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BRIAN SPENCER, FORMER KEEPER IN CHARGE OF THE MEDIEVAL COLLECTION AT THE MUSEUM OF LONDON, EXPERT ON PILGRIM SOUVENIRS, DIES AT 75

Brian Spencer, Former Keeper in Charge of the Medieval Collections at the Museum of London, died on April 3, 2003.

Spencer was born in Keighley, Yorkshire in 1928. He studied History at the University of Leeds and in 1952 was hired by the Museum of London after it was re-established in Kensington Palace after World War II. He was involved in both aspects of the museum, archaeology and art history. In 1954 he helped excavate the Temple of Mithras in London and years later talked of the excitement of the find and the interest of the crowds who came to observe. In 1972, he curated the beloved exhibition Chaucer's London which drew over 75,000 visitors.

When the museum (now merged with the Guildhall Museum) moved to its new quarters in the Barbican Centre in 1974-75, he helped install the medieval galleries and became the acting director until the museum opened officially. From then, until his retirement in 1988, he was the Keeper of Medieval Antiquities and put on many exhibitions and published numerous works on a wide variety of topics from seals to the unusual find of cheater's dice.

He established his international reputation by focusing on the hitherto neglected area of pilgrim souvenirs. What began as a single lecture on "Pilgrim Badges and the London Pilgrim" became a lifelong journey of learning, scholarship, and generosity as he almost single-handedly created the study of a new field. He defined what these objects were, their function, manufacture, style, and iconography. He identified every major souvenir and badge found in England and many on the continent in the last few decades. His grasp of medieval popular culture, history, and hagiography was unparalleled. His impact is reflected in the frequency with which his work is cited not only in almost every article and book on medieval souvenirs, but in works as far afield as the paintings of Robert Campin, the works of Chaucer, and souvenirs from the temple of Bodhgaya in India. He wrote numerous articles, contributed to many archaeological reports, and published important catalogues of the collections from the Kings Lynn Museum in Norfolk (1980), the Salisbury Museum (1990), and his masterwork, the Museum of London in 1998.

Beyond his exemplary scholarship, what set Brian Spencer apart was his great generosity and enthusiasm for all aspects of medieval art and culture. He corresponded with great numbers of scholars, students, collectors, amateurs, and the just plain curious, sharing his insights and thoughtful opinions. Most far-reaching was his involvement with metal-detectorists (called mudlarks). Shunned by some scholars, he reached out to them and offered his expertise in exchange for a chance to look over and photograph the objects they discovered. In this manner, the Museum of London and other public institutions were able to acquire objects that would have otherwise disappeared on the open market, or if they were not acquired, they were at least recorded for the use of later

scholars. The mutual respect between the mudlarks and Spencer can be seen at low tide when the graffiti “Brian Spencer Rules O.K.” can be seen under one of the bridges over the Thames.

His other great interest was in horticulture and he and his wife Joan shared a lifelong fascination with different plants and growing conditions. Every year from his beautiful garden he brought plants into the Museum of London to be sold for charitable donations to the Imperial Cancer Fund.

Brian Spencer is survived by his widow, Joan, three children, and six grandchildren.

Those lucky enough to have met him will remember his kind generosity and gentle sense of humor. He will be very much missed.