The recent deaths of Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle and William R. Coe have robbed the Museum of two of its most distinguished archaeologists. A portrait of Bill Coe, the legendary excavator of Tikal, follows in these pages. But Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle commands less attention in the United States, unlike in Britain, where her passing was mourned at a ceremony in Winchester Cathedral. The wife of Martin Biddle, Director of the Museum from 1977 to 1981, she assisted her husband as he began to professionalize the University Museum. In particular, collections managers, called keepers after their British Museum counterparts, were hired to put order into the University Museum’s great holdings. Until then the Museum had been a research institute with huge stores, largely unknown to the public. The Biddles sought to change this.

Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle’s name will reside in the annals of archaeological history as the excavator of the Old Minster, Winchester, and of its fiendishly complicated cemetery. This building was in many respects the greatest church in Anglo-Saxon England, but as in so many similar churches, its stone was plundered to build the present New Minster, leaving robbed (or ghost) trenches where walls had been. Ingeniously disentangling this labyrinth of walls and phasing the robber trenches as well as thousands of burials, Kjølbye-Biddle succeeded in opening the eyes of European archaeologists to the extraordinary possibilities of open area excavation as an instrument for charting new urban histories. Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle’s 1960s excavations, made in a renowned partnership with her husband, served as a training ground for a generation of eager European and American archaeologists. Celebrated for the rigor of their recording techniques, standards were set here that the Biddles then took to two further remarkable sites, Repton and St. Albans Abbey, which they excavated while they were at the University Museum. Few Museum excavations have been so assiduously undertaken, and sadly, very few people know of the association between these legendary digs and the Penn Museum. In a long history of expeditions, the name of Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle deserves to be recalled as one of the University of Pennsylvania’s finest archaeologists, publishing to standards that were no less intellectually rigorous than the complicated excavations she brilliantly managed.

Richard Hodges, Ph.D.
The Williams Director