OBITUARY

WILFRED ARTHUR SEABY (1910-91)

‘BILL’, as he was known to his contemporaries, was the youngest son of my grandparents, Professor Allen W. and Ada Seaby. Born 16 September 1910, he was educated at Wycliffe College, Stonehouse, Glos., then spent a year at Reading University studying art under his father and reading history and Greek. In 1927 he joined B.A. Seaby Ltd., the business commenced by his eldest brother Herbert (‘Bert’) the previous year. This early experience in numismatics stood him in good stead after he changed to a career in the museums field in 1930.

There was just ten years age difference between Bill and myself and, as I spent much of my childhood with my grandparents, I came to look on him somewhat as an older brother. My first clear memory of ‘Uncle Bill’ goes back to when I was five or six – I recall making a kite with him and being taught how to fly it, and probably had a lecture on aerodynamics! Bill had inherited a love of nature, art and history from his father and he developed a natural curiosity in things mechanical. After he joined the staff of Reading Museum we went off together on various weekend expeditions to view ancient sites, churches, windmills and watermills in Berkshire and adjoining counties, often accompanied by Maitland Underhill, Hon. Secretary of the Berkshire Archaeological Society. The year after I left school we excavated together a Bronze Age barrow on the edge of the New Forest which was being burrowed into by rabbits. It was while he was at Reading Museum that Bill gathered the material for his first numismatic paper, ‘Early British coins found in Berkshire and the Silchester District’, published in the Berkshire Archaeological Journal, vols. 52 (1938) & 53 (1939). In 1935 Bill was appointed Assistant in Archaeology at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, and it was here that he developed an interest in the study of white-dial clocks. In 1937 Bill married Nora, only daughter of Mr and Mrs A.E. Pecover, of Reading.

Before the war Bill had taken a keen interest in the aerial photographic survey of archaeological sites. He enlisted in the R.A.F. in September 1940 and it occasioned little surprise to hear that on being commissioned he was posted to the Central Interpretation Unit at Medmenham, near Henley, where he was engaged in the study of reconnaissance photographs of bomb damage in enemy territory. Reappointed in 1946 at Birmingham Museum as Keeper in the Department of Archaeology, Numismatics and Metalwork, in 1948 he organized a major exhibition of Midland church plate. The following year he was appointed Curator of the Taunton Castle Museum and Secretary of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. His ‘Coinage from Ham Hill in the Taunton Museum’ appeared in the Numismatic Chronicle for 1949, followed by numerous other papers on archaeological and numismatic subjects. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Numismatic Society in 1946, a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1948 and he was also a Fellow of the Museums Association. He had been a member of the British Numismatic Society first in 1927–30 and was re-elected to this Society in 1967.

Bill and his family went to Northern Ireland in 1953 when he was appointed Director of the Municipal Museum and Art Gallery, Belfast. Here one of his early tasks was the formation of a collection of road and rail vehicles for a transport museum. Bill’s first contribution to the BNJ was his publication in 1959 of the unique ‘Patricius’ halfpenny of John de Courci, lord of Ulster, with the unequivocal inscription IOh’S: DE CVRCI, which had been found at Ballykinder Motte, Lismahon, Co. Down, in 1958. In 1962 the Belfast
Museum was re-established by the Northern Ireland Parliament as the Ulster Museum, and Bill was enabled to build up important collections of Irish silver, Williamite glass and, of course, the numismatic collection. The most important accession to the last was the acquisition in 1962 of the entire Hiberno-Norse, Anglo-Irish and early Scandinavian portions of the vast Raymond Carlyon-Britton collection of medieval coins. The following year Michael Dolley came to lecture at Queen’s University and Bill collaborated with him in producing a number of joint numismatic studies, the most important of which was their Sylloge volume on the early Anglo-Irish coins in the Ulster Museum. In addition to a variety of papers on Irish coinage Bill compiled useful listings of Ulster tokens, truck tickets, food vouchers and other checks, as well as coins defaced for political propaganda.

At the age of sixty, after ten years as Director of the Ulster Museum and having seen the establishment of the Ulster Folk Museum at Cultra Manor, Holywood, Co. Down, Bill retired as Director but remained on the museum’s staff as a senior research assistant for a further three years to continue building the museum’s numismatic collection and to carry out research on Ulster clocks and clockmakers. He received the degree of Honorary M.A. from Queen’s University in 1970. On retirement to Solihull in 1973 Bill was quickly recruited to work as a volunteer at Warwick Museum, becoming Honorary Keeper of Numismatics, and here he began working many hours a week cataloguing the Museum’s collection and also researching Warwickshire clockmaking and the windmills of the western midlands. His second Sylloge volume, on the Hiberno-Norse coins at the Ulster Museum, was published in 1984. In more recent years he developed a particular interest in the Celtic coinage of the Dobunni and the Anglo-Saxon coinages of western Mercia, recording numerous single finds from the West Midlands for the BNJ Coin Register.

Bill was working at the Warwick Museum until less than a fortnight before his death on 30 October 1991 at the age of 81. He was a keen amateur painter who evolved a very individualistic style with his watercolour landscapes. He exhibited at Solihull Library and was Vice-President of the Solihull Society of Arts. A delightful, friendly man, full of enthusiasm and always so helpful to others, he was regarded with deep affection by all who worked with him and he will be much missed by his many numismatic friends. He was never happier than when he was surrounded by his family. He is survived by his wife Nora, his sons David and Andrew and daughter Sarah and their families.

PETER SEABY