

A life on the tiles: a conference in memory of **Dr Philip Mills**

Ulla Rajala MClfA (5739), Jeremy Evans and Mark Bell

Phil in Syria in 2008.
Credit: Ulla Rajala



The world of Roman pottery and CBM studies suffered a huge loss 18 months ago with the passing of Dr Philip Mills, a ClfA member for 24 years and former Chair of the ClfA Finds Group. On 20 September 2025 a group of colleagues, friends and family members gathered at the Birmingham and Midlands Institute to honour his memory at a day conference. The idea came from Dr Jeremy Evans, former employer and colleague, assisted by his co-organiser Mark Bell.

The day started with Phil's widow, Ulla Rajala, talking about Phil as a private person. This showed the personal side of Phil's life as a family man.

This was followed by Professor *emeritus* David Mattingly (University of Leicester) sharing his memories of Phil as a PhD student. This was a warm talk that emphasised the personal growth Phil went through from timid PhD applicant with a 2:2 and no master's

degree to confident specialist in Mediterranean CBM trade networks.

Duncan Brown followed with 'Not subliminal', concentrating on Phil's legacy in the ClfA Finds Group. He showed how Phil progressed from a fervent critic to chair of the group. Phil contributed to the creation of the Toolkit for Specialist Reporting (<https://www.archaeologists.net/work/toolkits/specialist-reporting/introduction>) and promoted proper contracts for finds specialists, something that is still not standard practice.

Dr Hilary Cool (Barbican Associates) presented 'Glasses, pots and beer. Exploring glass use in Meroitic Nubia', referring to Phil's liking of a good pint. She made a convincing case for local glass production in Meroe against the current consensus of glass being imported from Roman Egypt.

Colin Wallace, in his 'Sorting pottery in the dark – how I met Phil Mills and was led to the light', pencilled the outline of Phil's work in Bulgaria.

Dr Peter Warry presented ‘The Brandier Tilery: 3 kilns, 9 drains, 218 stamped tiles’. This talk was pure CBM heaven for the aficionados but a little obscure for those who were not.

After lunch, Professor Kevin Butcher (University of Warwick) remembered Phil’s fondness for bad Kung Fu movies in ‘The afterlife of ancient coins’. He suggested that some of the chance finds of unusual Roman coins in unexpected places would be a result of the use of any suitable base metal coinage as loose change as late as 1971!

Jerry Evans presented, on behalf of himself and Phil, the talk ‘Big data on Romano-British pottery and dating – a first attempt’. This interesting paper showed a real and dramatic drop-off in pottery use after the 190s AD that persisted for at least a century. This is possibly linked to the Antonine plague.

Dr Nick Beaudry (Université du Québec à Rimouski, Canada) gave his paper ‘A city behind the frontier: the late Roman fortress of Zaldapa Bulgaria’ via Teams. Beaudry gave an outline of this international project, for which Phil was an integral contributor to the research proposal.

Alice Lyons presented in her paper ‘Recent work and new discoveries: a view from the east of England’ her favourite find type – ceramic cauldrons. Lyons pieced together the known examples of these beautiful objects and was looking for more. She also presented hope for the future as Oxford Archaeology trains up new Roman pottery specialists.

Afternoon tea and surprise champagne, courtesy of Jerry Evans, was followed by Ian Rowlandson’s paper. ‘By fire and violence? A review of the pottery from Adrian Oswald’s excavations’ showed the excavations of Norton Disney as an example of how current events affect interpretation of sites and that the settlement at the site continued longer than Oswald suggested.

Pete Wilson’s paper ‘Building understanding: Phil and Yorkshire’ highlighted the effect of the loss of Phil; he had participated in the analysis of some key sites in Yorkshire and helped in the functional interpretation of many of the sites.

The conference was finished in style with professor *emeritus* Martin Millett (University of Cambridge), who in his paper ‘Patterns of deposition at Aldborough (*Isurium Brigantum*)’ presented the preliminary results of the study that started in 1985, coincidentally the year of Phil’s first ever excavation. He presented a preliminary study of soil volumes and find densities from different types of sites in Yorkshire.

Throughout the conference the atmosphere was uplifting and cheerful but tempered by the more

serious realisation of the importance of Phil’s work and the lack of a younger generation of finds specialists.

The papers were all videoed and are available to view on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/live/tEaPm5m4zy4?si=bG343uXnfpeoc6xq>. They will also be available on The Study Group for Roman Pottery website.

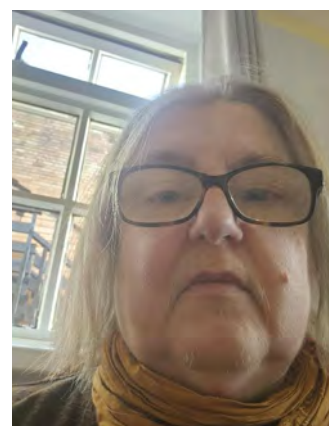


The audience listening to Martin Millett’s lecture. Credit: Mary Smith



Ulla Rajala

Ulla is Phil’s wife, fellow archaeologist and mother to their son Alexander. She is currently affiliated with Stockholm University, Sweden. She and Phil edited the Oxbow volume *Forms of Dwelling* together.



Mark Bell

Mark has a BSc in Archaeological Sciences from the University of Bradford and an MPhil in Computer Simulation from Staffordshire University. He currently makes his living in IT but still has archaeology as an interest.



Jerry Evans

Jerry is a freelance Roman pottery specialist with a PhD from the University of Bradford. He is a Director of Barbican Research Associates.