

Earliest Antiquaries

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By the 1570s, the intellectual climate had become more propitious for antiquarian research. The recovery of the Anglo-Saxon language was being accomplished by the circle of scholars around the Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker, who were making great progress in understanding the forgotten language by studying bilingual texts in Latin and Saxon that had survived in monastic libraries. There was a strong interest, encouraged by Parker and by William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Elizabeth I's chief minister, in elaborating a history of Saxon Christianity that would reveal a native church untainted by interference from Rome. The cultivation of humanist scholarship in the universities was beginning to produce men equipped to undertake an intelligent study of antiquities. From this background came William Camden (cat. 18), the master-antiquary who has always commanded the respect of his successors. With the support initially of the courtier Sir Philip Sidney, and later of Lord Burghley, he began the ambitious project that was eventually published as *Britannia* in 1586 (cat. 17). The impetus to compile this innovative work came from the Flemish cartographer Abraham Ortelius, who urged Camden to give the world an account of Roman Britain that would be as detailed as modern scholarship would permit. Camden accepted the challenge. He determined to describe the configuration of the Roman settlements in Britain, a plan that required him to give an account of the native British tribes that the Romans had overcome and ruled. After that he started to enquire into the origins of the peoples who had occupied the land before the Romans came, and into their language and customs – customs that could be credibly reconstructed from a wide range of classical accounts then in print. Camden made a number of journeys around the country to inspect towns and ancient sites, and decided to structure his book as a county-by-county perambulation in which history and topography would be combined, and all phases of human activity recorded. He fulfilled his main aim admirably, in giving a thorough account of Roman Britain and its remains. Most creditably, he came to recognise that the Saxons had exercised a far more formative influence on the country than the Romans. His blind spot was his inability to identify pre-Roman remains; although he wrote much about the Ancient Britons, he seemed unaware that any physical traces of their presence had survived.

Britannia was written in Latin, and went through six editions before being translated into English in 1610. Its success made Camden an intellectual hero, and provoked much antiquarian activity in England. About the time of its publication, a group of Camden's friends and associates formed themselves into a society of antiquaries, meeting regularly to discuss matters relating to the institutions, offices and customs of England. Most members, including Sir John Dodderidge

(cat. 24), were lawyers or heralds, who had a professional interest in such subjects. One who is still remembered today was John Stow, the historian whose invaluable *Survey of London* was first published in 1598. This Elizabethan society of antiquaries ceased to meet about 1607. An attempt to revive it in 1614 met with James I's displeasure; he believed it would give rise to undesirable enquiries into such sensitive subjects as royal prerogative and the rights of Parliament. A few years later the herald and historian Edmund Bolton petitioned the King to establish an academy that would promote antiquarian research (cat. 23), among other subjects, but this project also foundered.

Sir Robert Cotton, a close friend of Camden, has always been associated with the remarkable library he built up at his house in London and made available to all who were intent on antiquarian research. Consisting predominantly of Saxon and medieval manuscripts, mostly rescued from monastic libraries, the library became the archive for, and meeting-place of, Jacobean antiquaries. Those who benefited from its resources, and became in consequence lifelong friends of Cotton, included the polymath John Selden, and the church antiquaries Archbishop James Ussher, Sir Henry Spelman and John Weever. Selden's expertise stretched from ancient Hebraic law and customs to modern maritime rights. In a long career, he wrote discourses on the ancient Syrian gods, on Greek statuary and inscriptions, on Byzantine historians and Norman chroniclers, on the origins of the law in England, on tithes, titles of honour and on British topography (cat. 5). Ussher documented the complex history of Christianity in Britain and Ireland and compiled a universal chronology (cat. 2). Spelman clarified the legal rights of the Church, gave a history of Church councils and elucidated the legal terminology of Saxon and medieval England. Weever studied comparative funerary customs and made vast collections of epitaphs, with commentaries. Cotton's library was closed in 1629 on the orders of Charles I, who thought it was being used for seditious purposes by Parliamentarians opposed to his royal prerogative. Its closure seems to have hastened the death of its owner: Cotton pined for his books, and went into a fatal decline. By the time of the Civil War, however, the library was available to scholars once more.

Antiquaries depend on fellowship and the assistance of their peers. Many were based in London, where the great repositories of national records lay, yet a considerable number flourished in the provinces. A network of correspondence held them together, and intermittent meetings fortified their common interests. Older men helped younger, while proficient linguists helped less able friends. The vast scale of many antiquarian enterprises required cooperation, which, for the most part, was willingly given, out of friendship and in the interest of English scholarship. The activities of William Dugdale (later Sir) illustrate this point. His incomparable survey of his home county, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* (1656), was compiled over twenty-five years with the assistance of numerous members of the local gentry and custodians of records in London. In the mid-1630s, Dugdale joined up with Sir Christopher Hatton, Sir Thomas Shirley and Sir Edward Dering in an attempt to form an antiquarian society, 'Antiquitas Rediviva', but it did not

thrive (cats 21, 22). Dugdale had helped the Yorkshire antiquary Roger Dodsworth with the immense task of recovering the charters and deeds of the monasteries of England, and then took over this project when Dodsworth died, producing the three seminal volumes of monastic studies, entitled *Monasticon Anglicanum*, in 1655, 1661 and 1673. His later works, on the history of St Paul's Cathedral and on the baronage of England, all benefited from the contributions of others. Dugdale in turn helped to launch the career of the Oxford antiquary Anthony Wood, and so the chain went on.

Archaeological activity, in the sense of inspecting and excavating ancient sites, and interpreting finds, was slow to develop. In 1600 Camden and Cotton made an expedition to Hadrian's Wall, where they noted inscriptions and collected some small altars and pieces of statuary, which were transported to Cotton's house in Cambridgeshire. In 1620 James I, puzzled by Stonehenge, asked his surveyor, the architect Inigo Jones, to carry out some excavations and draw up a report of his views on the monument's origin and purpose. Jones dug and measured, but his unexpected conclusions – that it was a Roman temple – were not published until 1655, after his death. Urns were frequently dug up, mosaic pavements uncovered, hoards of coins unearthed, but no proper record was made of them and they disappeared into private collections or were dispersed and lost.

Not until the Wiltshire antiquary John Aubrey became fascinated by ancient stone monuments did any systematic recording begin. In 1649, Aubrey found himself in the Avebury stone circle during a hunt, and lingered to inspect it. He soon recognised that it was a complex of circles, and not a random collection of stones, as was commonly thought. In repeated visits, he measured the site, identified the great avenue, and plotted the scheme of the monument. He saw affinities with Stonehenge, and understood how features of Avebury helped to clarify the layout of Stonehenge. The rudeness of the stones convinced him that these were works of the Ancient Britons, made long before the Romans came. Both Aubrey and his friend Walter Charleton made presentations about Avebury to the Royal Society in 1663 (cat. 25). Aubrey was exceptional in that he had a vigorous imagination that was fired by places rich in historical associations. He imagined these stone circles as ceremonial sites, as temples, and attempted to envisage what kind of society had made and used them. Excited by his discovery of a new field of study, he began to write a book about the stone monuments of Britain, gathering information by direct observation and by correspondence with people in the remoter parts of the country. The result of his enquiries was *Monumenta Britannica*, the first credible archaeological treatise in English. It remained in manuscript form until the twentieth century, however, although it was known and used by antiquaries concerned with prehistoric Britain.

Aubrey became a member of the Royal Society in 1663, and his work with antiquities properly belonged to the Baconian ethos of the new institution, with its emphasis on collecting and

interpreting data. Measurement, comparison and verification were methods he employed, and in his county surveys of Wiltshire and Surrey he paid attention to natural history and local phenomena in ways that the Royal Society approved. In general, however, antiquarian matters did not fit into the Royal Society's programme and during the Restoration period few outstanding developments occurred. However, by this time antiquarian interests had become widespread among the gentry of England, and it was no longer unusual to be well informed about local history, to make small collections of coins and urns and other *curiosa*, or to read works of antiquarian scholarship. When Edmund Gibson of The Queen's College, Oxford, undertook to produce a vastly enlarged edition of Camden's *Britannia* at the end of the century, he found a large pool of contributors willing to revise each county, and a gratifyingly large readership.

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