

John F Goodchild M.Univ. 1935-2017

It is with much sadness and regret that we have to record the sudden death, on Friday 6th January, of John F. Goodchild, M.Univ. John was a colossus in the field of West Yorkshire and industrial history and his loss will be irreplaceable to researchers at both local and national level. Whilst he lectured and wrote on innumerable topics, his most lasting legacy will be his vast collection of manuscript and related material which is the most substantial and important in private hands. However, whilst privately owned John always generously made them accessible to all. It was the fact that he was no mere collector but interpreted and used his huge collection for the benefit of all that makes him special.



Born in Wakefield, being brought up on Thornes Road, he went to school at the Queen Elizabeth Grammar School in Wakefield where he took up history and religious studies in the sixth form. Upon leaving school at 17 he went to work at County Hall in the West Riding Record Office. Even at this time alongside his work he ran a private museum open to all comers. It was in 1966 that he became founding Curator of Cusworth Hall Museum near Doncaster and subsequently this museum obtained a Museum of the Year award for educational work. Some nine years later he returned to Wakefield as its first District Archivist, subsequently he became Principal Local Studies Officer, based at Balne Lane Library where he was visited by thousands of researchers.

Upon reaching retirement age he established the private “The John Goodchild Collection” based beneath Drury Lane Library, Wakefield; here he again made his collection freely available to all. He is fondly recalled by his many visitors, surrounded by his collection and the many documents became the source material for many writers both local and national. It is certain that without John’s encyclopaedic knowledge of his material the writing of many books would not, could not, have taken place. Upon the closure of Drury Lane Library his collection was loaned to the West Yorkshire Archive Service, where it is currently housed in the new Local History Centre in Kirkgate, Wakefield. It was somehow rather fitting that his working life came full circle back to where it all started with West Yorkshire archive material and it was to his late father’s office at the Registry of Deeds building where John was to be based for the final time prior to the recent move to Kirkgate of the WYAS.

John was a member of The Yorkshire Archaeological Society, where he was co-founder of the Industrial History Section and of the Wakefield Historical Society, where he was Vice President, also being a founding member of Wakefield Historical Publications in 1977. The first book published by the group was John’s “Coal Kings of Yorkshire”. He was a well-known figure in the region giving many thousands of lectures, all without charge, each one uniquely and individually researched and this together with his many publications will be a lasting memorial. In 1984 John was awarded the honorary degree of Master of the Open University for “academic and scholarly distinction, and for public services”, the ceremony being presided over by the distinguished historian, Lord Asa Briggs.

But it was his collecting of manuscript material and books, a boyhood interest that became his lifelong passion, that will be his most lasting legacy. Indeed, in this he rivalled one of his great “heroes” that

great 19th century bibliophile and collector Sir Thomas Phillips, whilst unlike Sir Thomas, we trust John's collection will be kept together for posterity. John hunted down material in exciting visits to bookshops, auction purchases, dusty cellars and anywhere else they may be hidden. The John Goodchild Collection relates primarily, but not exclusively, to the area of West Yorkshire. It includes material from the 12th century onwards, and it is especially rich in material from the 18th and 19th centuries. Almost any subject can be explored through the manuscripts, books, maps and illustrations and related items that he brought together. There are over one thousand boxes of manuscripts alone, and these reflect the stories of hundreds of individuals and institutions through the centuries. One of his most recent and significant acquisitions was one of the only two known 18th century silver Wakefield Waits badges; John was researching the background to this. Indeed, in a last conversation an hour before he died he was enthusing and looking forward to the arrival of some further Wakefield manuscript material.

Outside of history a major interest was the Unitarian Church and he was a trustee and had served as secretary of Westgate Chapel Wakefield. He had also served as President and for a period secretary of the Unitarian Union. The two interests came together in the vaults of the chapel where he knew rather well the residents of the place through their manuscript remains and his formidable knowledge of 18th and 19th century Wakefield. He was also for a brief period a councilor on Wakefield City Council. John had a multi-faceted life, and was a familiar figure in area. He was very much a dog lover having owned three previous rescue dogs, Tom, Lassey (named after a colliery owner!), Fern and latterly Benji a Shih Tzu, all have been excellent companions whom he loved dearly. John also shared his life with his closest friend and partner Alan, who was also a Freemason. They have lived very happily together for the past sixty years. John will have very many enduring legacies, he had high standards of research and expected others to maintain this ideal, woe betide if they did not, but to those of us fortunate enough to have known him we will long treasure the warmth and enthusiasm of his friendship and will sorely miss his outstanding generosity.

Richard Knowles, FSA