust on unpublished work on Lundy. Charles passed over to me his archives on the Beacon Hill cemetery. He had discovered both prehistoric and Roman activity beneath the cemetery referred to above but had published no detail on this. His interactive support allowed a good account to be published in the *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society* (2010). From that time I was on his 'speed dial' list, from which he contacted the friend he considered most likely to hold the answer to an immediate query! I was also on his Christmas card list – which resulted in the receipt of specially prepared illustrations on Cornish matters. His last card to me has a delightful image of his model of a Cornish fishing boat c.1900 and still sits on my window sill.

Charles Thomas was the major figure in Cornish archaeology for over half a century. He set up the present Cornwall Archaeological Society in 1961 and the organisation which is now the Cornwall Archaeological Unit of Cornwall Council in 1975. His role and status were reflected in the presentation to him of the Henry Jenner Medal by the Royal Institution of Cornwall in 2008 for "Eminence in all fields of Cornish studies", the first recipient since the historian A.L. Rowse. The respect and affection with which Charles was regarded, within the county and across Britain and beyond, was reflected in the moving memorial service held in July at the Truro Methodist Church, attended by over 300 of his wide circle of friends and colleagues.

HENRIETTA QUINNELL