

## Archaeology in London [to be available as pdf from Archaeology in London page

Archaeology in London → an introduction pdf

### An introduction

#### London – home to thousands of archaeological sites

In terms of its archaeology, London is one of the world's most-excavated and best-recorded urban areas, with artefacts and records from nearly 10,000 individual sites housed in the **archaeological archive**. The findings span many millennia, with the greater London area containing extensive evidence of human activity from early prehistoric times up to the modern era (for a summary and mapping of archaeological discoveries through the 20<sup>th</sup> century see *The archaeology of Greater London: an assessment of archaeological evidence for human presence in the area now covered by Greater London*, Museum of London 2000).

The archaeology of London involves more than just excavation, of course, and research into the historic environment includes all sorts of physical evidence for past human activities, both buried and built, while London's historic landscapes and townscapes provide the context for archaeological, architectural and urban history. Documentary history, social studies, demographics and many other disciplines can also contribute to archaeological research.

The physical residue of history has been accumulating across the Greater London area for millennia, with the process most pronounced in the Roman, Saxon and medieval settlements beneath parts of the City of London, north Southwark and Westminster. Here, the ground surface has risen by a substantial amount over time - an average of 3 or 4 metres in the City of London and as much as 8 metres in lower areas such as the Fleet and Walbrook valleys. The accumulation of layers of material associated with various events in history has formed an archaeological layer-cake and a complex palimpsest of structures and other features for archaeologists to decipher.

Although thousands of sites have been excavated, analysed and published, significant findings continue to be made through new fieldwork and the study of archived information. Most archaeological work dwells on the accumulation of fine details but there is still scope for major revelations, such as the identification of the *Lundenwic* settlement area in Covent Garden (*Saxon London*, Vince 1990) and the Roman amphitheatre beneath the Guildhall in the City of London (*London's Roman amphitheatre*, Bateman et al 2008).

#### London's archaeologists

A brief history of London could be presented here but would hardly do justice to such a large **subject. However**, a quick mention of some of London's most influential archaeologists is **revealing....**

#### ***Monks, architects and private collectors***

The evolving study of London's archaeology has a long and complex history worthy of study in its own right. London's antiquity was mentioned by Bede in the 8th century and Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 12th century. John Stow wrote a detailed history of the city in the 16th century and Sir

Christopher Wren correctly identified Roman artefacts dug up during the rebuilding of St Paul's and Bow Church after the Great Fire. The physical remains of the Roman city's defensive wall were repaired and used in the medieval period, continuing to exert a profound influence on London's expansion.

### **19<sup>th</sup> century expansion and the beginning of the scientific approach**

Interest in London's archaeology grew along with 19th-century London's rapid expansion. By the mid-19th century so many 'antiquities and curiosities' had been dug up that they barely fitted into the Guildhall Library but archaeological discovery continued to be driven by private collectors, with important finds purchased or picked off spoil heaps and of uncertain provenance. Charles Roach Smith, the foremost collector of the time, began to change this with his outspoken comments in defence of London's heritage.

Others followed, including General Pitt-Rivers, a soldier who became involved in field archaeology through an interest in Darwin's theory of evolution and whose careful recording work was the start of a scientific approach to archaeology. The arrival of Mortimer Wheeler at the London Museum in 1926 was the catalyst for another dramatic advance and Wheeler was asked to produce an overview of Roman London for the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, published in 1928.

### **Post-WW2: opportunities, improved funding – and patchy recording**

During the second war nearly a third of the City of London was destroyed by enemy bombing and this tragedy presented archaeologists with an unprecedented opportunity to excavate sites after the war. WF Grimes was appointed to supervise work in London and in 1949 the redevelopment of a bomb site near the ancient Walbrook stream at St Swithin's House saw Ivor Noel Hume face the bulldozers alone to rescue artefacts for the Guildhall Museum. Publicity about the desperate working conditions helped to convince the Corporation of London to provide more funding. Grimes's greatest discovery was made just across the road in 1954 with the excavation of the Temple of Mithras on the east bank of the Walbrook stream. When the marble head of Mithras was recovered the site became a cause-celebre and Ralph Merrifield would later say 'If you wish to see building contractors cower and property developers turn pale, you need only whisper the words Temple of Mithras'. The finds were donated to the Guildhall Museum but most of the archaeology at Bucklersbury House – and at many other sites redeveloped in the 1950s and 60s - was destroyed without record.

### **Public funding, new strategies, standardised recording**

As the pace of post-war redevelopment increased more people began to realise that London's archaeology was a valuable and finite resource. Archaeologists such as Ralph Merrifield and Peter Marsden were able to record important sites during the 1960s but their work was restricted by a marked shortage of resources – often relying on voluntary diggers from local archaeology and history societies at weekends. Demands that more should be done to protect and record London's archaeology culminated in the 1973 publication of *The Future of London's Past*. The Department of Urban Archaeology (DUA) was formed later that year to carry out publicly-funded archaeological excavations in the City of London, while the Department of Greater London Archaeology (DGLA) was formed shortly afterwards to cover the surrounding boroughs.

A large number of excavations took place in the City and adjacent areas in the 1970s and 1980s, some with public support and others through voluntary private funding by property developers. Increasingly, these archaeological units gained official access to sites and developed a range of skills, including formalised excavation strategies and standardised recording systems.

### **Boom....**

A boom in redevelopment after the 'Big Bang' of 1986 witnessed an extraordinary amount of archaeological work in and around the City of London. The boom included many major excavations and important finds, eliciting strong support from some property developers and hostility from others. In 1989 the discovery of the Rose Theatre in North Southwark led to a high-profile preservation battle, mirrored to a lesser extent by arguments over the fate of Huggin Hill bath house on the north bank of the Thames. It was clear that arrangements for the recording and protection of London's archaeology needed review.

### **...and Bust**

Then in 1990 the boom turned to bust. When the dust had settled, the DUA and DGLA had been amalgamated into a new organisation called the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) and a new piece of national planning policy guidance (PPG16) had been enacted. PPG16 placed new obligations on developers to fund appropriate levels of archaeological work but also introduced open competition into the marketplace, with different archaeological contractors allowed to offer their services. New waves of property development have resulted in extensive archaeological excavation work across London and some spectacular finds. In recent years PPG16 has given way to new planning rules and regulations such as the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) though the principles of developer funding and competitive archaeological contracting remain firmly in place.

### ***London Archaeologist, a key witness for 50 years***

*London Archaeologist* magazine has witnessed many of these changes since it was first published in 1968, while the typical London archaeologist has come a long way from his or her antiquarian forerunners. Archaeology remains a relatively small and young profession but it has done remarkably well to cope with the changing context of the workplace, while London has remained at or near the forefront of archaeological innovation and best practice. *London Archaeologist* has had the privilege of playing a key role in this process of discovery and change.