

# Eric Birley (1906–1995)\*

## Vice-President 1951–1995

The death of Eric Birley on 20 October 1995 marks the end of an era. He was the last of that select band of archaeologists whose work in the 1920s and 1930s did so much to establish the basic facts about Hadrian's Wall and whose conclusions have shaped our views of the northern frontier ever since. Birley joined the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies in March 1924 and the *Journal of Roman Studies* witnessed the publication of his first paper in 1928. Appointed Vice-President in 1951, he was the senior holder of that office.

Eric Birley was born at Eccles in Lancashire on 12 January 1906 and educated at Clifton College and at Brasenose College, Oxford. Here he fell under the spell of R.G. Collingwood and, as an undergraduate, went to excavate on Hadrian's Wall in 1927. At that time the Durham University Excavation Committee, operating under the direction of F.G. Simpson, was exploring the turf wall. Eric's first dig was at Birdoswald and it was here in 1928 that he learnt that he had obtained a first in Greats. Following graduation he spent a brief period working for the Society of Antiquaries, observing construction work in the City of London, before returning North to take up the post of Director of the Durham University Excavation Committee. One long-term result of his time in London was his friendship with J.A. Stanfield, which was to bear fruit 30 years later with the publication of Stanfield and Simpson, *Central Gaulish Potters*.

At Birdoswald in 1929 examination of a pair of buildings in the *praetentura* revealed four periods, but apparently no inscriptions. It was particularly galling that there was nothing to show the visiting Robin Collingwood. A stone which could pass for an altar was placed upright and a ceremony of dedication took place. After Collingwood had left the flagstones were lifted. The 'altar' had stood on one inscription face-down and Collingwood had stood on a second, face-up. These two stones (*RIB* 1909 and 1912) led Birley to propose the re-dating of the Wall periods which has formed the basis of all subsequent work on the chronology of Hadrian's Wall.

1929 was an important year for Birley in another way. The Clayton estate was up for sale and Birley bought the fort at Chesterholm-Vindolanda: Housesteads was later offered, but he could not afford both, though he was later to excavate at both. Birley was appointed to a lectureship at Durham University in 1931 and was based at Armstrong College, in the Newcastle division of the university, before moving to Durham in 1935. At Newcastle one of his first pupils was Margaret Goodlet, who became Peggy Birley in 1934. This was to be the longest and most fruitful of all Eric's relationships with his students, lasting over 60 years. He brought Peggy to Chesterholm and there their sons were born, Robin in 1935 (named after Robin Collingwood) and Anthony in 1937 (after Anthony Hedley, antiquary and former owner of Chesterholm). The Birleys stayed at Chesterholm until 1950 when they moved to Durham.

\* I am grateful to those friends and colleagues who have helped me prepare this obituary: Mr R.E. Birley, Professor A.R. Birley, Professor Rosemary Cramp, Dr B. Dobson, Professor C. Haselgrove, Dr Brenda Heywood, Mr P. Heywood, Professor J.C. Mann, Dr Margaret Roxan, and Professor J.J. Wilkes.

Birley excavated at Vindolanda from 1930 to 1935, placing the fort in the care of the Office of Works in 1939. In addition he worked on the civil settlement at Housesteads (1931–36), in the final report placing his work in the context of other discoveries on the frontiers of western Europe. He also examined the smaller installations on Hadrian's Wall, turrets and milecastles, as well as the structure of the wall itself. In the late 1930s Birley directed his attention further north, excavating at Birrens in 1936–37 and, with Ian Richmond, at Carzield in 1939. At the same time Birley and Richmond began to re-examine Corbridge, commencing in 1936 a series of excavations which continued until 1973, though, after Richmond's translation to Oxford in 1957, with John Gillam as director of excavations. The reports on these excavations were regularly published in local journals and his views were disseminated to a wider audience through his guide-books to Housesteads, Corbridge, and, after the War, Chesters.

While undertaking a busy excavating programme, Birley was also developing two other interests, pottery and epigraphy. He reported on the pottery and inscriptions in the 1929 Birdoswald report, while his frequent contributions on epigraphical matters to the two local societies throughout the 30s culminated in 'The Beaumont inscription, the *Notitia Dignitatum* and the garrison of Hadrian's Wall' in *TCWAAS* xxxix (1939), 190–226.

1939 saw Birley's interests firmly established: excavation, pottery, epigraphy, and the Roman army. Throughout the 1930s he was regularly in Germany and foreign comparanda and scholarship were never far from his thoughts. It was appropriate therefore that he had to be summoned home from Berlin in 1939, ostensibly by a telegram from his wife, but in reality sent by the War Office.

Birley spent his war service in Military Intelligence. His duties were to examine the careers and promotions of German army officers and determine and monitor the strength, distribution, and movements of the German army. At a meeting in France in 1940 (a few weeks before the French collapse at Dunkirk) Birley announced his calculations of the strength of the German army as 130 divisions – the French insisted that there were only 80. After victory it was discovered that there had been 128 divisions – plus 2 Waffen SS divisions, about which Birley had then not known, so his figure of 130 proved to have been exactly right.

Birley became head of Military Intelligence Research and ended the War as Chief of the German Military Document Section with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. Milton Shulman in an article in the *Evening Standard* (24 November 1995) has recorded 'that Eric Birley was pre-eminent among those who gave our commanders the information needed to defeat Hitler'.

An archaeologist when he left for war in 1939, Eric Birley returned, fortified by his wartime experience, a brilliant analyst and interpreter of the Roman army and Roman military affairs. Virtually his only excavation thereafter was the annual training excavation at Corbridge. Here many British – and some foreign – archaeologists had their earliest experience of excavation. Birley increasingly left direction of the excavation to his colleagues, concentrating on the finds, samian continuing to be his primary interest.

In 1935 Birley had moved from Newcastle to Durham, becoming Reader in Archaeology and Roman Frontier Studies in 1943. Here, in 1947, he became Vice-Master of Hatfield College, succeeding as Master in 1949. Hatfield was in dire straits, seemingly certain to amalgamate with University College, but Birley turned the situation round, effectively becoming the second founder of the college. He served as Master until 1956 when Durham awarded him a personal chair in Roman-British Archaeology.

Local archaeology always claimed much of his attention. He served the Cumberland and Westmorland Society as editor for ten years (1948–57), while contributing regularly to local journals: every issue of *Archaeologia Aeliana* through the 1930s contained at least

one paper by Birley. After the War a distinguished series of papers in *TCWAAS* reviewed the state of knowledge of eleven forts in Cumberland and Westmorland. Birley edited the handbook for the Centenary Pilgrimage of Hadrian's Wall in 1949. Ten years later, at the time of the next Pilgrimage, he served as President of both the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries (1957–9) and the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society (1957–60). His handbook for that Pilgrimage, delayed owing to problems in the print industry, was to be enlarged into *Research on Hadrian's Wall* (1961). From 1959 to 1963 he was President of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland. Many local committees also benefited from his advice, including the Housesteads Management Committee, on which he sat from 1930 to 1949, and the Trustees of the Clayton Collection at Chesters, which he served from 1949 to 1991.

Many of his papers in local journals were concerned with wider issues. Significant contributions on Roman Britain, the Roman army, or frontier policy were first published in *Archaeologia Aeliana*, the *Durham University Journal*, *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*, or the *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, many being reprinted in *Roman Britain and the Roman Army* (1953) or, together with papers published in national and international journals, in *Roman Army Collected Papers, 1929–86* (1988).

Birley's output was prodigious in another sphere: his pupils. He never taught a first degree in archaeology, but students from History, Classics, and general courses all came to do his Roman Britain special subject, which included Roman Provincial Administration. Some stayed on to do research and Birley directed his students to carefully chosen problems. Many aspects of Hadrian's Wall were investigated. Provinces and areas were studied in depth. And, of course, particular attention was paid to the Roman army and its officers. Artefacts were not forgotten: Birley encouraged research on samian, coarse ware, mortaria and amphorae. Those whom we would today call amateurs were also encouraged and sometimes brought into the department. Colleagues from other disciplines were swept up, particularly through Corbridge. Scholars came from abroad to work in Durham or were encouraged by correspondence: throughout his long life Birley kept in touch with a wide range of scholars in Britain and abroad. As a result many came to regard themselves as Birley pupils. His library, files and time were freely available to everyone and many a research project started with the gift of a Birley archive. Birley accomplished more through his pupils than he could possibly have done alone. It may be difficult for an outsider to appreciate the sense of loyalty and comradeship which Eric Birley inspired in his students, but this is demonstrated by the number of joint papers which they have written, a remarkable achievement in a discipline which has experienced its own share of argument.

Birley's students were at first taught in the seminar room in the Hatfield Rectory, then in a hut in the grounds of Hatfield College. In 1957 the department moved into the Old Fulling Mill and it is with this building that Birley is most closely associated. Birley strengthened his department with colleagues as well as students: John Gillam in 1948, Rosemary Cramp in 1955, John Mann in 1957, and Dennis Harding in 1966.

It was pottery that had first drawn Birley to the Continent in 1929. Through the next decade he visited frontiers and museums to study pottery, inscriptions and frontiers, mainly in Germany and Switzerland. As a result, and in particular after discussions with Kurt Stade, he conceived the idea of a meeting of scholars interested in Roman frontiers, a Congress of Roman Frontier Studies. The outbreak of war was to postpone its inauguration until 1949, when it was held in Newcastle upon Tyne. Sixteen meetings of the Congress of Roman Frontier Studies have now been held, the most recent in 1995 in

The Netherlands. The gatherings have met Birley's aims of bringing together scholars to inform their colleagues and discuss matters of common interest.

Eric Birley retired in 1971, at first to Hexham and then to Carvoran. He continued his research, publishing up to 1993. In 1970 he had accepted the post of Chairman of the Vindolanda Trustees and his support for the work there and at Carvoran continued unabated. He also regularly attended meetings of the Congress of Roman Frontier Studies, of which he had been appointed Honorary Life President in 1974. He addressed the 1989 Pilgrimage of Hadrian's Wall at Birdoswald, 60 years after he had excavated there.

Eric Birley was appointed MBE in 1943, and awarded the Order of Polonia Restituta by the Free Polish Government in 1944 and the Legion of Honour by France in 1947. He was elected FSA in 1931 and FBA in 1969; he was an Honorary Fellow of Brasenose College and of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, a Vice-President of this Society and of the Yorkshire Architectural and York Archaeological Society, a Member of the German Archaeological Institute and an Honorary Member of Gesellschaft Pro Vindonissa; he served on the Ancient Monuments Board for England from 1966 to 1976. Birley was made an honorary Dr Phil at Freiburg in 1970; honorary DLitt at Leicester in 1971 and Dr *honoris causa* at Heidelberg in 1986.

Eric Birley always remained a Northerner. His original views of Roman Britain were often at odds with main-stream thought and it is perhaps not surprising that his reputation was greater abroad than in Britain. In many ways, as an epigraphist-archaeologist, he better fitted the continental pattern of research, and it is very appropriate that his younger son, Tony, is now a Professor at Dusseldorf. Eric Birley had wide interests, but his reputation rests most securely on his work on the Roman army. Many aspects were investigated by himself or his students, creating a body of research that is a worthy successor to that of the great Alfred von Domaszewski.

Eric Birley died in the North where he had lived since 1929, at Carvoran the home of his elder son Robin, and his ashes were buried in the garden at Chesterholm.

DAVID J. BREEZE