

J. David Thomas (1931–2026)

by Ted Kaizer



John David Thomas, Emeritus Professor of Papyrology at Durham University, died on 7 June 2026, two weeks short of his 95th birthday.

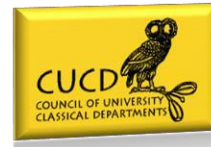
Born on 23 June 1931, David was educated at Wyggeston Grammar School in Leicester, completed his National Service in the Royal Air Force, and read Classics at Worcester College, Oxford (MA 1955). He was appointed to a permanent lectureship at University College of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1955, before he had even finished his final examinations at Oxford. It was in Wales that he developed his strong interest in papyrology, as the last pupil of Sir Harold Idris Bell (who had retired to Aberystwyth

after his own career at the British Museum, and who offered David access to his own library), and where he did his PhD. He continued to lecture at Aberystwyth for over ten years, before moving to Durham. A revised version of his doctorate was published in 1967, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Greek Papyri in the Collection of Wilfred Merton*, vol. III, as Supplement 18 to the *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*.

David joined Durham University in 1966 as a Lecturer, then Senior Lecturer, in Palaeography, in the Department of Palaeography and Diplomatic (which later amalgamated with the University Library). In 1977 he became Reader in Papyrology and in 1990 was promoted to Professorial Fellow.

An eminent scholar, David became known as one of the most distinguished interpreters and editors of the Oxyrhynchus papyri, the collection of mostly documentary papyri written in Greek cursive handwriting that were discovered in the late 19th and early 20th century in Egypt. He contributed to several of the volumes of the series, was a co-editor to some of them and sometime general editor. He also authored a major two-volume work on *The Epistrategos in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt* (1975–1982) which still stands as the main study of this civil official. But he will probably be best remembered for his foundational work on the famous Vindolanda Tablets, the wooden tablets inscribed in near-illegible Latin cursive handwriting first found near Hadrian's Wall in the 1970s, which he deciphered and published in three volumes together with his longtime collaborator Alan Bowman (1983 – Britannia Monograph Series vol.4; 1994, 2003 – British Museum Press).

Recognised as a leading scholar in two different fields – one focussing on Greek, the other on Latin documents – David held visiting positions at Wolfson College, Oxford, at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and at Cologne and Leuven, and was on the Comité International de Papyrologie from 1983 to 1995. In 2001 he received a Festschrift (*Essays and Texts in Honor of J. David Thomas*), edited by his former student Traianos Gagos together with Roger Bagnall and published as volume 42 in the *American Studies in Papyrology* series. David was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1989 and was a recipient of the Chancellor's Medal of Durham University in 2017.



Following his retirement in 1992, David remained an active member of the research community in the Department of Classics & Ancient History at Durham, where he was made an Honorary Fellow. Colleagues from way back then reported that he would regularly drop into the Department for coffee with a papyrus he was working on in his bag, of course always properly shielded between two glass plates. By the time I arrived in Durham and got to know him, in 2005, he was still often attending research seminars. David was known by all for his deep learning, his humour, his unassuming attitude and his great kindness and generosity with advice to junior scholars.

He was also a family man, very proud of his two sons, Michael and Richard. The decline of his first wife Marion's health in the final years of her life affected him deeply, and it took some years for him to recover from the great sadness. When, in his 80s, he met Angela, who was to become his second wife, the spring came back in his step, and there was never a subsequent occasion when I saw him that he did not emphasise how fortunate he felt to have found love and happiness once again, so late in his life.

David was also an avid birdwatcher, and was pleased to be able to tell you that he went to the same school as David Attenborough, though some years behind him.

He had a genuine interest in other people and always showed his pleasure in seeing you. This remarkably modest scholarly giant will be greatly missed and fondly remembered by all those who had the good fortune to get to know him.

David is survived by his wife Angela and by his two sons.

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