

## A Brief History of The Wallingford Historical and Archaeological Society (TWHAS)

### *The Beginnings of TWHAS*

In 1974, county boundary changes were planned to bring Wallingford out of Berkshire and into Oxfordshire. Recognising the importance of this change, a booklet by Caroline Simpson entitled *Wallingford: The Archaeological Implications of Development* was published in 1973 by the new Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit, led by Tom Hassall. The booklet highlighted the need for proper archaeological investigation before proposed development destroyed essential evidence of Wallingford's historical importance.

A public meeting, called by Mayor Bryan Myatt and led by Tom Hassall, convened on Thursday 2nd November 1973 in the Town Hall. It aimed to raise awareness and to find volunteers who would set up a local group to help monitor what was happening. About 100 people attended and by the end of the evening The Wallingford Historical and Archaeological Society (TWHAS) was born.

Its first elected Chairman was Stuart Dewey, and for lack of any other offers from the new committee, his wife Judy (then Head of History at Didcot Girls' School) reluctantly agreed to act as Secretary. At the first committee meeting the aims of TWHAS were agreed to be: ***'To research, preserve and make public all aspects of the past in Wallingford and its locality.'***

Within the first year there were training sessions on documents and pottery and the Society's first archaeological training excavation took place in a garden in Thames Street. This was led by archaeologist Tom Hassall, assisted John Weare of TWHAS. Amazingly, the dig discovered the graveyard of the lost medieval church of St Michael's, together with a medieval bell pit! An exhibition in the Town Hall in 1975 displayed the discoveries and created great interest.

Other activities included field-walking and the beginnings of a cellar survey in the town, all carefully recorded by the 'Architecture Group' which in later years also made a photographic survey of buildings in the town.



### ***'Save Wallingford Castle!'***

1975 saw a huge threat to the survival of the Wallingford Castle site, which was then still in private hands. The run-down Victorian Mansion on the site had been demolished in 1972 and plans were submitted to build a large modern home for retired architects, in close proximity to the few remaining castle ruins, and on a site where unpublished archaeological investigations had revealed substantial medieval buildings.

This situation drew TWHAS unexpectedly into leading a major awareness campaign in the town to *Save Wallingford Castle*, which included bright yellow posters round the town and a demonstration day by *The Sealed Knot* Civil War society. Professional archaeologists joined forces to try to defeat the plans at a five-day Public Enquiry at which TWHAS significantly represented the local community views.



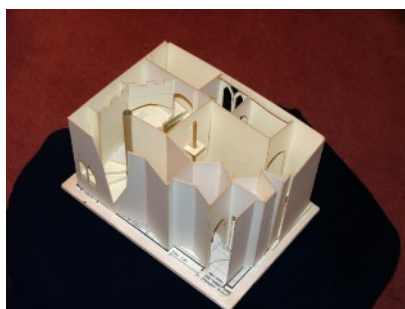
It was a landmark decision in 1976 when the development plans for the castle were finally rejected on the grounds of the importance of the site's heritage – the first decision of this kind to be made. In years to come, new planning guidance was gradually introduced, culminating in 'PPG16' in 1990, which recognised that archaeological remains should be a '*material consideration*' in any application for new development.

As for the castle, its owner Sir John Hedges very generously handed the whole site to the town in 1977. It has been in public ownership ever since, now protected as a scheduled ancient monument and a wonderful open space for the townspeople. Work has recently been completed by grant aid from *Historic England* and the *Wolfson Trust* to help ensure the survival of the iconic castle ruins.

### **Wallingford Museum**

From early days TWHAS recognised the need for a museum for the town, where artefacts and research could be safely stored, and exhibitions presented to the public. The top floors of Flint House (owned by Wallingford Town Council) became available in 1979. A new Museum Trust was set up to launch the project. TWHAS was closely involved, but the Trust was financially separate, and the Trustees were not all TWHAS members.

Work was well underway when a dreadful fire broke out in the adjoining Flint Cottage in May 1980. It destroyed much of the building's medieval roof and set the museum project back for nearly a year. The fire officers were magnificent, saving the building and leaving beams revealed, to enhance the ceilings after the renovations. TWHAS helped with fund-raising events and created displays for the Museum before it opened in April 1981. The first castle exhibit in the museum had won TWHAS first prize in an Oxfordshire competition in 1980 - amazingly parts of it are still in use today!



By 1990 the TWHAS committee was managing the Museum on behalf of the Trustees and in the 1990s the team designed and built new display areas, creating the room sets that are still in use. The Norreys room, at the end of the corridor, became '*The Story of Wallingford*', created entirely from a scale cardboard model made by Stuart Dewey, who also recorded a sound track to accompany it.



When the ground floor of Flint House became available in 2005, the Museum expanded downstairs and became a Charitable Company. TWHAS is still fundamentally important for providing the museum with its historical and archaeological research but financially, each institution remains independent. The museum remains vibrant and is still run entirely by unpaid volunteers.



## Research Projects and Publications

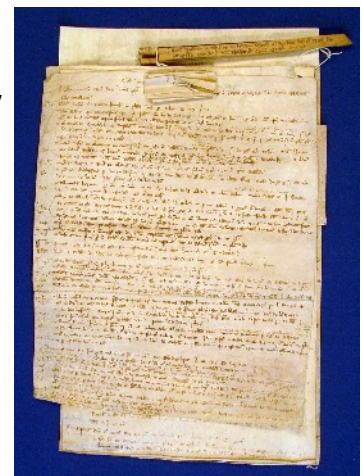
Documentary research has been a key aim for TWHAS since it began. Wallingford was granted its Charter in 1155 and records of the borough survive from 1220 to modern times.

Early initiatives focused on getting a broad view of the town's history, sourcing earlier written histories – particularly JK Hedges' *History of Wallingford* – a private publication in 1881. This led to exploring the Berkshire County Record Office, where many of the Borough Records had been deposited in the 1960s. *The Book of Wallingford*, by Judy and Stuart Dewey was published in 1977 as a first attempt to present the story of the town to the public and provide an awareness of the importance of Wallingford's amazing history and heritage.

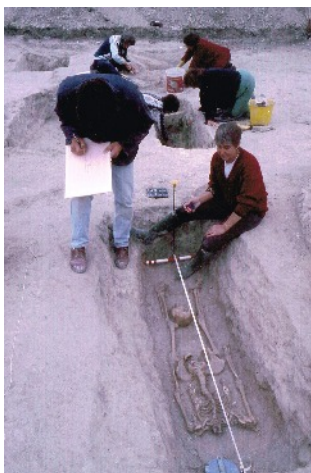
Since then, it has been one of TWHAS's most remarkable achievements to have examined the vast majority of the surviving records, with the aim of providing an accessible starting point for further research. Members of the small but dedicated **TWHAS Documents Group**, led by David Pedgley, spent hundreds of hours in County and National Record Offices making detailed transcripts of the Wallingford records from the original hand-written documents.

The work was first typed up as a paper record and copies deposited in the museum in a large filing cabinet. They were made accessible to any members wishing to research. Much of this work has recently been converted to a digital format, making it more easily available to TWHAS members. Work is now progressing to make these files more widely accessible.

Over the years, individual researchers have used this resource as a starting point for publishing articles and booklets, producing university theses and preparing museum exhibitions. The surviving medieval castle records have been examined in detail by Katharine Keats-Rohan but the rich source of medieval town court and property records remain to be explored further.



## Archaeology



The TWHAS archaeology programme began in 1974 with the New Road excavation of a medieval cemetery and bell pit. The next was in 1980, led by Pat Granados with the guidance of Brian Durham of the Oxford Archaeological Unit, on the forecourt of the old Regal Cinema. This revealed a Saxon house foundation and well, plus many later features, the first indication that St Martin's Street had Saxon origins. Another major role for TWHAS was monitoring planning applications to alert the County Archaeologist to key sites where archaeology might be necessary.

The finding of a lead coffin by a local farmer at Cold Harbour Farm Crowmarsh, led to extensive excavations from 1995-98, revealing a Roman burial site and corn drier and several Iron Age pits. TWHAS has recently returned to the area using fieldwalking, resistivity surveys, and metal-detecting to seek out the site of the villa that must have existed close by. This is an on-going five-year project which is proving very interesting.

TWHAS has always tried to encourage the public to visit archaeological ventures, holding open days and a regular Family Archaeology Day each year.

## *The Wallingford Burh to Borough Project: the archaeology of Wallingford, AD 800-1400*

For the last 20 years, TWHAS has worked closely with Neil Christie (now Professor of Archaeology at Leicester University), in a project that has absorbed most of our archaeological energies.



Neil first approached us in 2002 with the idea of using Wallingford as the base for an archaeological research project. *The Burh to Borough Project* received funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and ran active excavations, geophysical surveys, and test-pitting from 2008-11. Students from Leicester and Exeter universities, working alongside TWHAS members, were led by Neil Christie and Oliver Creighton (now Professor of Archaeology at Exeter).

TWHAS undertook the massive geophysical survey of the castle, which revealed its three walls and many other features for the first time. It also organised four conferences to engage a wide audience with the project and the TWHAS documentary research brought details of the site's long history vividly to life. Two publications have followed from this: *The Origins of the Borough of Wallingford*, and *Wallingford: The Castle and Town in Context*, which stand alongside the full archaeological report: *Transforming Townscapes*.



The Garden Archaeology test-pitting programme, initiated by Neil Christie, continued under the TWHAS leadership of Gerard Latham. His enthusiastic team completed the 100<sup>th</sup> Test Pit in October 2019 - a magnificent effort which had enlivened the town with archaeology. There were also larger TWHAS excavations behind the Museum in 2015 and 2016. The publication of the test-pits and excavations is now in preparation.

### *Expansion and new initiatives*

The taking over of the whole of Flint House in 2005 allowed the museum to expand dramatically, with rooms devoted to Wallingford Castle and to the important local Agatha Christie connection – both of which are of national significance. Museum exhibitions are changed and refreshed annually during the closed period from December-February, always with a new special exhibition to maintain local interest. TWHAS continues to provide the research.

In 2018, grant aid and a generous legacy from Documents Group member Daphne Baker, enabled the building of a new Collections and Archaeology store at the back of the museum. It also allowed remodelling of the kitchen to form a new space for children's activities, meetings and displays, and provided a new public toilet facility. The modifications have enabled the development of schools and family activities and the better accommodation of coach groups, all bringing history to a wider audience.





### **Most recent Causes for Celebration**

In June 2019 TWHAS had the great honour of receiving the Queen's Award for Volunteers, given for the work TWHAS has done in: ***Engaging the community with local history through research, archaeology, publications and its museum.***



In 2021 the new Castle Model was commissioned and installed, based on documentary research by TWHAS and the archaeological investigations of the *Burh to Borough Project*.



In 2023, after alerting the town to the importance of our Agatha Christie connections for several years, it was a delight to see the unveiling of a fine bronze statue of the famous author. Seated on a bench opposite the museum, she is already attracting visitors from all over the world.

So now we can celebrate our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, looking forward into the next half-century, with an on-going programme of research, archaeology and publications.

**Judy Dewey, November 2023**

*Vice-Chair TWHAS and Curator Wallingford Museum*

