

Well How Did This Happen?

A letter from the Hon. Pres. Of the UK Classical Association, Lindsey Davis

Texas Classics in Action, Summer 1997

[Note from Ginny: I had reprinted an article from Print Magazine called "Touch Stones," which involved the studying of ancient letterforms and taking rubbings of the same. I realized afterwards that of course Lindsey was absolutely right: that it is our job to preserve monuments and not add to their ruin. I had been thinking with my artist hat on and not my classicist hat....]

I have been discussing Cultural Backgrounds with my good friend Ginny Lindzey. She's artistic, but I'm a conservationist. It's a dangerous mix. When she's extolling beauty and creativity in connection with "rubbing" ancient inscriptions, I imitate the action of a middle-aged English woman, all tweed skirts and laced up brogues, roaring about the lessons of brassrubbing (now banned except under strict supervision in special centres, because of damaged brasses). I cite legislation; I speak of etiquette; I threaten Greek jails. In short, I am rude in the snootily baroque manner of an outraged Brit.

A shipment of chocolate chip cookies calms me down. Then I start musing on why I feel so strongly. It strikes me that the members of the TCA might be interested in the answers.

I shall be fifty just before the Millenium. I was at the tail end of the post-War "baby boom," so my primary school had 44 children in each class-a hot subject among educationalists in Britain right now. There was no money. We cut pencils in half so more children could use them.

At eleven we were "selected," either for academic "grammar" schools or others which dwelt on woodwork and domestic science. I took an extra exam and went to "King Edward's," one of many schools founded in the Sixteenth Century by the short-lived younger brother of Queen Elizabeth the First. The girls' High School was younger, but we still thanked "our pious founder" in the school prayer. It was in effect a "public" school, i.e. a private one; in fact most of the pupils, including me, had their fees paid by the city council. I belonged to the generation for whom the 1948 Education Act had provided that both primary and secondary education were compulsory and free, and that tertiary education would be available to all who wanted it-again mainly free. I would be among the first in my family to go to university; unlike today's graduates, I would confidently expect that to get me a better job, which I would take up unsaddled by debt.

The main benefit of King Edward's was classes of only 25 taught by wonderful teachers who were lured there by paying them above the national scale. (They would have said the

attraction was the reward of teaching extremely bright girls.) We had the proverbial "classical education" and everyone (75 girls per year) was taught Latin from the age of twelve. Most did three years. Teaching then was closely language-based. We glanced at Roman history and discussed ideas, but glimpses of "daily life" were incidental. Frankly, this was not much fun, especially if you were linguistically challenged-as I was. I do remember in my first year we did a project, making model Roman villas, but seemed like cheating (much like writing the Falco series, if I'm honest-too much fun!). And in those days there were hardly any books available to show us what villas were. The modern proliferation of fabulous textbooks packed with reconstructions and photos is something you should be desperately thankful for.

At thirteen we all faced a strangely arbitrary choice: Geography, German or Greek? With three others I chose Greek. I was hopeless. Being taught in such a tiny class was a brilliant discipline (no chance ever to skimp on your homework!). And we did have more freedom to discuss Ancient Greek life and philosophy. But I didn't warm to the Greeks. Well, not until I went abroad on a school trip across Europe by train and was entranced by Athens, Delphi, Mycenae, Olympia, Epidaurus and Corinth.

Incidentally, that was a great privilege. It is only in my generation that "ordinary" people started to go Abroad for holidays (though the footsoldier classes had been astonished by travel during the two World Wars). At first we couldn't afford to fly, so reaching a Mediterranean country took three or four days. Despite that we felt "the Continent" was on our doorstep, full of daring gourmet food, wine, political treachery and sexual depravity. I don't think we paid much attention to the artistic culture that we nowadays devour.

The best thing that happened to me was that one of my classics teachers, now Mrs Varney, was keen on archaeology. She ran an extracurricular society where young archaeologists, some now famous like Professor Graham Webster, came to talk about their latest excavations and to show slides of digs. Because interest was small, this was the only society that was run jointly with the Boys' School next door-a cunning boost to the membership. We visited sites, mainly Roman ones because that was where most excavation was being done; sometimes we worked as volunteers. I learned that I was too feeble to be an archaeologist myself (not keen on the rain, the mud, or the back-breaking effort). My interest in the subject, however, was lifelong and it certainly affects how I approach my books.

What classics teachers need to know about Elys Varney is that in me she had a truly dismal student. Remember this when you feel depressed. If I had been a star pupil, it would be far less of a triumph for my teacher that one day I ended up writing about the Romans-to such good effect that I would earn a decent living, attract the friendship of Ancient World specialists internationally, and be elected Hon. Pres. of the UK Classical Association "for bringing the classics to the public eye." No one who taught me can ever have envisaged this! Maybe you too have some wilting flower bungling gerunds, whose potential doesn't yet show.

I took Latin formally to the age of eighteen; a compulsory classics translation was part of the entrance exam for Oxford. Even to read English this could be crucial. In those days the colleges were single-sex; for women there were only three at Cambridge and five at Oxford. The competition was horrendous. I think I remember a tutor saying she had had a thousand girls applying for just sixteen places to read English Literature and Language, all really good at their main subject, so their acceptance might cruelly hinge on their Latin.

Why was I reading English? I had wanted to be a historian (my special period would have been the English Civil War of the Seventeenth Century). Quite simply English was where I could pass the exams. One teacher complained that I could write a good English essay even if I hadn't read the book it was about. . . .

Modern students would be alarmed to know that for me, English Literature stopped at 1918; you were supposed to hone your critical skills on the old stuff, then read contemporary authors for yourself. Thomas Hardy was dangerously modern. American authors were something we didn't speak of at all! The unmodernised English syllabus in our first year covered: Anglo-Saxon (learned from scratch, and studied in the original), Milton (more pain, frankly)-and Virgil's Aeneid, Book VI. Having already done the Descent to Avernus with the great Mrs Varney, I finally got the hang of it at that point. Another lesson: persevere.

My academic world has now vanished for ever: the latest edition of my college magazine announces that students are being accepted to read Classics at Oxford even if they have never learned Latin at school. Apparently they do five hours a week in their first year, with a slightly adapted general syllabus. To those who learned Anglo-Saxon in the same way this seems quite natural, but I deduce that traditional classicists find it shocking. (They probably say it's too American.)

When I left Oxford, it appeared that I left behind the Ancient World for ever, though I still cared about what we called "modern history" (which, like literature, was supposed to end after the Nineteenth Century). I had grown up in Birmingham, the second city of the UK. Funnily enough, it has virtually no Roman history. There may be a local signalling post, and Boudicca was defeated nearby, but we had no fort, no amphitheatre, no ancient city gates. In most English towns you can still plot the Roman streets, and our major roads follow the ones the legions used. Birmingham only grew in the Seventeenth Century, producing swords for the Parliamentary army in the Civil War (ours), then flourished later as a manufacturing city-engineering, motors, jewellery, guns-and a home to religious non-conformists. What it did have was Aston Hall, one of the finest Jacobean mansions ever.

Aston Hall is not particularly famous and I suspect that's because the city runs it; it never features in general catalogues of Historic Houses such as the National Trust's. It is wonderful, however, and every autumn parties can visit by candlelight. I first went with my primary school. From that visit dated my keen interest in old houses-despite my left-wing parents who disapproved of anything connected with the upper classes. Stately

homes were becoming the thing then, as their financially desperate owners tried to keep them going. Among the first were Chatsworth, Beaulieu with its vintage cars, Woburn with its lions. (Lions-in England? It caused much controversy, though in fact lions just grow thicker coats and don't mind.)

It has to be relevant that ordinary people were then starting to own cars; most grand estates are set in acres of countryside, and inaccessible by public transport. Once we could drive around we were out there, first with Scenery: from Birmingham which is centrally placed we had access to most of the Best of Britain-the picturesque cotswold villages with their thatched cottages, the mountains of Snowdonia, the Lake District, and the narrow lanes and moors of the West Country. Soon big houses were added to the beaches and beautyspots as daytrips for everyday Britons. A difference between here and the US must be that Britain is so small. Of course you have the Ante Bellum mansions of the South, Monticello, the houses in New England-but most of you can't get there and back before Sunday lunch as we can with ours.

This has become ingrained in the fabric of life. Large numbers of English people join English Heritage (castles and battlefields) and the National Trust (scenic coastlines and great houses). When we visit friends at weekends, a trip to a nearby Stately Home is likely to form part of the entertainment. Yes, you get a chance to growl at the aristocracy if that's your attitude, but there is also fine architecture, the best gardens, furniture, china and glass, silverware, pictures. As a DIY-[Do It Yourself]-mad nation, we collect inflated ideas for décor. Newsagents' shelves are packed with shiny magazines called things like "Home and Heritage," featuring gingham cushions and corn dollies (ugh!). English grannies, I fear, go out with plastic bags and seccateurs, to steal cuttings of rare plants. Not in my family, of course-though my Mum was once seen on Dartmoor shovelling pony dung into the boot of the car to take home for her roses. . . .

This is typical recreation in Britain, and would have made me a sad enough history-freak. But I had an extra incentive for passion: when I left university I became a civil servant. My US editor says that this translates as a garbage collector (nice irony!); I mean pen-pushing in a government department. It was the Department of the Environment, a misnomer since its major task then was providing nuclear missile sites. It also had responsibility for Ancient Monuments. One of my jobs was letting contracts, starting with ticket offices and toilets for castles, then working on new galleries in the great London Museums. I was involved in the controversial underground Visitors' Centre at Stonehenge and arranged the hole into which the new British Library has been put.

There were many unusual situations, for instance stabilising the fabled White Cliffs of Dover or renovating Brunel's Ironbridge, where there had to be a clause about supplying a rescue boat in case any workmen fell off into the racing River Severn. Since I specialised in oddities I also oversaw the contract for the Green Cross Code Man who was sent to schools to teach young children how to cross the road safely. . . . He was not strictly an Ancient Monument but an actor called Dave Prowse, who had been the Jolly Green Giant, and who became the original Darth Vader in "Star Wars." A clause in his

contract said he had to provide his own uniform-and launder it. Well, that's another kind of history.

In the DOE I learned a lot about how buildings are constructed, and what can be done to repair them or to try to prevent damage. I worked with architects, engineers and surveyors, and my job included making sure that their paperwork worked, though I was not responsible for its technical content. A later job involved writing policy papers on such issues as conservation. I hope it made me flexible. So (mellowed by cookies), I can concede to Ginny that there may be as much case for the artistic use of inscriptions as for their hardline preservation out of reach in museum galleries. Museums are now starting to say "Please feel free to touch the exhibits," after all. A different generation may have a completely different attitude.

On the other hand, (NB Eng Lit student speaking with Balance here), my archaeological grounding, amateur though it is, does make me want to tread carefully. I know that the Nineteenth Century excavators thought they were admirable seekers after knowledge as they gouged out precious sites, destroying evidence as they went, simply in order to furnish rich men with treasures. Even early Twentieth Century "scientific" methods of digging are now in disrepute. Modern archaeologists believe in leaving things underground to await the better techniques of the future (and also in not opening sites that governments won't pay to look after properly). However careful we try to be, our descendants may yet regard us as vandals and philistines.

As for inscriptions, modern scholarship is learning to use them to fill gaps in our knowledge in ways that would not have been foreseen in my childhood. I grew up when we thought classical literature was a closed body of knowledge. We learned about the Rosetta Stone and Linear B with astonishment. There was no thought of previously unknown Greek plays turning up in ancient rubbish dumps or private letters being decoded from waterlogged material preserved on Hadrian's Wall. Even classical history was an area where we might "prove" by archaeology that things in literature were more than myth, but we hardly dared hoped for brand new insights into events. Our horizons have expanded, and the fact is, we simply do not know how much extra information might become available in the future, or how existing relics might be used by scholars one day.

I don't view the past with reverence simply because it is old. Because I regard the Romans, and to a lesser extent the Greeks, as sharing a common humanity my feelings towards them and what they have left us are more friendly than awestruck. The Romans gave us the basis for modern Europe and much of Western life in general; I respect that. And the Romans were here; for a Brit they are ours. That said, Americans of Italian extraction probably feel more affinity with them as actual ancestors; we here are quite proud that we nearly threw them out under Boudicca, and that when they abandoned us to the barbarians four centuries later, we survived.

What I respond to personally reflects my own interests and background: their engineering, their bureaucratic efficiency, in literature their satire and in art their realism.

(I am going to the British Museum exhibition of the portraits from Fayum, for instance, and I won't be seeking idealised proportions but real faces-many of them female.) The past is intriguing for the way it relates to the present. I believe it should be preserved, studied, taught to children in a sensible manner, written about in fiction as well as in PhD theses-and seen as a suitable subject for jokes.

Which is, I suppose, much the same as I feel about Millenium age Britain and America.

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