

SIR ALFRED WILLIAM CLAPHAM

Died 26th October 1950

THE death of Sir Alfred Clapham, President of the Society of Antiquaries from 1939 to 1944 and previously its Secretary, has removed a Gold Medallist, a senior Fellow of the Society, and one of its most faithful adherents. Week after week during the Society's sessions he took his place regularly at Burlington House whatever the subject-matter of the discourse, on the often-avowed principle that, to the true antiquary, antiquity had no bounds. His special study was that of Romanesque architecture, but his curiosity was infinite and his knowledge both catholic and accurate. Indeed in all things his mind was that of the scholar, even though, until in 1935 he became a Fellow of the British Academy, he lacked the normal trappings of scholarship. He neither entered a university in his younger days nor, strangely enough, in his days of eminence was he ever honoured by one. Even the craft-guild of his early choice, architecture, passed him by. But these things were of no moment to him. His alert and factual intellect, his quick and astute judgement, his constant insistence upon plain first-hand evidence, required no academic stimulus. He had a full mind, of a scope unusual in an age of specialization, and of a sympathy far in excess of the modern average.

His life was uneventful. He was born on 27th May 1883, and was educated at Dulwich College. Thereafter he chose architecture as his profession, but soon left the drawing-office, first for the *Victoria County History* and then, in 1912, for the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), with which he remained successively as editor, secretary, and commissioner until he died. From the outset he stamped the Commission's work with his direct intelligence. He sought brevity of expression, even to the extent of baldness; and he had an almost intuitive knack of seeing a problem and of scenting its answer between the unsuspecting lines of the field-reports that were presented to him by the Commission's miscellaneous staff. At an early age he fortified this natural perspicacity by the systematic visitation of medieval buildings throughout the country and by the methodical preparation of architectural and other notes in a multitude of note-books, some of which have happily survived him. Monastic sites were then his special interest, and there was scarcely one in Great Britain whereof his retentive memory did not preserve the essential facts. His life was one of unflagging though seemingly effortless application.

The only interruption of this routine was a period of military service in Egypt and Palestine during the First World War when he served in The Royal Sussex Regiment. He seized the opportunity to make a fresh and illuminating study of the Holy Sepulchre, and the resultant paper, with a monumental coloured plan, was chosen to inaugurate the *Antiquaries Journal* in 1920. From that date until his death he produced from time to time papers dealing mostly though not exclusively with medieval architecture in the same journal, in the *Archaeological Journal*, in *Antiquity* and elsewhere, but his published material never fully reflected

his potentiality or indeed his actual achievement. In his maturity he wrote three volumes for the Oxford University Press, two on *Romanesque Architecture in England* (1930 and 1934) and one on *Romanesque Architecture in Western Europe* (1936), which are marked by his customary conciseness and clarity of thought and are standard works within the limits of their restricted scale. But the importunities of his friends failed to ruffle the even tenor of his life and to stir him to any more anxious activity. The reports of his Royal Commission dealing with Essex, Buckinghamshire, Huntingdonshire, Middlesex, London, Herefordshire, Westmorland, and Oxford remain his principal literary memorial.

It is truer, however, to say of Clapham than of most men that his finest memorial lies in the hearts of his friends. He had a great capacity for friendship of an unobtrusive but enduring kind; and to those of his intimates who had the privilege of travelling with him in this country or in France, his quiet gusto for all that he saw and experienced and his wisdom lightly borne have left a memory of perfect companionship. Those who knew him less well had yet some understanding of the kindness, steadiness, and probity of his mind. He held a balance between the new and the old schools of thought, and in his latter days made the perfect chairman of bodies where both had to be mutually reconciled. He was never a spectacular leader but, when moved, was an accepted organizer of victory. Such action as he took was the more effective for the essential placidity from which it sprang. The Council for British Archaeology, for example, state-aided response to war-time and post-war conditions, was largely a product of his brain and his persistence, and during difficult years he lent his counsel, as chairman, to the London University Institute of Archaeology and, as president, to the Royal Archaeological Institute.

Latterly in his retirement he had returned to the study of pre-Conquest sculpture, and it is to be hoped that some of his latest work may yet see the light of print. In the course of it he found himself in a characteristic dilemma: on the one hand an acute anxiety not to traverse the feelings of his friends, and on the other hand his intense distrust of any but the most objective and analytical reckoning. The dilemma fairly represents his sensibility and his forthrightness, two traits which were never more manifest than in his last months and may perhaps serve as his epitaph in the minds of us who knew and valued him, and of the Society which was the focus of his life.