



St John's Lodge, in London's Regent's Park, the headquarters of the Institute of Archaeology for its first 22 years. In 1956 a move was made to the present premises in Gordon Square (below)

Fifty years of archaeological teaching and research

Since its formation in 1973 IAMS has worked closely with the Institute of Archaeology at the University of London where it provides lectures in archaeometallurgy as part of the degree-awarding courses. By far the biggest archaeological teaching and research unit at any United Kingdom university today, the Institute was founded some fifty years ago by Sir Mortimer Wheeler, who raised British archaeology to new heights and became the greatest excavator of his age. Sir Mortimer helped to launch IAMS and was a Trustee at the time of his death in 1976.

Robert Eric Mortimer Wheeler – known always to his friends as Rik – conceived the idea of an Institute of Archaeology while excavating Roman sites on behalf of the National Museum of Wales, of which he was Director, in the 1920s.

“In my latter days at Cardiff my mind turned increasingly to the need for systematic training in a discipline which was emerging from the crasis stage”, he wrote in his autobiography (*Still Digging*, London, 1955).

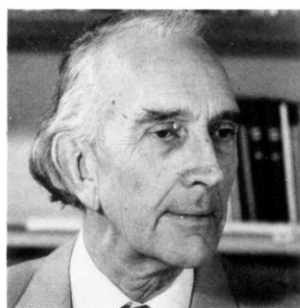
“Students were increasing in numbers; archaeological posts were slowly beginning to multiply. Something had to be done about it, and, looking round in my war-depleted generation, I could see no one but myself to do it – such was the poverty of the land. During the early months of 1926 I drew up a detailed scheme for a university Institute of Archaeology such as nowhere existed in this country.”

Although there had been a Chair of Archaeology at Cambridge University since 1951, digging up the earthly past had hitherto been largely the pursuit of the enthusiastic amateur, and – in the eyes of many people – the wealthy eccentric. In the 19th century an heroic tradition of excavators had come into being, beginning with Layard and Mariette, and continuing with Schliemann, Flinders Petrie, Pitt-Rivers, Arthur Evans, Leonard Woolley and a few others. Wheeler himself was perhaps the last of this distinguished line. He was determined to replace it with an entirely new concept of archaeology which he set out to achieve by a harnessing of science and the humanities which would “bring to civilization something of the function which the laboratory has long fulfilled in the study of chemical or physical science . . . a place where the archaeologist would seek the collaboration of the geologist, the botanist and the palaeontologist.”

Obviously the task was going to be hard and long. It was made easier by Wheeler's appointment before the end of 1926 as Keeper of London Museum, a post which brought him into close contact with people of high standing in the academic world, and with influential and prestigious bodies such as the Society of Antiquaries and the British Academy.

Moreover, his campaign for an Institute – in which he





The Institute has had only four Directors in its half-century of operations. Left to right: Sir Mortimer Wheeler (honorary), 1934-43; Professor Gordon Childe, 1945-56; Professor W.F. Grimes, 1956-73; and Professor J.D. Evans, since 1973

was energetically assisted by his wife Tessa – coincided with his direction of a series of highly successful excavations, including the Roman sites of Lydney Park in Gloucestershire, at Verulamium, present-day St Albans; and perhaps even more exciting, the Iron Age hill-fort at Maiden Castle in Dorset.

Ever alert to publicity, Wheeler made sure that the media were kept fully informed of what he was doing. Very soon archaeology – the “dry as dust” hobby of the eccentric – began to capture the imagination of the general public and to attract support to regularize its teaching.

The big problem, as always, was money. In a lecture to the Royal Society of Arts in 1927, Wheeler declared that £70 000 would be needed to create an efficient school of British archaeology, but later he was forced to lower his sights.

As an alumnus of University College, Wheeler felt that, through the College, London University “might be led gently into the garden and right up the path.” In 1928 University College awarded him a new lectureship, “tenuous, unpaid and unrenowned”, but he used it, quite unashamedly, to promote his efforts for an Institute.

Television star

The breakthrough eventually came from an unexpected source. In 1932 Wheeler heard that Sir Flinders Petrie, then in his 80th year, had formulated some ideas of his own for the accommodation of archaeology in the new university buildings in Bloomsbury then being planned. He sought out the old man who promised his full collaboration.

Sir Flinders was good to his word. A few months later, when planning his retirement in Palestine, the famous Egyptologist faced a problem of finding a home for part of his enormous collection, then stored in some disorder in a multitude of packing cases. When a generous friend came to the rescue with an offer of £10 000, Petrie, with equal generosity, promptly passed on the cheque to the

Whealers, stipulating only that space should be found for his collection when the Institute was established.

Although Petrie’s gift represented only one-seventh of the sum originally estimated to be the minimum for endowment, this was enough to get the Wheelers started. After much negotiating, London University agreed that the scheme should go ahead. Sir Charles Peers, Director of the Society of Antiquaries, became chairman of a committee to appeal for public support, with Tessa as secretary. Together they worked energetically and two years later, in 1934, the London University Institute of Archaeology came officially into being – if only on paper.

Home in the Park

The most urgent need now was to find suitable premises. “We scoured London for the impossible, a large building at next to no rent,” wrote Wheeler. Incredibly, they found just what they wanted. St. John’s Lodge, on the “inner circle” of Regent’s Park, had been built in the “Grecian style” as part of John Nash’s original design for the Royal Park early in the 19th century and had later been much enlarged: it boasted two libraries and a domed ballroom, big enough to house the contents of Petrie’s packing cases. For years the lodge had stood empty since serving as a wartime hospital, derelict and unwanted in its beautiful surroundings. The Wheelers secured it at a “peppercorn” rent and set about its restoration.

Meanwhile staff were recruited and students enrolled. Rik Wheeler himself accepted the post of Honorary Director and Kathleen Kenyon became secretary of the management committee. Three more years were to pass, however, before the Earl of Athlone, as Chancellor of London University, officially opened the Institute on April 29, 1937 – just one year after the tragic death of Tessa Wheeler, who had done so much to bring it into being.

The Institute had barely got into its stride before war

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The formal opening of the Institute was in April 1937, three years after work had begun. Left to right: S.J. Worsley, acting Principal of the University of London; Dr. Wheeler; the Earl of Athlone, Chancellor of the University; H. Lightfoot Eason, Vice-Chancellor; Rt Hon. W. Ormsby Gore, MP, Secretary of State for the Colonies and later Baron Harlech



Fifty Years of Archaeology

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brought its activities to a standstill. Rik Wheeler, who had fought at Passchendaele in 1917, hurried back into the Army to raise an anti-aircraft battery at Enfield. He was later posted to the Western Desert and was in command of 10 000 men of the 8th Army's anti-aircraft brigade when in 1943 he answered a call from Lord Wavell, Viceroy of India, to reorganize archaeological survey and excavation in the subcontinent.

Meanwhile, with the end of the war in 1945, London University assumed full control of the Institute. Professor Gordon Childe, a "formidable prehistorian" of Australian birth, was appointed its first full-time Director and began to fulfill the ideals of scientific training and research for which the Wheelers had worked so hard.

When Wheeler returned from abroad in 1948 after bringing "new inspiration to the study of ancient India", he found St. John's Lodge bustling with activity. Kathleen Kenyon was about to relinquish her secretaryship to become Lecturer in Palestinian Archaeology and to start her epoch-making discoveries in Jericho, while Max (later Sir Max) Mallowan, who had been installed in a new Chair of Western Asiatic Archaeology, was getting ready to launch his successful excavations at Nimrud.

Breakthrough

There seemed to be no place for Wheeler who could be offered no more than a part-time professorship – in the Archaeology of the Roman Provinces – which, as he put it, "my friends had discovered for me" in the Institute that he had founded. However, the post gave him a base from which he continued his adventurous career on two main fronts – as a revolutionary Secretary of the ailing British Academy, and as archaeology's unofficial chief public relations officer, a post which he filled with his customary flair and brilliance, not least as a TV performer in the enormously popular series *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?*, chaired by his friend Professor Glyn Daniel.

Knighted in 1952, he continued to serve on the management committee of the Institute until his death and remained closely in touch with its affairs. In 1970 he was instrumental in arranging for the archaeological discoveries of the Arabah Expedition to be displayed at a special exhibition at the British Museum, and he took a leading part in the foundation of IAMS in 1973.

When Gordon Childe retired as Director in 1956 – just before the Institute moved from St. John's Lodge to its present premises in Gordon Square – he was followed by Professor W.F. Grimes, who had been Wheeler's successor at both Cardiff and London Museum. Grimes, a distinguished excavator whose discovery of the London Mithraeum had caused a considerable stir in 1954, continued to hold the post until Professor J.D. Evans took over in 1973.

The Institute today

While the pattern of its activities has naturally changed over the years, the Institute still clings to the basic principles laid down by Sir Mortimer Wheeler in the 1930s – to combine scientific and humanistic elements of the subject in a centre for teaching as well as research.

Today the Institute provides first degrees in archaeology instead of postgraduate diplomas, as was the case up to 1968, and its field training programmes are linked with rescue archaeology projects, funded until recently by the Department of Environment's Directorate of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings – a function which has now passed to the newly formed Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission, chaired by Lord Montagu of Beaulieu.



A Roman pottery seminar at Gordon Square

The Institute attracts financial support for research from various governmental and non-governmental sources, and both staff and students are active in fieldwork in many parts of the world.

Of the twenty or more universities in Britain which now offer archaeology at first or higher degree level, the Institute in London is by far the biggest single unit. At any one time there are some 200 students – more than half of them undergraduates – and there is a teaching staff of 22. Though large by comparison, the organization is yet small enough to encourage the intimacy of a college-type community life.

For convenience the work is divided into five departments: human environment; prehistory; the archaeology of the Roman Provinces (in fact, of the whole empire); Western Asiatic archaeology; and conservation and materials science, under which the IAMS course is offered as part of BA/BSc and MA/MSc degrees.

John Evans, the present Director, has been a member of the University staff since 1956 and for 17 years occupied the Chair of prehistoric archaeology. Among many appointments he is a Trustee of IAMS and a member of its Scientific Committee.

The science factor

Looking back over his long association with the Institute of Archaeology, Professor Evans feels that one of the most significant features has been the development of the scientific element, a trend reflected in the fact that nearly half his staff are scientists. At the same time he looks with satisfaction on the transition of archaeology from the process of looking for objects to the development of what has become a "human ecology", or, as Mortimer Wheeler would have put it, "digging up people" rather than "digging up things".

Another development that pleases him is today's recognition of archaeology as an "educational subject" as distinct from one aimed solely at producing skilled professionals. This process began to become apparent in the 1950s and was accelerated by the popularity of the subject among millions of ordinary people who found themselves fascinated by news of great archaeological discoveries and entertained by TV features such as *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?*

All these are factors which have not only helped to build the Institute but have also contributed to establishing Britain in the high place which it occupies in world archaeology today. Those who work at Gordon Square can be proud of the part that they and their predecessors have played in bringing this about.

A.J.W.

Sources: *Institute of Archaeology Library and records*; Mortimer Wheeler, *Adventurer in Archaeology*, Jacquetta Hawkes, London, 1982; *Still Digging*, R.E.M. Wheeler, London, 1955; *A Short History of Archaeology*, Glyn Daniel, London, 1981.