

Geoffrey Egan PhD, FSA Archaeologist and finds expert.

Author: Chris Catling & Roger Bland

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Full version of obituary by Chris Catling submitted to the Times



Shakespeare's description of Autolycus, the pickpocket and pedlar in *A Winter's Tale*, as 'a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles', aptly sums up Geoff Egan, who was a world expert on just the kind of novelties, toys, trinkets, buttons, hooks and bells that would have formed the stock-in-trade of an Elizabethan fairground hawker or packman.

In archaeological parlance, Egan was a 'small finds expert', but where most specialists in this field narrow their studies to one type of object, Egan had an encyclopaedic knowledge of a multiplicity of objects. In the children's toys, dice or pilgrims' badges that he studied, or the lead seals that were the subject of his doctoral thesis, attached to cloth by the maker, sometimes by finishers (eg the dyers) and the taxation authorities as a guarantee of provenance and quality, Egan initially saw stories of daily life and changing fashion and the developing economy of a city that was to become the capital of a worldwide empire, but his interests became much more wide ranging and encompassed the trade, economy and life of all Europe and beyond.

Born in Harrow, Egan was the son of Daphne, who was a lab technician before her marriage and Dr Harold Egan, the distinguished biochemist who had held the position

of Government Chemist between 1970 and 1981. Educated at Harrow grammar school, Geoffrey Egan went up to Peterhouse, Cambridge, initially to read Classics. Friends there introduced him to the sociable tea room in the Archaeology and Anthropology Faculty, an institution that has played a catalytic role in the lives of many now-eminent archaeologists, and Egan soon realised how he wanted to spend the rest of his life.

The periods that interested Egan most – the medieval and post-medieval – were still regarded as ‘fringe’ territory in the 1970s, the realm of the historian rather than the archaeologist. That began to change with the rapid pace of development in London and the discovery that during the Roman and medieval periods large parcels of land had been reclaimed from the Thames, each plot of new land being infilled with whatever refuse lay to hand.

For archaeologists, these waterlogged wharfs, with their well-preserved organic objects of wood, leather and textile, provided a fascinating insight into the domestic and industrial life of the developing city, and it was to this ‘detritus’ that Egan devoted his life after graduating in 1976. Employed initially as a ‘digger’ on those waterfront excavations (intermittently also working as a gardener at Kew), he rose to the rank of site supervisor with the Museum of London’s Department of Urban Archaeology before becoming the museum’s specialist in medieval and later non-ceramic finds.

It was in this capacity that he published more than 100 papers in academic journals, and an impressive series of books on small finds from London that are now classic reference works. These include such major monographs as *Dress Accessories* (1991, with Frances Pritchard), *Lead Cloth Seals* (1995), *Playthings from the Past* (1996), *The Medieval Household* (1998), *Trifles, Toys and Trinkets* (2005, with Hazel Forsyth), *Material Culture in an Age of Transition* (2006), about everyday objects from the Tudor and Stuart periods, and *Meols: The Archaeology of the North Wirral Coast*, (2007, co-written with David Griffiths and Robert Philpott) about the enormous number of later medieval and post-medieval finds discovered at the site of a beach market at Meols, on the Wirral Peninsula.

Egan relished nothing better than finding a type of object that had been neglected in recent scholarship. He would then scour libraries and antiquarian bookshops for anything that would throw light on the subject – preferably works contemporary with the objects he was studying. He read voraciously until he had mastered all the facts about the manufacture, use and date of the object. As a result, the house in which he was born in Wembley, and that he had inherited from his parents, was filled with a sea of books.

He taught himself German, Russian and several Scandinavian languages in order to read excavation reports and was an adventurous traveller, visiting museums as far afield as Mongolia in order to add to his store of knowledge, and very often being welcomed on arrival with boxes of objects that he would be asked to identify. One such journey of 100 days took him round the world in 49 plane flights and numerous trains in 1987 and stemmed from his desire to visit a life-long friend working in Papua New Guinea.

His natural gifts as a communicator meant that he was much in demand as a speaker, and he was just as much at home talking to an international conference in Lubeck, Nuremberg or Gdansk as he was talking to a local society or metal detecting club in Blackpool or Liverpool.

He was a founder member of the Finds Research Group in 1984 and served on its committee for 19 years, organising several of its conferences and trips. Having been on the council of the Society of Post-Medieval Archaeology since 1982, he served as its President from 2005 to 2008, co-editing the 50th anniversary volume of the Society's journal in 2009 and organising conferences for that Society – choosing faraway places that he wanted to visit, such as the West Indies or Williamsburg, Virginia.

In 2004, Egan was seconded part-time from the Museum of London to the British Museum as National Finds Adviser on Early Medieval to Post Medieval Finds for the Portable Antiquities Scheme, and from July 2010 the post, which he described as his dream job, was made permanent. At the BM, his legendary knowledge was put to effective use in identifying tens of thousands of finds brought to the museum by members of the public every year, the most interesting of which he wrote up in successive Portable Antiquities and Treasure Annual Reports and in the Journal of Post-Medieval Archaeology.

In May 2009, Egan was elected Master of the Company of Arts Scholars, Dealers and Collectors – quite possibly the first time that a professional archaeologist had ever served as the head of a City of London guild. Nobody who was there will forget the Company's Fourth Annual Lecture, given by Egan on 25 October 2010 at Carpenters' Hall on the subject of 'Glorious Mud: treasures from the Thames', made memorable by the playing of a replica of a late 14th-century trumpet, 1.6 metres in length, that Geoff had found whilst undertaking a watching brief at Billingsgate Market lorry park.

For Egan, that Thames mud was a huge lucky dip that kept on giving up archaeological treasures (in recent weeks for example, volunteers working for the Thames Discovery Programme have found the 30m-long skeleton of a right whale and London's oldest structure, a 6,000-year old timber structure at Vauxhall). At a time when many in the archaeological community were hostile to the activities of mudlarks and detectorists scouring the foreshore for finds, Egan shared their passion for discovery and helped to bridge the two worlds. Such was his rapport with the detectorists that when the History Channel recently made a programme about them ('Mud Men'; to be broadcast in February 2011), they told the producer that Geoff was 'god'. Egan would have been as proud of the tributes paid to him on detectorists' social media sites since his death as of any academic accolade.

Egan died suddenly, of a coronary thrombosis, in the prime of life and with much left to give. Despite his sociability, love of jazz and good food, and large and international circle of friends, his lifestyle was not one easily shared with a companion, and he never married. He came from a loving and supportive family, and he regarded his best friend and next of kin, the landscape architect Graham Martin, as more like a brother than the cousin he was.

Geoffrey Egan, medieval and post-medieval finds expert, was born on October 19, 1951. He died on December 24, 2010, aged 59.

Obituary from *The Searcher*, and also submitted to the *Guardian* by Roger Bland

Geoff Egan, who died on 24 December 2010, was the leading expert in medieval and later small finds and pioneered liaison with the ‘mudlarks’ who search for finds on the Thames foreshore in London. Digging in thick mud against the tide, mudlarks have retrieved a fascinating trove of metal artefacts that had been lost by generations of Londoners on the banks of the Thames. In the 1970s they were shunned by many professional archaeologists, who deplored what they saw as their unscientific methods of retrieval, but many had great expertise in the finds they made and some, like Tony Pilson, donated their collections to the Museum of London and the British Museum.

Geoff had done some mudlarking himself. Together with his colleague Hazel Forsyth, Geoff published the collection of Toys, Trifles and Trinkets that Tony Pilson donated to the Museum of London. This pioneering work studied a class of artefact (children’s metal toys made between about 1200 and 1800) that had not been recognised by archaeologists before the discoveries of the mudlarks brought significant numbers to light.

As the specialist in medieval and later non-ceramic finds in the Museum of London Archaeology Service Geoff played a key role in the series of catalogues on Medieval Finds from Excavations in London which are an essential reference for all specialists in this period, and he was personally responsible for two volumes: *The Medieval Household and Dress Accessories* (with Frances Pritchard). He also wrote *Material Culture in London in an Age of Transition: Tudor & Stuart Period Finds from Southwark*.

Another area of interest centred on the lead seals that were affixed to textiles sent out in trade from the 14th to the 18th centuries: Geoff appreciated that recording the find spots of these unprepossessing objects can give us much information about the cloth trade, for a long time was the main source of the England’s prosperity. Geoff’s study of these led to a doctorate from the Institute of Archaeology London and also resulted in a publication of a catalogue of seals in the British Museum. Geoff was also a key player in the project to catalogue the unique series of finds from the enigmatic site of Meols on the Wirral coast: the settlement itself has disappeared into the sea (it is thought to have been a beach market) and it is known mainly to us through the finds. The monumental catalogue, written with David Griffiths and Rob Philpott, is another key reference for specialists. In all Geoff contributed more than 100 papers and notes to both national and county journals.

Geoff Egan was born in Wembley in north-west London on 19 October 1951, the only son of Daphne and Dr Harold Egan, who was the Government Chemist between 1970 and 1981 and later wrote the history of the Laboratory of the Government Chemist. Geoff was educated at what he described as the ‘academic hothouse’ of Harrow County School, and gained a place at Peterhouse College Cambridge to study

Classics, although he subsequently switched to Archaeology and Anthropology, which he found more congenial. This change was to dictate the course of his career.

After graduation in 1975 Geoff worked for a while at Kew Gardens, but a life-long love of travel took him to Norway, where he ended up working on an archaeological excavation in Trondheim and his future career as an archaeologist was set. On his return to England in 1976 he obtained a job as an archaeologist at the Museum of London, and he stayed there for the next 34 years. Starting on the bottom rung, Geoff worked his way up to be a fieldwork director before becoming a finds specialist.

The 1970s were great days in the excavations of London as the boom in the redevelopment of the City led to an enormous upsurge in archaeological excavations and the Department of Urban Archaeology at the Museum of London, as it then was, was created to respond to this need.

Geoff's encyclopaedic knowledge of finds and his experience in working with the mudlarks meant that his expertise was of great value to the Portable Antiquities Scheme, established in 1997 to record finds made by members of the public. Geoff had had a part-time role with the Scheme since 2004 and in July 2010 he was appointed to a full-time post as Finds Adviser for the Scheme, based at the British Museum. He said this was his dream job and it is a tragic loss that he held it for so short a time, dying of coronary thrombosis at his home just before Christmas. Geoff was always keen to share his encyclopaedic knowledge of finds with experts and amateurs alike. He was in great demand as a speaker and he was as much at home talking at an international conference as to a local society or metal detecting club – in the month before he died he had spoken at an archaeological colloquium in Lübeck, advising Gdansk museum on their collections, while the next week he was back speaking at a metal detecting club in Blackpool. His sheer enthusiasm and knowledge was infectious. When ITN proposed to make a series of programmes called Mud Men on finds from the Thames foreshore, shortly to be screened on the History Channel, the mudlarks urged ITN to engage Geoff's services – they said that as far as they were concerned he was 'god'.

Geoff did not have great respect for authority, whether that was Peterhouse College Cambridge, or his managers in his professional life, but he loved working with fellow-archaeologists and researchers through societies. He was greatly loved by his peers and of the many people I have spoken to about him, no one had a bad word to say about him. A Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, he was also a linch-pin of the Finds Research Group, organising several of its conferences and visits and speaking at most of them. He had been on the council of the Society of Post-Medieval Archaeology since 1982 and served as its President from 2005 to 2008. He also organised conferences for that Society – preferably in faraway places such as the West Indies or Williamsburg, Virginia. He had a great love of travel and built up many friends in European and American museums: he had accompanied the Finds Research Group on a trip to Nuremberg two weeks before he died. But perhaps the organisation that gave Geoff greatest pleasure was the Company of Arts Scholars, Collectors and Dealers, one of the newest of the city guilds. Geoff served as its master in 2009-10 and one of his proudest moments was last summer when he joined

members of the guild who exercised their right as freemen of the City of London and to drive a flock of sheep across London Bridge.

Geoff was a magpie. His home in Wembley, where he lived all his life, was crammed full of the fruits of his collecting, from his childhood collection of pottery sherds and other antiquities, all neatly classified in metal cabinets, to a massive collection of books.

He even kept the many tickets he accumulated from his extensive travels. He never took to modern technology. ITN were surprised to learn that he did not possess a mobile phone and the ways of computers were a bit of a mystery to him: he continually battled with his e-mail inbox. Geoff would have been more at home with a quill pen in the tradition of 18th century gentleman scholars such as William Stukeley.

Donations

Donations in memory of Geoff may sent to The Company of Arts Scholars Charitable Trust, c/o The Clerk, 28 Aldebert London SW8 1BJ (<http://www.artsscholars.org/>)

Memorial event

There will be a memorial event for Geoff in the BP lecture theatre at the British Museum from 2 to 5.30 pm on 24 March at which his friends and colleagues will contribute their memories of him and there will also be clips from the TV series Mud Men.

All are welcome and there is no charge; please contact ccostin@britishmuseum.org to reserve a place.