

## OBITUARY: James Copland Thorn, FSA

Jim Thorn's sadly premature death on 22 December 2007 came about after a long and heroic struggle against diabetes accompanied by gradual blindness and a host of debilitating related illnesses. On a happier note the photo appearing in a 1958 issue of the *Gazette and Post* catches him at the age of nearly 16, carefully poised behind a desk, holding a medieval tile in his right hand, a pen in his left. The 22-point headline loudly exclaims, 'SWOTS? WELL, YES; BUT WE HAVE FUN'. Leaving aside the dated journalese and Jim's unexpectedly natty attire, the article today seems remarkably prescient. The acting curator at the Gunnersbury Park Museum, Miss Rhoda Bickerdike, is quoted as saying, 'James Thorn over there has reconstructed some thirteenth and fourteenth century tiles, excavated at Northolt'.

But what became a virtually lifelong commitment to archaeology already had its genesis in trips at the age of ten to museums throughout the London area, in particular the British Museum. During the bitterly cold winter of 1962–63 Jim dug at Winchester Palace in Southwark, and he met his future wife, Dorothy, on a series of rescue digs in the same area in 1963.

Two years later saw them both featured in the article, 'The Searchers, Dedicated to Digging up London's Past' in the 15 February 1965 edition of the *Evening News and Star*. In 1964, in a decision which was to shape much of his subsequent career, Jim began pottery drawing lessons at the Bishopsgate Institute in Liverpool Street. By the mid-1960s Jim was employed in writing and illustrating articles for *The London Archaeologist*. In 1966 he became an archaeological illustrator for the Royal Commission for Historic and Ancient Monuments, later English Heritage, off Regent Street, where he was mainly occupied with drawing pottery and architectural features. Jim was called upon to draw the scorched remains of Hampton Court after the fire in 1986. In 1987 he joined the British Museum's Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities where he was to remain happily for the next ten years until failing eyesight caused him to retire.

Jim's involvement with Libya started in the summer of 1981 when he came out to Cyrene to assist the University of Pennsylvania's Museum in its final study season of the Extramural Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone. During his relatively brief stay he accomplished two things for us. The first was the completion of a remarkable portfolio of detailed drawings of



Jim aged 16 at Gunnersbury Park Museum, 1958 (photo: *Gazette and Post*).



Jim (right) in discussion with Abdulrheem Saleh Saed Mabruk Shariff, Cyrene, 1998 (photo: D. Thorn).

the site's architectural *frusta*, later accompanied by a set of elegant restoration drawings of its S7 Sacred House, all eventually incorporated in the first and fifth volumes of the sanctuary's final publication. The second, despite considerable efforts to make him take shelter from the sun, was to acquire staggeringly awful sunburn. The latter is to be noted only because it goes to the heart of his total absorption with whatever was the task at hand. With no exaggeration, Jim was one of the hardest-working individuals I ever had the pleasure to witness on an archaeological site.

In addition to his activities that summer for the University of Pennsylvania's Museum, Jim's stay in Cyrene introduced him to the work of Alan Rowe on Cyrene's ancient cemeteries, whose study came to dominate his next 24 years. What started as a thesis for an MPhil on Rowe's pottery culminated in the 2005 publication of his magisterial, 829 page-long *The Necropolis of Cyrene: Two Hundred Years of Exploration*, which

received the eleventh Award of 'L'Erma' di Bretschneider. In addition to its exhaustive text, it incorporates 426 figures, the bulk of which are Jim's own drawings.

During 1989, and through 1992, 1998, 2000 and 2002, Jim and Dorothy's research trips to Libya were supported by grants from the Society for Libyan Studies. Independently funded trips were also undertaken in 1994 and 1995, making the Thorns one of the most travelled members of the Society to Libya during those contentious years. Shortly before, Jim had joined with this writer for the University of Pennsylvania's Museum's 1985 and 1987 excavation seasons on Bates's Island at Marsa Matruh on the northwest coast of Egypt. His stays produced a characteristically monumental corpus of trench plans and objects drawings, plus Jim's own publication of the Ottoman era pottery, all of which found their way into the two volumes of the 2002 publication of Bates's Island. During these same years Jim attended several archaeological conferences where he delivered a number of well-received reports.

Jim's immersion in work was total. During the years he toiled away on Rowe it became increasingly difficult not to believe that Jim had not been part of the original 1952–57 Manchester team, to say nothing of John Cassels who had been active in 1953 and 1954. Perhaps because he had an elderly parent who had served in the First World War, Jim was able to turn himself into an expert on World War One, particularly on the little-known British-Senussi campaign in late November 1915, as well as on the months leading up to Rommel's final withdrawal from North Africa during the Second World War. Here again it was hard not to fall under his spell and believe that Jim had somehow 'been there'.

His American, British, Italian, and Libyan colleagues and friends all speak of his dedication to Libyan archaeology, his generosity in sharing the results of his research, his loyalty to friends, his passion for truth, and his total preoccupation with the past. One can only add that his artistry with the draftsman's pen ultimately finds its roots in the renderings of Jean-Raimond Pacho, the two Beechey brothers, and E.A. Porcher and that the world, at least on this computer-crazed side of the Atlantic, is not likely to see his equal in this respect for years to come, if ever.

Donald White

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