The Society of Antiquaries of London over 300 years

by David Gaimster and Bernard Nurse
Society of Antiquaries of London

The Society of Antiquaries of London is the oldest independent Learned Society concerned with the study of the past. The Elizabethan College of Antiquaries, with such scholars as William Camden, Sir Robert Cotton and John Stow, disbanded in the reign of James I. The Royal Society, founded in 1660, had an early interest in historical monuments such as Avebury and published much material on archaeological finds in its Philosophical Transactions. However, by the end of the 17th century, its attention was focussed purely on science. The Society of Antiquaries of London traces its origin to a meeting on 5 December 1707 between three friends, Humfrey Wanley, John Talman and John Bagford in a London tavern. At this time, those who were interested in the physical and documentary evidence of the past were called antiquaries. The Society was formally constituted in 1718 when there were twenty three members, and the first Articles of Association defined the purpose of the Society as making knowledge of British antiquities more universal.

The Society had a membership of about 150 in 1751 when it was granted a royal charter by King George II, who became its patron, and its members became entitled to call themselves Fellows (or FSA). It was charged by its charter with the ‘encouragement, advancement and furtherance of the study and knowledge of the antiquities and history of this and other countries’, and a wide national and international outlook has been a feature ever since. Once the Society had been incorporated as a chartered learned society, bequests could be accepted. In 1753, the Society rented rooms in a former coffee house in Chancery Lane, providing a secure space for the library, but it soon outgrew these premises. In 1781, the Society of Antiquaries joined the Royal Society and the Royal Academy in the spacious new accommodation with finely decorated rooms at Somerset House, which had been granted by their patron at the time, King George III.

The collections grew rapidly. Fellows were collectors and donated acquisitions of an astonishing variety. Unique broadsides relating to the seventeenth century Virginia Company were given with several hundred others. Objects such as a Bronze Age shield, (Fig. 2) from Scotland and a Thomas Becket casket from about 1200 were donated as were illuminated manuscripts such as a Book of Hours (Fig. 3) from about 1500. An outstanding group of early royal portraits was bequeathed by Thomas Kerrich.
Society purchased from its own funds two important collections of drawings previously belonging to John Talman and Edward Harley, and occasionally purchased paintings such as that of Old St. Paul’s. Key manuscript sources for British history, such as the twelfth century *Winton Domesday* and the mid-sixteenth century *Inventory of Henry VIII*, were bought at auction, although it was nearly two hundred years before transcripts of them were published. Before the middle of the nineteenth century the Society was often seen by Fellows as the most appropriate place to deposit British antiquities and historical documents and pictures. The British Museum only started officially collecting British antiquity with the acquisition of Charles Roach Smith’s FSA collection of London finds in 1856 (previously its interests had been dominated by classical antiquity). The National Portrait Gallery was not founded until the same year and county record offices were not established until the twentieth century.

The Society’s most notable contribution at this time was towards the understanding of British medieval art and architecture. The commissioning of record drawings of medieval buildings was an important aspect of its work, and artists such as George Vertue and John Carter were appointed as draughtsmen. The thirteenth-century murals at the Palace of Westminster and the sixteenth-century murals at Cowdray House, Sussex, were recorded and published by the Society; both buildings were later destroyed by fire. Drawings of items in Fellows’ collections were exhibited at meetings; one was of a ring said to have been given by Mary Queen of Scots (Fig. 8) to an ancestor of Lord Mansfield. This can no longer be traced. Drawings were commissioned for publication such as those of the Ribchester helmet (Fig. 4) now in the British Museum. Objects were displayed and passed around a long table for members to discuss; a practice caricatured by George Cruikshank in his satirical print *The Antiquarian Society*.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Society was considered fashionable, with members that included leading politicians, noblemen, clergy, lawyers and collectors and numbers had reached about 800 by 1812. The Antiquaries remained a small society, but managed to raise its standing in the archaeological community by the vigorous efforts of several distinguished officers in the second half of the nineteenth century. After 1842, local secretaries were appointed who reported on finds in their areas and the record was published in the Society’s *Proceedings*. When A.W. Franks, Keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum, was Director in the 1860s and 1870s several important exhibitions were held in Somerset House. These included a series on Palaeolithic (1871), Neolithic (1872) and Bronze Age (1873) implements. Scholars with an international reputation, such as Heinrich Schliemann, visited the Society and addressed meetings.

The government’s pressing need for accommodation for civil
servants in Somerset House led to the learned societies there being offered alternative premises in the new Burlington House, Piccadilly, and the Antiquaries moved in 1874, gaining considerably more space for the growing library. The collections developed from a concentration on British topography into a major resource for the study of British and European archaeology. Under the Presidency of Sir John Evans (1885–92), the Society took the initiative to improve liaison between county archaeological societies by establishing the Congress of Archaeological Societies. In 1889, Evans established the Research Fund with a sizeable donation from his own resources. Grants from the Fund, the Society’s support and the expertise of its Fellows made excavations at many important British sites possible, from Silchester, Hampshire, in the 1890s to Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, in the 1980s.

The Society has a distinguished record in promoting the interests of British archaeology and the protection of the historic environment. In 1877, William Morris, who was later elected a Fellow, formed the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and in 1882 Fellows were instrumental in lobbying for the passing of the first Ancient Monuments Protection Act. In 1907 the Society

Fig. 5. Two hand-coloured lithographs depicting caricatures of antiquaries and connoisseurs from Twelve original designs by George Spratt c.1830. Courtesy of the Society of Antiquaries of London.

Fig. 6. This jewellery casket belonged to Jane, wife of William Morris, given to her and painted by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his wife Elizabeth Siddall in 1860-62. It is a wooden, iron-bound casket with small romantic scenes painted on the panels, at least one of which is believed to derive from a medieval manuscript. The casket houses six internal compartments with drawers below. It is of high Gothic design, epitomising the inspiration of the Rossetti, Morris and Webb fraternity before the 1860s. It could well have been designed by Philip Webb. Courtesy of the Society of Antiquaries of London.
encouraged the government to establish the Royal Commission for the Historical Monuments of England. In 1944 it took an active part in the creation of the Council of British Archaeology to succeed the Congress of Archaeological Societies.

Today the Society’s Fellowship has grown to almost 2,500 individuals spread around the United Kingdom, Europe and the world. Women were admitted for the first time in 1921 and now form about one sixth of the total. Fellows work in the fields of archaeology, landscape art and architectural history, material culture studies, museology, archival research, conservation and cultural resource management and serve in senior positions in universities, museums, libraries, archives, professional bodies, local authorities, national heritage agencies, as well as in private practice. As an independent charity and leading non-Governmental

Fig. 7. If Hope Were Not Heart Should Break and Imago Cleopatrae; ceramic tiles from a set of seven, designed by Edward Burne-Jones. The tiles depict Geoffrey Chaucer’s Legend of Goode Wimmen; stories of heroines from classical antiquity who suffered or died of devotion to their lovers. These tiles were produced by Morris and Company in the 1860s. Edward Burne-Jones’ initials can be seen on the lower left-hand tile. As well as being the designer, he could well have painted this one. Courtesy of the Society of Antiquaries of London.
Specialist Insurance Solutions from the supporters of The BADA Loan Exhibition

Aon, through our Artscope and Private Client divisions, specialises in providing insurance cover for your most treasured assets and valuable belongings.

As a specialist insurance broker, our service philosophy is built upon the fact that all our clients have different needs and they expect quality advice and service. On becoming a client you have direct access to a dedicated Client Manager who acts as a single point of contact for all your personal insurance matters.

We work closely with a few specialist insurers, enabling us to provide access to competitively priced policies that are suited to your requirements and lifestyle.

Aon would be delighted to be of service to you and invite you to contact us, with no obligation, to discuss your individual requirements.

For information please contact:
111 Chertsey Road, Woking, Surrey GU21 5BW.
Tel: 01483 706091 Fax: 01483 706010
Email: private-clients@aon.co.uk

Aon Private Clients is part of Aon Limited which is authorised and regulated by the Financial Services Authority in respect of insurance mediation activity only.

The British Antiques Dealers’ Association Fair is very grateful to Xxxxx for making this exhibition possible. The BADA Fair Committee is also grateful to Aon and Gander & White Shipping for their continued support.