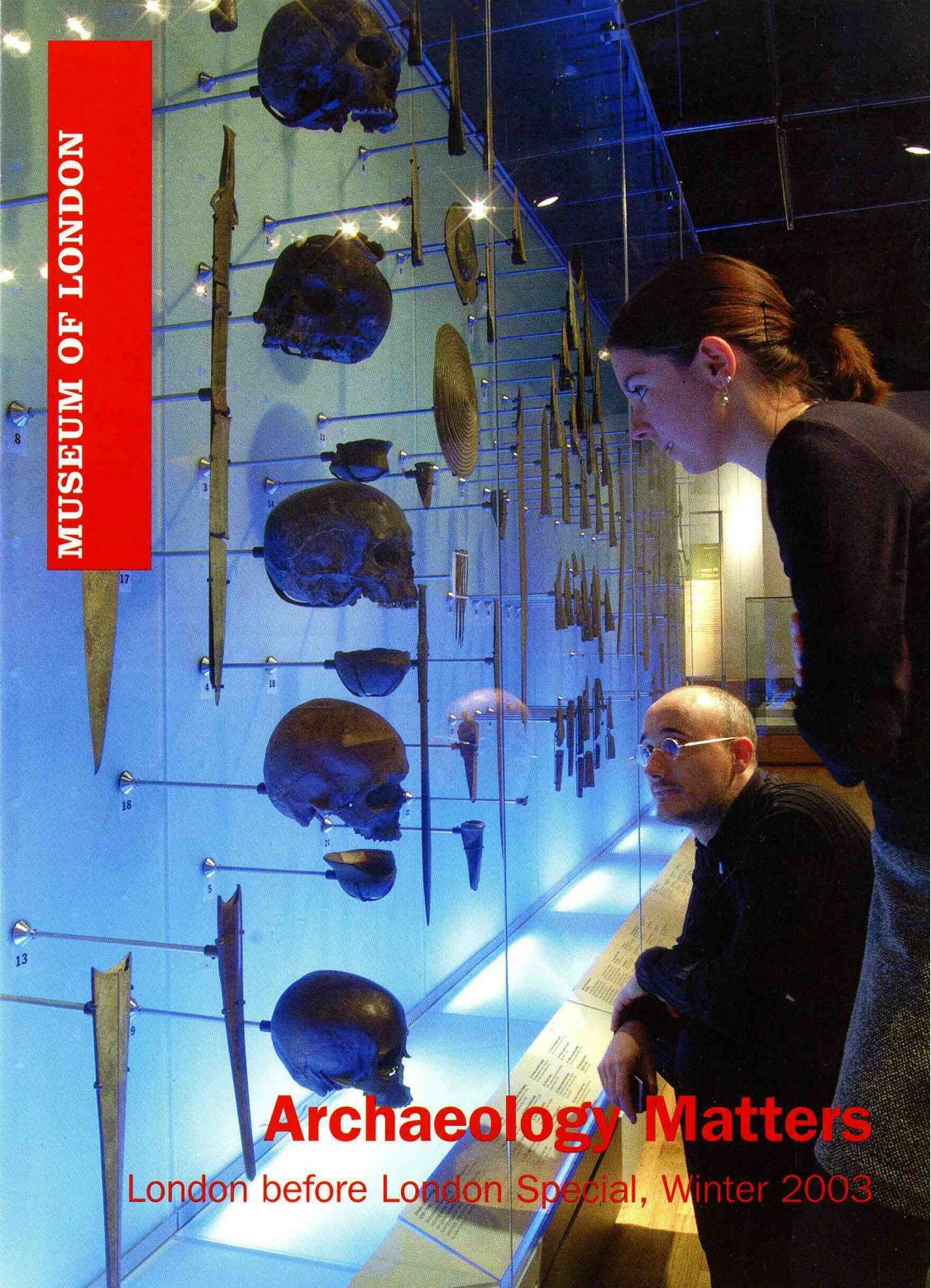


MUSEUM OF LONDON

Archaeology Matters

London before London Special, Winter 2003



London before London gallery

To enter, pass the fearsomely horned skull of an aurochs, a wild ox that lived near Ilford a quarter of a million years ago. Next, take a look at an elephant's foot from Avely, Essex, and a hippotamus tusk from Regent Street. Interspersed with these relics of an African-style landscape – extraordinary reminders of how London's geography has changed and is still changing – are remains of people who lived here: a human skull, 400,000 years old, and giant-sized but beautifully finished stone tools.

London before London is the Museum's third, and by far its most expansive, attempt at displaying prehistory. When no other permanent gallery has been rebuilt more than once, why should this period have been given special treatment? Partly because of the pace of archaeological discovery. Partly because of progress in interpreting this most remote of eras. As the curator, Jonathan Cotton, puts it, 'we are now able to use sites and artefacts to focus on people

– some from species ancestral to us, others from remarkably sophisticated socio-political elites – and on their legacy to us today'.

The gallery contains over 1500 items, many of them never previously displayed. A 5000-year-old bowl rim, for instance, evocatively carries the finger impression of the woman who made it. A hoard of broken bronze axes shows that mass-production began at least a thousand years before the Roman conquest. To encourage visitors to think beyond artefacts to the people who used them, the captions are often written in a semi-poetic style. And just as the Thames commanded the region throughout prehistory, both physically and spiritually, so does a vast blue-lit case containing Thames finds dominate the gallery (see front cover). It is 26m long and contains over 400 objects. As you leave, remember that the names, Thames and London ('place where the river floods'), are pre-Roman, one of the longest-lasting legacies of prehistory.



Bronze Age Beckton

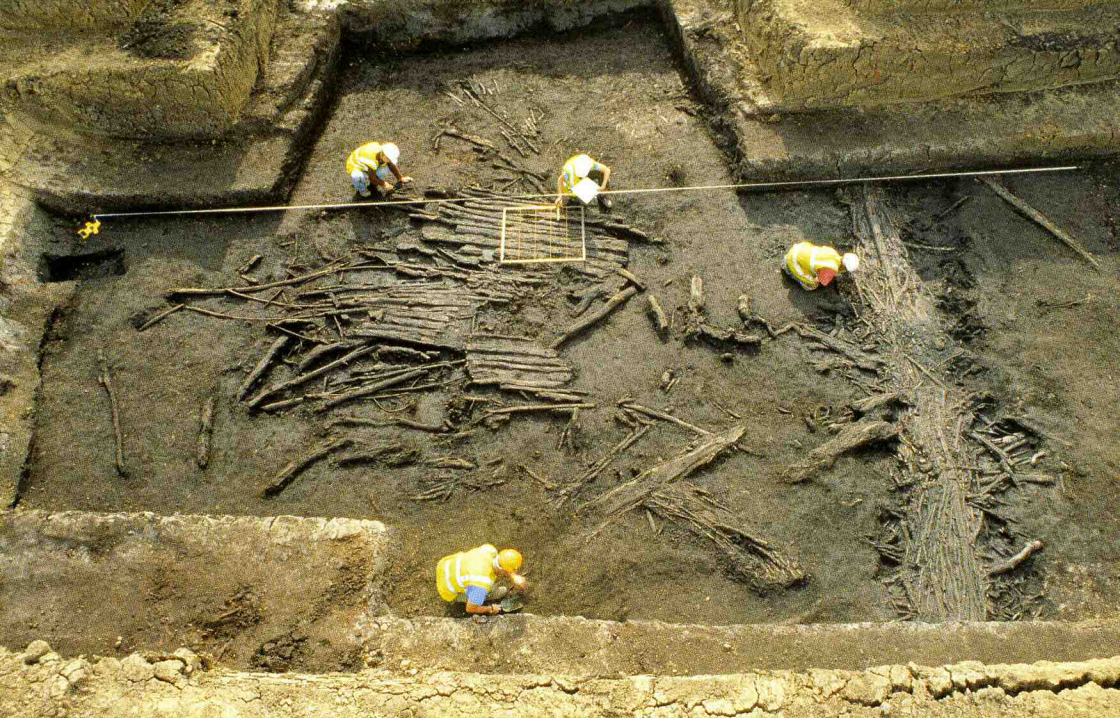


Photo: Pre-Construct Archaeology

The remains of a wooden trackway 3500 years old and of an adjoining platform, possibly a hunting hide, have been discovered off South Woolwich Manor Way, Beckton, in east London. From cut marks on the timbers we can tell the sizes and shapes of the bronze axes that were used and possibly even how many different axes were employed.

The trackway (right of picture) was made from bundles of brushwood, and was wide enough for one person or animal. The rectangular platform (centre) is a much rarer discovery. It was constructed in two stages. First, cut branches were spread over the area, fairly randomly, to make a solid base. Then poles cut to a similar length were laid on top, side by side, like Bronze Age garden decking. The woods include alder and yew. We are not yet entirely certain of the platform's purpose, but a hunting hide is the most likely explanation.

Vast areas of the Thames estuary were wetlands during prehistory but have now been reclaimed

and are dry land. Global changes in sea level over thousands of years caused conditions to vary from saltmarsh or reed swamp to very wet woodland. This plant matter has survived, decomposed, as thick layers of peat. Around 2000–1500BC – a period of rising sea levels in the earlier Bronze Age – people built wooden trackways across the peat from the gravel ridge in the north towards the open river. This enabled them to fish and hunt birds, to collect reeds or wood, and to reach boats. Animals may have been driven out to pasture in the summer when water levels dropped. From future laboratory analysis of the Beckton timberwork we hope to find out whether natural or managed woodlands were used, what the surrounding vegetation was like, and whether any microscopic food remains have been left behind.

Tim Carew
Pre-Construct Archaeology

Heathrow airport

To the thousands who fly over them every day, the pair of parallel ditches on the site of the future Terminal 5 must look like the remains of a disused runway. In fact they mark the edges of a ritual highway or 'cursus', which was laid out in the Neolithic, over 4000 years ago. The dig here, by Framework Archaeology for BAA, will continue for a year and will eventually cover nearly 90 hectares.

The Stanwell Cursus runs for 3km in a north-north-easterly direction from Stanwell church to the banks of the river Colne. Several sections have been excavated previously, but the present length of 300m is the longest to have been exposed on a single occasion. The dig has shown that the shallow ditches originally flanked an elevated causeway, about 20m across, which afforded clear views over the flat landscape on either side and may have been used for ceremonial processions.

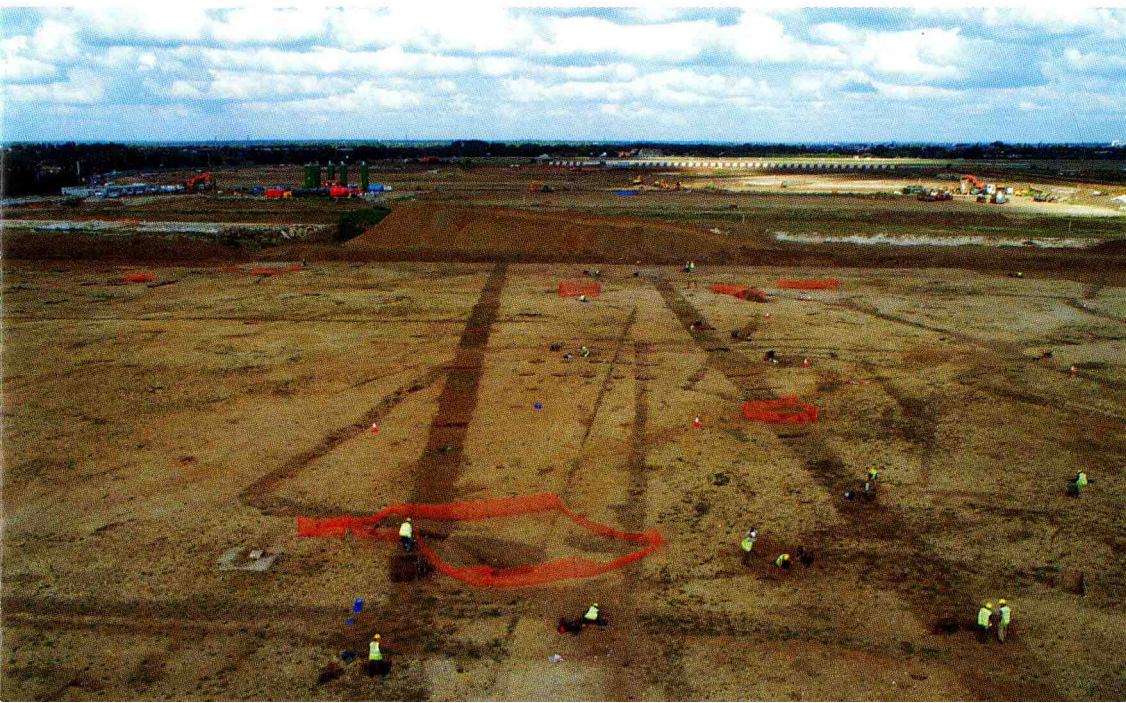
The first habitation goes back considerably earlier, to around 6500BC in the middle of

the Mesolithic. At that time the area would have been mainly woodland. Tree clearance began during the Neolithic (4000–2400BC), and by the end of that period the region had evidently acquired great religious significance, the cursus being just one of several known ritual monuments.

During the Bronze Age (2400–700BC), field boundaries were laid out beside and across the cursus. Associated settlements were connected by trackways and may have been seasonally occupied. The site seems to have reverted to grassland during Iron Age and Roman times but, interestingly, when a medieval enclosure system was created it appears to have been influenced by its Bronze Age predecessor. The prehistoric ditches and banks had presumably remained visible markers in the landscape.

Information from Gill Andrews and Nick Wells

Photo: Framework Archaeology



Ashford henge



Photo: Pre-Construct Archaeology

The ring ditches of a number of roundhouses in an Iron Age settlement had already been discovered during a dig at Ashford Prison, near Staines in west London, when one turned up that looked slightly different. At 17.5m across it was noticeably bigger, and it did not have the usual south-east entrance, even though it was located near the heart of the settlement. Closer examination showed there were numerous pits dug into its fill. On excavation both these and the ditch were found to contain Peterborough ware potsherds, placing it in the mid- to late Neolithic (c 2500BC), not the Iron Age (c 500BC).

It was therefore probably a small 'henge' – a circular area defined by a ditch and external bank – that predated the settlement by about 2000 years and was used for ceremonial purposes. Later in the excavation it became clear that the site had been an important place for ceremonial activities or ritual even before this, as fine Early Neolithic flints had been placed in pits nearby. Such activities continued

for some time after the building of the henge.

The henge was probably still visible as an earthwork when the roundhouses were built, even if its original significance had been forgotten. This raises the possibility that its presence influenced the siting of the Iron Age settlement, and that the inhabitants may even have mistaken it for the remains of a rather large ancestral roundhouse.

The combination of light soils over gravel with proximity to the River Ash meant that this was always an attractive place to prehistoric people. Thousands of years before the henge was built, Mesolithic hunter-gatherers left some of their tools, probably while exploiting the riverside environment, and subsequently a Late Bronze Age field system seems to have been laid out to hold and control livestock.

Tim Carew
Pre-Construct Archaeology

Early hunters at Swanscombe

Palaeolithic archaeology has a hard time attracting the attention it deserves. At least that's how it often feels, particularly when confronted with the (fortunately unique) machine-driver who chucked a just-retrieved handaxe onto his footplate commenting 'just a stone', or the (more common, and even eminent) archaeologists concerned about excavating 'bedrock'. Roman mosaics or Iron Age swords are impressive and accessible, but you have to work harder for your kicks in the distant past. The excitement and awe come as much from the implications of the evidence as its immediate impact – although deep sequences such as these half-million-year-old river deposits at Swanscombe have their own beauty. Combine the most unspectacular flint flake with a secure Pleistocene context, and one is immediately face-to-face with an ancestral hominid making a handaxe in the Thames Valley of 400,000BC – a valley teeming with lions, elephants and rhino, but with no shelter, no fire and no cold storage.

How human these early hominids were and how they lived is still fiercely debated. Recent

finds suggest they were surprisingly human, making substantial wooden spears to hunt medium-size game such as small rhinos, horses and deer, before butchering the meat from the carcasses with their handaxes – possibly snacking a little – and transporting the majority back for other members of the group. And all who have successfully replicated their flint handaxes recognise mental capabilities not too far from our own.

Recent investigations at Swanscombe have revealed numerous handaxes and faunal remains, including a tusk of the extinct elephant *Palaeoloxodon antiquus*. This beast was twice the size of a modern African elephant, standing 4m high at the shoulder and weighing 9 tons. It is hard to imagine it could have been hunted if fully fit, but a wounded specimen could have been killed, or the carcass of a dead one scavenged for meat.

Francis Wenban-Smith
Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton

Photo: Francis Wenban-Smith





Head of the river

One of the most tantalising exhibits in the *London before London* gallery is a fragment of skull in which a large hole has been cut. It was unearthed last year by Fiona Haughey of University College, London, during a survey of the Thames foreshore at World's End, Chelsea, and has recently been radiocarbon dated to 1750BC.

The skull is of an adult male, the first Londoner known to have undergone and survived major head surgery. The operation, 'trepanation', involved making an opening in a roughly central position on the top of the head and is still the standard medical procedure for relieving pressure inside the skull. The ancient surgeon probably scraped with a flint rather than drilled or gouged, so as to reduce the risk of piercing the brain. The operation may have taken up to an hour. Astonishingly, the patient lived for months if not years afterwards, for there are signs of bone regrowth and no evidence of infection.

The operation may have been an attempt to cure migraine or epilepsy, or to exorcise evil spirits. That the skull was discovered by the river comes as no surprise, for hundreds of other skulls have been found there. Most are of men in their late 20s or early 30s, and radiocarbon dates in the range 1300 to 800BC are common. In Bronze Age London it was evidently normal practice to commit the dead to water rather than to the earth. But this particular skull had been carefully buried within peat at the water's edge and, exceptionally, just the frontal bone survives. Jon Cotton, the *London before London* curator, speculates that in fact it was no ordinary skull. 'Are these the treasured remains of a spiritual leader', he suggests, 'of a man who had defeated death – the equivalent of a medieval relic?'

Information from Simon Mays and Jane Sidell, English Heritage, and Jon Cotton, Museum of London

Lecture: Londoners – the first ½ million years

Wednesday 5th March
 1.10pm (50 mins)
 Nick Ashton, British Museum

Lecture: How prehistoric was the population of Roman Londinium?

Friday 28th March
 1.10pm (50 mins)
 Hedley Swain, Museum of London

Workshop: Prehistoric jewellery

Sunday 2nd March
 1pm, 1.30pm, 2pm, 3.30pm, 4pm (30mins)
 Family activity, suitable for children aged 7+. No advance booking, but places will be limited

Working Water: Roman technology in action

Last year Museum of London archaeologists excavated two deep wells containing the iron and timber parts of two Roman water-lifting machines, astonishingly well-preserved. Now, in collaboration with engineers and timber construction experts, we have built a full-size working model of what may be the earliest example of mechanical engineering in Britain.

Trained demonstrators will operate the machine at 12pm and 1pm on weekdays, and at 1pm, 2pm and 3pm at weekends (weather permitting). For up-to-the-minute information, please telephone the Box Office: 020 7814 5777

Swiss Re

Sponsored by



The prehistory and topography of Southwark and Lambeth

By Jane Sidell, Jonathan Cotton, Louise Rayner and Lucy Wheeler
 This report describes the remarkable natural topography of the south bank of the Thames and the complex interaction between human communities and their environment from around 9500BC to AD50.
 MoLAS Monograph 14, £12.95

Under Hackney: the archaeological story

By Keith Sugden, with Kieron Tyler
 A short illustrated history of the borough, the location of many recent excavations. At Stoke Newington archaeologists have found evidence for some of the earliest human activity in Britain.
 Friends of Hackney Archives, £4.95

The Roman tower at Shadwell, London: a reappraisal

By David Lakin, with Fiona Sealey and Kevin Rielly
 Once believed to be a military signal station, research has shown that the tower excavated in the 70s a mile east of Londinium was in fact an imposing Roman mausoleum.
 MoLAS Archaeology Studies Series 8, £6.95

To order books mentioned in this leaflet, please phone 020 7814 5600.

Payment by credit or debit card. Prices as stated, plus post and packing.



Museum of London

London Wall
 London EC2Y 5HN
 Tel: 020 7600 3699
 Web: www.museumoflondon.org.uk
 Email: info@museumoflondon.org.uk

If you would like to receive *Archaeology Matters* regularly, please phone 020 7814 5730.

Text and editing (unless stated otherwise) by Francis Grew, Curator (Archaeology), Museum of London (fgrew@museumoflondon.org.uk; 020 7814 5738)

front cover: the London before London gallery