

Obituary of David Sellwood

(23 July 1925 – 7 April 2012)

To be the bearer of sad news is always heart rending, more so to report the passing of a close friend and mentor for over 25 years. It is, therefore, with great sadness that I should inform the numismatic community that David Grenville John Sellwood, the leading Parthian numismatist, passed away on 7 April 2012 at Kingston Hospital.

David was born in Brentford, West London, to Thomas Dorey Sellwood and Jenny Rebecca Lawes. After completing his primary and secondary schools, he followed in his father's footsteps and chose engineering as a career; Tom Sellwood was an aeronautical engineer, working on important engineering projects during and after WWII, particularly at the new Spitfire factory at Castle Bromwich built by Lord Nuffield and later managed by Vickers-Armstrong. David then began his National Service in 1946, serving in the Royal Engineers in India, Malaya, Singapore, and Japan, and rising to the rank of Captain. Later he went to Birmingham University to take a degree in Mechanical Engineering and then worked in industry for a few years. He joined Kingston College of Technology (as it then was) as a lecturer, to teach engineering evening classes and quickly became a permanent member of staff. He remained in academia for over 40 years, gaining an MSc in Metallurgy in the 1970s and finally retiring as a Principal Lecturer in 1995. David was immensely proud to be an engineer and always championed the profession.

With his great intellect and numerous contacts in further education, David was able to help and advise many people, not just his engineering students. He is, nevertheless, recognized around the world only for his interest in coins which began in childhood when his grandfather gave him a box of assorted currency. David's passion for collecting and studying coins continued throughout his adult life and included groundbreaking numismatic research. One of David's friends from the Royal Numismatic Society, John Casey, has summed up his impact as follows: "David's contributions to the field of numismatics were outstanding. Best known for his pioneering work on the coinage of the Parthians, he put Iranian numismatic studies on a new footing with the publication of two editions of 'An Introduction to the Coinage of Parthia'". David also contributed to the study of the Sasanian successors to the Parthians with a work which made these coins accessible to the non-specialist. I have been drawing upon David's articles and books for many years and believe that the true significance of his contributions to Parthian numismatics has not yet been fully appreciated. As the product of an insightful and incisive intellect, David's papers have set the highest standards of critical scholarship. They represent an important landmark in the study of Arsacid coinage and play a pivotal role in establishing numismatics as an essential technique of historical research. He was undoubtedly a remarkable teacher and a writer of considerable erudition.

David not only developed a technique of coin classification, but also was at heart a working scientist, a metallurgist and an engineer. He brought his professional expertise to bear on problems which had vexed historians for generations. To this end the workshops of Kingston Polytechnic became a branch of the mint of ancient Athens where David applied practical methods to answer the question of 'not what was produced, but how much was produced'. Re-establishing the technology and metallurgy of antiquity, he made dies and struck coins to the extinction of the dies, so

defining the quantitative limits of ancient coin production per die. He thus transformed a subject hitherto based on art historical studies into one in which serious economic questions could be addressed.

David was appointed President of the Royal Numismatic Society in 1979. In being chosen to fill this role he served until 1984 with distinction in an office which had been held for more than a century by great scholars. As President he furthered the application of science to numismatic studies. His achievements were recognized by his appointment as an Honorary Fellow of the Society. David was generous with his knowledge. A short conversation with him was worth a month's formal library research.

Classical Music too was a passion throughout David's life and one of the interests he shared with many people. He himself played the flute and piccolo, forming a trio with two friends, Andy Tittensor and Kenneth Jenkins, and often holding concerts at Christmas in each others' homes. He had an enormous collection of recorded classical music first of vinyl records and later of CDs. In later years, his favourite composer was Schubert and he chose for his funeral the Adagio from Schubert's Quintet.

David had two loving marriages. The first was to June Ethel Mary Woollard, whom he married in 1954, and with whom he had two daughters, Lynette and Philippa. June, an art teacher by profession, sadly died in 1981 at the early age of 53. David later married Gladys in 1991 and with her he shared many of his interests until his death.

David enjoyed going to concerts with Gladys and many other friends, making the most of what music London had to offer. Though a natural athlete, he was very modest about his prowess in a number of sports. Much to his embarrassment, given his gentle manner, he was a champion boxer in the army. He played basketball at Birmingham University after the War at a time when the team was Varsity champions. He was a powerful swimmer and met his first wife June through a swimming club. During summer holidays at Rustington, he was the only swimmer on the beach attempting a butterfly stroke in a strong Channel swell. He played squash well into his sixties while at Kingston University.

David also loved to travel; this may have stemmed from his days of National Service. He was not only a traveler but also a linguist who worked in both Germany and Sweden, spoke fluent French and German and could more than "get by" in Italian and Spanish.

A big thrill for David was finally to travel to Iran with me in October 1994. Together we visited several museums and David delivered two lectures on Parthian coinage and history at the Iranian Cultural Heritage Centre in Tehran. We then travelled to Kerman, visiting the provincial museum as well as the famous Arg-i Bam, a massive mud-brick construction from the Parthian and Sasanian periods. We continued to Shiraz visiting Persepolis, Naqsh-e Rostam and Pasargadae to the north, and several Sasanian sites to the south of that city.

Up until his final days, David was involved in the revision of his 'An Introduction to the Coinage of Parthia' in collaboration with me. He even wrote the "Foreword to the Third Edition" on 11 May 2011, while waiting for some coins from his collection to

be photographed at the offices of Spinks in London. Implementing the changes that he had approved, I shall complete the project in his memory.

David is survived by his second wife, Gladys, two daughters from his first marriage, Lynette and Philippa, and two grandchildren, Holly and Jacob.

Although Parthian numismatics will be poorer without David Sellwood, his legacy will surely endure.

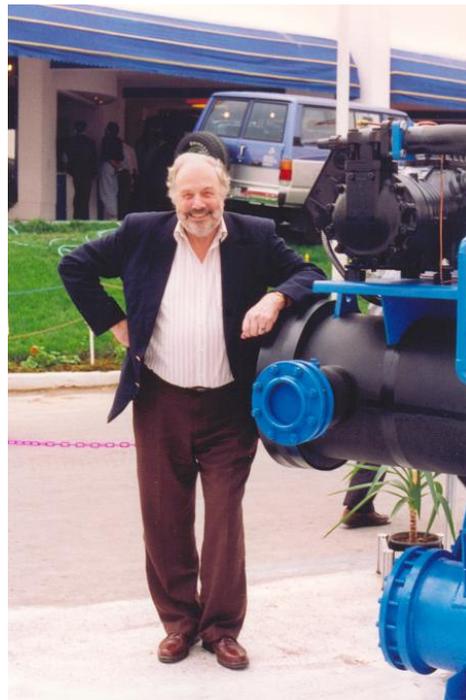
A funeral service will be held for him at 11:00 o'clock on 1 May in Kingston Crematorium.

Requiescat In Pace.

G.R.F. Assar
(Oxford, UK)



David Sellwood, visiting Iran's National Museum, Tehran, October 1994



David Sellwood, visiting the International Trade Exhibition, Tehran, October 1994