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To cite this article: David W. J. Gill (05 Dec 2024): William F. Grimes: archaeology in the public eye, Public Archaeology, DOI: [10.1080/14655187.2024.2408076](https://doi.org/10.1080/14655187.2024.2408076)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14655187.2024.2408076>



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RESEARCH ARTICLE

William F. Grimes: archaeology in the public eye

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William Francis Grimes (1905–1988) was Director of the Institute of Archaeology, London, from 1956 to 1973. His career included membership of the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff where he was responsible for the excavation of prehistoric and Roman sites in Wales. In 1938 he joined the archaeology team of the Ordnance Survey and took part in the excavation of the Anglo-Saxon burial at Sutton Hoo. During the war years he undertook rescue excavations prior to the construction of military airfields. He was appointed Director of the Museum of London in 1945 and was engaged with the excavation of bomb-damaged London, including the site of the Roman Mithraeum at Walbrook. In retirement he conducted a number of field projects in Pembrokeshire through the Field Studies Centre at Dale.

KEYWORDS rescue archaeology, war-time archaeology, museum archaeology, Ordnance Survey

Introduction

Archaeology is prominent in the public mind through popular television programmes such as *Time Team*. The publicizing of the discipline has a long pedigree with the Oxford academic David G. Hogarth — one of the first students admitted to the newly established British School at Athens (Gill, 2011)— popularizing archaeological activities in the eastern Mediterranean and Anatolia in the late 19th and early twentieth centuries (e.g. Hogarth, 1889, 1896). Sir Mortimer Wheeler brought archaeology to public prominence during the inter-war period through the publicity of his work at the Roman amphitheatre at Caerleon, the Iron Age hillfort of Maiden Castle, and the Roman city of Verulamium (Sorrell

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& Wheeler, 1937; Wheeler & Sorrell, 1938). Wheeler is, of course, remembered for his energetic efforts to create the Institute of Archaeology in London, but it is a later director, William Francis Grimes (1905–1988), whose sustained commitment to public archaeology from the late 1920s through to the early 1980s deserves to be better known (Miles, 1989; Gill, 2000, 2004).

The study of personalities within archaeology helps to explore how the discipline has developed over time (Trigger, 1989: 4–12). Grimes' work on prehistoric, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and medieval remains indicates how a broad approach to archaeology had developed in Britain during the inter-war period. Archaeologists were themselves usually based in national or local museums, or were part of the team based with the Ordnance Survey in Southampton whose role was to verify the accuracy of archaeological information included in national maps (Ordnance Survey, 1973: 1–2).

Archaeology and the National Museum of Wales

Grimes, whose roots were in Pembrokeshire, grew up in Bedfordshire where his father had moved to work as a draughtsman for airships. He graduated in Latin from the University College of Wales, Cardiff, in 1926; among his lecturers was Wheeler, who was Keeper of Archaeology and then Director at the National Museum of Wales; another was Cyril Fox, who had been appointed Keeper of Archaeology as a successor to Wheeler. Wheeler's departure that July to take up the directorship of the London Museum meant that there was a movement of staff in the museum at Cardiff: Fox was appointed Director, and Victor E. Nash-Williams as Keeper of Archaeology. On graduation Grimes immediately joined the National Museum of Wales, as the assistant to Nash-Williams, where he realised the importance of making archaeology accessible to the public (Boon, 1990). His role allowed him to take part in a number of excavations across Wales. Initially the emphasis was on Roman Wales, unsurprising given his undergraduate studies, with the study of the legionary workshops near Holt (Grimes, 1930), work on the legionary fortress at Caerleon (Grimes, 1935) and an excavation at Caerwent prior to the construction of a new bypass (Grimes, 1931a). This developed the work of the Committee for Excavation and Research in Wales and the Marches that had been established by Francis Haverfield prior to the First World War to record Roman sites (Gill, 2011: 238; see also Freeman, 2007) as well as Wheeler's post-war research (Wheeler, 1925). Grimes reviewed the pottery from and workshop at Throlam Farm in Yorkshire (Grimes, 1931c), and was invited to comment on a Roman kiln excavated in Suffolk by Basil Brown with whom he would later work alongside at Sutton Hoo (Brown, et al., 1935). However, Grimes soon developed a strong interest in the prehistory of Wales, and his discovery of a water-logged boat at Castell Collen in Wales drew public attention (Anon., 1929; see also Grimes, 1931b, 1931d). Other prehistoric projects included the burials at Stormy Down at Pyle in Glamorgan (Grimes, 1928b), Ludchurch in Pembrokeshire (Grimes, 1928a), Corston Beacon in Pembrokeshire (Fox & Grimes, 1928), Llanboidy in Carmarthenshire (Grimes, 1929), the Bronze Age burial at Jacket's Well near Knighton (Grimes, 1938b) and at Breach

Farm in Glamorgan (Grimes, 1938a). He also conducted a survey around Solva in Pembrokeshire looking at the distribution and sources of flint (Grimes, 1933b). Among Grimes' other projects was a survey of the prehistory of Brecknock and the excavations of some of the Neolithic tombs in the area (Savory, 1955, 79). He explored the Palaeolithic site at Coygan Cave near Laugharne in Carmarthenshire (Grimes & Cowley, 1935) and the Priory Farm Cave near Pembroke where he confirmed the Palaeolithic phase (Grimes, 1933a).

From 1932 Grimes started to report on recent prehistoric finds in Wales for the Prehistoric Society of East Anglia (Grimes, 1932; Clark et al., 1933; Clark et al., 1934), and its successor the Prehistoric Society (Clark et al., 1935, 1936, 1937; Leask et al., 1938, 1939) right up to the outbreak of the Second World War. He was a key figure who broadened the focus of the society from its East Anglian (Norfolk and Suffolk) roots to take in the whole of the British Isles (Phillips, 1987, 52). This regular reporting led Grimes to make the prehistory of Wales accessible through the publication by the Ordnance Survey of a map showing Long Barrows and Megalithic monuments in South Wales (Grimes, 1936a; see also Grimes, 1936b; see also Phillips, 1987, 64). This was supplemented by a guide to the prehistoric collections in the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff (Grimes, 1939; see also Grimes, 1951b). In 1935 he worked with Audrey Williams on the centenary exhibition of the Royal Institution of South Wales in Swansea, and this led to archaeological work at Dan-yr-Ogof at the head of the Swansea Valley.

The Ordnance Survey and the Sutton Hoo excavations

In September 1938 Grimes was appointed Assistant Archaeological Officer with the Ordnance Survey in Southampton where he would work alongside O. G. S. Crawford (*The Times*, 29 August 1938, 15; see Phillips, 1987: 64; Daniel & Pottle, 2004). This archaeological work was intended to inform the mapping of the landscape of the United Kingdom (Ordnance Survey, 1973; see also Hewitt, 2011). It was in the summer of 1939 that Grimes experienced the publicity surrounding a major excavation. He was called, as a member of the Ordnance Survey archaeology team, to assist with the excavation of the Anglo-Saxon ship burial at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk. His expertise on working on waterlogged prehistoric boats in Wales was no doubt an asset. The find of the ship-burial soon drew attention from the media in spite of the gathering clouds of war (Anon., 1939a, 1939b, 1939c). Grimes was himself involved in writing up part of the excavation (Grimes, 1940). In addition to the work at Sutton Hoo, Grimes' experience of fieldwork as part of the Ordnance Survey led to a strategy document for the mapping of linear earthworks (Fox, et al., 1946). Grimes' close friendship with Crawford is reflected in his editing a series of essays in Crawford's honour and to mark his 65th birthday, *Aspects of Archaeology in Britain and Beyond* (Grimes, 1951a).

Rescue archaeology during the Second World War

It was recognised that the construction of new aerodromes and other military infrastructure as part of the war effort could endanger undiscovered archaeological

remains. Grimes formed a team, that included Audrey Williams, to work on such rescue projects under the auspices of the Ancient Monuments section of the Office of Works (O'Neil, 1948; Grimes, 1960; see also St Joseph, 1974, 170). Such a move had been prompted by the destruction of the Ordnance Survey's offices in Southampton as the result of enemy action in 1940 (Phillips, 1987: 86). Among the projects was the excavation of Saltway Barn Long Cairn near Bibury in Gloucestershire prior to the construction of an airfield at the start of the war, the investigation of the prehistoric site at Stanton Harcourt in Oxfordshire (Grimes, 1943), and the exploratory excavation of an Iron Age temple at the site of Heathrow Airport in 1944 (Grimes, 1948; Grimes, et al., 1993). The excavations captured the public imagination. An overview of his archaeological work undertaken during the war years was published in 1960 (Grimes, 1960).

In 1941 Grimes prepared a paper on the future of museums as part of a conference in London to consider the future of archaeology as a discipline (Grimes, 1944). He reflected on how the war had touched museums, as well as on the lack of a national museum strategy. Museums were seen as a hub for local and regional archaeological activity, a model that Grimes had seen work effectively through the fieldwork conducted by Audrey Williams through the Royal Institution of South Wales, and through the archaeology team at the National Museum in Cardiff. He argued for the recognition of the public benefit of museums, and saw the potential in more peaceful times for revenue generation through the attracting of tourists and visitors from outside the immediate locality. This theme of public benefit was explored in Grimes' review (for *Antiquity*, edited by Crawford) of Wheeler's pre-war excavations of Maiden Castle that considered the role of the excavator (Grimes, 1945). Grimes saw archaeology as 'performing a social duty to the community'.

The Museum of London and excavations in bomb-damaged London

Grimes' views on the contribution of museums prepared the way for his appointment as Director of the Museum of London in December 1945 (Anon., 1945b), as the successor to Wheeler who had been appointed Director-General of Archaeological Survey of India (Anon., 1945a). Museums were seen as the base for archaeological work, particularly in London; this would supplement the national programme for archaeology supported by the Ordnance Survey. Grimes was soon directing excavations at locations that had been badly damaged by bombing during the war (Anon., 1946; Grimes, 1947; see also Milne, 2002).

The people of Britain are struggling back, through a difficult period of transition, to a more normal life. Prominent in the minds of many of them are the problems of physical reconstruction and replanning which the devastation of World War II has now made urgent. But these problems have a bearing on the past, as on present and future; they carry them with the responsibility which every cultured community must bear towards its history, that of seeing that preoccupation with the activities of the present does not lead to neglect of the past and its evidences. (Grimes, 1947: 379).

He discussed the nature of this ‘rescue’ work in a programme for the Third Programme of the BBC (Grimes, 1949a). Among the projects in London was the work on the Roman fort at Cripplegate (Shepherd, 2012), medieval Cripplegate (Milne, 2002), the Charterhouse (Knowles & Grimes, 1954), and the blitzed St Bride’s Church in Fleet Street (Anon., 1952; Milne, 1997). Grimes was granted freedom of the City of London in 1952 in acknowledgement of his contribution to the capital through archaeology. A key summary of the overall findings for Roman and medieval London appeared in 1968 (Grimes, 1968).

The project that particularly caught the public imagination was the excavation of the Roman Mithraeum at Walbrook that was conducted from 1952 to 1954 (Grimes, 1954; Shepherd, 1998). He worked alongside Audrey Williams, now at the Verulamium Museum, and whom he was later to marry (Cardy & Sabine, 2002). The importance of the excavation was captured by Alan Sorrell’s dramatic reconstruction of the interior of the Mithraeum (Sorrell & Grimes, 1954; see Sorrell & Sorrell, 2018: 163, fig. 104). Large queues of people formed to see the result of the work. After public outcry that the temple might be destroyed, the structure was lifted and placed on display on the south side of Queen Victoria Street near Bank in the heart of the City of London (for the location, Merrifield, 1973: 24–25): it has now been reinstalled in the basement of the Bloomberg European headquarters on Walbrook where it is on public display. Grimes was able to connect the Mithraeum with a number of finds, including sculptures, that had been made in the vicinity of Walbrook from 1889 and which had subsequently formed part of the collection of the London Museum (Toynbee, 1986).

Grimes’ work and approach was not without criticism. Wheeler, in a review of Grimes’ study of Roman and Medieval London, not only celebrated his own ‘disgraceful vein of egotism’ but at the same time openly attacked Grimes (Wheeler, 1969).

Future generations will not thank Mr. Grimes for hoarding his evidential material away in boxes and cellars. His duty to history, to his supporters, and not least to himself is to publish without further delay. Here he has served us up an appetizing dish of inferences. But no historian or archaeologist, particularly in the future, can be expected to have full confidence in these until their material basis is plain for all to see. It will be a thousand pities to tarnish a fine record of endeavour by falling short in the final and essential achievement.

In contrast, Eric Birley considered that Grimes’ book ‘deserves a place in every serious archaeologist’s book-list’ (Birley, 1970), and Barry Cunliffe saw the value of Grimes’ work for ‘the layman’, thus acknowledging the public nature of his work (Cunliffe, 1969).

In post-war Britain the Ministry of Works, responsible for monuments placed in state guardianship, wanted the public to engage with its heritage in a new way (see Chapple, 2014a, 2014b). One of the ways was to develop a series of site guides to monuments in State Guardianship (see Gill, 2018, 2023b). Grimes himself was invited to prepare a short guide to the Pentre-Ifan burial chamber in Pembrokeshire that he had excavated in 1936 (Grimes, 1949b, 1953). He also prepared a short guide to the burial chamber at Capel Garmon in Eryri National Park (Snowdonia)

that had been excavated by Wilfrid James Hemp, the Inspector of Ancient Monuments for Wales, in the 1920s (Hemp, 1927; Grimes, 1956).

Director of the Institute of Archaeology

In 1956 Grimes was appointed Director of the Institute of Archaeology as a successor to V. Gordon Childe (Evans, 1987: 19, 22 fig. 17): Wheeler was fiercely opposed to the appointment (Hawkes, 1982: 320–23). It was Grimes who received the note indicating that Childe had committed suicide in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales (Daniel, 1992: 135–40; see also Gathercole, 2004). Grimes had been involved with the planning of the new building in Gordon Square (Evans, 1987: 19–21, figs. 14–16), and had described the role and contribution of archaeology in the university sector (Grimes, 1955). One of Grimes' initiatives for the Institute was the introduction of a field-training course (Evans, 1987). In 1959 he excavated the Lake Group of Bronze Age Barrows near Stonehenge in Wiltshire (Grimes, 1964a). Grimes retired from the Institute of Archaeology in 1973 to live in Swansea and a series of essays were prepared in his honour (Strong, 1973).

Archaeology in Wales

Grimes served as a member of the Royal Commission on the Ancient Monuments in Wales and Monmouthshire from 1948 to 1978, and for Historical Monuments in England 1964 to 1978. His commitment in Wales was the recording and preservation of the industrial archaeology of the nation (Wakelin & Griffiths, 2008: 26). He was President of the Cambrian Archaeological Association and gave his presidential address in 1963 on the subject of Prehistory in Wales and Ireland (Grimes, 1964b). He was a key figure, with C. A. Raleigh Radford (a former Inspector of Ancient Monuments for Wales as well as a director of the British School at Rome), for the decision in 1969 to map the archaeological record along the route of the M5 motorway from Somerset to Gloucestershire (Fowler, 1974: 119). This formed part of the development of rescue archaeology to precede major construction projects.

In later years Grimes used the Field Studies Centre at Dale in Pembrokeshire, located in the Victorian fort that had been constructed to defend Milford Haven, as a base for archaeological projects in the county. Among his projects in Pembrokeshire was a study of the prehistory of Caldey Island that started in 1949 (Lacaille & Grimes, 1955, 1961).

Conclusion

Is there value in reflecting on the history of archaeology though the lives of archaeologists (Gill, 2023a, 2024)? There is a danger that there can be too much focus on some of the more high profile practitioners, thus ignoring the contribution of those whose work did not attract the same recognition or indeed publicity. Grimes, for example, was placed in the shadow of Wheeler and Childe, previous directors of the Institute of Archaeology. And in a re-evaluation of his work, it is important

to note the contribution of Audrey Williams — whom he later married — whose fieldwork in Wales and London was equally significant and indeed was acknowledged by Grimes to be superior to his own. Yet a reflection on the history of archaeology is not just about the sites excavated, the finds discovered, and the publication of reports: it is about how these archaeological activities have had an impact on the public perception of the past. Grimes' excavations on bomb-damaged London, especially the Walbrook Mithraeum and at Cripplegate, caught the public imagination and were enhanced by the vivid reconstructions prepared by Alan Sorrell. The photographs of people waiting patiently to catch a glimpse of the work at Walbrook are a vivid reminder of how archaeology was opening the past to members of the public. Grimes' contribution to national archaeology was through his involvement with local as well as national archaeological societies. His major input to the excavation of the ship-burial at Sutton Hoo has not perhaps received the recognition that was his due. (His depiction in *The Dig* [2021] fails to capture his role and contribution.).

Grimes' career and archaeological fieldwork had a close relationship with museums: the National Museum in Cardiff, the Royal Institution of South Wales in Swansea, and the London Museum. These institutions were the repositories for local and national archaeological collections, and allowed the public to engage with the material and to understand the heritage of their localities. Grimes grasped the significance of this network of archaeological expertise that could be used to reveal the history of a locality.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Molly Grimes for sharing information about her late husband with me as part of the preparation for the memoir in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, and to Paul G. Bahn for his comments on the preparation of studies in the history of archaeology.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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