

Audrey Henshall

1927 – 14 December 2021

Audrey Shore Henshall MA OBE who died on 14 December 2021 aged 94 was a distinguished pioneer of textile archaeology in Britain. Her first published work, *Textiles and weaving appliances in prehistoric Britain* (Henshall 1950), began as a thesis written as a final-year archaeology student at Edinburgh University in 1949. The topic was suggested to her by Professor Stuart Piggott. It was a challenge but, having been born in Oldham in the heart of the Lancashire cotton industry, it was not unfamiliar territory. She received help from the legendary Grace Crowfoot, who had reported on some earlier archaeological finds of textiles in Britain, but whose main research was carried out in the Near East, and from her daughter Elisabeth Crowfoot, who followed in her mother's footsteps. There followed a series of synoptic papers by Audrey on early textiles found in Scotland (Henshall 1951–1952, 1954–1956), and reports on some outstanding finds like the 17th century costume from Dungiven in Ulster (Henshall 1961–1962) and a Roman gypsum burial in York (Henshall 1962), to name but a few.

Her practical involvement with textiles, however, gradually waned, and she is best known among prehistorians for her magisterial survey in six volumes (1963–2001) of the Neolithic chambered tombs (cairns) of Scotland – some 600 monuments which she measured and recorded personally in the field, a mammoth task before digital surveying instruments became available. Most of her working life was spent in Edinburgh, first as an Assistant Keeper in the National Museum of Antiquities and from 1970 as Assistant Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. She was a pivotal and very popular figure in Scottish archaeology: her achievements were recognised in 1992 by a *Festschrift* (*Vessels for the Ancestors: Essays in the Neolithic of Britain and Ireland*) and the award in 1993 of an honour, OBE (Order of the British Empire). On a personal level, my debt to Audrey is enormous.



Audrey Henshall (Image: R. Meldrum)

She was the only person in Britain with whom I could regularly “talk textiles” when I embarked on my doctoral research. When I was visiting her in Edinburgh on one occasion, she lent me for the night the copy of *The Warp-Weighted Loom* which Marta Hoffmann had just sent to her, hot off the press. Its content was electrifying! Later, she was persuaded to act as external examiner for my dissertation. We kept in touch, and in her reply to my sending her copies of the *Archaeological Textiles Review* in 2015 commented: “I am astonished at the width and breadth of textile studies at the present time. Also, so much of interest, especially the snippets on tablet-weave that was ever so dear to my heart.”

It is very sad that we have now lost our last link to the heroic age of archaeological textile research in Britain, some 70 years ago.

Bibliography

- Henshall, A. S. (1950) *Textiles and weaving appliances in prehistoric Britain*. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* NS 16, 130–162.
- Henshall, A. S. (1951–1952) *Early textiles found in Scotland, Part I homespuns*. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 86, 1–29.
- Henshall, A. S., Crowfoot, G. M. and Beckwith, J. (1954–56) *Early textiles found in Scotland, Part II medieval imports*. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 88, 22–39.
- Henshall, A. S. (1961–62) *The Dungiven costume*. *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 24–25, 119–142.
- Henshall, A. S. (1962) *Cloths with burials in gypsum*. In *Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, An Inventory of the Historical monuments in the City of York: Volume I Eburacum: Roman York*. London: RCHM England, 108–109.
- Sharples, N. and Sheridan, A. (1992) *Vessels for the Ancestors: Essays on the Neolithic of Britain and Ireland in Honour of Audrey Henshall*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

By John Peter Wild