

NEWS

Professor David Russell Harris (1930–2013)

Director of the Institute of Archaeology, UCL: 1989–1996
Emeritus Professor of Human Environment: 1996–2013

Ken Thomas*

Through his varied and highly productive career as a geographer, human ecologist and archaeologist, David Harris gained an international reputation as an authority on the ecology, origins and evolution of agricultural systems, and of plant and animal domestication. He was Director of the Institute of Archaeology, University College London (UCL) from 1989 until his retirement in 1996 (**Fig. 1**). After retirement he was Emeritus Professor of Human Environment at the Institute until his death on 25th December 2013.

David Harris was born in London on 14th December 1930, the son of Herbert and Norah Harris. Herbert Harris had been a Nonconformist minister in Oxford but lost his faith and retrained as a medical practitioner. In keeping with his principles, Herbert Harris had been a conscientious objector during the First World War, undertaking civilian service by working on a farm, where his interest in the countryside, plants and wildlife had been reinforced. This keen interest he communicated to his four children, all of whom were to develop careers which, in different ways, engaged closely with the natural world. Esmond was a forester, Elspeth a horticulturalist, and Clare a potter. David was educated at St Christopher



Fig. 1: David Harris in 1989, when Director of the Institute of Archaeology (UCL).

School, Letchworth, which was progressive for its time, being coeducational and vegetarian, with predominantly Quaker teachers during the 2nd World War. There he did well, but always wanted to know more about the history of the world beyond Britain, Europe and North America. It was also at school that David met Helen Wilson, his future wife. He left school with an Exhibition to University College, Oxford, but before he could take it up he was called up for National Service. He

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chose the Royal Air Force, in which he served for 18 months before proceeding to read Geography at University College, Oxford.

After completing his degree David continued with postgraduate studies at Oxford, being awarded a B.Litt. in 1955 for a thesis on *'Water resources and land use in Tunisia'*. In the same year, he was awarded a King George VI Memorial Fellowship to study in the USA and enrolled as a research student at the University of California at Berkeley, where he was also a teaching assistant. At Berkeley he took graduate courses in botany and anthropology, and was greatly influenced by the celebrated cultural and ecological geographer Carl Sauer and his colleagues in the department of geography. For his PhD (awarded in 1963) David undertook research into the history and ecology of land use in the Leeward Islands, his thesis (*'Plants, animals and man in the outer Leeward Islands, West Indies: an ecological study of Antigua, Barbuda and Anguilla'*) being published in 1965 by the University of California Press.

Meanwhile, Helen had attended the University of Bristol, where she read English, French and Philosophy, before becoming a school teacher. She and David resumed their friendship in the summer of 1956 and were married in July 1957. They spent what Helen has described as "an amazing first year together" when David took up his teaching assistantship at Berkeley. They crossed the Atlantic on the Queen Elizabeth, bought a second hand car in the middle of Manhattan and drove across the U.S. to Berkeley, camping rough all the way.

After these American adventures and his completion of his PhD, David became a lecturer in geography at Queen Mary College and, from 1964, a Reader in the geography department at University College London. He became increasingly interested in interdisciplinary research themes which overlap between archaeology, anthropology and geography. During this period he was invited to participate in an expedition in the American tropics with the objective of

travelling by hovercraft from Manaus in Brazil to Port of Spain in Trinidad, making a range of observations on the way. Tiring of the noise of the hovercraft, David travelled for part of the way by dug-out canoe in the company of a Venezuelan botanist, during which they visited a Yanamamo settlement to study the subsistence system. There David observed that the inhabitants combined cultivation of root crops and fruit trees with fishing and hunting, leading him to conclude that the clear distinction that had conventionally been made between hunter-gatherer and agricultural modes of subsistence was a great oversimplification. This stimulated, in 1974, a major field project on present and past human subsistence in the Torres Strait region between Australia and New Guinea. After he moved to the Institute of Archaeology (see below), this project was expanded to include archaeological surveys and excavations of coastal middens and relict field systems in the western islands of Torres Strait and coastal Papua New Guinea. In 1989 David Harris began his last major overseas research project at the Neolithic site of Jeitun in the Karakum Desert, Turkmenistan (**Fig. 2**). He later recalled that this project enabled him to combine his long-lasting interest in the beginnings of agriculture with his early love of desert landscapes.

In January 1980 David Harris joined the Institute of Archaeology, succeeding Geoffrey W. Dimbleby as Professor of Human Environment and Head of the Department of Human Environment (at this time the Institute was one of a number of Senate Institutes of the University of London, with its own internal academic departments¹). In 1986, after a series of negotiations in which David Harris played a major part alongside the then Director Professor John D. Evans, the Institute merged with UCL and, after a period of transition, the Institute's internal departments were dissolved. David's first academic priority for the Department of Human Environment was to develop research and teaching in the archaeobotany of plant



Fig. 2: David Harris excavating at the Neolithic site of Jeitun, Turkmenistan, 1997.

macro-remains. In 1981 he obtained a three-year research grant which enabled Gordon Hillman to work full-time at the Institute pursuing research on the archaeobotany of Tell Abu Hureyra, an important pre- and early-Neolithic site in Syria. As part of this research, in 1983 David, Gordon and Sue Colledge travelled extensively in Syria and Turkey (accompanied by Tony Legge and Peter Rowley-Conwy in Syria), making ecological surveys and collecting herbarium specimens to develop the Institute's now-renowned comparative botanical and archaeobotanical reference collections. David later recalled an incident during fieldwork searching for emmer wheat in a remote area in northeastern Turkey, when they were 'arrested' at rifle point by three young Turkish soldiers who marched them across country to a small command post from where they were driven to a nearby town and incarcerated overnight. They were released the following day when intervention from Ankara convinced

the military authorities that they were not Armenian terrorists. Another important, if less adventurous, development in 1983 was the appointment of Gordon Hillman to a lectureship in archaeobotany which David had secured through a University of London New Academic Initiatives competition.

From his period as Director of the Institute, 1989 to 1996, David Harris left a number of important legacies. Perhaps the greatest, and certainly the most tangible, being the Wolfson Archaeological Science Laboratories and secure artefact store which were built in the basement of the Institute, following a major fund-raising effort, and opened in 1991. Another major achievement was a 'culture shift' in the Institute towards a clearer focus on excellence in research and in teaching, particularly with an expansion of teaching at graduate level with new MA and MSc degree courses. He also encouraged increased diversification of the academic profile of the Institute,

for example with teaching posts in theoretical archaeology and museum studies. This vision, and the resulting structural changes, led to a firm foundation upon which subsequent Directors, Peter Ucko and Stephen Shennan, continued to build and expand. As well as his many and enduring contributions to the Institute, David also made active contributions to the academic and administrative affairs of UCL and the University of London, and also to the wider academic community. Included among the latter, the chairmanship (1989–1992) of the Science-Based Archaeology Committee (then part of the Science and Engineering Research Council, now under the aegis of the Natural Environment Research Council) and the presidency of the Prehistoric Society (1990–1994) stand out as especially important contributions to the discipline. The excellence of his academic contributions was recognised in various ways throughout his career. In 1972 he received the Back Award of the Royal Geographical Society for 'Contributions to Biogeography, especially of Middle America'. He was invited to convene a prestigious Wenner-Gren Foundation conference on human ecology in savanna environments (the 79th Burg Wartenstein Conference), which took place in 1978, leading to the publication in 1980 of *Human ecology in savannah environments*, which he edited. In 1982 he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries; he was made an Honorary Fellow of University College London in 2000 in recognition of his services to UCL; and his distinguished contributions to scholarship were recognised in 2004 when he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

As Emeritus Professor of Human Environment at the Institute of Archaeology since his retirement in 1998, David Harris continued to be involved with research and publication, attending seminars and public lectures, and stimulating and encouraging younger colleagues. For generations of archaeologists he was an influential teacher on past

resources and human subsistence, drawing on a global and encyclopaedic knowledge of ethnographic subsistence systems and world archaeology. Since David's death, a number of past MSc students now in academic posts in various parts of the world, have posted on-line tributes to his teaching. One, now a senior researcher at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, states: "I first came in contact with David through his 'Resources and Subsistence' MSc module at the Institute, a fascinating world tour of food production practices, all based on first hand observations, and a compelling demonstration of the virtues of the worldwide, comparative, rigorous approach that David took."

Through his writings, edited volumes, and conference organization, he influenced generations of environmental archaeologists, ethnobotanists and archaeobotanists, by promoting a comparative and world approach to the diversity of pathways from foraging to farming. His papers on tropical agriculture and the importance of vegetation were highly influential in encouraging the development of tropical archaeobotany across the world, from the American tropics to Africa, and New Guinea. His fieldwork and research contributions were based in many world regions, from early work in the Caribbean and Neotropics, the American Southwest, the Torres Straits islands, and the Fertile Crescent, to his more recent work on Jeitun in Central Asia. He was renowned for the clarity of his thought, most notably the production and rigorous application of definitions to what a colleague has termed 'slippery concepts', and for his monumental syntheses of the origins of agriculture in various regions. He was also a dedicated and knowledgeable historian of the Institute of Archaeology and its staff, most particularly of V. Gordon Childe and Frederick Zeuner. One of David's senior colleagues at the Institute noted that "David Harris, through both his teaching and his publications, inspired the development of research into agricultural origins and plant domestication

on a truly global and comparative scale. The development of tropical archaeobotany in particular has derived continued inspiration from his work.”

David Harris was a prolific author and editor, and an author in one of his edited collections soon became aware of how very exacting an editor he was. Some of us felt that he had virtually rewritten our contributions and, in so doing, improved them immeasurably. In addition to numerous important chapters and journal articles he published many books, among the most important of which are: *Origins of Agriculture in Western Central Asia: an Environmental–Archaeological Study* (2010), *The Origins and Spread of Agriculture and Pastoralism in Eurasia* (1996), *The Archaeology of V. Gordon Childe: Contemporary Perspectives* (1994) and *Foraging and Farming* (1989).

On his retirement David continued to work, first as the founding editor of *Archaeology International*, the ‘house’ journal of the Institute of Archaeology, from its first issue of 1997/98 to the eighth in 2004/2005. He was able to spend more time on cultivating the large garden at home, practising (in Helen’s words) a little of what he preached: growing subsistence crops such as potatoes and beans. He and Helen stayed in the same house in Rickmansworth for most of their married life, enjoying the views and sunsets

over the valley of the river Chess. Their greatest shared interest was walking, especially amongst mountains.

David Harris was an inspirational teacher and supportive colleague who had a profound influence on the academic careers and outlook of numerous scholars across the world through his teaching, supervision, publications, peer-reviewing, editing, and other supportive activities. He was also a devoted family man who will be greatly missed by Helen and their daughters Sarah, Joanna, Lucy and Zoë, and grandchildren Sam, Tobias, Eliza, Tiggy, Rowena, Finnian, Tabitha and Laura.

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Note

- ¹ For a concise history of the earlier years of the Institute of Archaeology see David Harris’ article ‘Sixty years on: the Institute of Archaeology, 1937–97’, *Archaeology International 1997/98*, 3–5.

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