**Professor John Morton Coles**, FBA, FSA HonFSAScot (25 March 1930 – 14 October 2020)

Few archaeologists have had such an influence on the archaeological profession around the World as Professor John Coles. He will be particularly remembered for his contributions to experimental archaeology, Scandinavian rock art and perhaps above all the promotion of wetland archaeology in the UK and across the Globe.

John was born in Canada and studied at Toronto University, but 3 years of office work in a small town induced him to travel to England and begin a Diploma in prehistoric archaeology at Cambridge. A PhD at the University of Edinburgh followed, where he was a research fellow (1959–60) before moving back to the University of Cambridge as an assistant lecturer in 1960, then promotion to a full lectureship in 1965 and a readership in 1976. He was Professor of European Prehistory at the University of Cambridge from 1980 to 1986 and was a fellow of Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge from 1963 onwards. He was Director of Studies to Prince Charles while the prince studied at Trinity College.

John’s involvement in the Severn Estuary area came about when Grahame Clark took him down to the Somerset Levels to meet Stephen Dewar, a local archaeologist who had uncovered some wooden prehistoric trackways. John excavated the ‘Dewar’s Tracks’ and then in 1966 the Neolithic Abbot’s Way, followed by several small excavations, until in 1970 John was sent a plank from a peat company that had been found by Ray Sweet. The subsequent excavation of the eponymous Sweet Track marked the beginning of the Somerset Levels Project which flourished for the next 15 years with the financial backing from the Department of the Environment/English Heritage. That year was also when John met Bryony Orme, who would soon co-direct the project from Exeter University. Their close working association would soon lead to marriage.

The Somerset Levels Project was pioneering in many respects, such as the close integration of palaeoenvironmental studies in the excavations, the use of dendrochronology, most memorably on the Sweet Track itself, and the excavation methodology. Those involved in the excavations will remember the hours spent lying down on planks over the trackways excavating with fingers or bespoke plastic spatulas, for which there was a large fine for any individual careless enough to lose one. A ‘no feet on peat’ policy was rigidly enforced, with one student transgressor having to move the spoil heap as a reminder not to do it again.

John’s practical and determined character was shown when faced with the problem of what to do with the large quantities of prehistoric wood coming from the rescue excavations in the Somerset peat cutting areas. When told there were no facilities for conservation, he created his own from scratch, with heated tanks of PEG (polyethylene glycol), first in his own rooms in Cambridge and later at a purpose made facility on the Somerset moors. There were occasional hiccups, most notably when a power cut led to wood having to be chipped out a mass of waxy PEG, but the end result is that the Museum of Somerset contains one of the world’s largest collections of conserved prehistoric wood.

Prompt publication was one of John’s points of principle. The 15 volume Somerset Levels Project series was an exemplar in that regard but the importance of reaching a wider audience was not overlooked, with the very popular book ‘Sweet Track to Glastonbury’ bringing the prehistoric wetland of Somerset to a wide audience. John wisely understood the power of a good image and anyone who worked on the trackway excavations will remember the lengths that were gone to in order to achieve those iconic photographs he took of the structures. A small Somerset Levels Museum was also created at the Willows Garden Centre near Westhay, where the owner, Roger Rogers made replicas of some of the trackways.

The success of the Somerset Levels Project inspired English Heritage to create a series of similar schemes in the Fens, the Humber Wetlands and the North-West wetlands. John was influential in the establishment and running of all of these projects.

John and Bryony had a global influence on the development of wetland archaeology through the establishment of the *Wetland Archaeology Research Project* (WARP) which brought together wetland archaeologists from many countries through a newsletter, a series of very successful annual conferences and eventually the establishment of the *Journal of Wetland Archaeology*. One of the most recent WARP publications was John’s archaeological autobiography ‘*Yesterday’s man. An archaeological Life* *1955-1980’* (2019), although his contribution to archaeology continued for more than a quarter of a century after 1980.

Aside from the wetlands John published important works on the Bronze Age and Field Archaeology but also made a significant contribution to the development of experimental archaeology as a seriously regarded discipline. His *Archaeology by Experiment* (1973) was a landmark publication in that regard and no introduction to experimental archaeology can be complete without the ubiquitous image of John and Don Allan belabouring each other with bronze swords to test the relative efficacy of bronze and leather shields.

The interest in Bronze Age metalwork also led to engagement with Scandinavian rock art of that period, with the encouragement of Bo Gräslund, who became a good friend. His official retirement gave John more time to pursue the recording and interpretation of the rock art, helped by Bo and another long-term friend, Steve Minnitt of the Somerset County Museum. The results were significant publications on the rock art of Uppland (2000), and Bohusland and Ostfold (2005).

John’s achievements were recognised by the profession. He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1963 and a Fellow of the British Academy in 1978. He received an honorary doctorate from Uppsala University, and was awarded the Grahame Clark Medal of the British Academy (1995), the Gold Medal of the Society of Antiquaries of London (2002), and the Gold Medal of the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities (2009), and was made Honorary Professor at the University of Exeter in 1993.

John has left an enduring legacy, not only in the success of his work and the promotion of his fields of interest, but also in the personal effect he had on those who worked with him, studied under him, were examined by him or were advised and encouraged by him.

John suffered a heart attack at home and his wishes not to be resuscitated were respected. He will be sadly missed, and our sympathies go to Bryony, his four children and his other family and friends.

Richard Brunning