

= Mick Aston =

Michael Antony " Mick " Aston , FSA (1 July 1946 ? 24 June 2013) was an English archaeologist who specialised in Early Medieval landscape archaeology . Over the course of his career , he lectured at both the University of Bristol and University of Oxford and published fifteen books on archaeological subjects . A keen populariser of the discipline , Aston was widely known for appearing as the resident academic on the Channel 4 television series Time Team from 1994 to 2011 .

Born in Oldbury , Worcestershire to a working @-@ class family , Aston developed an early interest in archaeology , studying it as a subsidiary to geography at the University of Birmingham . In 1970 , he began his career working for Oxford City and County Museum and there began his work in public outreach by running extramural classes in archaeology and presenting a series on the subject for Radio Oxford . In 1974 , he was appointed as the first County Archaeologist for Somerset , there developing an interest in aerial archaeology and establishing a reputation as a pioneer in landscape archaeology ? a term that he co @-@ invented with Trevor Rowley ? by authoring some of the earliest books on the subject . In 1978 he began lecturing at the University of Oxford and in 1979 became a tutor at the University of Bristol , supplementing these activities by working as an archaeological tour guide in Greece .

In 1988 , Aston teamed up with television producer Tim Taylor and together they created two shows which focused on bringing archaeology into British popular consciousness . The first was the short @-@ lived Time Signs (1991) , although this was followed by the more successful Time Team , which was produced for Channel 4 from 1994 to 2013 . Aston was responsible for identifying sites for excavation and for selecting specialists to appear on the show , and through the programme became well known to the viewing public for his trademark colourful jumpers and flowing , untidy hairstyle . In 1996 he was appointed to the specially @-@ created post of Professor of Landscape Archaeology at Bristol University , and undertook a ten @-@ year project investigating the manor at Shapwick , Somerset . He retired from his university posts in 2004 , but continued working on Time Team until 2011 and in 2006 commenced writing regular articles for British Archaeology magazine until his death . Although Aston did not believe that he would leave a significant legacy behind him , after his death various archaeologists claimed that he had a major impact in helping to popularise the discipline among the British public .

= = Biography = =

= = = Early life and education : 1946 ? 69 = = =

Aston was born on 1 July 1946 into a working @-@ class family in Oldbury , West Midlands , to cabinet @-@ maker Harold Aston and his wife Gladys . He developed an early interest in archaeology , although teachers at Oldbury Grammar School attempted to dissuade him from pursuing it . His father gave him two books on archaeology as a Christmas present , and he subsequently spent much time visiting archaeological sites , sometimes playing truant to do so . The first of his family to attend university , Aston studied geography at the University of Birmingham , albeit with a subsidiary in archaeology , graduating in 1967 . He taught himself more about archaeology by enrolling in various excavations , and was influenced by such figures as his thesis supervisor Harry Thorpe , as well as the geographer Trevor Rowley and archaeologists Philip Rahtz and Philip Barker . His dissertation was on the development of settlement in the West Penwith peninsula .

= = = Early career : 1970 ? 87 = = =

Aston first gained full @-@ time employment in 1970 , working as a field officer at the Oxford City and County Museum in Oxfordshire . For a time living in a tent , he worked on the sites and

monuments record and taught several extramural classes while based at the museum . This extramural teaching fitted closely with Aston 's staunch belief that archaeology should be open to all who were interested in it . As part of this devotion to public outreach , he presented a radio series on archaeology that was broadcast on Radio Oxford . In 1974 he moved to Taunton to become the first County Archaeologist for Somerset , where he set up a new site record and oversaw the excavation of sites revealed by the construction of the M5 motorway . Again he also taught extramural adult education classes , this time for the University of Bristol . It was here that he developed a passion for aerial archaeology , and would often charter private planes in order to undertake aerial photography . Becoming a pioneer of landscape archaeology , along with Trevor Rowley he was responsible for coining the term in their 1974 book , Landscape Archaeology . With archaeologist James Bond he authored The Landscape of Towns (1976) , in which he extended his use of landscape archaeology to urban areas . Recognising his contribution to the discipline , in 1976 , he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London .

Tiring of his position as county archaeologist , finding it " too safe , pensionable and superannuable " , in 1978 he returned to Oxfordshire to take up a temporary position as a tutor in archaeology and local studies at Oxford University 's External Studies Department . That year he co -@-@ ran his first study tour to Greece with Peter Hardy ; he would continue to run these annually for a number of years , most often visiting Santorini . In 1979 he returned to the West Country as tutor in archaeology at the University of Bristol 's Extra @-@ Mural Department , through which he organised weekend and evening courses throughout the region , introducing thousands of interested people to archaeology . During this period he also authored Interpreting the Landscape (1985) .

= = = Founding Time Team : 1988 ? 95 = = =

In June 1988 the producer Tim Taylor invited Aston to work on a new four @-@ episode television series for Channel 4 called Time Signs , broadcast in June and July 1991 . The series focused on the historical development of the area about to be flooded by the Roadford Reservoir in Devon , making heavy use of archaeological data . Aston brought archaeologist Phil Harding into the project in order to explain techniques of experimental archaeology to the audience . Meanwhile , in August 1989 , Aston was promoted to the position of Reader in Landscape Archaeology at Bristol University . He also continued to write on the subject , authoring the book Monasteries (1993) ; he had initially planned to title the volume Monasteries in the Landscape but his publisher , Batsford , had insisted on the shorter title .

Aston and Taylor subsequently decided to work together on a new archaeological television series , devising the format for Time Team . Whilst Taylor organised the film production side of the project with Channel 4 , Aston located suitable sites to excavate , and gathered together a team of specialists to appear on the show , among them field archaeologists Harding and Carenza Lewis , artist Victor Ambrus , and historian Robin Bush . He knew the actor and television presenter Tony Robinson after they had met on an archaeological course in Greece , and successfully requested that he present the show . From an early stage , they had agreed that every episode would feature a practical process or a re @-@ enactment alongside the field archaeology .

Time Team was first broadcast in 1994 , and would attract around four million viewers per episode , with Aston becoming " an icon to the viewing public . " Writing in The Guardian , Christopher Dyer noted that Aston 's " unkempt hair and beard , multicoloured sweaters and Black Country accent made him instantly recognisable " to the British public , describing him as " a popular success " who had attracted " a large public following " . Aston acted as chief archaeological adviser to the programme until the end of series nineteen , starring in almost every episode , although he would later comment that when it first started he had no idea it would continue for so long . Aston enjoyed working with the Time Team crew , commenting that they were " a great gang ... There are some real party people . "

Aston saw Time Team as an extension of his work as an extramural tutor , telling a 2013 interviewer that it was " a way of reaching 3 million people rather than 30 people in the village hall . " Commenting on the popularity of Time Team , and its role in exposing the British public to

archaeology , in a 2010 interview Aston remarked that " My motive was to get as many people as possible interested in archaeology , because we [in the profession] all enjoy it and think it interesting . That was my personal aim ... and on that basis I think it is a success . " Time Team encouraged wider public interest in archaeology and led to increasing numbers of students applying to study archaeological courses at British universities , while subscriptions to Current Archaeology magazine quadrupled to 18 @, @ 000 in the show 's first five years . In autumn 1998 , Channel 4 started a Time Team fan club , which had 16 @, @ 000 members within a few months , while Aston became a supporter of the Council for British Archaeology 's Young Archaeologists ' Club (YAC) , and with Harding gave regular talks to YAC branches . Aston found himself giving up to 20 public lectures a year on the subject of Time Team , describing the public feedback as " embarrassingly encouraging " .

= = = Professorship : 1996 ? 2011 = = =

In 1996 , Aston was appointed to the position of Professor of Landscape Archaeology at Bristol University 's Department of Continuing Education , a post designed explicitly for him . In 1998 the post was moved to the Centre for the Historic Environment within the Department of Archaeology . He would subsequently be instrumental in setting up the master 's degree in archaeology and screen media at the department . By 1996 , Aston was feeling " a bit frustrated " with Time Team , primarily because he was always " number two " to Robinson . He proceeded to present his own six @-@ episode series , Time Traveller , in which he explored various archaeological sites in the counties around Bristol . It was broadcast on HTV over July and August 1997 , and gained the largest local audiences for its time slot .

The archaeology students of King Alfred 's College , Winchester also participated in a 10 @-@ year project led by Aston to investigate the manor of Shapwick in Somerset . It became the " type site for the study of the development of medieval villages " . Aston published the results of the project in The Shapwick Project , Somerset : A Rural Landscape Explored (2007) , co @-@ written with Christopher Gerrard , and this was followed by a more popular account of the project , Interpreting the English Village , in 2013 .

Alongside his academic publications , Aston wrote two books on archaeology for a more general audience , both of which were published by Channel 4 Books as a spin @-@ off from the Time Team television series . The first of these was Time Team 's Timechester : A Companion to Archaeology , co @-@ written with Carenza Lewis and Phil Harding and first published in 2000 . Based around the fictional British town of Timechester , the book looks at how the settlement would have progressed from the Palaeolithic through to the modern day , and examines the remains that each period would have left behind in the archaeological record . This was followed in 2002 by Archaeology is Rubbish : A Beginner 's Guide , which Aston co @-@ wrote with Tony Robinson and dedicated to Harding . Archaeology is Rubbish describes a fictional excavation site in an ordinary suburban back garden , and discusses the evidence from different archaeological periods , the field methods and techniques used by the excavators , and the legal proceedings and problems that archaeologists in Britain face .

Aston retired from Bristol University in 2004 , subsequently becoming Professor Emeritus . He was also appointed an Honorary Visiting Professor at the University of Exeter , University of Durham , and the University of Worcester . That year , the University of Winchester awarded him an honorary Doctor of Letters . In 2006 Aston began writing a regular column , " Mick 's Travels " , for the bimonthly journal British Archaeology , the publication of the Council for British Archaeology . In 2007 , Worcester University awarded Aston an honorary doctorate ; that same year a number of his colleagues released a festschrift in his honour entitled People and Places : Essays in Honour of Michael Aston .

= = = Final years : 2012 ? 13 = = =

In February 2012 it was reported that Aston had left Time Team . He explained his position to the

Western Daily Press , stating that the show 's producers had made a number of changes to the series without consulting him , and that in the process Time Team had been " dumbed down " , something he considered bad for archaeology . He was annoyed that a number of archaeologists ? including surveyor Stewart Ainsworth , small finds specialist Helen Geake and illustrator Victor Ambrus ? had seen their roles diminished while a new co @-@ presenter , Mary @-@ Ann Ochota (a former model with a bachelor 's degree in archaeology and anthropology) , had been introduced , and that as a result the episodes now contained " a lot of faffing about . " In an interview with the magazine British Archaeology Aston said : " The time had come to leave . I never made any money out of it , but a lot of my soul went into it . I feel really , really angry about it . "

In July Aston received a lifetime achievement award at the British Archaeological Awards , with Bristol University 's Professor Mark Horton praising him for making " the past accessible to all " . In October , Channel 4 announced that the twentieth series of Time Team would be its last as the show was being axed . In December Aston signed a petition advocating his support for the revamp of the Somerset Rural Life Museum in Glastonbury , which was then seeking financial backers .

On 24 June 2013 it was announced that Aston had died unexpectedly at his home in Somerset .

Ralph Lee , head of Channel 4 's factual programming , announced that they had been " terribly saddened " by the news , and that they were planning a " tribute night " to Aston consisting of Time Team episodes to be screened on More4 on 13 July .

= = Selected works = =

= = Personal life = =

Aston was known for his " unfailing commitment and integrity " , with his life being dominated by " old @-@ fashioned idealism and loyalty " . He was a vegetarian and a naturist , as well as an anarchist and an atheist . Describing himself as " a keen European " , a friend of his noted that he " railed against right wing politics , reserving special venom for Margaret Thatcher , and fought against all manner of authority , including university paperwork , and most especially if it came in a uniform . "

His hobbies included gardening , pottery , astronomy , listening to classical music and cooking . He supported a number of charities and other causes , including Greenpeace , the Woodland Trust , Oxfam and Sightsavers International . He liked to live a private , hermit @-@ like life , and once commented that " For some of the time I feel I could be a monk " but that he " couldn 't cope with the celibacy . " A self @-@ described " solitary person " , he found it somewhat annoying being a television celebrity and being recognised by members of the public .

Aston had a son , James , and a stepdaughter , Kathryn , both children of his former partner Carinne Allinson , with whom he broke up in 1998 . He later entered into a relationship with landscape historian Teresa Hall , who survived him on his death . He lived in what he called " a rather grotty ' 60s bungalow " in Somerset . The reporter Steve Eggington visited Aston 's home in 2008 , where he noted that it was filled with " a labyrinth of books and maps , seemingly with different projects at different stages in each room . "

Aston commented that throughout his life he suffered from poor health ; he was afflicted with aspergillosis from the early 1980s , and was also asthmatic . He suffered a brain haemorrhage in March 2003 , and was hospitalised for two weeks . The experience sent him into depression for eighteen months , during which time he read the autobiography of actress Jane Lapotaire , who had gone through the same experience , something which he believed aided his recovery more than anything else .

= = Legacy = =

Aston did not believe that he would leave a significant legacy behind him . He commented that this was the case because Britain 's archaeological community had failed to develop the work that he

had done with Time Team and with extramural teaching , and that all the public outreach he had accomplished would die with him . He felt that there was no " celebrity archaeologist " to replace him , and ultimately felt that the situation in British archaeology made him " angry and sad . "

In British Archaeology magazine , Aston was described as " the Mortimer Wheeler of our times " because , despite strong differences between their personalities , both had done much to bring archaeology to the British public . It went on to note that Aston reminded archaeologists that " their job is to do archaeology , and if that was an archaeology that meant nothing to ordinary people , there was no point in it ? and government would be among the first to notice . " Two of Aston 's colleagues from Bristol University , Stuart Prior and Mark Horton , commented that " Mick brought archaeology into the living rooms of half the nation , and left a legacy that will shape the discipline for decades to come . " Writing for the website of Antiquity , Christopher Gerrard described him as " perhaps the best known face in British archaeology " , adding that " in so many different areas of medieval archaeology his legacy will live on " . Emma McFarnon described Aston as " Somerset 's premier archaeologist " in her obituary on the This is Somerset website .

Following Aston 's death , former colleague Francis Pryor noted that Aston was a " remarkable archaeologist who could really dig " , being a " warm , loving , nice man . " Another colleague , Phil Harding , commented on Aston 's " incredible knowledge " and " effortless way of making archaeology accessible to people . " Tony Robinson wrote of him : " Mick was a real child of the ' 60s and a bit of a rebel , but he was also a series of contradictions . He was one of the best academic archaeologists in the country , yet his real love was teaching ordinary people . He was the grumpiest old Black Country curmudgeon you could imagine , but he had a heart of absolute gold . " He also noted that " archaeology is now a subject that tens of thousands of people enjoy and value , and this is almost solely down to him . " Ralph Lee , head of Channel 4 's factual programming , described Aston as a " brilliant communicator " who helped make archaeology " so popular " in the UK .