

ESSAYS
in honour of
JIM & MURIEL TONKIN



WOOLHOPE NATURALISTS' FIELD CLUB

2011

A tribute to Jim and Muriel Tonkin



***T**his volume of Essays has been compiled by the Woolhope Club of Herefordshire in honour of Jim and Muriel Tonkin. For more than forty years they served as officers, retiring from their posts in April 2009. Such exceptional service merited, in the Club's view, a fitting tribute to their dedication.*

The general theme of the volume, The People of Herefordshire and their Buildings, is meant as a compliment to their special interests. From their earliest days as a couple, they shared a love of history and the study of the tangible remains of that history in the landscape and in documents.

Apart from a considerable amount of published work, they have passed on their knowledge and the fruits of their research with great enthusiasm and generosity. Many people have happy memories of expeditions around Herefordshire and beyond, often to remote and windswept places.

The authors of the essays in this volume owe a great debt to Jim and Muriel for the encouragement and support so freely given by them. It is a great sadness to us all that Jim died on 22 April 2010, before we were able to publish this tribute. We in Herefordshire must count ourselves very fortunate that Jim and Muriel chose to make their home here and to contribute so much to their adopted county.

The photographs above were taken soon after Jim and Muriel's engagement at Easter 1946.

Cornish born and bred

Although Herefordshire was to be their home for the major part of their lives, Jim and Muriel never lost sight of the fact that they came from good Cornish stock. Nor in fact did anyone who knew their address, as the name of their house is Cornish for the 'House of the Seekers.' As we shall see, this echo of their time in Cornwall could not have been more appropriate.

Muriel Davey was born on 22 January 1918 in the village of Gulval, the only child of William Davey and his wife Winifred, née Maddern. Although she attended the Penzance County School for Girls and Jim attended the equivalent boys' school, she was not acquainted with him. He was a few years her junior and so probably beneath her notice. There was time for her to go on school picnics like this one to Praa sands in 1930.



Already Muriel had a good memory for people and places and was delighted to read *Breakfast with Dolly*, a recent memoir by John Hedgecoe. He was a well-known artist and photographer responsible for the Queen's image on postage stamps. Thinly disguised as a novel, his book is an account of his time as an evacuee to Gulval, where he attended the local school and visited the local farming families whom Muriel knew well.

After school, Muriel started work at the G.P.O. office in Penzance in 1936 where she became supervisor of telegraphs. Jim arrived there in the latter part of 1940. She had already taken an interest in the many ancient monuments in the Cornish landscape, braving the February weather in 1940 to visit Lanyon Quoit. Once the war had begun in earnest the Cornish beaches were mined, and perforce her bicycle outings with friends were inland.



Muriel on expeditions to Lanyon Quoit in February 1940 and on her bicycle in 1941



Muriel at her best friend's wedding and (right) in the Morrab 'tropical' gardens in Penzance, in the fine weather of June, 1941

James White Tonkin was born in Newlyn on 14 October 1921, the elder son of James White Tonkin and his wife, the former Elizabeth Mann. Newlyn is in the parish of Paul but has its own church; it is known for its fishing industry. Paul lies just to the south-west of Penzance with Mount's Bay around the headland to the north. Jim's father was a monumental mason who worked at Castle Drogo using Cornish granite—perhaps we can ascribe Jim's interest in building stone to his father's influence.

From 1933 until July 1940 he attended Penzance County School for Boys, where he matriculated in French, Greek and Latin among other subjects. His mother was keen for him to enter the church and he was accepted at Leeds university to read theology, commencing in

October 1941. In the meantime, he found a job with the G.P.O. in Penzance. This employment may be said to have shaped his future in more ways than one, as it led to his wartime service in the Royal Corps of Signals and, importantly, he met his future wife Muriel Davey there.

The exigencies of wartime may have given Jim the excuse to relinquish theology; in any case he enlisted in June 1941, when he was posted to Catterick and was promoted to lance-corporal at the end of November. His ex-headmaster, Mr. Bradley, certified that he was of good moral character in December 1941 and he was put forward for officer training in February 1942.

Eventually he sailed for the Far East in May 1942 on the *Staffordshire* and arrived at Mhow in Madhya Pradesh, which lies to the north-west of Mumbai. In February 1943 he was on the move again across India to Pandu (modern Guwahati) in Assam where he saw his main action of the war. Here rail traffic was transhipped across the wide and changeable Brahmaputra. He was still at Pandu when Orde Wingate's controversial foray into Burma behind Japanese lines took place, but from November 1943 until October 1945 his army record simply says 'Field.'



Fortunately, as official records are patchy in this period, he kept a war diary in a series of exercise books. These and two albums of photographs have only recently been discovered by Muriel with his other war memorabilia, all of which will be deposited at the Royal Signals Museum. At the end of this tribute Muriel provides a more detailed account of what she has found in Jim's papers. In 1944 Jim was often operating overnight as signalmaster—a key role when events were leading to the pivotal Battle of Kohima. In November 1945 he sailed for home on the *Scythia* and after some administrative roles in Yorkshire was demobbed in December 1946. He had risen to the position of acting major on 10 October 1945, four days before his 24th birthday. On his release he was granted the rank of major.

Jim decided against taking up his offer to study at Leeds university, as he felt that he needed to be out in the working world. Accordingly, he enrolled for teacher training at Bristol's Redland College. Awaiting entry, he taught for two terms at Delabole all-age school in north Cornwall. On completion of his course at Bristol, as history was his first love, he took up an appointment teaching it at Basset Road Senior Boys' School at Camborne in Cornwall which he held from 1949 to 1953. In January 1954 he moved to Newquay as deputy headmaster of Tretherras County Secondary School, newly-built with a large catchment area, and remained there until 1963. During these years he studied for and gained a degree in history from London University, an upper second. He followed this with a year at Cambridge Institute of Education from 1962-3 when he was awarded a Dip. Ed.



Jim pictured at Tretherras in 1960 with the headmaster and his teaching staff

Married life in Cornwall

Jim and Muriel had communicated during the war, Jim recording meticulously letters received and sent. They became engaged at Easter 1946 and married on 12 August 1949.

They joined the Newquay branch of the Old Cornwall Society and by 1958 Jim was vice-chairman and Muriel assistant secretary, valuable training for the Woolhope Club. There they became friends with Charles Woolf, a Newquay photographer who, when president, wrote a booklet *Newquay Old Cornwall Society 1928-78*. Woolf says: 'Attention must be called to the names of Mr and Mrs J. W. Tonkin for they profoundly influenced the affairs of the Society for the next five years.' Jim was 'doing valuable work recording Tudor houses.' In 1961 it was said 'Mr Woolf and Mr Tonkin appear to devote almost all of their spare time to Old Cornwall.' The Newquay branch was asked to host the 1962 Gorsedd of Cornish bards.

Because of his work for the county, Jim had already been instituted as a bard at the Gorsedd at Callington in 1959, when he took the name *Whyler Chyow* or Seeker of Houses. It was appropriate that Muriel was instituted as bard at the 1962 Gorsedd, where she took the name *Whylores Breyon* or Seeker of Fragments—a reference to her research in documentary records which she has carried on for many years. The photograph below shows Jim and Muriel in their bardic robes, which Muriel still has, at the 1962 Gorsedd with Charles Woolf.

Jim and Muriel explored the Cornish countryside and its historical sites enthusiastically, as Charles Woolf's photograph below shows. Jim Tremain is at the top, but Jim is having to do duty as a ladder. Jim's pursuits were not entirely intellectual—he was a school referee for all sports.



Charles Woolf, Muriel and Jim in bardic robes in 1962



Somewhere in Cornwall, 1957



Charles Woolf, Jim, Muriel and Jim Tremain 'seeking houses' in the late 1950s

It was recorded in the minutes of the Old Cornwall Society's committee meeting in April 1963 that '[a] loss to the Society [was] reported in that Mr and Mrs Tonkin were to leave the town. In return for all that they had done for the Society they were to be presented with a book each of their own choice and be made Honorary Members.'

Jim and Muriel also joined the West Cornwall Field Club, later the Cornwall Archaeological Society. The first reference to them in the index of its journal is to the review of their book, the *History of the Parish of St Enoder*, published in 1962. Jim's article, 'The Recording of Vernacular Architecture in Cornwall' was published in the journal in 1965, after they had left the county, though Jim had written 'The Great House, Truro' for the journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall in 1961.

The move to Herefordshire

Jim's experience as deputy headmaster meant that he was an ideal candidate when Herefordshire County Council was seeking a headmaster to take on a secondary school newly built at Wigmore. It must have been a wrench to leave Cornwall, but Cornwall's loss was Herefordshire's gain.



Jim with his staff at the opening of Wigmore High School

Jim took up his post in September 1963 when he posed with his teachers for the group photograph shown above. Although he and Muriel had to live in temporary accommodation for a while, they moved in due course to a local purpose-built house.



Jim with Wigmore High School prefects in the early 1960s

Jim was headmaster of Wigmore High School from 1963 until his retirement in 1981. Former pupils have commented that if he did have to cover for an absent teacher, the talk soon turned to history, whatever the original subject! He is remembered with affection by his many pupils.

Both he and Muriel found that Herefordshire was a fruitful county for their researches, with a wealth of documentation and, of course, a wonderful stock of buildings. They joined the Woolhope Club shortly after their arrival, and soon began to serve as officers. Muriel was Assistant Secretary from 1966 and Assistant Treasurer from 1984, with much of the day-to-day administration in her hands. Jim was Editor from 1966 until 2005, and Secretary from 1986. They relinquished the last of their posts at the beginning of April 2009.

Members of the Club are well aware of their great good luck in attracting a couple who were willing to devote so much time to the Club's affairs. With Muriel's vital administrative work as assistant to the Secretary, membership secretary and *de facto* treasurer the Club would run smoothly for many years. Her hard work also freed them to pursue their historical interests to the great benefit of Herefordshire.

Jim's publications concentrated initially on the history of Hereford itself. Jim's first paper for the Club, on No. 3 High Street, Hereford, was published in the 1964 *Transactions*. It was followed by papers on 'Early Street Names of Hereford' (1966) and a contribution to 'A Medieval cellar off East Street and the early North Ditch of Hereford' (1967).

The 1964 *Transactions* saw Jim's first report as the newly-instituted Buildings recorder, which he continued without a break until 2007. His preamble in 1964 states that we should carefully record our old buildings because 'such a record is not simply architectural or archaeological, but is of importance to the social and economic historian as well and, in fact, to all who study the culture of the county.'

He also reports that ‘thanks to the Extra-Mural Department, University of Birmingham and the W.E.A., a group is being trained to record buildings and the fruits of their labours will be deposited with the Club and at the National Buildings Record.’

Jim’s ‘buildings group’ continued for many years, even after the University of Birmingham ceased to support it. Jim gave lectures to the group in the Woolhope Room during the winter, using his ever-expanding collection of slides. Latterly he had a cycle of lectures which lasted some years and such was the interest that many group members have enjoyed several cycles. During the summer visits were paid to house-owners who had consented to let him explore their bedrooms and lofts—they may have been disconcerted when subsequently his group arrived to see them too. Jim also led summer schools based at locations around the county. Photographs taken during his expeditions form a valuable record of the county’s buildings.

Both Jim and Muriel continued to publish papers in the Club’s *Transactions*. Muriel contributed ‘Onneslo’s Charity School, Aymestrey, 1516-1965’ (1967); ‘Wigmore Enclosure Act and Award 1772-1774’ (1975); ‘Mr Guy’s Hospital and its Herefordshire Estate’ (1980); ‘The Wigmore Enclosure Act and Award 1810-28’ (1984); ‘Woolhope Club Badge - Carpet Bed’ (1991) and ‘Herefordshire Toll-houses Then and Now’ (1996).

Jim published ‘An introduction to the Houses of Herefordshire’ (1968); ‘The Forbury Chapel, Leominster’ (1971); ‘Penrhos Court, Lyonshall’ (1973); ‘The Nunnery of Limebrook and its property’ (1974); ‘The Palaces of the Bishop of Hereford’ (1976); ‘Herefordshire Castles’ (1982); ‘Religious Houses with Special Reference to Herefordshire’ (1983); ‘The Goods and Chattels of our Forefathers, 1660-1760’ (1985); ‘A ‘Lost’ Domesday Manor’ (1988) and ‘Woolhope Room’ (1991). Both contributed to the 2000 sesquicentennial volume: Jim with ‘The Woolhope Club’ and ‘Medieval Houses in Herefordshire’, Muriel with ‘Windmills in Herefordshire’. They used their Hereford researches to publish *The Book of Hereford: the Story of the City’s Past* in 1975. Jim followed it with *Herefordshire* in 1977.

Although the majority of Jim’s publications were about Herefordshire, he did write or contribute to articles and books about other places—Shropshire and Dyfed, for example. Perhaps the most exotic is the paper on ‘Two Hanseatic houses in the Shetlands’ for *Archaeologia Cantiana* in 1976.

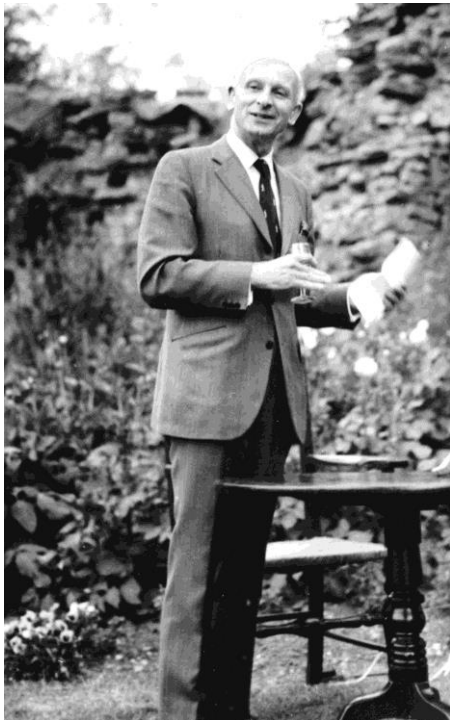
Jim was an early member of the national Vernacular Architecture Group, which was formed in 1952 to further the study of traditional buildings. Jim and Muriel had joined the society when they were living in Cornwall, Jim in 1954. At that time membership was not just a question of paying one’s subscription—a thesis had to be submitted and approved. The Spring conferences were usually held around Easter time, not always in the school holidays, but Jim managed to attend, and indeed organised that for 1968 which was held in Herefordshire.

In April 1965, when the conference was held at Evesham College, Jim was asked if he would become treasurer, which he did. He was also secretary from 1972 to 1980 after Sir Robert Hall retired from the post and moved to New Zealand. Jim served as president for three years from 1980 and vice-president for the three following years. He was also elected to fellowship of the Society of Antiquaries in 1974.

Field visits

As well as many talks to local organisations, Jim and Muriel led visits both for the Woolhope Club and other groups. Indeed, their commitment to the Club meant that as officers they usually went on all the summer one-day field trips. Each was president three times, Muriel in 1974, 1983 and 1995, Jim in 1967, 1973 and 1984. For many years they were involved with the organisation of week-long visits to other counties: a special pleasure must have been when a party of 43 members was taken to Cornwall for seven days in August 1979.

One of Jim's favourite buildings was nearby Wigmore Abbey and he led many visits there, making friends with the owners. Indeed, the current owners John and Carol Challis have placed a bench in Jim's memory in the abbey ruins. On the right below he is shown leading a visit there in 2007. The photograph on the left shows Jim in front of another ruined wall and flowerbed, probably at The White House, Aston Munslow, between 1975 and 1980.



Wigmore and the wider community

Not all Jim and Muriel's time was taken up with Wigmore school and their historical work. Jim was a trustee and vice-chairman of the Village Hall committee and Muriel has been its secretary since 1965. She was also a JP from 1970 to 1983.

When Jim retired in 1981, there was no question of putting their feet up. Instead, it was an opportunity for each of them to take on a substantial new role as volunteers at Herefordshire Record Office. Jim's interest in information on houses and their fixtures and fittings led him to

start the mammoth task of correcting a pre-existing index to Hereford wills from 1540 to 1700. Following from this, he analysed the content of some 20 per cent of the wills for their incidental information. In this he was helped by Muriel, and they spent most afternoons each week in the search room—no mean feat as Wigmore is a good distance from Hereford. Jim was very pleased to be chairman of the Friends of the Record Office from 2000 to 2005. Fortunately his work on Herefordshire wills has been submitted to the British Records Society and we await its publication. In spite of badgering by many of his friends Jim never managed to compile *The Houses of Herefordshire*, though his corpus of notes in the *Transactions* and in his archive calls for publication.

Jim and Muriel served a number of organisations outside the Woolhope Club. Just two examples: for many years they served on the committee of the Weobley and District History Society and Jim served on the *Victoria County History of Herefordshire* committee for eleven years until 2009.

Jim's contribution to Herefordshire life has been extraordinary but it was backed by Muriel's constant hard work and support. As well as her own publications and work for the archives, she has helped innumerable family historians discover more about their Herefordshire ancestors. 'Innumerable' is, of course, incorrect—Muriel has always kept excellent records.

A personal view

I have been a member of the Woolhope Club for just fifteen years and so have only known Jim and Muriel in their later years. I can, however, remember Jim climbing ladders enthusiastically to reach interesting roof timbers in remote buildings. He was unfailingly polite and helpful to the novices in his buildings group, just the latest generation to have been inspired to value their county and its history.

It has also been an honour and a pleasure to explore with Muriel the details of their lives in Cornwall and Herefordshire while compiling this tribute.

For those with longer memories, there will be an obituary for Jim in the Club's *Transactions* for 2010, written by members who knew Jim and Muriel from their earliest days in Herefordshire.

Rosalind Lowe (Editor)