

ALAN VINCE

These personal reminiscences pay tribute to Alan George Vince (1952-2009) our friend and mentor, particularly in terms of his lasting contribution to ceramic petrology. They are offered by Elaine Morris, Jacqui Pearce and Roberta Tomber who remember different aspects of his life and career.

My first sighting of Alan Vince was in Shrewsbury, Shropshire. The West Midlands Rescue Archaeology Committee (WEMRAC) had hired a team, under the direction of Martin Carver, to excavate a site at Pride Hill along the town wall. We were in post-excavation phase and based at Rowley House, next door to the Museum. Alan was working on his doctoral research at that time, travelling around the region to examine as many post-Roman assemblages from castles, towns and rural sites in museums, units and private collections as he could find to gather data and select samples for petrological analysis for his thesis on the medieval ceramic industry of the Severn Valley – a large-scale study covering both pottery and ceramic building materials. His timing was perfect; I had been struggling with ‘fabrics’, getting very frustrated with my lack of experience and knowledge while trying to teach myself how to characterise and define them as best I could. Alan’s visit blew my mind. He transformed my way of looking at what was in front of me, changing me from a ‘splitter’ worrying about every little inclusion into a ‘lumper’ who appreciated the variations found amongst volcanic and sedimentary rocks and sandy clays. And he did this with style as a sensitive teacher – Alan always wanted to share what he knew with others for the good of the subject. This was 1974; a few years before the Peacock enlightenment (1977a) was available to all of us.

Alan convinced me to study ceramic analysis at the University of Southampton under David Peacock, who had been his supervisor during the eight years of research and writing of this thesis in the 70s. For this study, Alan prepared over a thousand thin sections and “had a lot of data”; so much data that David had to convince him not to put his entire thesis into one article (Vince 1977)! This kind of post-graduate research is rarely possible today in Britain but it was Alan’s extraordinary vision, perseverance, systematic recording style (before personal computers) and sheer single-minded determination that made it happen. He applied a rigorous method to the application of our science of ceramic petrology to explore and re-create the history of an ancient industry. But real life intervened as it always does – his grant had run out. Alan had to make money as he and his wife, Joanna, had become parents with new responsibilities so he was hired to direct a major excavation in Newbury in 1979 and discovered that the pottery from Berkshire was equally challenging and in need of his skills, characterising the many fabrics

such as Newbury A and Newbury B which are common to so many assemblages in the area. Eventually his doctoral thesis, a three-volume labour of love, was finished and awarded in 1983, by which time he had been appointed to his first long-term post as head of archaeological ceramics at the Department of Urban Archaeology, Museum of London.

Elaine Morris

Alan started working at what was then the Museum of London’s Department of Urban Archaeology (DUA) in 1980, taking up the reins from Clive Orton (a very hard act to follow!). Clive, working with Chris Green and Mike Rhodes, had begun the monumental task of creating an exhaustive ceramic fabric type series for London, based on the scientific approach to fabric characterisation that was then still in its infancy. The system embraces all periods, but we had already moved towards a much greater understanding of the major ceramic wares used in medieval and later London than had previously been possible. What Alan did was to develop the study of fabrics in the DUA, using the solid foundations that had been laid to build an edifice of lasting importance to our understanding of London’s pottery. By means of an extensive programme of thin-section analysis, backed up in due course by Neutron Activation Analysis of carefully selected groups of material, Alan and his team at the DUA were able to characterise in detail the full range of ceramic industries supplying London during the Saxo-Norman and medieval periods.

This ground-breaking work gave rise to a series of published fabric type series for London, five volumes of which were published between 1982 and 1991. He was one of the most generous of people with his scholarship, and always encouraged those who were lucky enough to work with him. The various volumes of the type-series therefore appeared as multi-author works, with Alan unfortunate enough to have a surname beginning with V, so always coming at the end of the list – but he was the inspiration and guiding hand behind each one. He was a man of vision, who could always see past the trees to the wood, and this lay behind his development of the published the London type-series. This was again ground-breaking work, marrying archaeologically excavated evidence with that of the Museum of London’s magnificent Ceramics and Glass Collection to build a closely datable ceramic sequence for the capital’s pottery. He achieved this by bringing together the evidence derived from considerable quantities of sherd material from dendro-dated revetment dumps excavated along the Thames foreshore in the City (that is, pottery with ‘context’), and that of the largely complete pots in the museum collection (all found in the City, but largely without ‘context’, in the archaeological sense). This work has provided the fundamental basis for all subsequent ceramic studies in London, and remains as valuable (and as valid) today as when it was first developed.

It was a very great privilege to work with Alan Vince and it was always great fun too. He was one of the most 'unstuffy' people one could meet – a very rare quality when combined with such a brilliant mind.

Jacqui Pearce

I first met Alan in the summer of 1976 at Bewell House, a house standing alone in the middle of a car park in Hereford. I was taken there by Elaine Morris, who was meeting Alan to discuss the early medieval shelly wares with which they were both grappling. Even at this time Alan was established as a fabric guru. I subsequently lived in Bewell House while working in Herefordshire myself. Thus a pattern was set of me following in Alan's footsteps. I went to Southampton to study soon after he completed his PhD and subsequently took over his job in London when he left that. Alan was so well-loved by all his staff at the DUA and had professionalised the study of pottery there so thoroughly I never even attempted to fill his shoes!

It was through the CPG that we actually coincided. From the first conference hosted by the British Museum in 1980 (Vince 1982) until the last conference he attended in Sheffield in February 2008 as its Chair, Alan was a motivating force behind the Group. I suspect if I had the programmes to hand I would find he had given a paper at nearly every conference, and certainly he always had questions for the speakers – questions that helped us all progress ourselves and also progressed the subject. This, his generosity with information and his light touch in imparting, has already been widely noted. His sharp sense of humour enlivened many a CPG conference and our rare Committee meetings held at the Neel Akash restaurant near the British Museum.

Since Alan's death I have received a number of emails asking for advice as to whom might take on the petrographic work that Alan would have done. The answer is that there's no one single person who combines the background knowledge, the petrographic experience and the ability to combine petrology with ICP analysis that had become the hallmark of Alan's later work. The gap he leaves requires more than one person to fill.

Personally we can be grateful for knowing Alan. Professionally he has left us an incredible legacy. Part of that legacy is his 'A computerized database for United Kingdom ceramic thin sections' (UKTS) that was collected by Barbara Precious and Kate Steane in the 1990s and which provides us with a listing of c. 20,000 thin sections stored in various universities, museums, archaeological units and private collections throughout the UK. One outgrowth of this catalogue was a chronological assessment of the state of petrographic work in the UK for the prehistoric (Morris and Woodward 2003), medieval (Vince 2005) and post-medieval (Vince 2001) periods. Alan was one of the first archaeologists to champion the open dissemination of

archaeological data and grey literature through electronic means and this resource is one result of that interest.

A second legacy comprises the over 4000 thin sections Alan examined as a freelance specialist and that his family has donated to the Department of Conservation and Scientific Research at the British Museum. At the BM it will be curated in perpetuity and form an invaluable resource for consultation and research. More information on the scope of this collection will be published in a future OPA, and anyone with specific requests should contact the Department at science@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk.

Roberta Tomber

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