

## A BIOGRAPHY OF

### Professor Vera Ivy Evison, FSA

Archaeologist, born 23 January 1918; died 19 March 2018

Vera was the youngest child of Francis Evison, a cabinetmaker and woodwork teacher, and his wife Emily. She lived all her life in London, first in a flat over the family business in Lewisham, and then, from 1940, in Harrow.

Leaving school in 1937, Vera attended evening classes in subjects including archaeology and then studied for a London BA in English language and literature, supporting herself by working at the London University Institute of Archaeology as a secretary for **Kathleen Kenyon** DBE., FBA., FSA., a British archaeologist of Neolithic culture.

In 1947 she went to Stockholm and studied with **Nils Åberg**, a Swedish archaeologist and scholar with wide interests in European prehistory, beginning her interest in the European Migration period of the 4th–7th centuries CE, and acquiring knowledge of Scandinavian languages. She also worked as a volunteer assistant at the British Museum, helping unpack Anglo-Saxon objects from **Sutton Hoo** when they were returned from storage to London after WW II.

Though she worked on Kenyon's excavations at Sabratha in what is now Libya in the summer of 1948, Vera's stories about this did not relate to the archaeology but to her social life, suggesting a more sociable and light-hearted younger woman than her later students encountered. She had a sense of humour, but also a fairly critical, and at times caustic, wit.

Her excavation at the **Buckland** Anglo-Saxon cemetery in Dover (1951–53) marked a turning point in the recognition of the strong element of Frankish material culture in Kent. Among the many finds from the Dover graves were imports from France and the Rhineland, as well as locally made copies: silver and garnet brooches, wheel-thrown pots and above all glass vessels.

Vera improved the approach to excavating and recording burials, participating in the excavation of almost every grave herself. Each day she took a train from London to Dover, excavated graves all day with the help of a few workmen, put the finds into a suitcase, caught the train back, lectured at Birkbeck, University of London, in the evening, and then catalogued

the finds, which eventually went to the British Museum, ready to start again the next day.

Through the exercise of such energy, dedication and a steely will she rose to the top of her profession at a time when this was very difficult for a woman who had entered university as a mature student and did not possess independent means. Anglo-Saxon archaeology in the 1940s and 50s was dominated by a small number of Oxbridge-educated men, and it took boldness and determination to break into this charmed circle.

Vera Evison expanded knowledge of the crucial period in British history that saw the transition from Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England, the 5th–7th Centuries AD. She did this by pioneering the introduction of continental methods to develop the systematic study of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. She showed that there was also considerable interaction between southern Britain and northern France and the Low Countries, the areas under Frankish control in the post-Roman period.

Vera had a long teaching career at Birkbeck, from appointment as a part-time lecturer in 1947 to Professor in 1979, retiring in 1983. Her reputation was perhaps stronger abroad than at home: a Festschrift, *The Evidence of Material Culture* (2016), appeared in a French series, with articles in both English and French, while some reviews of her book *The 5th century Invasions South of the Thames* (1965) were hostile concerning her 'Frankophilia'. [Ed: the Franks, not the French!]

Her single-minded devotion to her subject was communicated with encouragement and enthusiasm. Former students can still recall elements from her lectures in the early 60s to this day – not least her fascinating descriptions of working with glass-blowers. Her study of early medieval vessel glass culminated in the *Catalogue of Anglo-Saxon Glass in the British Museum* (2008), including **palm-cups**.

She respected people prepared to defend their position, and would be prepared to concede the point if robustly argued; but she had no time for those who did not. Vera's stated aim when she was 95 years old was to reach 100, which she duly achieved.

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