

OBITUARY: Sheila Constance Gibson, R.I.B.A., A.A.Dip (Hons), F.S.A. 1920-2002

Architect by training and profession, artist and illustrator by inclination, Sheila Gibson combined the two skills with extraordinary finesse in the service of archaeology and the recording and graphic reconstruction of fragmentary buildings. Hers were neither the architect's 'presentation drawing' nor the artist's 'impression', but a uniquely personal formula which evolved in response to the needs of the archaeologists she worked with and the projects in which they enlisted her aid. In her hands modern archaeo-architectural reconstruction developed into a rigorous experimental procedure, a test of the processes of excavation and an integral element in the interpretation of structural remains.



Sheila Gibson.

Sheila was born in Dublin, on the ides of March (as she gleefully liked to put it) 1920, the fourth daughter of Michael Gibson, a distinguished gynaecologist. On his retirement in 1936, the family moved to Bath and during the Second World War Sheila went to work as a secretary at the Admiralty. It was her first chance to break out from what had hitherto been a very sheltered life at home (she never went to school since her father believed she was too delicate) and after the war she took matters firmly into her own hands, determined to become an architect. With the aid of six months at a London crammer she gained entry to the Architectural Association and graduated with honours in 1953, winning the Bernard Webb Studentship to travel in Italy that spring and then going straight into practice that autumn with the firm of Carden and Godfrey, specialists in the conversion and restoration of historic buildings. She stayed with Carden and Godfrey for the next thirty-two years, retiring to Oxford in 1985 to pursue yet further what with their co-operation had by then become a second, quite remarkable career in the archaeological world.

It all began in 1959, when she met John Ward-Perkins on a Swan Hellenic cruise to North Africa. He had just agreed to write his book on *Roman Imperial Architecture* for the Pelican History of Art, and learning that Sheila had already done illustrations for other volumes in the series, he asked her to help with his. In the event the book was not finished for the next ten years, largely because Ward-Perkins kept on getting diverted by other projects, and Sheila found herself redeployed as well, away from the drawing table and into the field. First came a survey, analysis and reconstructions of the successive phases of the

small church of S. Liberato on the shores of Lake Bracciano in 1961, then the triclinium of the Flavian Palace on the Palatine in 1964, followed by Chedworth Roman villa for Ian Richmond, San Rocco Roman villa for Molly Cotton and in the later 1960s Iris Love's excavations at Cnidos in Turkey; in 1970 she helped the young Bryan Ward-Perkins on a project at Trogir Cathedral (Croatia). In the 1970s it was the turn of medieval houses in earthquake-ridden Tuscania (Lazio) and the catalogue of the Christian Antiquities of Cyrenaica, which had been left incomplete on the early death of Richard Goodchild, both interwoven with the UNESCO Save Carthage campaign—first a survey of the Antonine Baths and subsequently Henry Hurst's shipsheds on the island and other parts of the circular harbour; thence to work with Andrea Carandini on the Roman villa at Settefinestre in Italy. In 1975, a keen model-maker herself, she branched out into the business on a grand scale, collaborating with Kim Allen on the model of the Insula of the Menander for John Ward-Perkins' *Pompeii AD 79* exhibition. That was when I first had the chance to get to know her, as she shared our freezing accommodation in Torre del Greco in February, told us merry tales of her life on the archaeological trail, and carried out a complete survey of the insula in under a week! No wonder she also managed to fit in along the way a survey of the Leonine Wall in Rome and a reconstruction of the three-storey Roman ruin called Le Mura di S. Stefano at Anguillara. In the 1980s there was more work in Rome, with Henry Hurst on S. Maria Antiqua and Simon Pratt on the Palatine Temple of Magna Mater, then in the mountains of Molise on Richard Hodges' excavations at S. Vincenzo al Volturno, in a famously reeking ditch with Neil Christie drawing the city walls of Ravenna, and in the forests of Castelporziano, near Ostia, helping me bring some sense and order to the remnants of the Vicus Augustanus.

Her drawing style was honed by lots of practice in book illustration (in addition to the illustrations for Pevsner's *Buildings of England* and John Ward-Perkins' *Roman Imperial Architecture* she also drew for his *Architettura Romana*, and latterly for Judith McKenzie's *Architecture of Petra* and her forthcoming monograph on Alexandria). It is a deceptively simple and readable style, characterized by strong contrast in weight between the lines which define the basic nature of the structure concerned and those which supply the detail, never fussy, always sharp and capable of extreme reduction in print. She was rightly proud of her ability to do the minimum number of drawings, taking the minimum number of levels and other measurements, in order to work up the plans and sections on which she would base her reconstructions. Right from the start she would know the best scale to work to, and the best viewpoint from which to work, to suit the character of given building. She was especially a master of the axonometric projection, both as a succinct and economical form in which to present surviving remains in their actual state and as a demonstration of the efficacy of their reconstruction in elevation.

The joy of working with Sheila was not just the guarantee that she would do the job as quickly and efficiently as you would allow her and that she would deliver—and deliver on time—everything she promised to do, but that she was such a marvellous person to have around as part of the team, a delightful companion, a trusty and loyal friend with a tremendous zest for life. Slightly built and neat in person, nimble in action, she could trip over a trench peg, roll with the fall, and pick herself up with the ease of a practised horsewoman. Indeed, deaf and diabetic, she was always bouncing back from all sorts of medical and physical hardships. She did not suffer fools lightly and was impatient with those who didn't share her commitment to getting on with the job, scathing in her condemnation for instance of Iris Love and her non-publication of Cnidos, and of others who couldn't or wouldn't see things through to a proper conclusion. As a staunch member of the Libyan Society, it was a great relief to her in the last year of her

life to know that the Cyrenaican churches, for which she produced over 42 drawings in the 1970s and had done everything within her power to help see into print (even saving them in the nick of time from being thrown out as rubbish in the 1990s), are indeed going to see the light of day. Her death at 81 took her, and the rest of us, rather by surprise; she had seemed so indestructible, but the memory of her personality and her work will endure.

For Sheila's drawings in general see:

Architecture and Archaeology: the work of Sheila Gibson. Catalogue of an exhibition held at the Institute of Archaeology in London and the British School at Rome, Rome 1991

For some of her Libyan drawings:

- J. B. Ward-Perkins, 'The Market Theatre at Cyrene', *Libya Antiqua* 13/14 (1976-7): 331-73.
- J. B. Ward-Perkins, 'The Christian Architecture of Apollonia', in J. H. Humphrey (ed.), *Apollonia, the Port of Cyrene. Excavations by the University of Michigan 1965-7, Libya Antiqua Supplement IV*, Rome (1978): 285-8.
- S. C. Gibson, J. H. Little and J. B. Ward-Perkins, 'Excavation reports: Ptolemais 1978', *Libyan Studies* 9 (1978): 5-12, fig. 1.
- J. B. Ward-Perkins, J. H. Little, D. Mattingly, 'Town houses at Ptolemais, Cyrenaica', *Libyan Studies* 17 (1986): 109-153, esp. figs 4, 16, 19.
- E. Alföldi-Rosenbaum and J. B. Ward-Perkins, 'Justinianic Mosaic Pavements in Cyrenaican Churches', *Monografie di archeologia libica* XIV, Rome (1980), figs 1, 4-6, 8-9.

Amanda Claridge
September 2002