

Brian Hope-Taylor

By James Graham-Campbell

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Brian Kenneth Hope-Taylor, archaeologist and artist: born 21 October 1923; FSA 1950; University Assistant Lecturer, then Lecturer, in Archaeology, Cambridge University 1961-76; died Cambridge 12 January 2001.

Yeavinger in Northumberland, the site of the earliest known Anglo-Saxon royal residence, has for more than 40 years been synonymous to medievalists with the names of its excavator, Brian Hope-Taylor.

His publication of this work undertaken often in extreme circumstances during the 1950s, was long awaited but, on its eventual appearance, his book was hailed as “a landmark in British archaeology”. Long before that, however, his pioneering work had been recognised “as one of the most brilliant and satisfactory pieces of research ever to be made in such a field”. Hope-Taylor thus achieved in his lifetime a unique position in the world of Anglo-Saxon studies and Yeavinger: an Anglo-British centre of early Northumbria (1977) will be his lasting memorial. In the meantime, however, there are many who have cause to remember him gratefully as friend, teacher and colleague.

Brian Hope-Taylor was born in 1923 into a family with three generations of interest in the arts, although his father was a Surrey accountant who continued to practise into his eighties. Brian himself trained as an artist with the noted wood-engraver, George Mackley, who later wrote to him that: “You needed no teaching. All that I did was to be present at your learning”.

After a reputed period in naval intelligence, Brian Hope-Taylor joined the RAF in 1943, serving for a period at Medmenham, in Buckinghamshire, where his artistic skills were put to use as a model-maker for bombing targets identified through aerial photography. Among the staff in photo-intelligence at Medmenham were many professional archaeologists who encouraged a young man’s growing interest in the subject. This had developed through his discovery of prehistoric field-systems on Farthing Down in Surrey, the survey of which he undertook during periods of leave. These early researches led onto a series of excavations in Surrey which included that of the Norman motte at Abinger (published in 1956 in *The Archaeological Journal*).

During this period of his life, Hope-Taylor worked as an artist, the profession ascribed to him when he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1950. Examples of his work include a fine group of illustrations of British mammals, in a scraper-board technique of his own devising, for ‘The Nature Lover’s Companion’ (1949). The acuteness of his eye is readily apparent, a factor which contributed greatly to both his incomparable skills as an excavator of the remains of timber buildings and as an archaeological draughtsman.

Hope-Taylor’s interest in mottes (earthwork castles), fuelled by his work at Abinger, led him onto the comparative study of the Motte of Urr in Galloway, but his archaeological interests were deflected to an earlier period through his identification of the site revealed in an aerial photograph by Kenneth St Joseph of Old Yeavinger as that documented by Bede as Ad Gefrin. It was at Ad Gefrin that Paulinus travelled with Edwin, king of Bernicia, to undertake a mass baptism of his people. Shortly after

commencing his excavations at Yeavinger, Hope-Taylor started work also at another Anglo-Saxon royal site, recorded as being an 11th-century palace, at Old Windsor in Berkshire.

These two great excavations were both undertaken for the Ministry of Works at a time when to be employed in such a capacity meant being paid only for work in the field. Resources were not then forthcoming, as they would be today, for post-excavation study and the writing of reports for publication. Hence the several winters spent by Hope-Taylor at Yeavinger combined with summers at Old Windsor, until his work on both sites was completed.

In order to advance himself professionally, Hope-Taylor was permitted in 1958 to register at St John's College, Cambridge, to undertake a PhD thesis on Yeavinger, despite not having a first degree, never having been to university. He was awarded his doctorate in 1961, when, encouraged by Glyn Daniel, he was appointed as a University Assistant Lecturer in Archaeology at Cambridge. His promotion to a full lectureship was followed, in 1967, by election to a fellowship at University College (now Wolfson College).

During these Cambridge years he continued to excavate on early Anglo-Saxon sites in the North: on Lindisfarne, at Doon Hill (Dunbar), and at Bamburgh Castle – all sites which regrettably have remained unpublished. Between the work at Doon Hill and Bamburgh, there came the call (in 1966) to undertake engineering excavations within York Minster, when it was realised that the great building was threatened by collapse. During the repairs which followed, much of his time was spent on ensuring the completion of the essential archaeological investigations, in his capacity as Director of Research, with a committee chaired by his friend, Sir Mortimer Wheeler. Finally, in 1973, he directed a rescue excavation when construction of the M11 required a cutting to be made through the Devil's Dyke in Cambridgeshire.

During the 1960s, Hope-Taylor was recruited by Anglia Television to write and present two successful archaeological series, 'Who were the British?' and 'The Lost Centuries', the former of which (broadcast in 1965) was nominated for a Bafta award. The new medium of television was one which, in the words of his director and producer, Hope-Taylor "embraced with consummate ease".

Hope-Taylor was born late in the life of his parents, as an only child, and their care in old age exercised him greatly. To a considerable extent they dominated his life so that, when they died, he was left somewhat bereft, never having himself been married. He was marked as a young man by the death of his fiancée, who was killed by a careless cab-driver in New York.

He resigned his Cambridge post in 1976 and moved to Wooler in Northumberland, where he was cared for in ill-health by his old friends Vera and Lionel Rutherford. By 1981 he had regained strength sufficiently to embark, with renewed excitement, on the preparation of his report on Old Windsor. He moved south again to Cambridge, filled with a desire to renew relations with old friends. Such was not to be and, even as energy ran out before the work on Old Windsor was completed, he had become largely reclusive in his habits, even if his manner remained as charming and evasive as ever to those who sought to assist him in the continuation of his work. During his latter years he turned to research on East Anglian churches – abandoning his accumulated backlog of excavations.

Hope-Taylor sought perfection in his undertakings which left him prone to dissatisfaction and unable to glory in his achievements, but his inspirational qualities and the high standards which he set are in themselves lasting legacies for those who were privileged to have encountered him in person.

They, and many more besides, still hope that the means may yet be found to bring Old Windsor to fruition, as well as other of his projects, so that they may receive the attention which they so justly deserve for our knowledge and understanding of the early medieval period in Britain.

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Brian Hope-Taylor is the author of *Yeaving* (3.67 avg rating, 3 ratings, 0 reviews, published 1977), *Nature*. See if your friends have read any of Brian Hope-Taylor's books. Sign in with Facebook. Sign in options. Join Goodreads. Brian Hope-Taylor's Followers (1). Brian Hope-Taylor. edit data. Combine Editions. Brian Hope-Taylor's books. Brian Hope-Taylor Average rating: 4.2. 5 ratings 0 reviews 3 distinct works. *Yeaving: An Anglo-British centre of early Northumbria*.