

## Digging Lincoln: An Archaeological Memoir

*'Digging': breaking ground; excavating (an archaeological site); appreciating*





Excavations in progress in the summer of 1974 on deposits of the 10th to 12th centuries at Flaxengate (cf Fig 35). Work can also be seen taking place further up the hill at part of the Danes Terrace site, and was under way at another area further west along Danes Terrace (see Fig 34) as well as across the street from that trench at 4-7 Steep Hill (see Fig 36). (Photograph by H N Hawley; reproduced by kind permission of the City of Lincoln Council)

ARCHAEOLOGICAL LIVES

# Digging Lincoln

## An Archaeological Memoir

Michael J. Jones

*'I can't present myself to posterity as some improbable paragon - no one will believe it.'*

Cicero, from Robert Harris, *Dictator* (2015)

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Archaeological Lives

Cover: A rare event: MJJ actually doing physical work, shovelling spoil out of a trench dug in 1984-5 at the south-eastern corner of the cathedral, with the Roman city wall visible beneath. The investigations clarified the relationship of the early English cathedral (late 12th century) to the Roman city wall (photograph by David Stocker)



Lincoln Record Society

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To all diggers of Lincoln  
and  
to my grandchildren:  
Lola, Lucia, Jude, Elisia, Isaac, Fern, Rafi, and Kit.  
Now you know why Grandad is tired!



# Contents

List of Figures .....	ii
Preface and acknowledgements .....	xi
Part One: From the Pit to the Trench	
Chapter 1: A personal backstory.....	3
Chapter 2: 1966-70: Beginning in archaeology .....	15
Part Two: The Early History of Archaeology in Lincoln	
Chapter 3: Shoulders and giants: Antiquarians to archaeologists, c. 1700 - c. 1900 .....	31
Chapter 4: 1906-1970: A museum and a research committee .....	39
Part Three: Urban Archaeology in Lincoln	
Chapter 5: 1970-72: Becoming urban archaeologists .....	57
Chapter 6: 1972-74: A new trust for Lincoln's archaeology.....	74
Chapter 7: 1974-78: City under the county .....	89
Chapter 8: 1978-84: Stability challenged and restored .....	108
Chapter 9: A major exhibition: <i>Lincoln comes of age</i> , 1984 .....	134
Chapter 10: 1984-88: County unit, and a new crisis .....	140
Chapter 11: 1988-94: Another new dawn - another city unit .....	159
Chapter 12: 1995-2000: Unit in distress .....	185
Chapter 13: 2000-2005: Into the city .....	202
Chapter 14: 2006-12: Winding up .....	224
Chapter 15: 2012 On: Investment in Lincoln's heritage reaches new heights.....	238
Chapter 16: Epilogue: Some reflections .....	252
Appendix: Some Wider Horizons.....	260
Some Further Reading .....	271
Index .....	273

# List of Figures

Figure 1.	The author, aged six, in the back garden, wearing my new cowboy outfit. Was this boy ready to take on the world? The footwear suggests not! (family collection) .....	4
Figure 2.	Gardens adjacent to Clifton Park Museum, Rotherham, where column-fragments from the granary of the Roman fort at Templeborough are displayed adjacent to the layout of the granary's plan. These remains were found during the excavations of 1916-17, in advance of the site's destruction to make way for new steelworks (where my father later worked) to aid the war effort. (M J Jones) .....	9
Figure 3.	Royal visit to Silverwood Colliery, 31 July 1975, with HM the Queen, equipped to go underground, and miners in jolly mood (by courtesy of Alamy) .....	10
Figure 4.	A recent view of the Faculty of Arts (now the Samuel Alexander building), with the main library beyond, Manchester University. The Greek and Latin departments occupied the prestigious front (north) range for many years, with history and archaeology in the then newly-built south wing (M J Jones) ....	16
Figure 5.	Some of the Manchester University students sitting in an ancient pit excavated at Mam Tor hill-fort, Derbyshire, 1967. I am far left, with other future archaeologists Freda Beresford to my right, and Shelagh Grealey two to my left (photograph: D G Coombs).....	18
Figure 6.	The team at Carmarthen, summer 1969, consisting mainly of present and former students, including schoolteachers who brought groups of their pupils from Hull and Liverpool. Among those present here were future archaeologists Bill Hanson, Rick Jones, John Little, John Williams, Dicky Bird, John Dore, and M J Jones (photograph: G D B Jones) .....	21
Figure 7.	Barri Jones in a typically daredevil pose, balancing at the top of a mechanical bucket to take a photograph of the excavations at Carmarthen, 1969 (photograph: J H Williams) .....	22
Figure 8.	Some of the staff and former students of the Manchester Archaeology Department of the early 1970s during the Roman Archaeology conference at Reading University, 1995: (L. to R.) Barri Jones, Rick Jones, Joanna Bird, David Bird, Bill Hanson, John Peter Wild (photograph by Mrs F C Wild, kindly provided by J P Wild) .....	23
Figure 9.	The reconstructed rampart at the Lunt Roman fort at Baginton, near Coventry, where I took part in excavations in the spring of 1970. Note the weathering of the rampart-front, which would clearly have required regular maintenance – useful information for my thesis (M J Jones) .....	26
Figure 10.	Engraving of Roman hypocaust found near Exchequergate, c. 1739-40, by George Vertue (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	32
Figure 11.	Portrait of the antiquarian E J Willson. The artist's surname was Andrew; little more is known about him (reproduced with the kind permission of the Usher Gallery, Lincoln) .....	33



Figure 12.	View of Greyfriars from the south-east c. 1830, when it began to be used by the Mechanics' Institute (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum) .....	34
Figure 13.	West gate of the Roman city, exposed adjacent to the castle's west gate 1836, by Samuel Tuke (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum) .....	35
Figure 14.	An image from volume 15 of <i>Punch</i> magazine (1849), with a satirical story and cartoon based on the visit to the Mint Wall, based on the Archaeological Institute's annual conference based in Lincoln in 1848.....	36
Figure 15.	Interior of Greyfriars Museum, 1930s (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	39
Figure 16.	Graham Webster (on ladder, left) at the Flaxengate excavations in 1946/7, with (both standing) Norman Booth and Ian Richmond (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum) .....	44
Figure 17.	Hugh Thompson, Keeper of the City and County Museum 1951-55, and later a committee member and our Chairman 1981-84, with then Mayor of Lincoln, Councillor David Jackson, in the civic guildhall in 1990 (by courtesy of Reach plc).....	48
Figure 18.	From Left: Tom Baker, Ian Richmond, Francis Hill - the three key officers - and then Mayor, Councillor Allan Briggs, at the 10th annual meeting of the Lincoln Archaeological Research Committee, February 1955 (by courtesy of Reach plc).....	48
Figure 19.	Experienced volunteer Alice Reah operating the hoist at Cottesford Place 1957 (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum) .....	49
Figure 20.	Dennis Petch, Keeper of the Museum 1955-62, with an important Roman inscription found at Nettleham, north-east of the city that probably adorned an arch leading to a temple enclosure (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum) .....	50
Figure 21.	Newport Arch partially destroyed by a commercial vehicle, May 1964 (by courtesy of Reach plc) .....	51
Figure 22.	Museum Keeper Ben Whitwell working on the excavation of a Roman pottery kiln in Swanpool, on the SW edge of the city, 1968 (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum) .....	52
Figure 23.	The impressive remains of the lower west gate from the north, 1971. Christina Colyer is left centre, on the site of the road between the towers, Brian Gilmour to her left, partly hidden by the south tower; long-term excavator Malcolm Otter is front left (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum) ....	58
Figure 24.	The Swanpool kiln experiment 1971, overseen for the LARC by Ken Wood (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum) .....	60
Figure 25.	Christine Mahany, one of the first full-time itinerant field archaeologists in the U.K., who was based in Stamford for most of her career. She came to Manchester University while I was still a research student to talk about her excavations at Roman Alcester (by courtesy of David Stocker) .....	66
Figure 26.	The former College of Art /Old City School building on Monks Road that was the Trust's first real headquarters, 1972-76. It is now part of Lincoln College. Extreme left is the back range of the Sessions House, the subsequent headquarters from 1976 until 1989 (photograph by Mary Wilford; cf. Fig 38).....	75

Figure 27.	Remains of the medieval Lucy Tower and adjacent city wall exposed at the south side of Lucy Tower Street, a little north of Brayford Pool, 1972. It was preserved <i>in situ</i> beneath the new car-park (City of Lincoln Council).....	76
Figure 28.	Group of 15th-16th century pots and candlesticks found at 181-3 High Street in 1972. The depth and complexity of the archaeological remains at this site, several hundred metres well to the south of the Stonebow, emphasised both the geographical extent of the city's buried archaeology and the importance of the city's post-medieval archaeology (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum) .....	77
Figure 29.	Symbolic launch of the Broadgate East 1973 excavations, with the Mayor, Councillor Peter Archer digging the first hole. Out of shot were two excavators wearing RESCUE T-shirts (photograph by H N Hawley; reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	81
Figure 30.	Excavations in progress on remains of medieval and later houses at Broadgate East, looking north (photograph by H N Hawley; City of Lincoln Council).....	82
Figure 31.	Skull and facial reconstruction of one of the Anglo-Saxon female burials from Saltergate, on display in Lincoln Museum (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	84
Figure 32.	Kathleen Major, a nationally important figure in the study of medieval documents, and a great benefactor to historical and archaeological studies in Lincoln (photograph: the estate of Kathleen Major).....	86
Figure 33.	Sir Francis Hill hands over his coin collection to the City of Lincoln, March 1974 (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	87
Figure 34.	View of excavations of medieval and later houses at the western end of Danes Terrace during the 1974 excavations, looking up Steep Hill towards the cathedral. A larger area was being excavated further east (City of Lincoln Council) .....	91
Figure 35.	Excavations under way on the early medieval deposits at Flaxengate, 1975; looking ESE (photograph by H N Hawley; reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum) .....	91
Figure 36.	View of the work at 4-7 Steep Hill at an early stage, looking towards Steep Hill itself. The site adjoined Jews Court to the south (right), adjacent to where a post-medieval cellar was being excavated (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	92
Figure 37.	Finds viewing in progress at the St Paul-in-the-Bail site, 1975; possibly taken during a break, in view of the presence of (from left) MJJ and site supervisor Dick Whinney, as well as Jen Mann, A N Other, Lauren Adams, Christina Colyer (standing), and Kate Foley (City of Lincoln Council) .....	94
Figure 38.	View from the top of St Hugh's church on Monks Road with part of the Sessions House, the Trust's headquarters 1976-89, in the foreground, bottom right; beyond are the Usher Gallery, and the Medieval Bishops' Palace in the shadow of the cathedral (cf. Fig. 27; photograph by Mary Wilford).....	98
Figure 39.	View, looking east, of the remains of the Roman and medieval city wall, including (at the far-end) the late Roman Posterngate. The excavations (by the DoE) took place in 1973-4 but were then left open for some time, and the Trust's staff had to clean and record these standing remains before they were covered by the later development. The eastern part, including the Posterngate	

	at the far end, is now open to the public on selected days (photograph by H N Hawley; reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	100
Figure 40.	Excavations at St Mark's Church site under way in 1977. Some of the wide foundations of the Norman church, excavated in 1976, are still in place, but the excavators are now uncovering and recording remains of the four adjacent Roman traders' houses beneath (photograph by H N Hawley; reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	103
Figure 41.	Excavations at St Paul in the Bail, looking west, 1978. Note the nave and chancel of the medieval church, and to the left slight remains of the south wall of the later south aisle (photograph by H N Hawley; reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	104
Figure 42.	Hanging-bowl, probably of the seventh century, found in an important early grave at St Paul-in-the-Bail, after conservation. It had to be carefully removed from the site by the conservators. Note the enamelled escutcheons; discs at the base were also highly decorated, in their case with millefiori glass. The bowl showed signs of having been repaired and was not in good condition when placed in the grave, probably a century or two later (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	106
Figure 43.	Conservator Kate Foley with Dr David Wilson, Director of the British Museum and Trust Chairman 1978-81, examining a Viking-period object on one of his early visits, November 1978 (by courtesy of Reach plc).....	109
Figure 44.	Some of the various headlines in the local newspapers that covered the industrial tribunal in detail (by courtesy of Reach plc).....	111
Figure 45.	The site team at St Paul-in-the-Bail site listening to an update on progress and plans for the site. The length and style of hair betrays the late 1970s date. The team included some long-term and regular excavators, and others who would go on to run their own organisations: locally-born student Gary Brown, who established the successful company Pre-Construct Archaeology in 1993, is among those present (photograph by H N Hawley; City of Lincoln Council)..	113
Figure 46.	Aerial photograph of the St Paul in the Bail area (centre, near to top) during the excavation of the Roman legionary headquarters (summer 1979), whose post-pits can just be discerned; taken by the RAF from an Avro Vulcan travelling at speed – this explains the rather fuzzy nature of the focus (photograph by former staff of RAF Scampton).....	114
Figure 47.	Some of the delegates from the International Roman Frontiers Congress based at Stirling, visiting Fendoch Roman fort, September 1979. Our academic adviser, Professor Sheppard Frere of Oxford University, who had visited the St Paul-in-the-Bail excavations that summer, is second from the right (M J Jones).....	116
Figure 48.	The Roman army enactment group, the Ermine Street Guard, performing their drill in front of a large crowd at Lincoln Castle, June 1978 (M J Jones).....	118
Figure 49.	Tig Sutton's reconstruction of 10th-century Anglo-Scandinavian timber buildings at the corner of Grantham Street and Flaxengate, used on the cover of Dominic Perring's report on the site that was published in 1981 (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	121
Figure 50.	David Stocker 'in the field', recording yet another Lincolnshire church while based with the Trust. He continued his researches and remarkable output on	

Lincolnshire archaeology after leaving in 1986 to work for English Heritage, and especially since retirement (photograph by courtesy of David Stocker) .....122

- Figure 51. The stone store in the basement at the Sessions House, containing architectural fragments, gravestones and other sculptures (photograph by David Stocker)...123
- Figure 52. John Magilton, one of the Trust's Feld Officers 1982-1985, after which he left to become the Chichester District Archaeologist (photograph by David Stocker) .124
- Figure 53. Brayford Wharf East 1982: (left to right) John Farrimond, Tony Wilkinson and Brian Gilmour recording and sampling one of the sections of the long trench that revealed a series of advancing waterfronts and medieval fish traps (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum) .....126
- Figure 54. David Vale's reconstruction drawing of the early church (5th-6th century?) under construction at the site of St Paul-in-the-Bail, among the ruins of the forum (by courtesy of the Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology)..128
- Figure 55. Naples conference on urban archaeology, May 1983, during a visit to the excavations in the city occasioned by an earthquake. On the left, keynote speaker, Henry Cleere, Director of the Council for British Archaeology, is partially obscured by French urban expert Henri Galinié from the city of Tours; on the far right is Brian Hobley, Chief Urban Archaeologist for the city of London (M J Jones) .....130
- Figure 56. A rare opportunity and a privilege to gain access to the top of the Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman forum, where Amanda Claridge had been investigating remains of post-Roman structures. The arch of Titus is visible in the distance (photograph by Henry Cleere).....131
- Figure 57. In the 1983-4 annual report, I suggested that one way to increase the city's heritage profile would involve annual summer excavation of the castle lawns, leading to reconstructions of buildings of the various periods that must have existed there. Our illustrator Tig Sutton created this cartoon of the result being admired by visitors and frowned on by judges from the Crown Court .....132
- Figure 58. Publicity leaflet designed by Ivor Heal for the *Lincoln Comes of Age* exhibition that opened in April 1984 .....135
- Figure 59. Painting commissioned for the exhibition showing an imaginative reconstruction of the Late Iron Age settlement at Lincoln (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....136
- Figure 60. Still Image from BBC TV's *Blue Peter* children's programme of presenter Simon Groom with some of the miniature legion in the studio four days before the official opening in April 1984.....137
- Figure 61. Lord Denning performed the official opening of the exhibition. Here he is being shown the Bordeaux Altar, a dedication stone to the goddess Tutela Boudiga set up in Bordeaux by Marcus Aurelius Lunararis, a presumed wine-merchant and a priest of the imperial cult at Lincoln and York, AD237 (by courtesy of Reach plc).....138
- Figure 62. The scaffolding arrangement and barrow-run created for the excavation of the well at St Paul-in-the-Bail (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum) .....141
- Figure 63. The team that excavated the deep fill of the well at St Paul in the Bail, spring-summer 1984, shown at the site with the range of equipment that they used to ensure safety. Among the group are Kevin Camidge, Colin Brown, Mike Jarvis,

	Doug Young, Caroline Kemp, and Malcolm Otter (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	141
Figure 64.	A rare event: MJJ actually doing physical work, shovelling spoil out of a trench dug in 1984-5 at the south-eastern corner of the cathedral, with the Roman city wall visible beneath. The investigations clarified the relationship of the early English cathedral (late 12th century) to the Roman city wall (photograph by David Stocker).....	142
Figure 65.	Painting by Tig Sutton of the 14th-century east gate and barbican of the castle, produced as an illustration for the new guide by Helen Elliot and David Stocker, published in 1984 (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	143
Figure 66.	View of the excavations of the later Roman structures at the Hungate site 1985, requiring heavy shoring, which made for more difficult excavation. The earliest deposits here were found at a depth of about six metres, the deepest that we ever excavated (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	145
Figure 67.	The remarkable seal-matrix, made of walrus ivory, found at the Hungate site; late 11th century. The inscription suggests that it belonged to a papal sub-deacon, perhaps one of those advising Lanfranc, the new Norman Archbishop of Canterbury, on the location of his cathedrals (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	146
Figure 68.	Diagram illustrating the changing levels of funding sources for archaeology in the city, 1975-88 (from the Trust's 1987-8 annual report). Note the significance of the contribution from the Manpower Services Commission to compensate for the decline in national government/English Heritage funding. Income from developers hardly registered during much of this period, but was starting to grow.....	151
Figure 69.	The road and adjacent buildings (13th century) excavated in 1986-8 inside the Norman west gate of the castle. A shallow grave was found under one of the road surfaces: the circumstances remain a mystery (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	154
Figure 70.	One of Bill Tidy's amusing cartoons - showing 'the famous Lincoln Archaeological Truss' - from the Council for British Archaeology's practical handbook <i>Recording Worked Stone</i> (1987). Roman tombstones and medieval grave-covers are extremely heavy, and should only be moved with care (by courtesy of David Stocker; reproduced with the permission of Bill Tidy MBE's family).....	155
Figure 71.	Roman wooden 'paddle' with perforations, found at the Waterside North site in 1988; perhaps a bread-shovel (similar to the design of those still used in some Italian pizza ovens). (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	162
Figure 72.	Botanist and TV presenter David Bellamy with environmental archaeologist Andrew ('Bone') Jones discussing - and tasting! - a version of the Roman fish sauce ( <i>garum</i> ), evidence for which had been found in the Waterside excavations. This scene was filmed in the upper floor of the Sessions House. Formerly the bar of the police headquarters, the archaeology unit was only allowed to use it for storage by (MJ Jones).....	163

Figure 73.	Tug of War! Hauling a huge stone, possibly used for mooring boats, out of the trench beneath Woolworth's basement; part of the Waterside excavations, 1989 (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	164
Figure 74.	Excavations under way to the south of Saltergate, the third major phase of the Waterside excavations, as the Woolworth's building was being demolished in the background. This trench was where we identified the line of the late Roman river-front (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum).....	164
Figure 75.	Tom Baker cuts the ribbon at the official opening of our new headquarters at the Lawn, in the presence of other City Council representatives, September 1989 (by courtesy of Reach plc) .....	166
Figure 76.	Three visiting Bulgarian archaeologists attending the Posterngate cellar, Saltergate. They were at a conference on Bulgaria at Nottingham University (by courtesy of Reach plc).....	167
Figure 77.	The then Prince of Wales performed the official opening of the Lawn complex, including the Lincoln Archaeology Centre. These photographs show images of the displays, including the chronological introduction, the stratigraphy wall, and models of a potter and mosaicist (City of Lincoln Council).....	168
Figure 78.	Heritage Minister Baroness Blatch launching the new government guidance note on Archaeology and Planning, PPG 16, at the English Historic Towns Forum's conference at the Lawn, November 1990 (City of Lincoln Council) .....	170
Figure 79.	View of the post-Roman pottery room at our offices at the Lawn, showing Judy O'Neill, who assisted our expert Jane Young at times. Some of the pottery vessels on the shelves were 'wasters' from the late medieval kiln found at St Mark's Station East in 1987 (City of Lincoln Council).....	173
Figure 80.	Official opening of the Waterside Shopping Centre by the then Prince and Princess of Wales, 17 March 1992. The Unit had prepared a display of some of the finds from the recent excavations at the site (photograph: R A Davey).....	175
Figure 81.	The Mayor, Cllr. Winston Crumblehume, is presented with a copy of <i>Lincoln: History and Guide</i> at the Guildhall in December 1993. Looking on (l. to r.) are Dr Jim Johnston, the author's wife Diana, our Secretary Greta Exton (about to retire), Dr Dennis Mills, and Greta's successor Angie Moore. As well as being distinguished local historians, Jim and Dennis were both long-term supporters of our endeavours (City of Lincoln Council).....	179
Figure 82.	Excavations under way over the winter of 1995-6 adjacent to the former St Mark's railway station. These revealed more elements of the Carmelite friary founded in 1269, as well as Roman and medieval structures fronting on to the High Street (City of Lincoln Council).....	186
Figure 83.	Front page of our promotional leaflet, incorporating the ingenious new trowel logo spelling out 'CLAU' designed by Dave Watt .....	188
Figure 84.	The International Viking Congress in 1997 was based in Nottingham and then York. The congress came over to Lincoln for the day, heard some presentations about discoveries in the city and were given tours of important sites. One of the groups is shown at St Paul-in-the-Bail, with Alan Vince acting as their guide (photograph by David Stocker).....	191
Figure 85.	One of David Vale's reconstructions of Lincoln: the medieval city from lower High Street looking up towards the cathedral (by courtesy of the Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology) .....	193

Figure 86.	The front cover of <i>The City by the Pool</i> , published in 2003 and although in need of an update still the standard printed work on the city’s archaeology .....	211
Figure 87.	External view of the new Museum, ‘The Collection’, opened October 2005, looking west (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum) .....	221
Figure 88.	Internal view of the new Museum’s main gallery (reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum) .....	222
Figure 89.	View from above of the interior of the former church of St Katherine, at the time that a new display on the area’s history and archaeology was created. It included a small excavation (centre, under glass) revealing section of the medieval green-glazed pipe that carried the priory’s water-supply (M J Jones)	226
Figure 90.	Sampling by Lindsey Archaeological Services under way at the site of and adjacent to the Lincoln University’s relocated flood alleviation pond. The archaeological investigations revealed the first significant evidence for Mesolithic-period activity in the area of the city (M J Jones) .....	227
Figure 91.	Information panel with reconstruction drawings by David Hopkins of the Roman and medieval east gate: one of the two new panels installed at the site in 2008. The third-century north tower can be seen behind (M J Jones) .....	227
Figure 92.	Aerial view of the excavations in progress on Long Leys Road in advance of the development of the city’s new cemetery. The visible structural remains belonged to a Roman villa complex, one of the closest to the city (photograph by courtesy of Allen Archaeology) .....	230
Figure 93.	Pearl Wheatley MBE, the longest-term supporter of archaeology and local history in Lincolnshire, and still very active in her 90s (photograph by David Stocker). Pearl was the first recipient of the University of Lincoln’s Chancellor’s Medal .....	231
Figure 94.	One of the South Common display panels, containing ecological and historical/archaeological information, the latter based partly on the results of the archaeological surveys by English Heritage. In 2010, many thousands of information leaflets for both West and South Commons were also printed (M J Jones) .....	233
Figure 95.	Revised display scheme installed at the site of St Paul-in-the-Bail as part of the ‘public realm’ project for the Bailgate area. It was now possible to view the internal structure of the Roman well-head. (M J Jones) .....	234
Figure 96.	Excavations under way in 2005, adjacent to the library of Bishop Grosseteste College, the summer training school for archaeology students and others led at the time by Craig Spence. This area lies over the site of Roman and medieval suburban properties fronting on to the successive street-frontages (M J Jones) .....	236
Figure 97.	The statue of Lincoln-born mathematician and logician George Boole teaching students, by Anthony Dufort, at its unveiling in November 2022 (M J Jones).	242
Figure 98.	Excavations in the eastern courtyard at Lincoln Castle undertaken as part of the <i>Lincoln Castle Revealed</i> scheme, being observed by visitors. They show walls of mainly medieval date (FAS Heritage/Lincolnshire County Council) .....	243
Figure 99.	Recording of the historic fabric under way on the west side of the Lucy Tower at the castle (FAS Heritage/Lincolnshire County Council) .....	244

Figure 100.	The west front of Lincoln Cathedral, revealed with no scaffolding for the first time in thirty years after conservation work in conjunction with the <i>Lincoln Cathedral Connected</i> scheme (M J Jones) .....	246
Figure 101.	Drone view of excavations under way close either side of the River Witham as part of the extensive investigations occasioned by the construction of the Lincoln Eastern By-Pass. Important remains were found of just about every period (photograph by courtesy of Network Archaeology).....	249
Figure 102.	Detailed view of Eastern By-Pass excavations looking north-westwards towards the cathedral. The flags indicate finds of lithic material - early prehistoric flints (photograph by courtesy of Network Archaeology) .....	249
Figure 103.	Most of the Unit's staff in 1992-3 gathered in the Joseph Banks Conservatory, adjacent to our headquarters at The Lawn. Back row, from left: John Hockley, Alan Vince, Paul Miles, John Wilford, Ann Irving, MJJ, Barbara Precious, Dave Watt; middle row, from left: Jane Cowgill, Janet Hooper, A N Other, Mickey Dore; front row, from left: Judy O'Neill, Lisa Donel, Jackie Hall, Jane Young, Helen Palmer, Pamela Graves, Kate Steane, Allan Smith. Among those not present on the day were Martin Brann, Maggi Darling, and Jen Mann (City of Lincoln Council).....	257
Figure 104.	Aerial view of the upper historic core at Lincoln, showing the Castle, Cathedral, and Medieval Bishops' Palace (to the south of the cathedral), all recently the subject of major conservation and presentation schemes, and of some archaeological investigations (photograph probably by R A Davey) .....	258
Figure 105.	View in 1991 of some of the reconstructed buildings of the Roman <i>colonia</i> at Xanten, N. Germany, including a classical temple (M J Jones).....	261
Figure 106.	Gable wall of building with architectonic representation of the Roman civic basilica at Nyon, a Roman <i>colonia</i> on the north bank of Lake Geneva, Switzerland. The plan of the basilica is marked out on the surface of the square and its remains lie beneath it, where the museum is also located (M J Jones)....	262
Figure 107.	View of the 'high town' and cathedral at St Bertrand-de-Comminges, enclosed by walls that were shown by the excavations to have been first built at the end of the Roman period. The investigations were located at various points immediately inside the city wall (Éditions d'art Larrey) .....	264
Figure 108.	Delegates of the 1994 International Congress of early Christian Archaeology, held in Croatia, visiting the Roman city of Salona, near to Split. They included the distinguished British scholar Professor W H C Frend (extreme right) (M J Jones).....	266
Figure 109.	Remains of the <i>castellum aquae</i> (water tank) at Lucus Feroniae in Southern Tuscany - a useful parallel for that at Lincoln (M J Jones).....	268



## **Preface and acknowledgements**

I started thinking seriously about writing this book in July 2020. I had first come to Lincoln exactly half a century earlier, while still based at Manchester University, to spend time supervising an archaeological excavation for the next few months. I was back working in the city for two short periods in the following year, and assumed that would be the last of my involvement at Lincoln. I was wrong. In the autumn of 1972 I joined the newly-established professional team – the Lincoln Archaeological Trust – that was being set up to undertake rescue excavations in the city in advance of redevelopment. There was a huge challenge facing this young group, in a new, professionalised era for field archaeology. Subsequently, I spent forty years employed in various senior roles investigating, preserving, and promoting Lincoln's archaeological heritage. What follows is primarily a personal account of that long period of endeavour, supplemented by summaries of events before and since.

Since arriving to live and work here full-time, I have never moved away from this impressive historic city. I must admit to being tempted at times by the prospect of a new challenge, and at other times to being driven almost to desperation to find new, more congenial pastures. On more than one occasion, my position was under threat – for various reasons - but I survived somehow.

I was, therefore, in the unusual position of being able to chronicle events in the same place over a long period. Thousands of other individuals have been involved in rescuing and researching remains of Lincoln's rich archaeology. There was always too much for us to do: justifying the need for funding, space, and equipment; and setting up new projects, finding the resources, including the staff; and in due course analysing the results and communicating them in reports and presentations. At one level, the book is the story of how significant discoveries emerged, and at another of the circumstances, often difficult, under which an archaeological record was achieved. The organisations for which I worked (and for many years directed) had several good periods, and some less comfortable times, not to say crises. My own personal experience reflected the same vicissitudes of fortune. The nature of the successive homes for the archaeological team was also a measure of the changing esteem in which we were held – from a series of condemned houses, to a condemned school building (restored after we left), a decaying former police station and old prison (ditto), and finally the nurses' home at a former psychiatric hospital.

Over this long period, various members of the team gave countless presentations on aspects of the many discoveries, some delivered to local groups and to county societies, and more academic accounts to conferences (including several abroad), national organisations and universities. I had to play a major role in such dissemination and promotion, and I have also produced or contributed to books and articles written for different audiences. The efforts of many others have now had a much greater impact in raising the city's formerly low heritage profile, both nationally and internationally. The last twenty years, and especially the last

decade, have seen the greatest investment in the presentation of the city's heritage - not before time.

Having helped produce many summaries, syntheses and detailed accounts of discoveries, I was well placed to tell the story of how those advances were made, and setbacks sustained and survived, against the background of changing legislation and organisations. I had decided that this would be the subject of my next book about ten years ago, and that I would give it the snappy title of 'Digging Lincoln', with its various connotations. I was not to know that a TV programme about current field projects, entitled 'Digging for Britain', would then appear. It is excellently produced and presented, and has made quite an impact. I strived for an alternative title, but no other phrase seemed to fit the bill so well, and so I stuck with it.

An opportunity to make progress on this sort of account offered itself when the restrictions on external activity imposed by the coronavirus pandemic finally encouraged me to address the huge store of notes that I had accumulated over decades. They included annual reports, committee reports, newspaper cuttings, newsletters of local societies, and copies of important correspondence. I also decided that it was about time that I set down on paper, if only for my children and theirs, how I have spent so much of my professional life. There are several similar such books, but perhaps none quite the same. In fact, one of my real inspirations came not from archaeology; rather it was *Trustees for Nature: a Memoir* (2007), produced by the Lincolnshire-born naturalist, Ted Smith, whose lifetime campaign to support nature conservation has been praised by Sir David Attenborough.

### **Archaeologists on their careers**

What has driven those of us who became archaeologists to take this course in life? Traditionally, early practitioners basked in reflected glory from exciting discoveries. The accomplished excavator Philip Rahtz, previously an accountant, photographer, and teacher, was honest - in his own *Invitation to Archaeology* (1985) - in admitting that such *kudos* was one of the attractions of the profession to him. As the prolific archaeologist Paul Bahn counsels in his popular and informative little book *The Bluffer's Guide to Archaeology* (in several editions since 1989), 'do not expect to get rich or powerful as an archaeologist, but you may occasionally find a little fame thrust upon you'. In my case, it was a combination of being inspired by others and by the range of activities, locations, and intellectual challenges that it involved.

Among recent autobiographical accounts of careers in archaeology, some also published by Archaeopress, Peter Wade-Martins' *A Life in Norfolk Archaeology, 1950-2016* (2017) is an homage to the built heritage of that large and adjacent county. He and colleagues strove successfully over many decades to achieve a relatively benign attitude from the county's local authorities and ensure the preservation or recording of many aspects of its heritage. There are a number of other impressive works that are at least semi-autobiographical in nature. Francis Pryor has written as eloquently and prolifically as anyone about the archaeology of Britain generally. His recent book, *The Fens: Discovering England's Ancient Depths* (2019), is just one of his several readable and informed books on British archaeology, but one that also includes a chunk of southern Lincolnshire, an area where he lives. Some prominent archaeologists, of course, have avoided the temptation to indulge in any personal memoir, and have instead maintained

their prolific output of specialist articles or impressive new syntheses. Others are still coping with their backlog of site reports.

A contemporary, Mick Aston, noted in his profusely-illustrated book *Mick's Archaeology* (2000) that he too had been inspired by several of the earlier generation, including one of his tutors at Birmingham University, Philip Rahtz again. Rahtz's own professional autobiography, *Living Archaeology* (2001), is one of the few other recent works of this genre. Going back several decades to a different environment, Sir Mortimer Wheeler's *Still Digging* (1955) remains an extremely readable, in places elegant, account. It covers much of the first half of the twentieth century, when involvement in archaeology was restricted to a select few. My former tutor Barri Jones's *Past Imperfect* (1984) documented the struggles of the 1970s by various bodies, including the RESCUE Trust and the Council for British Archaeology, to have the value of the nation's archaeology appreciated and measures taken to protect or record it. Some of the early challenges, as well as several decades of discoveries and hugely successful promotion, are also set out in Peter Addyman's beautifully-produced *York Archaeological Trust: 50 years on* (2022). The York Trust's Chairman in its first decade was Lincoln-born Maurice Barley, whose own memoir, *The Chiefest Grain* (1993), includes much on his early life in Lincoln as well as his later career based at Nottingham University.

Writing such works is both a cathartic experience and, in my case, certainly, it was at times a painful one. Some of those who have read drafts of chapters have commented on how much I appear to have remembered. I can only say that, having started to remember things, my memory seems to have been stimulated to remember more – often waking me at about 5.30 am to do so. I admit also that I may have forgotten to mention certain events, even some that I subsequently remembered that I had forgotten! My upbringing (see Chapter 1) was in a society where people were blunt. I have been honest, but tried to be discreet, and could have told more secrets, but that is not what the book is about. It is of course difficult to get it just right and to please everyone. Was the effort worthwhile? We shall see. Some will find parts petty and tedious, others self-indulgent. Just about all those in archaeology whom I have consulted have encouraged me not only to publish, but also not to downplay the personal perspective. I hope that their confidence was justified, and that the content of this particular book will still be of interest to many different types of reader. The younger members of my family tell me that their friends consider archaeology to be a 'cool' career.

As a preliminary, then, and, yes, perhaps as self-indulgence, but also because these days it is almost expected, I include some short biographical sections on my personal background: up to going to university in 1966 (Chapter 1), and from that time until I first visited and took part in a dig in Lincoln in 1970 (Chapter 2). There must have been thousands of others of that fortunate generation whose early lives followed similar trajectories. Those readers who consider such matters to be extraneous should move straight on to Chapter 3, which deals briefly with antiquarian discoveries, and Chapter 4, with the creation of the City and County Museum in 1906 and the achievements of the Lincoln Archaeological Research Committee from 1945. I continue the story of archaeology in Lincoln, but this time together with my own increasing involvement, in Chapter 5. The bulk of the book (Chapters 6-14) covers the history of investigation and discovery, the many changes in organisation, funding and personnel, and the regular struggles to survive. I considered it essential both to summarise the period since retirement (15) – not least because so much has been achieved with regard to both

investigation and promotion – and not to end without the opportunity for reflection in a final chapter (16). An Appendix gives a brief account of various travels and endeavours that were made in the hope of providing a wider understanding of some of our discoveries in Lincoln, and of some other diversions.

## Acknowledgements

Many of the personalities who played decisive roles are mentioned, and I thank especially those who made our working life more manageable. Others who were unhelpful or downright hostile – sometimes through ignorance – may not receive such a positive write-up, or may be conspicuous by their absence. Sincere thanks are also due to all those who helped towards the foundation and success of organisations undertaking archaeological work in the city. Some were prominent figures, speaking on behalf of national organisations, and others served on our various committees, some of them for decades, as well as advisers, local supporters, and officers and members of both local authorities and national bodies. A series of Inspectors of Ancient Monuments from the Ancient Monuments Branch (to 1984), and subsequently English Heritage and now Historic England provided much advice and strong support over decades. Some actually ensured that the Unit stayed in business. Sadly, some of that number and many other potential readers are no longer with us. For instance, even the few survivors of the original group that formed the ground-breaking, original committee of RESCUE in the early 1970s are all now of advanced years. It is in retrospect a pity that this book was not written and published several years ago, but I had other priorities at the time.

It would be gratifying to think that the many active contributors to the fieldwork and subsequent post-excavations processes will look back on their time in Lincoln with some fondness and satisfaction, and that this book will help them to do so. The excavations and other projects relied on the efforts and talents of various staff, principally fieldworkers, finds and other specialist workers, and administrators. They included also the local volunteers who provided the main workforce up to 1970, the diggers working for subsistence for the next couple of decades, some of them archaeology students, others on Government-sponsored unemployment alleviation programmes, and later the generally highly-skilled core workforce of the current commercial era. Some went on to much greater things. Again, many in all these categories have now passed away.

I must again pay tribute to the staff and facilities of Bishop Grosseteste University library, where much of the later work on this book took place. Certain friends and former colleagues have been kind enough to read particular chapters. Among these, David Stocker has seen an early version of the whole text and given much wise advice. John Herridge has made various useful comments on and suggested corrections to many of the chapters. Councillor Ric Metcalfe, the long-term Leader of the City of Lincoln Council (until his retirement in 2024), read a good part of the text from the point of view of the local authority. Joanna and Dicky Bird, Glyn Coppack, Naomi Field, Ian George, Shelagh Hampton, Bill Hanson, John Hockley, Bob Jones, Keith Laidler, Antony Lee, Alastair Macintosh, Tim Marshall, Arthur Ward, Andrew White, John Peter Wild, John Williams, and John Wilford all spent time reading selected parts and their efforts resulted in countless improvements to earlier drafts. Fellow ‘Struggler’ Amanda Spalding kindly read the proofs and identified errors that I really should have spotted earlier. Any remaining errors are my responsibility.

For assistance in providing or assisting with access to illustrations, I have to thank, especially, Dawn Heywood of Lincoln Museum: Figure 11 is reproduced with the kind permission of the Usher Gallery; Figures 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20, 22, 23, 28, 29, 31, 33, 35, 36, 39, 40, 41, 42, 49, 53, 59, 62, 63, 65, 66, 67, 69, 71, 73, 74, 87, and 88 are all reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum. Alastair Macintosh (City of Lincoln Council) kindly made others available: Figures 17, 26, 30, 34, 37, 45, 77, 78, 79, 81, 82, and 104 are reproduced with thanks to the City of Lincoln. Natalie Jones of Reach plc provided clear advice on the use of photographs that first appeared in the *Lincolnshire Echo*, formerly a daily newspaper, whose photographers were ready and willing to attend and record our events: Figures 18, 21, 43, 44, 61, 75, and 76 are reproduced by courtesy of Reach plc. Where appropriate, artists or photographers, notably former colleagues Tig Sutton and Nicholas Hawley, are acknowledged in the captions. The David Vale reconstruction drawings (Figures 43 and 85) are the copyright of the Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology. Figure 3 is reproduced by courtesy of Alamy. Figure 6 was taken by Barri Jones, and that of Barri Jones himself (Figure 7) by John Williams; Figure 8 was taken by Mrs F C Wild and provided by John Peter Wild; Figure 24 was taken by the late Ken Wood; Figures 27 and 38 are by the intrepid Mary Wilford; Figure 32 is from the estate of Kathleen Major; Figure 46 was given to us by staff of RAF Scampton; Figure 56 was taken by Henry Cleere; Figures 25, 50, 51, 52, 64, 84, and 93 were provided by David Stocker; Bill Tidy OBE's family generously allowed reproduction of one of his cartoons (Figure 70). Figure 80 was the work of former local photographer Ron Davey and Figure 104 is probably also his work. Figure 92 is reproduced with the permission of Allen Archaeology. Figures 98 and 99 were provided by FAS Heritage, and Figures 101 and 102 by Network Archaeology. Figure 103, of the Unit's staff members, was taken by Judy O'Neill. Figure 107 was produced by Éditions d'art Larrey, based in Toulouse. Alan Stacey at Bishop Grosseteste University helped with the scanning of some colour slides.

Mike Schurer of Archaeopress has given much positive advice from the start of our discussions and particularly over the final stages of production. Robin Orlić of Archaeopress produced the typeset version and was very obliging in updating it until we achieved a final copy. I am grateful for the publishers for agreeing to produce this book. The Lincoln Record Society provided funds from its Small Grants Scheme to keep the price of the volume at a reasonable level so that it could be enjoyed by many more than would otherwise have been the case.

Above each chapter is a song title or, in certain cases, some lyrics. They are almost all from the songs of Bob Dylan. That for this Preface was a song by Jethro Tull; that for Chapter 1 is from Joni Mitchell's 'The Circle Game'; and that for the Appendix was an album by Fairport Convention. Many of my generation will recognise most, if not all, as one soundtrack for the principal era covered by this book.

Finally, my wife Diana helped me to excise some of the unnecessary content. She had already made a huge contribution, in supporting me in various other ways, based in the home that we have now occupied for well over 40 years. The younger members of our family, dragged to many sites and museums, mostly (but not always) uncomplainingly, deserve thanks for their tolerance over many years. They will learn from this book where I was when I was not with them, both physically and mentally.