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Welsh Government

TRAILBLAZERS

Tessa Verney Wheeler - Archaeologist

by Joanna Davies

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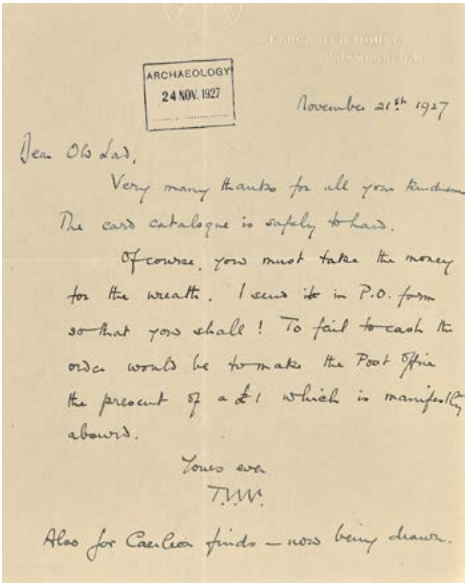
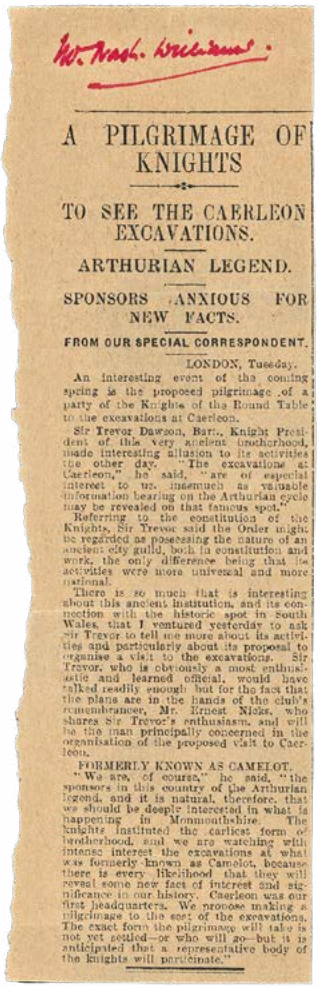
"This strange, elusive little woman, who gave so much to others while keeping her own soul hidden away..."
-Lydia Carr

Tessa Verney Wheeler

In an office deep down in the bottom floor of the majestic National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, there are three sturdy box files. Inside these files you will find a yellowing collection of handwritten letters, notebooks, drawings and sensational headlines. The signature 'TVW' appears in a determined hand on most of these documents.

They reveal the story of one of the most exciting finds in British archaeological history that happened in Wales nearly a hundred years ago. At the centre of it all was a determined woman, Tessa Verney Wheeler, a trailblazer, or 'trowelblazer' who transformed the way archaeologists work today. But curiously, she remains largely unknown.





W. Nash. Brickwall.

A PILGRIMAGE OF KNIGHTS

TO SEE THE CAERLEON EXCAVATIONS.

ARTHURIAN LEGEND.

SPONSORS ANXIOUS FOR NEW FACTS.

FROM OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT.

LONDON, Tuesday.

An interesting event of the coming spring is the proposed pilgrimage of a party of the Knights of the Round Table to the excavations at Caerleon.

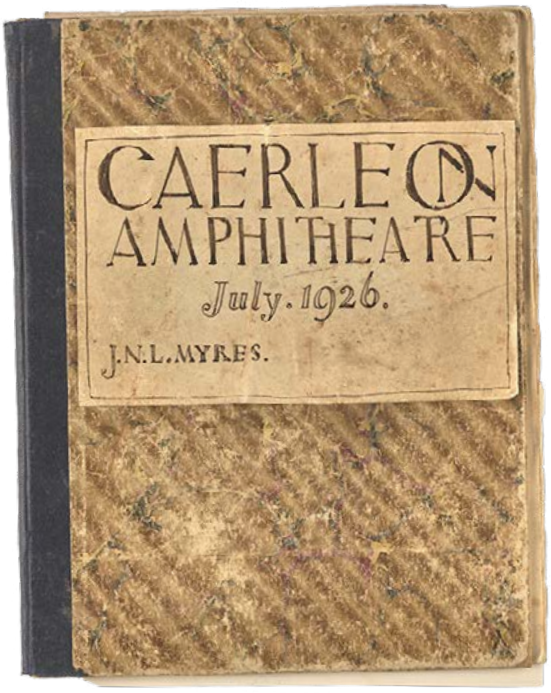
Sir Trevor Dawson, Bart., Knight President of this very ancient brotherhood, made interesting allusion to its activities the other day. "The excavations at Caerleon," he said, "are of especial interest to us, inasmuch as valuable information bearing on the Arthurian cycle may be revealed on that famous spot."

Referring to the constitution of the Knights, Sir Trevor said the Order might be regarded as possessing the nature of an ancient city guild, both in constitution and work, the only difference being that its activities were more universal and more national.

There is so much that is interesting about this ancient institution, and its connection with the historic spot in South Wales, that I ventured yesterday to ask Sir Trevor to tell me more about its activities and particularly about its proposal to organise a visit to the excavations. Sir Trevor, who is obviously a most enthusiastic and learned official, would have talked readily enough but for the fact that the plans are in the hands of the club's remembrancer, Mr. Ernest Nicks, who shares Sir Trevor's enthusiasm, and will be the man principally concerned in the organisation of the proposed visit to Caerleon.

FORMERLY KNOWN AS CAMELOT.

"We are, of course," he said, "the sponsors in this country of the Arthurian legend, and it is natural, therefore, that we should be deeply interested in what is happening in Monmouthshire. The Knights instituted the earliest form of brotherhood, and we are watching with intense interest the excavations at what was formerly known as Camelot, because there is every likelihood that they will reveal some new fact of interest and significance in our history. Caerleon was our first headquarters. We propose making a pilgrimage to the seat of the excavations. The exact form the pilgrimage will take is not yet settled—or who will go—but it is anticipated that a representative body of the Knights will participate."



"(She was)... a noted technical excavator and field conservator, a great finds archaeologist, and an excellent teacher of those skills. She was both her husband's partner and his equal. Yet she has been primarily forgotten today." - *Lydia Carr.*

Why has she been forgotten? The answer may partially lie in a recently discovered photograph in the National Museum of Wales archives, published for the first time in this booklet.

A recently discovered photograph in the National Museum of Wales collection showing Tessa 'hiding' in the Brecon Gaer Roman ruins c.1924. Other members of the party include Tessa's husband, Mortimer Wheeler (far right) and site sponsor, Lord Treowen (left). © Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales

Although Tessa is a central figure in this photograph, taken at the Brecon Gaer Roman ruins in 1924, she's also the only one 'hiding'. This tallies with her biographer, Lydia Carr, describing her as "curiously elusive." She's also showing her quirky sense of humour in this photo. But in a way, Tessa still stands out from everyone else, even though she is more hidden.

Many of her friends said that she was happy to let her extroverted, bombastic husband, Sir Robert Eric Mortimer Wheeler, 1890-1976, (known by Tessa as 'Rik'), a towering figure in archaeology, have the limelight. But she was also disregarded because she was a woman and a wife. As Lydia Carr commented in her blog about her research on Tessa:
"(Library) Cataloguers had either not been interested enough to note material or had filed it under Mortimer Wheeler instead — a fair metaphor for Verney Wheeler's career."

A woman's place

Tessa was also restricted by society's 'rules' and expectations for women in the 1920s. For example, women in the more academic "professions" such as teaching, were expected to resign immediately if they got married. It was just 'not the done thing' to be married and have a career.

There is no doubt that Tessa had a steely, determined personality beneath the 'quiet and introverted' exterior.

"She was not an isolated abnormality, but part of a long, evolving tradition of women intellectuals and specifically women archaeologists... She was a "quiet revolutionary," engaged in a relatively new, still primarily masculine intellectual activity and was exceptionally good at it. But she also operated somewhat under the radar, some of it her own choice." - *Lydia Carr.*

Tessa Wheeler pictured with the excavated amphitheatre at the dig in Caerleon 1926
© Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales

In 1925, Caerleon's Roman amphitheatre, one of the most important archaeological sites in Europe was discovered. It's long overdue for us to learn more about the unknown 'trowelblazer' and archaeologist, Tessa Wheeler, who made her mark there.

Digging deeper

Although Tessa was born in Johannesburg in South Africa on the 27 March 1893, she moved to London as a young child. She grew up in a flat on the Lewisham High Road in South London above her step-father, Theophilus Davies's pharmacy.

A young Tessa around 1914, just before her marriage © Caroline J Pettman

It's rumoured that her mother, Annie Agnes, who had several husbands, wasn't married to Tessa's father. He's a shadowy figure, noted as a 'Doctor John Verney' on Tessa's birth certificate. Having so many husbands and a possible child out of wedlock was taboo at the time. But Annie was a strong and determined character and her chequered past didn't seem to have an adverse effect on her children. Tessa was also lucky to have an affectionate stepfather. Although they weren't rich, she did have a good education at the Addey and Stanhope Grammar School in Deptford.

There aren't many records that mention Tessa's time in school and certainly nothing that indicated the abilities she'd show later in life. She showed a flair for English Literature and 'Experimental Science' and used scholarship funds to go to University College London. She studied History at University, and although bright, she didn't make a huge mark academically during her time there.

It's important to remember that Archaeology was a new discipline and it wouldn't have been accessible as a degree for Tessa to study at this time. Indeed, she didn't develop her interest in the subject until she met her husband.

Lewisham High street in the 1900s ©Chronicle/Alamy

The 'Wheelers'

Tessa was remembered by her fellow students as keeping meticulous notes in University, which she was happy to share. Described as a "small, unpretentious figure," this was the period she met the most important person in her personal and professional life, the flamboyant and charismatic, Rik Wheeler.

Rik, Tessa and baby Michael in England during the First World War c1917 © Caroline J Pettman

It was 1911 when the pair met at the University College Literary Society Committee. He was a Classics student and the Vice president of the Committee and she was the Secretary and Treasurer. A card listing them as members was found many years later in Rik Wheeler's belongings, which shows a sentimental streak that was said to be unusual for him.

Polar opposites, they both fell for each other and got married in 1914. Their only child, Michael, was born in January 1915.

Life was tough for the young couple, separated from each other as Wheeler went to France to fight in the First World War (1914-1918). His letters to her at the time show the strong bond between them:

"Killed in action" is the only epitaph a man can have nowadays, and the only tribute that I ask you to pay to this epitaph is that you read it dry-eyed. I ask it of you as a last gift, that you do not weep and that you never wear mourning. Our love is too great for tears and crepe. Our love cannot die. So, chins up!" - *Rik Wheeler*

Fortunately for both of them, Rik survived and returned to Tessa and their three year old son, Michael.

White blouses and blue stockings

During the War, Tessa had joined the 'white blouse revolution,' the name given to a group of young, educated women who were given clerical or 'desk' jobs. These had been previously held by men, who were away in Europe fighting in the War.

Tessa showed her abilities by becoming one of the first women to be an assistant surveyor on income tax, based in Basingstoke. This kind of job meant you had to be methodical, organised and have a good head for figures. Useful skills for Tessa in her future career as an archaeologist. Baby Michael was left in the care of his grandparents.

In the early 20th century, women who were openly authoritative and intelligent were often thought of as overly masculine and labelled 'bluestockings'. This was originally an affectionate term that dated back to the 1800s as a nickname for literary women's clubs. But by the 1910's it had morphed into a negative connation of women who wanted equality.

An anti-suffragette satirical postcard, circa 1910

The Suffragettes, who campaigned for the right for women to vote in the 1910s, were still fresh in people's minds. Women would not actually get the vote in Britain until 1928. These brave women who often used attention grabbing public 'stunts' to further their cause, were often depicted harshly in the media.

Tessa was a woman of her time but also wanted her own career. She's described as being a:

> *"gentle, curiously unyielding woman, who used the conventions of her time to answer her own needs even as she cared for those of others."* - *Lydia Carr.*

Discovering archaeology

There is no doubt that Tessa became interested in archaeology through her husband, a pioneer in the field. To go on and make such a valuable contribution in the field is a testament to her ability.

Wheeler made his first archaeological excavation during the War whilst stationed in Colchester, Essex. He struck gold by uncovering Roman remains there and 'caught the bug.' Archaeology was still in its early development and digs haphazard and primitive. He mentions "the utter inadequacy of the pre-war techniques for the recovery and analysis of buried material." So, he decided to focus on uncovering Roman Britain and creating a more scientific way of going about it.

The public imagination had also been captured by the amazing discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun, the Egyptian King, in 1922, and archaeology became "all the rage".

Tourists outside Tutankhamun's tomb in February 1923. © Maynard Owen Williams

More funding was made available for digs in Britain in the hope that there would be an exciting discovery of long lost treasures here too. The Wheelers were in the right place at the right time. Rik was then offered the role of 'keeper' at the new archaeological department at the National Museum of Wales. He, Tessa and Michael set off on a journey that would transform their lives and become an important landmark in Welsh archaeology.

Digging in Wales

Segontium, Caernarfon 1921- 1922

"My venue had been moved from Essex to Wales but my purpose remained unchanged: namely to integrate a given portion of Roman Britain by selective excavation, and at the same time to evolve an adequate technique..." - *Rik Wheeler, 'Still Digging.'*

In 1921 Wheeler was invited to continue an excavation in the Roman fort of Segontium, near Caernarfon. Another archaeologist had already started excavating the site in 1920, with the work funded by the "Segontium Excavation Fund".

Tessa and Rik excavated the site during their summer holidays in 1921 and 1922. Segontium was the first of many such working summer holidays. Student labour was easier to obtain over the summer months and the weather better for digging. This was one of their first major Roman discoveries in Wales and Wheeler published "Segontium and the Roman Occupation of Wales" about this work.

The raw Roman materials such as pottery and coins, were excavated and catalogued so efficiently that they may be re-examined today, over a century later, without difficulty. This shows how good Tessa, responsible for cataloguing the finds, was at this still new discipline.

Mortimer Wheeler (left) showing visiting dignitaries - including Lady Megan Lloyd George, around the Roman site of Segontium in 1922. Tessa can be seen smiling behind them (far left). © Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales

Segontium is an important Roman site. The longest occupied fort in Wales, it could hold over a thousand soldiers. It controlled the important island of 'Mona' (Anglesey), which had been conquered by the Romans. During their dig, the Wheelers recorded evidence of a Roman road, wells, ovens, pits and traces of wooden buildings where the Romans would have lived. Cadw is responsible for maintaining Segontium and you can visit the on-site exhibition to learn more about this fascinating site.

An aerial view of Segontium © Crown copyright (2024) Cymru Wales

Small finds, big ideas

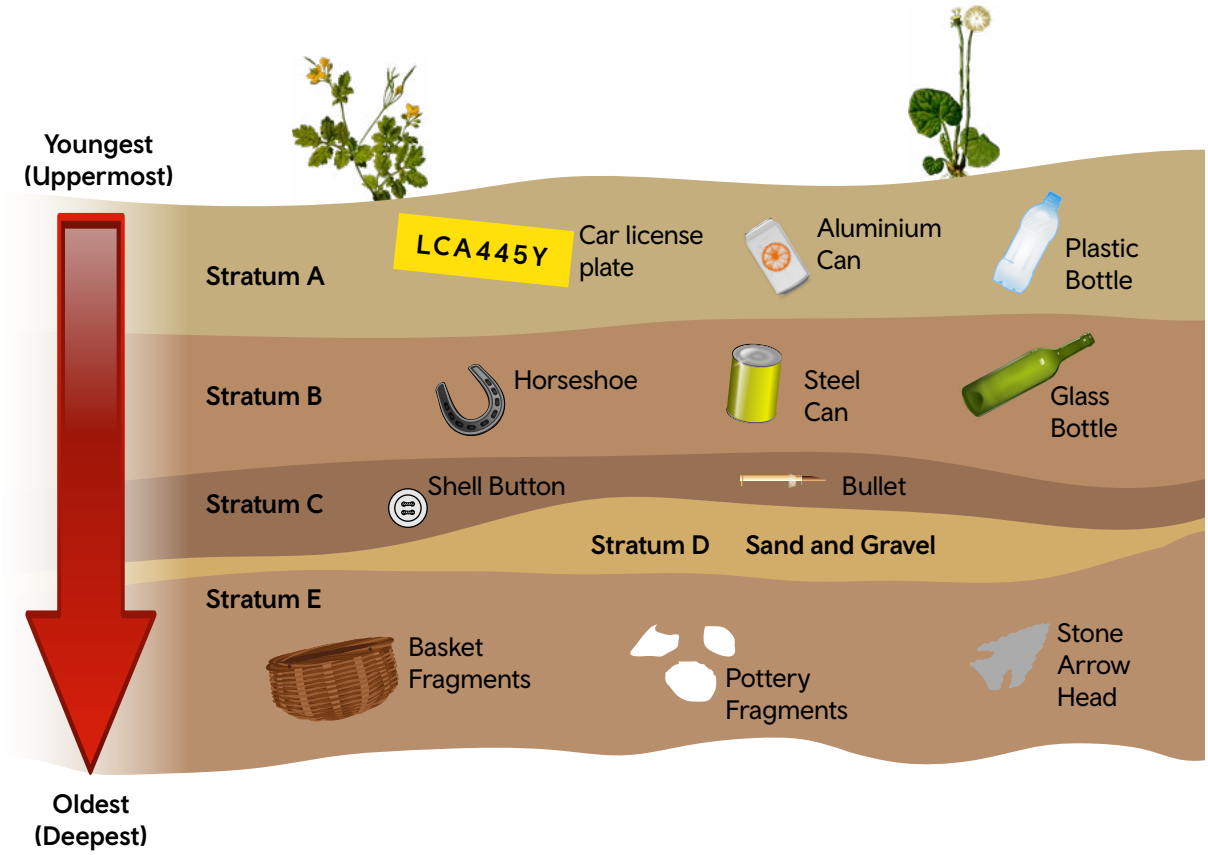
Looking at the files about the Segontium dig in the National Museum of Wales, Tessa isn't mentioned. But by the next major excavation in 1924, the evidence of her work can be clearly seen in the notebooks.

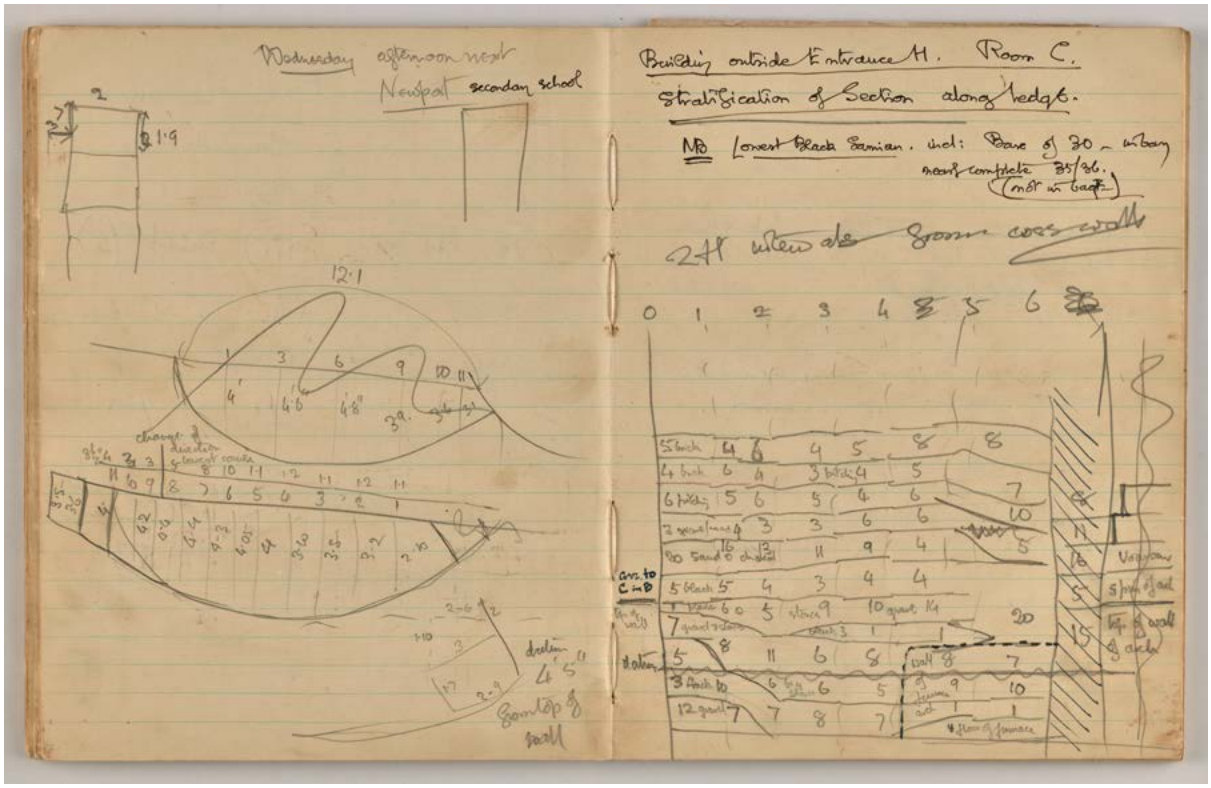
In 1977, the archaeologist, George Boon, re-examined the Segontium excavation. He noted that Tessa, along with Rik, had identified a collection of coins that were not catalogued when originally found. This shows her growing expertise in "small finds," which would become one of her specialisms. It also shows that she was consulted as someone with "specialist knowledge" of the site and its objects.

"...The Wheelers must have been satisfied with the results of their first joint venture in "archaeology from the earth." They were feeling their way in growing confidence, he particularly in the uses of stratification, she in the handling of and recording of artefacts. Presumably too, responsibility for the commissariat and for looking after the needs of the few students employed on the dig already fell upon Tessa." - *Jacquetta Hawkes, 1982.*

Now we can see how the Wheelers were transforming archaeology. Tessa took detailed notes, cataloguing finds meticulously. They also used archaeology students to help with the digs. Having 'field experience' was a new concept at the time. Now, of course every student has to have practical experience as part of their studies. Tessa was said to be a brilliant teacher, honing her skills on the digs in Wales.

The use of "stratification" in archaeology was also pioneered by the Wheelers. Stratification is the study of layers of materials that have been deposited over time. These can include soils, rocks and manufactured features like pits. The oldest layer being at the bottom.





Pages from Tessa's field notebook including stratification sketches. © Amgueddfa Cymru- Museum Wales.

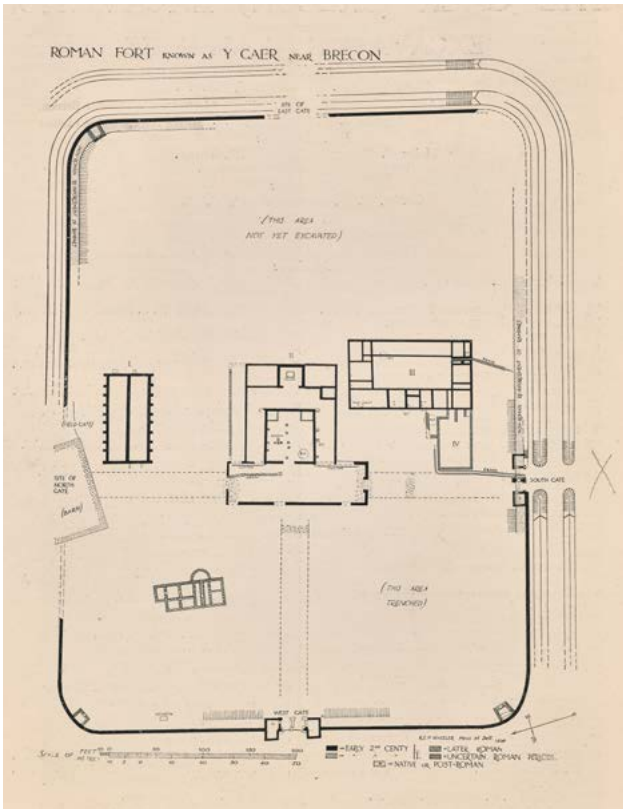
The Wheelers at work on a dig © St Albans Museum

The Brecon Gaer dig 1924-1925

Brecon Gaer, a Roman fort, was the second dig in Wales and this is where Tessa becomes more prominent in the site documents and archives. Wheeler wanted to learn more about the southern part of the Roman road system in Wales and the forts that garrisoned it.

It made sense to include a dig in South Wales politically too. The National Museum had been created to 'unify' Wales as one country that could be proud of its national history.

The presence of the "fishful" river Usk nearby was remembered fondly by Wheeler in his memoirs years later. They excavated during the summers of 1924 and 1925. He remembered in 1955 "on the whole, it was, I suppose, the happiest and least anxious of all my enterprises."



Brecon Gaer floor plan in the Wheeler files
© Amgueddfa Cymru -Museum Wales

Angry bulls and big finds

The National Museum of Wales holds a large archive for this dig including the site diaries, correspondence and bank details. Sir Flinders Petrie, an Egyptologist, described "the unfailing driving power of Mrs Wheeler which seemed to the back-bone of the carry-on." Tessa was fearless too. She saved some friends from an angry bull, chasing it away with only a "ranging-rod"!

Nowell Myres was one of the first archaeologists who can be described as Tessa's student, who worked on the Brecon Gaer dig. Years later he told writer, Jacquetta Hawkes, of his "profound admiration" of Tessa as a woman and a worker:

"The work on the Brecon Gaer was on quite a modest scale and was not conducted in a blaze of publicity. Rik himself treated the excavation as an agreeable background to a fishing holiday... Meanwhile, Tessa coped with all the organisational and administrative chores that a dig entails, including the provision of enormous picnic meals. " - Nowell Myres

This sounds like Tessa did most of the work. But to be fair to Wheeler, he didn't fish every day Hawkes says later. But it does show a 'pattern.' He would propose a dig and then Tessa would actually run the operation. The marriage was beginning to come under some strain, particularly as he insisted their archaeological work had to come first for them both. He was also regularly unfaithful to Tessa with the young female students working on the digs.

The Brecon Gaer site today © Crown copyright (2024) Cymru Wales

Mortimer Wheeler (centre) surrounded by students and workers on a dig. © Museum Wales

The Brecon Gaer dig was a hugely successful one. The Wheelers uncovered an important Roman site. A number of items were found, but the most important was the tombstone of a young cavalryman called Candidus, now housed in the Brecon museum. They also uncovered evidence of a large guardhouse, a granary where the Romans stored grain and a heated bathhouse.

Today, the site is cared for by Cadw. You can still see the perimeter wall and the corner turrets clearly. Tessa peeking from the ruins in the recently discovered photo from the dig, hints at her central part in running the operation.

Caerleon, the ðig that changeð everything

Tessa spent six years in Wales. Lydia Carr describes Tessa's time in Wales as "her graduate work" as it led to her becoming a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. This was important to Tessa as she saw it as a "proper" qualification in archaeology. Women in those days rarely had doctorates as it was considered "an American affection" (according to another archaeologist of the time, Kathleen Kenyon).

Caerleon amphitheatre today © Crown copyright (2024) Cymru Wales

Cardiff's National Museum of Wales, officially founded in 1907, took a long time to open because of the disruption caused by the First World War and the lack of funds following it. But the objects that were meant to form the archaeology department had already been donated to it.

"The use of archaeology in Wales, (and elsewhere in the British isles), to help create a unified national identity was in full flower by 1907. There was a conscious desire, as Wales industrialised, to create a national identity that was modern and still recognisably, historically Welsh." - *Lydia Carr.*

The National Museum of Wales today © Crown copyright (2024) Cymru Wales

The Liberal government of London provided some funding for the University and National Museum. It would have helped too that David Lloyd George, a Welshman, was the British Prime Minister from 1916-1922. This 'training' the Wheelers had in Wales would prove useful for their next big project at the London Museum.

Until the Museum in Cathays Park was finished, the archaeology collections were kept in a higgledy- piggledy fashion at the Cardiff Free Library. G.C. Boon describes the Wheelers' working and living arrangements at the time:

"He (Wheeler) flung himself into activity: his room in the old Museum quarters at Cardiff Library, to take a detail, had camp-beds where he and Tessa... slept when it was too late to go home." - *G.C. Boon*

The camp beds also show that they were 'living and breathing' their work. Michael Wheeler was only 6 when his parents moved to Cardiff and enjoyed studying the historical curios around him.

Young Michael Wheeler in Cardiff, holding an unidentified object. The reverse reads, in Michael's adult handwriting: 'In the workshop. Note the Bronze Age war [illegible] I am mending! Sept: 1921.' The background shows the disorganized state of the Museum of Wales at the times

Tessa wasn't officially a 'staff' member at the Museum, but she was most definitely an important part of the team. She received official mail there and had her own room to deal with the Caerleon excavations. This is clear to see in the Museum archives. Rik Wheeler was swiftly promoted and made Director of the National Museum of Wales at the age of only 33 in 1924.

The National Museum of Wales circa 1922 © Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales

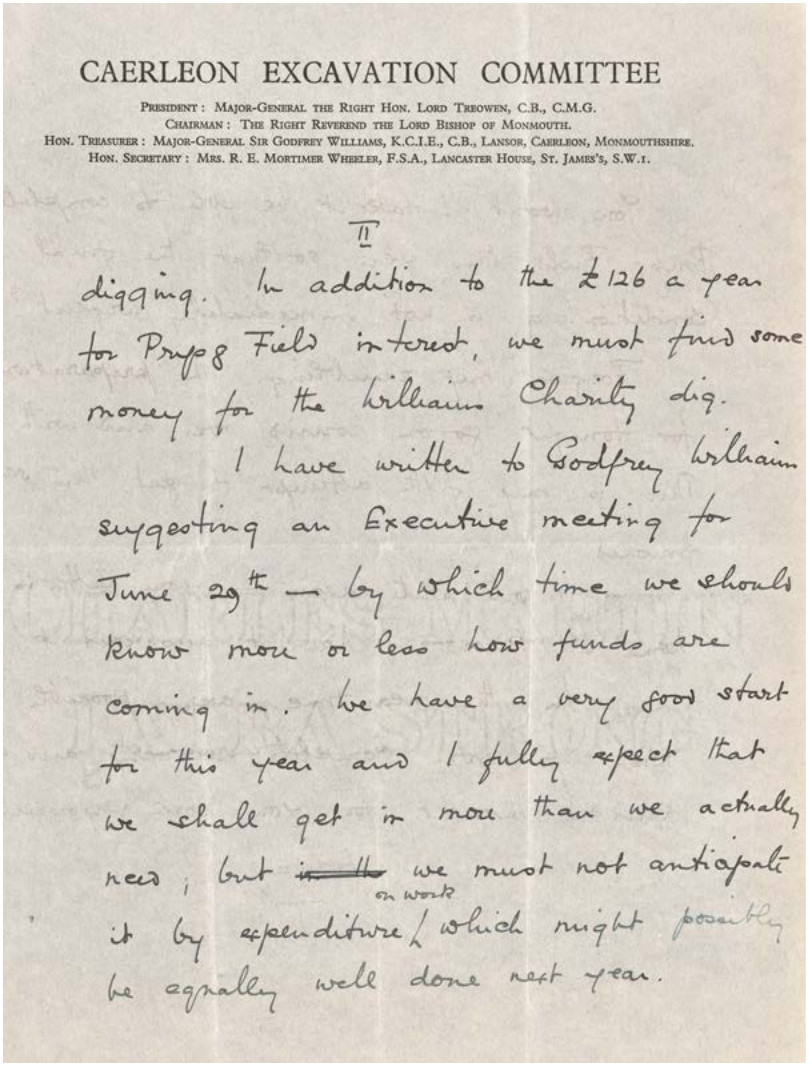
As a result of this promotion, Tessa and her family finally had a more permanent home. They moved into a house with a garden that they built themselves in the well-off suburb, Llandaf, in Cardiff.

A site that Wheeler wanted to explore next was Caerleon, near Newport. A trial excavation by another group of archaeologists in 1909 had shown it to be in excellent condition. It became more of a priority in 1925 when land in the centre of town was sold for development. The Caerleon Excavation Committee was formed in response under the leadership of Lord Treowen and the Bishop of Monmouth. Tessa served as its secretary and chief fundraiser until 1931, long after she had left Wales. This would be "her site."

"Caerleon was Verney Wheeler's site, perhaps more than any other. Her contribution is still rarely acknowledged, with the majority of the credit going to Wheeler. But by any measurement it was she who accomplished the actual excavation of the amphitheatre that interested the public in Caerleon, and thus paved the way for the archaeological work that has continued there intermittently ever since. The amphitheatre remains the most completely excavated in Britain."
- Lydia Carr.

It's clear from the written evidence that Tessa played a key role in the Caerleon dig. She was on-site for eight months, far longer than the other two site directors and she was on her own for most of that time. Her husband was in London and Nash-Williams, who took over the site when she left, kept in touch with her as he needed her expert advice.

She was also the 'honorary secretary,' (which meant she wasn't paid), of the Caerleon Excavation Fund, a post she held until 11 July 1931. Even after she left Wales, she continued to help by raising non-Welsh donations. An entry in the Society of Antiquaries of London lists a gift of £10 to Mrs Wheeler for 'Caerleon' as late as 1929.



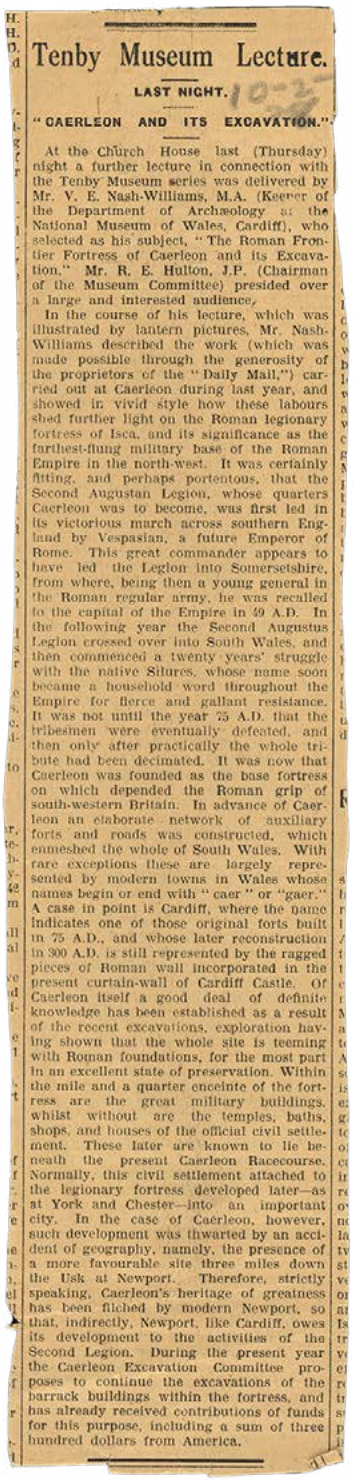
CAERLEON EXCAVATION COMMITTEE

PRESIDENT: MAJOR-GENERAL THE RIGHT HON. LORD TREOWEN, C.B., C.M.G.
CHAIRMAN: THE RIGHT REVEREND THE LORD BISHOP OF MONMOUTH.
HON. TREASURER: MAJOR-GENERAL SIR GODFREY WILLIAMS, K.C.I.E., C.B., LANSOR, CAERLEON, MONMOUTHSHIRE.
HON. SECRETARY: MRS. R. E. MORTIMER WHEELER, F.S.A., LANCASTER HOUSE, ST. JAMES'S, S.W.1.

II

digging. In addition to the £126 a year for Prysg Field interest, we must find some money for the Williams Charity dig.

I have written to Godfrey Williams suggesting an Executive meeting for June 29th — by which time we should know more or less how funds are coming in. We have a very good start for this year and I fully expect that we shall get in more than we actually need; but ~~it~~ we must not anticipate it by expenditure on work which might possibly be equally well done next year.



Tenby Museum Lecture.

LAST NIGHT.

"CAERLEON AND ITS EXCAVATION."

At the Church House last (Thursday) night a further lecture in connection with the Tenby Museum series was delivered by Mr. V. E. Nash-Williams, M.A. (Keeper of the Department of Archæology at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff), who selected as his subject, "The Roman Frontier Fortress of Caerleon and its Excavation." Mr. R. E. Hulton, J.P. (Chairman of the Museum Committee) presided over a large and interested audience.

In the course of his lecture, which was illustrated by lantern pictures, Mr. Nash-Williams described the work (which was made possible through the generosity of the proprietors of the "Daily Mail,") carried out at Caerleon during last year, and showed in vivid style how these labours shed further light on the Roman legionary fortress of Isca, and its significance as the farthest-flung military base of the Roman Empire in the north-west. It was certainly fitting, and perhaps portentous, that the Second Augustan Legion, whose quarters Caerleon was to become, was first led in its victorious march across southern England by Vespasian, a future Emperor of Rome. This great commander appears to have led the Legion into Somersetshire, from where, being then a young general in the Roman regular army, he was recalled to the capital of the Empire in 49 A.D. In the following year the Second Augustus Legion crossed over into South Wales, and then commenced a twenty years' struggle with the native Silures, whose name soon became a household word throughout the Empire for fierce and gallant resistance. It was not until the year 75 A.D. that the tribesmen were eventually defeated, and then only after practically the whole tribe had been decimated. It was now that Caerleon was founded as the base fortress on which depended the Roman grip of south-western Britain. In advance of Caerleon an elaborate network of auxiliary forts and roads was constructed, which enmeshed the whole of South Wales. With rare exceptions these are largely represented by modern towns in Wales whose names begin or end with "caer" or "gaer." A case in point is Cardiff, where the name indicates one of those original forts built in 75 A.D., and whose later reconstruction in 300 A.D. is still represented by the ragged pieces of Roman wall incorporated in the present curtain-wall of Cardiff Castle. Of Caerleon itself a good deal of definite knowledge has been established as a result of the recent excavations, exploration having shown that the whole site is teeming with Roman foundations, for the most part in an excellent state of preservation. Within the mile and a quarter enceinte of the fortress are the great military buildings, whilst without are the temples, baths, shops, and houses of the official civil settlement. These later are known to lie beneath the present Caerleon Racecourse. Normally, this civil settlement attached to the legionary fortress developed later—as at York and Chester—into an important city. In the case of Caerleon, however, such development was thwarted by an accident of geography, namely, the presence of a more favourable site three miles down the Usk at Newport. Therefore, strictly speaking, Caerleon's heritage of greatness has been filched by modern Newport, so that, indirectly, Newport, like Cardiff, owes its development to the activities of the Second Legion. During the present year the Caerleon Excavation Committee proposes to continue the excavations of the barrack buildings within the fortress, and has already received contributions of funds for this purpose, including a sum of three hundred dollars from America.

One of Tessa's letters about funding the Dig with cuttings describing fundraising public lectures about Caerleon.
© Amgueddfa Cymru -Museum Wales

Extreme sports, Roman style

Caerleon, like Segontium and Brecon Gaer, was a well-known former Roman settlement and its Welsh name reflected that early history. Place names that have "Caer" or the mutated "Gaer" in them are clues that these are Roman settlements, known as 'City of Legions.' The settlement of Isca dated from about AD75 when the 'Legio II Augusta' was stationed in the area as part of the Roman strategy to conquer the Silures, a fearsome Celtic tribe in the area.

Isca was soon made a permanent settlement and a sophisticated town established. The soldiers even had the first known leisure centre, with baths, swimming pool and a sauna! Caerleon also has the only Roman legionary barracks still on view in Europe. There is no doubt that the success of the amphitheatre dig lead to future excavations which revealed a treasure trove of Roman history in Caerleon.

Caerleon baths © Crown copyright (2024) Cymru Wales

The site also had a good port on the Usk river with access to the sea. It reflected the height of Roman military achievement in the area. By AD 90, the first version of the amphitheatre was already there, and Isca was an important centre of Roman occupation. The amphitheatre is where gladiators fought to the death in Roman times. Thousands of people would come and cheer the gory spectacle. Extreme sports, Roman style!

Round Table or Roman?

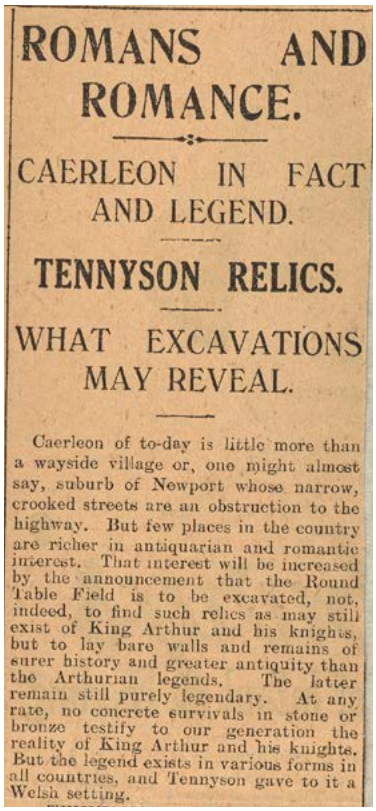
"The site of the Roman town of Caerleon in Monmouthshire stands alone in at least two important aspects. It represents the only legionary fortress in Britain where any considerable area till remains available for excavation, while its connections with Arthurian romance invests in it with an interest wider than usual in the case of Roman sites." - Quote from a letter by Rik Wheeler to the Editor of The Times, 20 Jan 1925.

A painting showing King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table 1405-1407 © Gallica

The press jumped on a tall tale that there could be a 'connection' between Caerleon's amphitheatre site and the legendary King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. Geoffrey of Monmouth, the 12th-century scholar, had written that Arthur was crowned in Caerleon and that the ruined amphitheatre was actually the remains of King Arthur's Round Table. Arthurian legends were popular again by the late 19th century. This was thanks in part to the success of the epic collection of 12 poems by the English poet, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'Idylls of the King'.

These tales appealed to the 'Daily Mail' newspaper, which funded the Caerleon dig in return for 'exclusive' updates on the 'Arthurian' excavation. The Wheelers were canny enough not to dispute this romantic idea as they knew the dig would be expensive and they desperately needed the funds. The newspaper cuttings in the Wheeler files in the National Museum of Wales shows the press's obsession with the story at the time. It was an appealing, (though untrue), story and was guaranteed to sell newspapers.

Over the course of the excavation, the Mail spent more than £3,000 funding it. The newspaper bought the site when the excavation was over, and presented it to the nation through Cadw's predecessor, the Office of Works. Cadw continues to maintain the site today.



ROMANS AND ROMANCE.

CAERLEON IN FACT AND LEGEND.

TENNYSON RELICS.

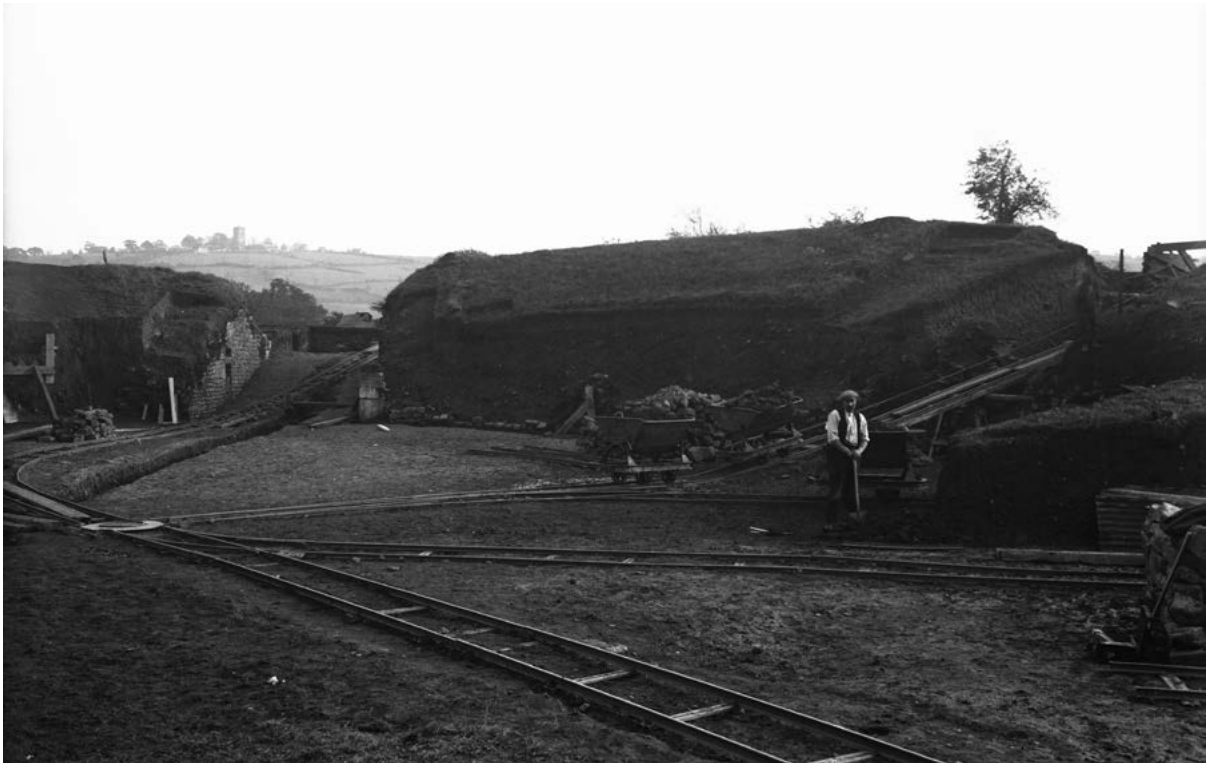
WHAT EXCAVATIONS MAY REVEAL.

Caerleon of to-day is little more than a wayside village or, one might almost say, suburb of Newport whose narrow, crooked streets are an obstruction to the highway. But few places in the country are richer in antiquarian and romantic interest. That interest will be increased by the announcement that the Round Table Field is to be excavated, not, indeed, to find such relics as may still exist of King Arthur and his knights, but to lay bare walls and remains of surer history and greater antiquity than the Arthurian legends. The latter remain still purely legendary. At any rate, no concrete survivals in stone or bronze testify to our generation the reality of King Arthur and his knights. But the legend exists in various forms in all countries, and Tennyson gave to it a Welsh setting.

Western Mail Clippings, March 1926

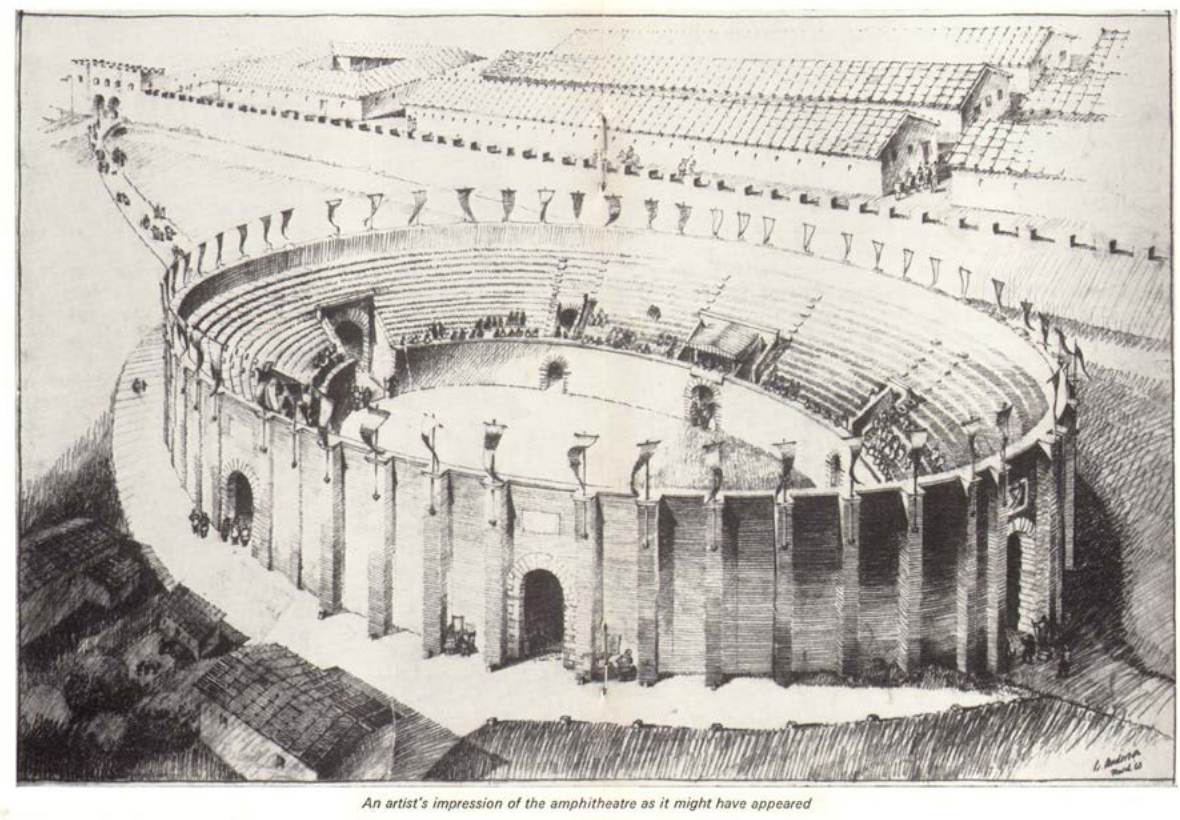
The Wheelers also collected other donations and had the genius idea of asking for a small admission charge from people who wanted to view the excavation 'in action.' Occasionally these visitors would prove tiresome as Tessa describes in one of her letters, showing that she did not suffer fools gladly!

"The Western Mail today is somewhat off the mark. The 'visitors' on Saturday were (a) Miss Williams, The Mount, who may be a cuckoo whose behaviour on finding pottery and coins may have given adequate course for emphatic comment, and two of my committee. The digging was authorised, the finds which do not include a necklace (one bead of normal type),are in my possession duly labelled. The occasional "helpers" here are often trying. I expect you know. Yours, TVW."



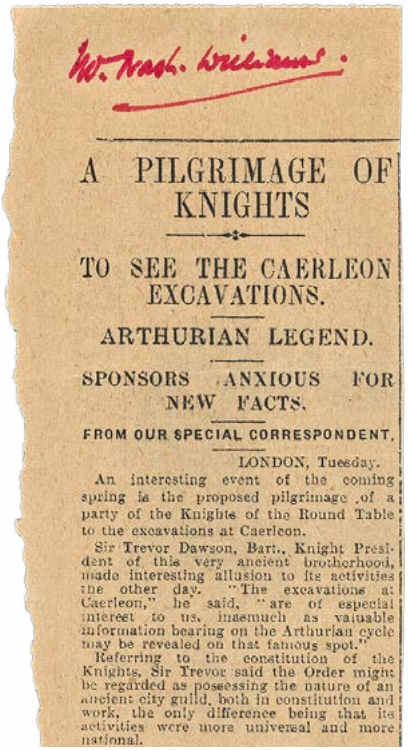
The excavation of the amphitheatre at Caerleon in 1927 © Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales

Courting the press did attract criticism at the time as being too "publicity hungry." But Tessa and Rik knew it was important to get the media interested. Making archaeology accessible and known to the public would encourage more funding and make it a credible subject of study.



An artist's impression of the amphitheatre as it might have appeared

An artist's impression of the Caerleon amphitheatre as it could have looked in its heyday from Rik Wheeler, Nash Williams and Victor Erle's book on the Dig published in 1970



A PILGRIMAGE OF KNIGHTS

TO SEE THE CAERLEON EXCAVATIONS.

ARTHURIAN LEGEND.

SPONSORS ANXIOUS FOR NEW FACTS.

FROM OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT.

LONDON, Tuesday.

An interesting event of the coming spring is the proposed pilgrimage of a party of the Knights of the Round Table to the excavations at Caerleon.

Sir Trevor Dawson, Bart., Knight President of this very ancient brotherhood, made interesting allusion to its activities the other day. "The excavations at Caerleon," he said, "are of especial interest to us, inasmuch as valuable information bearing on the Arthurian cycle may be revealed on that famous spot."

Referring to the constitution of the Knights, Sir Trevor said the Order might be regarded as possessing the nature of an ancient city guild, both in constitution and work, the only difference being that its activities were more universal and more national.

A Daily Mail news cutting 'anxious for new facts' © Museum Wales

Tessa took over the dig officially on 22 October 1926 and the 'Daily Mail', kept asking for more updates. So much so, there was constant pressure on the team to keep showing new discoveries. Of course, there were amazing discoveries, but also 'quieter' periods when it wasn't always possible to reveal a dramatic new find.

It has been said that some rummaging would happen in cupboards to present "new finds" that weren't necessarily all that 'new'...

Tessa in charge

Factory and pit closures meant unemployment in Caerleon was a serious problem in 1926. As a result, they had a workforce available to help on the Brecon Gaer and Caerleon digs. Most of these untrained workers were ex-soldiers from the First World War.

It was quite a sophisticated dig for the time. A gravity powered light railway was designed and laid down by the general site manager, J.V. Bowen, who'd worked for Tessa in Brecon Gaer. A young farm boy called Cecil Davies was hired with his father's horses to pull carts of soil and debris.

Cecil Davies was only a teenager during the dig. In an interview with Lydia Carr in 2006, he remembered Tessa warmly and with affection. He wasn't as complimentary about her husband! He described him as coming up "once a month to look over the dig dressed up like a dog's dinner".

The workers were devoted to Tessa. Indeed, Davies said, "I fell for her." He remembered a bus trip to Newport which she paid for herself, so that the men could see themselves in a newsreel in the cinema, at work on the dig. This shows Tessa's kindness and her skill in managing a male team in an era where women were not usually in charge.

Cecil describes the workers being asked to put anything interesting that they found to one side so "Mrs Wheeler could come to explain it." If it was a promising find, it would be taken away to the site office and cleaned. The men worked from eight to five and were paid a shilling and twopence per day, plus another shilling if they found a coin.

Photo of the Caerleon amphitheatre excavation team, taken in 1927. Tessa Wheeler is the only woman, standing in the centre of the second row with notebook in hand. Cecil Davies is sitting on the right in the front row. (Image courtesy of Caerleon Net)

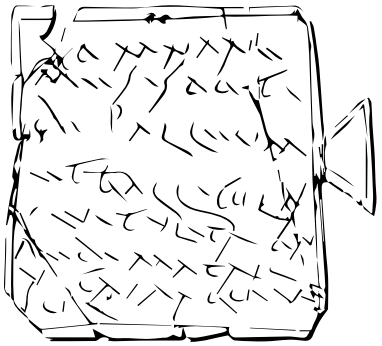
Tessa was known to wear a brown skirt suit to excavate, no matter what the site conditions. This was in contrast to the female students who were dressed more daringly for the time in shorts and jodhpurs (horse riding trousers). Lydia Carr theorises that Tessa had to maintain a comforting, easily recognisable 'femininity.' It was important that she wouldn't be seen as a threat by the males working alongside her, as well as the powerful men who controlled funding and publications.

Tessa was usually the only woman on site. Imagine how that would have felt a hundred years ago when women still hadn't been given the right to vote. It took confidence and a steely determination hidden behind the seemingly gentle façade to be so successful in such a new field for men, let alone women.

Intriguing finds

Technically the excavation was conducted in a 'modern' way, with the entire surface removed in regular layers. A mindboggling total of nearly 30,000 tons of soil was excavated, examined and carried away. This cost just under 10 pence a ton, which was a lot of money at the time.

One of the most intriguing finds during excavation of the amphitheatre was a lead 'tablet.' It was about 10cm square and had two nail holes in the top so it could be attached to the wall. The inscription was in Latin:



DONNA NII
MIISIS DO TI
BI PALLIIVM
IIT GALLICVLAS
QVI TVLIT NON
REDIMAT N**
***** SANGVINII
SVA

"Lady Nemesis, I give thee a cloak and a pair of boots; let him who took them not redeem them (unless) with his own blood."

The writer is saying to the goddess, Nemesis, "Have my cloak and boots: only give them to the thief who took them if he's killed or wounded."

It seems that the writer wants the goddess to arrange for the death of the person who stole his cloak and boots!

No-one knows the identity of the writer. He could have been a soldier or a gladiator. It's thought that there was a shrine to Nemesis just outside the entrance to the amphitheatre. It was commonplace for the Romans to build shrines to their gods, asking them to help them, or in this case, avenge them. Can you imagine how excited Tessa and her team would have been to find these tantalising items that revealed so much about the Roman way of life nearly 2,000 years ago?

Things to ðo

Tessa's notebooks were technical and businesslike. They were not organised by day, but by site feature, which was innovative at the time.

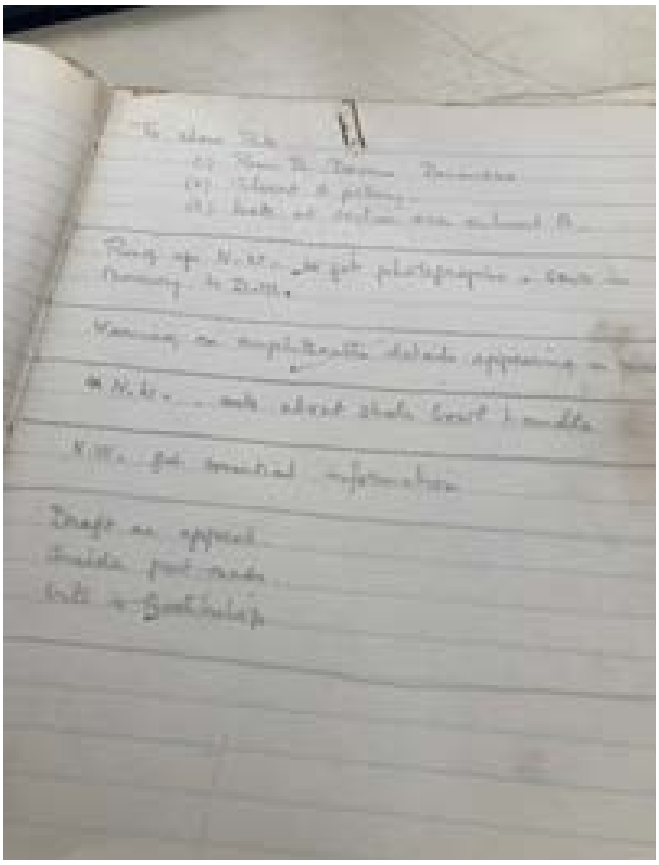
"Her plans are much more scientific anð technical, closer in appearance to those in a moðern site report. It is, in short, the work of someone familiar with Romano-British archaeology anð able to interpret it on the spot." - *Lyðia Carr.*

It's thrilling to still be able to read Tessa's notebooks in the National Museum of Wales archive and travel back in time to this exciting period. They provide many intriguing glimpses into her complex and endearing personality.

Tessa would also use her notebooks to keep her personal notes or –'to-do' lists ticking her tasks off as she achieved them. It's clear she was organised, had an attention to detail and her note-taking established the way archaeologists take notes on site to this day.

One of her lists (pictured left) shows some of the mindboggling tasks she was juggling:

- Draft an appeal.
- Warning re. amphitheatre details appearing in press.
- N.W. (her husband) - Ask about shale bowl handle.
- Write to Archbishop.



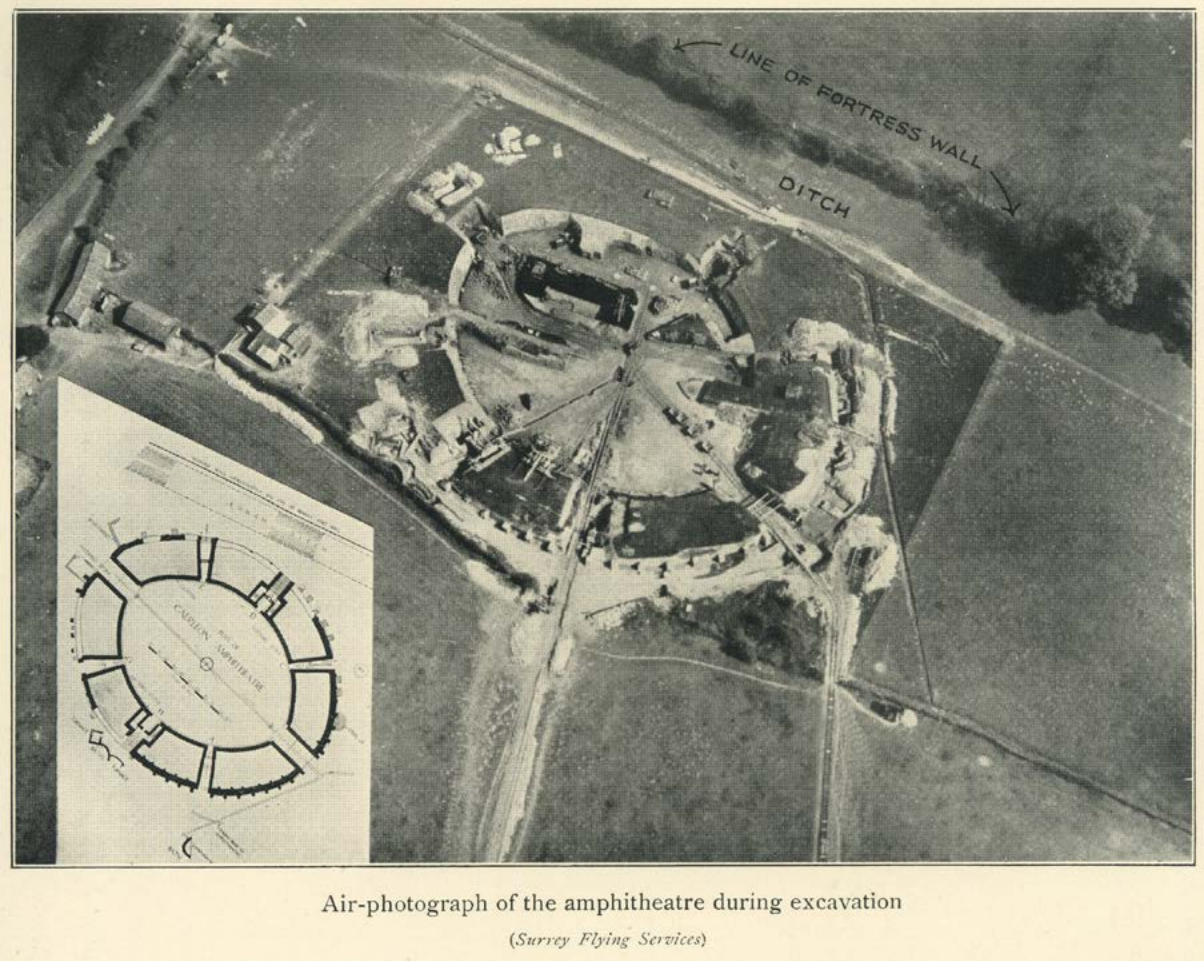
One of Tessa's to-do lists during the Caerleon dig
© Museum Wales

Most unusually, she has carefully copied a Welsh prayer, beginning

'Grant, oh Goð thy refuge,
anð in thy refuge, strength'

in an entry from October 1926. Not being particularly religious, this hints at the great strain she was under to make sure such a high profile dig was a successful one.

Even though Tessa did consult with her husband and other archaeologists about some finds in Caerleon, she mainly identified the finds on her own. This shows the beginnings of her talents to be able to identify items in a 'split second' after cleaning, remembered years later by her students.



Air-photograph of the amphitheatre during excavation

(*Surrey Flying Services*)

Aerial photo of the Caerleon Amphitheatre excavation, Surrey Flying Services. © Archaeologia Vol. LXXVIII

Tessa was also a good writer. She wrote a Summary report on Caerleon in June 1928, with whole paragraphs 're-used' later by her husband for his official report:

"It is at Cardiff, therefore, on the one hand, and at Richborough on the other, that we must look for the history of Caerleon in the fourth century, and it is possibly in the amphitheatre which lies buried outside the walls of Richborough that the lost century of 'King Arthur's Round Table' may yet be found."

Time to go

Tessa and Rik only lived in their house in Llandaf for two years. Wheeler missed London too much and accepted the role of Keeper at the London Museum. Tessa's good friend and archaeologist, Nash-Williams, took over the Caerleon dig in 1927. The amphitheatre finds were handed over to Caerleon Museum.

"In a larger sense, Verney Wheeler's years in Wales are an accelerated symbol for the development and normalization of women archaeologists in the inter-war years. Her time as a silent, helpful wife at Segontium quickly gave way to the more official role of the account keeper and recorder at Brecon Gaer. Following hard on the forts' heels, her independent direction of the Caerleon Dig... made her an archaeologist in her own right.' - *Lydia Carr.*

Tessa still maintained her links with Wales, especially her friend Nash-Williams and Caerleon. The museum staff gave them goodbye gifts, including matching silver cigarette cases. They were both heavy smokers, which was common for this time. Tessa was known to smoke even in 'neck-deep ditches in the rain'! The Welsh archaeological community organised a testimonial fund for them both. The 'Western Mail' described the 'handing over' ceremony:

"The Chairman of the fund... handed over to Mrs Wheeler a cheque for a substantial sum as a token of their friends' appreciation from the Principality. Mrs Wheeler, in response, said the ambition of her life was to be helpful to her husband in his archaeological researches and the kind words which had been spoken helped her to think that she had not altogether failed in that ambition. (Hear, hear)."

Note that Tessa is deferring to her husband here, rather than taking credit for her own successes in the Museum. The 'South Wales News' however paid tribute to Tessa:

"In Mrs Wheeler, Dr Wheeler had a wonderful chief of staff, one thoroughly interested and capable."

Read all about her

The press was very interested in the Wheelers. The South Wales News interviewed Tessa on 20 March 1926. The paper's 'Lady Correspondent' described Tessa in glowing terms too. The news article reveals that the Wheelers had been busy not only in Caerleon but in other parts of Wales too:

"Dr Wheeler's removal to London will be a double loss to Wales, and particularly to archaeological circles in the Principality, because of the valuable work which Mrs Wheeler has done in co-operation with her husband... To Dr Wheeler's schemes... she has brought her keen enthusiasm and specialised knowledge.

"For three seasons they excavated at Carnarvon and other fields where they have worked include Margam Mountain... the hut circle at Blaenrhondda, Ely Racecourse and Castell Morgraig... On these and other subjects she has lectured extensively throughout the Principality. She takes a keen interest in women's part in public life and is a member of the council of the Cardiff Women's Citizen's Association."

Mosaics and grids

Tessa and Rik went on to set up the Institute of Archaeology at University College London together. Tessa was also the site director for an important Roman dig at Verulamium in St Albans from 1930-1933. The discovery of fantastic mosaics at the site added another string to her bow. She painted lovely watercolours of the mosaics which she'd learnt observing Italian experts on a visit to the Mediterranean.

Tessa excavating the mosaic floor in Verulamium © St Albans Museum

A watercolour painting by Tessa of one of the most famous Verulamium mosaics. © St Albans Museum

In 1932, the Evening Standard described Tessa's work "lifting" mosaic pavements in an admiring, though patronising tone:

"ONLY ONE PERSON IN ENGLAND CAN DO IT AND THAT'S A WOMAN.

Mrs Mortimer Wheeler the famous woman archaeologist is feeling very pleased indeed with herself just now, for she has done something that nobody else can do. During the excavation of Verulamium.... Some magnificent mosaic pavements belonging to the spacious bathrooms of a Roman palace were found.... Mrs Wheeler, who had been superintending these excavations for her husband... wanted these pavements taken up and removed to the little museum on the site.

"It was discovered that the only people who could do the job were a London firm of Italian mosaic specialists who for generations had lived and worked amongst mosaics {....} The work was difficult and costly. The expedition's purse is thin. When the next floor was ready for removal, Mrs Wheeler decided to do it herself. Experts were horrified. They even whispered, 'Vandalism! It will be ruined.'.... And now she has taken up that floor successfully."

Again, the mosaic story shows Tessa's determination, resourcefulness and expertise. During their time in Verulamium, the Wheelers developed a method of excavation that involved digging squares in a grid. The walls would be preserved between the squares so it was easier to study the layers of earth. This technique was developed further by Kathleen Kenyon, a renowned archaeologist and student of Tessa's, when she was excavating in Jericho. The 'Wheeler-Kenyon Method' is still used in excavations to this day.

A well-known image showing the Wheeler-Kenyon "box grid" excavation technique at Maiden Castle c.1934
© Society of Antiquaries

Fleeting fame

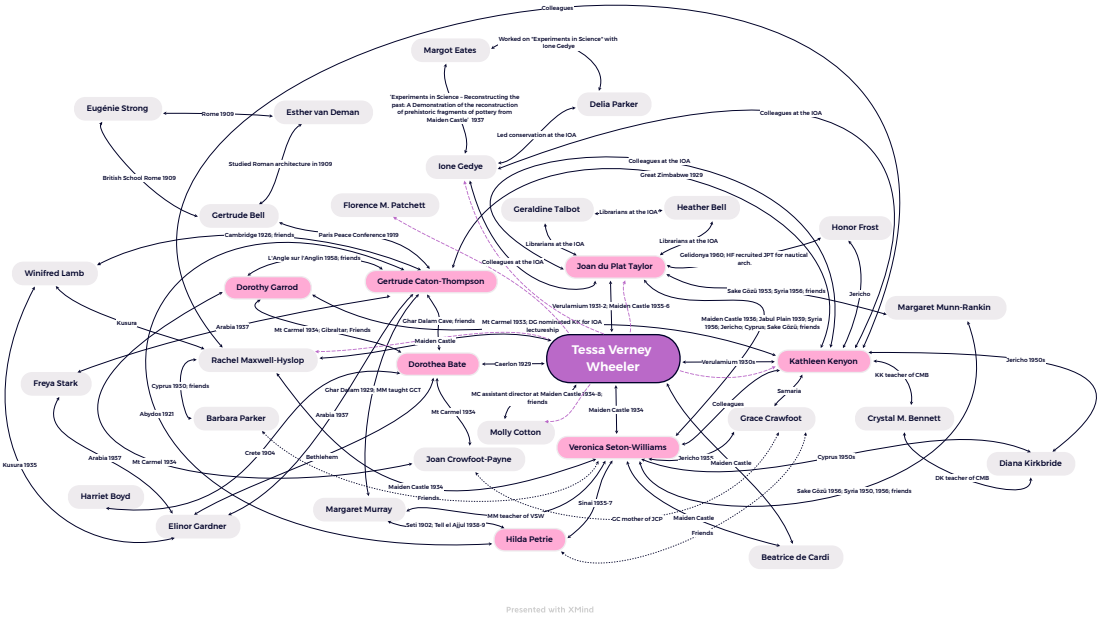
If she was a “famous woman archaeologist” in her day, why was Tessa neglected for so long by historians? She excavated, published, taught, appeared in news articles and was a member of the academic societies. But she isn’t usually included with contemporary female archaeologists like Dorothy Garrod or Gertrude Caton Thompson. Is this because, unlike the other two women, she was also a wife who worked in the same field as her husband?

Another example of a well-known female archaeologist would be Margaret Murray (1863-1963). She is much more well known for her work. Unlike Tessa, who died prematurely young aged 43, Murray was unmarried and lived a long life, reaching her 100th birthday in 1963. She had more time to make her mark.

The same could be said about Rik Wheeler, who died aged 85. He went on to excavate and write for another forty years after Tessa died. It’s not surprising, considering the gender bias at the time too, that the work she did with her spouse, was often attributed solely to him.

Still, Tessa helped the ‘jodhpur girls’ to be accepted and respected as female archaeologists. She nurtured her female students as much as the men.

A Truly Trowelblazing Network: The impact of Tessa Verney Wheeler



The Tessa Verney Wheeler TrowelBlazers Network Diagram shows Tessa’s influence on the female archaeologists that followed her.
© Saya Naumann (2022)

The magic has gone...

Tessa had always burnt the candle at both ends, working hard, and fighting bouts of ill-health which included stomach problems and fainting spells. After a minor operation, she died suddenly from a pulmonary embolism at the National Temperance Hospital in London on 15 April 1936.

Even though Rik Wheeler went on to have a successful and long life, a lot of the 'Wheeler magic' had died with Tessa. Veronica Carr, an archaeologist who together with two others managed the fieldwork of the Maiden Vale site after Tessa's death noted:

"By 1936 the magic of the great hill had gone: Mrs Wheeler was dead. Rik Wheeler was in many ways a perfectionist with drive and ambition but no patience with the minutiae of the day-to-day running of things."

Tessa was the one who kept things on an even keel. Rachael Maxwell-Hyslop, another student at Maiden Castle, was quoted in her obituary as saying about Rik Wheeler:

"He had a brilliance about finding sites – about where you ought to dig, but he spent an awful lot of time playing around with the good-looking female students."

Lydia Carr describes how Tessa was deeply hurt by her husband, but still loved him deeply. When Tessa died, he was in the Middle East with his latest girlfriend. He found out about his wife's death when he read her obituary in 'The Times' in Paris. Even though Wheeler was what was called a "cad" in those days, he did pay tribute to Tessa in his autobiography in 1955:

"Tessa suddenly died. She was irreplaceable."

He also noted her role in setting up the Institute of Archaeology in London:

"The inevitable appeal committee was formed in 1932... a manifesto was addressed to The Times. Likely individuals were approached. A prolonged search began for a suitable building at suitable cost. A staff had to be assembled in anticipation of funds wherewith to pay it. And in all these activities, save the last, Tessa shouldered a great part of the burden. Without her tireless loyalty through those days, the scheme might easily have fallen short of success."

Even though Tessa is not as appreciated as she should be for her work as a trailblazer in modern archaeology, her legacy is an important one. If she hadn't died prematurely, she may very well have been celebrated as women became more accepted in the workplace as the 20th century progressed.

Commemorative plaques in her honour can be seen to this day at the Institute of Archaeology in London and at the Verulamium Museum in St Albans. In Wales, her memorial is the amphitheatre in Caerleon, which still enchants visitors to this day.

Memorial plaque to Tessa in the Institute of Archaeology in London

The ruins of the Roman Temple at Lydney Park © Jeff Collins

Lydia Carr pays her a fitting tribute:

"The Roman temple at Lydney Park, most beautiful of all the Wheeler sites, looks over the Wye valley from its isolating hilltop, and it is the place where Verney Wheeler seemed closest at hand. I hope she is there, not in her little Roman brick tomb in St. Albans — pleasant as it is. The temple's medicinal streams still run rusty-red with iron ore, and the entrances to the sub-Roman and prehistoric mining tunnels gape shyly behind green undergrowth....It is a fittingly remote resting place for this strange, elusive little woman, who gave so much to others while keeping her own soul hidden away."

Find out more

Should you want to create your own trailblazing story, or find out more about Roman archaeology in Wales, here are some resources that could help you. Please note that Cadw is not responsible for the content on external websites.

Find out how to visit Brecon Gaer, Caerleon, Caerwent and Segontium's Roman ruins on the Cadw website.

Have a look at Cadw's excellent series of resources exploring The Romans in Wales
Watch this great video by Cadw showing the Segontium Roman Font rising from the ruins thanks to CGI.

Find out how to visit the Museum Wales Roman Legion Museum in Caerleon.

The Smithsonian Channel explains why Wales is the place to see 'Amazing Roman forts' in this short YouTube video.

The Caerleon.net website has a wealth of information and archives about Caerleon's Roman history.

Watch this YouTube video of Archaeologist, Dr Alice Roberts exploring Roman Britain in a BBC Timewatch documentary.

The British Museum asks how 'Roman' was Roman-Britain in this interesting YouTube video.

The Trowelblazers website shares the histories of prominent women in archaeology, including Tessa Verney Wheeler.

Discover a treasure trove of artefacts on the Museum Wales archaeology collection online.