

## **My first excavation: the Roman Villa in Box (1967)**

**Richard Hodges**

I was intrigued by archaeology when I was just 15, and was easily persuaded to join the evening class in the village school. It was in early November that the secretary of the class announced an imminent excavation at the bottom of the vicar's garden. I immediately wrote to the director of the project and soon received an elegantly written reply. It was on the first grey Monday morning following the end of term that I arrived on site at 8.00 a.m. I shyly approached the oldest of the group present and asked him if he was the director. The group, all drinking tea, laughed heartily - they were in fact the paid Ministry of Works' labourers. The director arrived a little late with what seemed a bevy of girls, and to one of these, I was allotted, and so slowly was trained to recognise levels, to differentiate between microliths (flints) and stone, Semian ware and post-medieval sherds.

The excavation was of the garden in advance of building the Selwyn Hall, and its aim was to quickly look at an area beyond the celebrated Roman Villa found by Brakspear in the first years of the twentieth century. The excavation grant was limited so we worked at a real pace ignoring rain and even snow, and digging when it was hard with frost. By becoming something of a local agent for the dig - supplying an arc lamp and fruit cakes (made by my Mother) - I was permitted access to the thoughts of the first-time director, and so began an long and inestimably valuable friendship. I have little doubt that it was this close association with the excavation, drawing sections of the trenches by arc light, digging on my days off, back filling at night, that fostered my determination to be an archaeologist. The frightful December weather merely added emphasis to the excitement.

The second campaign at Box in the following summer meant that I had earned the rights of a seasoned campaigner. Thus, for short periods as we re-excavated Brakspear's trenches I was elevated to the rank of supervisor with command over students seemingly many years my elder. To this season came a rich variety of volunteers making it a lively six weeks. For much of this time the weather was glorious, the only exception being one dramatic night-long thunderstorm that activated a long defunct Roman drain. And the predominant daily noise was a blend of John Arlott reporting the Ashes, and the swinging of pick axes beneath the fruit trees in the garden of Beckett Mill. Of course, time dismissed the cut hands and the aches from shovelling, and the long evenings drawing sections. It also conceals the seemingly endless state of perplexity arising from the trenches which lacked sufficient stratigraphy to make sense of what we were finding. Yet it was a very happy occasion and one that provided me with a firm conviction that archaeology was to be my profession. While it has proved the platform on which this first-time director has built a career that now includes excavations in other sites that are as notable in the Roman Empire - Carthage and Pompeii, to name just two of them.