



# John Salmon

1942-2020



**by John Rich and Stephen Hodkinson**

**J**ohn Brynmor Salmon was an outstanding Greek historian, whose masterpiece, *Wealthy Corinth: A History of the City to 338 BC* (Oxford, 1984), will long remain the standard work on its theme. He was also a much-loved teacher, colleague and friend, and a man of wide enthusiasms, above all for Greece and for the natural world.

John was born on 3 November 1942, the eldest of the three children of Brynmor Salmon, a Methodist minister, and his wife Bella. His father's ministry made for a peripatetic childhood, but John and his sisters Mary and Catherine were a close-knit family. John was educated at the Methodist foundation, Kingswood School in Bath, where he received a sound traditional classical training. In his schooldays he also formed some of his abiding interests, including cricket (as both player and spectator), classical music (especially Schubert *Lieder*), and butterflies: schoolboy butterfly collecting was in due course to be replaced by John's superb photography.

From Kingswood, John went on in 1961 to Wadham College, Oxford, where he took the classical course in its as yet unreformed pattern – five terms of Greek and Latin literature and language, followed by seven terms of ancient history and philosophy. Among his teachers, two had a particular importance for John – George Forrest, then in his brilliant prime as a Greek history tutor, and the Warden, Maurice Bowra. John read essays to Bowra in his fourth term, and continued to enjoy his friendship and support until his death in 1971: ‘to Sir Maurice Bowra’s infectious delight in all things Greek (and more) my obligation is greater than I know’ (*Wealthy Corinth*, preface). John’s undergraduate years also saw the start of his lifelong passion for travel in Greece: entranced by a first trip in 1963, he was back the following year, exploring the north-west, then relatively inaccessible, with funds obtained from the Craven Committee on the pretext of investigating Dörpfeld’s theory that Leucas was Homer’s Ithaca, and making (on Bowra’s recommendation) the first of many visits to the spectacular Acheron gorge. On Ithaca the lack of electricity to power his razor led John to acquire the beard which remained a lifelong adornment (apart from a brief intermission on Bowra’s advice, concerned that it might provoke hostility from Oxford appointment panels).

When John went on to the DPhil course in 1965, he was in no doubt that his research was to be on Greek history, and on a theme involving more exploration in Greece, and Forrest proposed the perfect topic -- early Corinth. Happy research years followed, much of them passed in Greece, acquiring the intimate knowledge of Greek archaeology and topography, both in the Corinthia and further afield, which shines through in John’s published work, as well as his excellent modern Greek. However, after just two years (less unusual then than it would be now), he was appointed to his first lecturing post, at Queen’s University Belfast.

Ancient History was a strong department at Belfast in those days under the able and supportive leadership of Alan Astin, and John formed strong friendships with him and with his colleagues Malcolm Errington, Richard Talbert and Raymond Davis. Richard Talbert writes: ‘I was the next recruit to the department staff after John, in 1970, and he naturally became my principal mentor. I could not have hoped for a better guide, and remain deeply in his debt. John was a major reason why the QUB Ancient History department thrived cordially and with increasing success in the late 60s and through the 70s. My most vivid memory of him is as an outstanding teacher and conscientious, fair examiner, who cared deeply about aiding the progress of every one of his pupils.’ It was typical of his selfless dedication to helping the department’s students that, when one of them was interned in Long Kesh as an IRA suspect, it was John who volunteered to undertake tutorial visits. On one of these visits, consternation was caused by a guard’s discovery of a copy of *The Republic* in John’s bag, but fortunately dispelled when the prison director, an Oxford classics graduate, confirmed that Plato was not a security risk.

John started his academic career at a period when the quality of one’s research publications counted for more than their quantity and young scholars were encouraged to take time to produce a small number of detailed and significant contributions. The early work which John went on to publish, after completing his DPhil in 1970, fits this mould perfectly, notably his major articles on ‘The Heraeum at Perachora and the early history of Corinth and Megara’ (*ABSA* 67 [1972], 159-204) and ‘Political hoplites?’ (*JHS* 97 [1977], 84-101). Both set out to challenge existing views, using close analysis of early Corinthian pottery (usually based on

personal study in Greek museums) and rigorous argumentation, to cut through flawed contentions in earlier scholarship and propose more plausible historical interpretations. 'Political hoplites', in particular, was a seminal contribution to debates about the 'hoplite revolution' and its impact on the Archaic Greek *poleis*, and his nuanced discussion of the political implications, especially his scepticism about the notion of a self-conscious hoplite class, has had a lasting impact.

Soon after his move to Belfast, John met and married Veronica, also the child of a Methodist minister, and it was in Belfast that their children Ian and Helen were born. They put down roots there and made many friends, but the Troubles increasingly cast their shadow, and by the late 1970s John and Veronica became eager to move back to the mainland, achieved in 1979, when John took up a post at the University of Lancaster.

It was at Lancaster that John brought his great work to completion, publishing *Wealthy Corinth* in 1984. Rather than just producing a revised version of his DPhil thesis, John had taken the time to turn it into a large-scale mature book, in particular extending its chronological coverage to embrace the Classical period. Its provision of the first full-scale treatment of Corinthian history throughout its period as an independent polis earned it immediate recognition as the standard work on the subject. The book's range is immense both chronologically and thematically: as one reviewer noted, there is scarcely a major problem in the political, social, economic, military or diplomatic history of this long period that *Wealthy Corinth* does not illuminate. Its skilful engagement with diverse kinds of material culture and literary texts fully displays John's breadth of expertise and his exemplary thoroughness, soundness of judgment, and caution about the limitations of the evidence. Not that *Wealthy Corinth* is in any sense a 'safe' book. It expresses firm views on all the relevant major controversies of the day, whether it be defending older views or advancing controversial new ones. Above all, it argued strongly against the then-common view that Corinth was primarily a 'trading' or 'industrial' city, emphasising instead that, although its economy was more diversified than those of most other mainland Greek *poleis*, its core resources were agricultural and that purely commercial considerations rarely if ever determined the formation of Corinthian foreign policies. This focus on the city's territory was ably supported by John's skill as a photographer; the volume's plates were praised by one archaeologist as including some of the most striking and informative views of Corinthian terrain. But he was equally at home on more traditional historical ground, such as his detailed narrative of Corinthian foreign policy after the Persian wars, which presents a convincing analysis of Corinth's role in the antecedents of the Peloponnesian war. Hence, notwithstanding new studies and discoveries over the last thirty-odd years and inevitable challenges on particular points, the volume remains the 'go-to' synthesis of Corinthian history and landscapes down to the late Classical period.

Two qualities, evident in *Wealthy Corinth*, that shone throughout John's academic work were his love of the Greek countryside and its ancient remains and his willingness to devote time and energy to getting minor details right. A notable instance occurs in his review of Pritchett's *Studies in Ancient Greek Topography* III-IV (*CR* 35 [1985], 100-3), where John undertook his own arduous autopsy of the pass from Tegea to Hysiae and so was able to correct the author's account and identify further traces of ancient roads he had missed.

The 1980s saw stringent cuts across the university sector. The viability of several Classics departments came under threat, and this led to a number of mergers and transfers. As part of this process, the Classics Department at Lancaster and the Departments of Ancient History and Classics at Sheffield were closed, and seven staff from these institutions were transferred to the Classics Department at Nottingham. John himself made the move in 1989, and thereafter remained at the University of Nottingham until his retirement in 2005.

At Nottingham John was able to concentrate his teaching mainly on the Greek history periods which he knew so well, regularly teaching courses on Greek Democracy, Greek Cities in Conflict, and The Age of the Tyrants. However, as earlier, he threw himself cheerfully into whatever else was required. At Belfast he had taken on at short notice a challenging advanced course on Hellenistic history, while at Nottingham he became an enthusiastic and highly effective teacher of Beginner's Greek. Here, as in his earlier posts, John was a superb lecturer and tutor, and many students have shared memories about how his passion made the subject come alive: 'a brilliant teacher -- taught me everything I know about Athenian democracy'; 'an extremely approachable teacher and eminently humane man, who was both generous with his time and kind with his critiques'; 'an incredibly cheerful and supportive teacher ... a very engaging speaker'. John's conscientious and caring concern for students was also to the fore in his main administrative role, as Senior Tutor.

As a colleague, John was a delight: always positive, sensible, warm and friendly, and wonderfully supportive especially to new and younger staff. Mark Bradley writes: 'He provided a ray of light and a touch of humanity as I grappled with all the challenges of working in a new job in a new institution. He presented a friendly face to pass in the corridor, a touch of humour in the common room, and a real community builder in meetings and team-taught modules. I shall always remember him with a sparkle in his eye and his aura of positivity and optimism.'

John's most notable innovation at Nottingham was the introduction of two-week student trips to Greece, for which he was of course the ideal person leader. Jim Roy accompanied him, but John did all the organization. The first week was devoted to Athens, Attica and Aegina, the second to Delphi and the Peloponnese. A cracking pace was set; as ever, John delighted in sharing his enthusiasms; and the students found it all hugely exhilarating and enjoyable.

John was already an old hand at such tours. Since 1989, he had partnered his old friend from Oxford days, John Prag, on adult education study tours to Greece which the latter organized from Manchester. Starting with the Corinthia, they led seven tours up to 2002, each to a different region. John Prag writes: 'All his life dear modest, gentle John clung to the belief that I was "allowing" him to be part of those trips, however hard I tried to persuade him otherwise. In my very last email to him, sent only a few weeks before his death, I wrote "without you the first Corinth one could never have got off the ground, and I doubt that many of the others would have worked half as well without you – if at all."' The pair usually allowed themselves a post-tour 'week or so of recovery', which was perhaps the part which they enjoyed best of all. 'We'd done the job, usually with great pleasure, and now we could go off somewhere and just relax, pretending we were students again, living in basic hotels and

nosing out interesting places to eat and drink without having to worry about what the “guests” might think, although it must be said that during the tours they tended to regard the antics of “the two Johns” with a mixture of amusement and respect. My overriding memory is of me dozing under an olive tree exhausted and half-asleep while John potted off happily photographing flowers and butterflies – photos which would duly reappear on those gorgeous Christmas cards which his lucky friends were privileged to receive year after year.’

John made an important contribution too to the research culture of the Nottingham department as co-organizer of the Leicester-Nottingham seminar and co-editor of the resulting volumes. The Leicester and Nottingham departments had long run a joint Ancient History seminar, but this had undergone a re-organization in the 1980s, under which two years’ meetings were devoted to a single theme, followed by publication as a series (Leicester-Nottingham Studies in Ancient Society, Routledge). John acted as the Nottingham organizer from 1991 to 1997, and co-edited the four resulting volumes, in collaboration with successively Graham Shipley, Lin Foxhall and David Mattingly. The last of these, *Economies beyond Agriculture in the Classical World* (2001), reflected his own increasing interest in the non-agricultural elements of polis economies.

John continued to publish papers showing all the characteristic virtues of his scholarship – good writing, thorough research, sound judgement – for example, his incisive re-examination of the Corinthian and Athenian tribes in a memorial volume for George Forrest (‘Cleisthenes (of Athens) and Corinth’, in *Herodotus and his World*, ed. P. Derow and R. Parker [Oxford, 2003], 219-34), or his wide-ranging survey of ‘The economic role of the Greek city’ (*G&R* 46 [1999], 147-67), neatly set in the context of contemporary political debates in the heyday of New Labour. His chief research undertaking in these years was a major project on the volume and economic impact of temple-building. For this he developed innovative techniques for extrapolating man hours from recorded measurements of building materials and temple building accounts, which involved him in a huge amount of arduous calculation. Sadly, John was not able to bring this project to completion, but its preliminary results are presented in his important paper in the *Economies beyond Agriculture* volume (‘Temples the measure of men: public building in the Greek economy’).

During their time at Lancaster, John and Veronica had fallen in love with the beautiful country in its hinterland, and, while he was still at Nottingham, they made their family home there, at Burton-in-Lonsdale, at the foot of Ingleborough. After his retirement in 2005, John continued to return to Nottingham for seminars and the like, and he was also able to pursue his many interests and devote himself to his family, as always the core of his life. He and Veronica were regulars at operas and concerts at Buxton, Leeds and Manchester. There were more trips to Greece too, but now the butterflies had become the main focus. John joined what is now the European Butterflies Group of the charity Butterfly Conservation and under its auspices made six butterfly trips to northern Greece or the Peloponnese between 2008 and 2017. An initial visit to Mt Chelmos in Achaia in search of the Chelmos Blue ended in triumph when, after much frustration, John insisted on a final return to a particular sheep trough where the elusive insect was at last discovered. Several subsequent visits focused on the Tzoumerka-Peristeri National Park in Epirus, where the party were guided by Lazaros Pamperis, author of *The Butterflies of Greece*, and Rika Biza, the Park’s

conservation officer, who had now become John's good friends, and were charmed by his knowledge, enthusiasm and good humour. (Information from Nigel Peace.)

John's final years were clouded by a blood disorder, and complications arising from this brought about his death on 16 May 2020. He leaves Veronica, his children Ian and Helen, and Helen's children Holly and Luke.

We close with two of John's many photographs from his Greek travels: a Two-Tailed Pasha, his favourite butterfly, and a Pyramidal Orchid.



John Rich [John.Rich@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:John.Rich@nottingham.ac.uk)

Stephen Hodkinson [stephen.hodkinson@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:stephen.hodkinson@nottingham.ac.uk)