On local leave

After working for the foreign office and establishing the Council for British Archaeology, Beatrice de Cardi pursued a distinguished archaeological career in the United Arab Emirates.

I was lucky. Archaeology gave me an interest I’ve been able to pursue right up until now. Some people get bored as soon as they retire: I was taking an expedition to Qatar the day after I retired from CBA in 1973.

I started life, immediately after University College, as secretary to Sir Mortimer Wheeler, who was then keeper of the London Museum (1936). I got my field background at Maiden Castle. In the evenings if you’d shown any sort of promise on the excavation, you were allowed to go up to Tessa Wheeler’s bedroom, and she would explain the significance of what had been found. So you got a bit of training as well as just scratching about in a pit.

Wheeler was a controversial character. He had a violent temper – if you weren’t quick in thinking, I’m glad to say I remained good friends with him until his death. He did a lot for archaeology: he was the father of scientific excavation.

When the museum finally closed on account of the bombing, I was lent to the foreign office as personal assistant to the representative of the war cabinet in China. When I got back I found my museum post was filled, so I got a post as assistant UK trade commissioner in Delhi. Then when partition was in the air in ’47 I opted to work in Pakistan, because I could investigate Indus civilisation in my local leave.

I went up to Baluchistan, sparked off by reading an article by professor Stuart Piggott. In the museum in New Delhi, he’d spotted a distinctive type of pottery which came from the region of Quetta. He got in a taxi knowing only the names that were on the museum labels, and the driver was able to locate

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De Cardi (below in 1966) became the CBA’s first secretary in 1949, after bombing had shown archaeology’s need for a public voice: photo (left) shows site of Roman Temple of Mithras in the City of London, whose discovery drew huge public interest. She celebrated her 90th birthday in June

the sites for him. I thought, well, pottery that sophisticated must have been in demand for use on more than five small sites, I’ll go and see what the distribution is. I received a great deal of help from the Khan of Qalat. I was lent a clapped out jeep and a driver, and away I went. I can’t drive, I’m lethal!

The Council for British Archaeology was formed in 1944, and I was invited to apply for the post of secretary. The bombing of London had alerted everyone to the need for concerted action to bully the government into allowing time for excavations in historic towns.

The office was in the attic of one of those six storey buildings in South Kensington. You didn’t get many members of the public who wanted to crawl up all those flights to the attic.

It was impossible to devote any time to work out east, until I got the CBA more or less established in the mid 1950s. I was able to go back to Baluchistan in 1957 by dint of putting two years’ leave together.

There was too much tribal unrest to continue working there. So, I decided to hop across the border and work in south-eastern Iran, at Bampur. After the excavations, I went on survey only to be pounced on by the Iranian secret police. I thought, I’ll look at the nearest point to Iran, and chose Ra’s al-Khayma emirate.

After the survey there in 1968, I sent a copy of my report to the ruler, and the next thing I knew was I was invited to put forward a programme of research. Like many of the Gulf rulers, he was anxious to establish a museum. It was all a question of identity for the country.

I’ve been toing and froing each winter to Ra’s al-Khayma right up until this spring. I got involved in a project to put their accessions on computer.

It’s really necessary for archaeologists not to be insular, but to look at the techniques used by other countries. It ought to be appreciated that the person who is not paid a salary for doing archaeological work can make a contribution. It’s something I’ve always held very strongly.

Beatrice de Cardi talked to Mike Pitts