

Penny MacConnoran: tribute

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Penny MacConnoran, who died on 21 July 2010, aged 60, was one of Britain's leading archaeological finds managers. Working her way from site to finds, she understood all aspects of the archaeological process and was respected by all for her sound judgement and comprehensive knowledge of all manner of artefacts and ecofacts; in addition to her managerial role she was also an expert on Roman and medieval leather.

Born in Dunleer, Co. Louth, Ireland, in 1949, Penny was educated at Our Lady's Convent, Greenhills, Drogheda, where she displayed a talent for languages. Between 1970 and 1973 Penny studied Archaeology and French at the National University of Ireland, Galway, and her first job after graduating was as a French teacher in Donegal, where she stayed for about a year. Archaeology, however, was calling and in 1975 she moved to Dublin to work on the Viking period excavations at Christ Church Place and Fishamble Street. From here she moved in July 1976 to work on a medieval cemetery in Co Clare.

In September 1976 Penny arrived in London, where she first worked on a Department of the Environment site at the Tower of London, before joining the newly formed Department of Urban Archaeology (DUA) as a Finds Assistant in December of that year. At this time finds processing was carried out on site, but when the DUA moved to the former Guildhall Library in Basinghall Street, Penny was placed in charge of finds processing and she was accommodated in a former boiler room below the entrance hall, which she shared with other assistants.

From here she worked her way up through the ranks of Assistant Finds Supervisor to Finds Supervisor and then Assistant Finds Officer, and also developed specialist skills in the publication of leather reports. In 1980 the DUA moved to offices in the basement of the MOL, which although still cramped, allowed Penny to expand her team and build up a band of dedicated volunteers all fascinated by archaeology. Penny found work for them, nurtured their interest, and rewarded them with her smiles and her thanks – all were devoted to Penny (and she to them). Such empathy also extended to all who were trained by her, many of whom have gone on to work in archaeology, heritage and other sectors, in

whose lives she played a formative role.

The principles of the DUA finds recording system had been formed by Mike Rhodes before Penny joined the team, but it was she who was instrumental in refining and developing all aspects of the recording and storage procedures systems for finds which were copied across the country.

When computers appeared in the late 1970s, Penny collaborated with Paul Tyers on the development of the DUA system; she was also pivotal in the creation of the DUA Finds Manual (an updated version of which is now available online).

In 1991 the DUA and DGLA merged to form MoLAS (now MOLA) and moved to No. 1 London Wall, with Penny as Deputy Finds Manager. Finds processing here was less easy, but the building was close to premises in the Museum of London Rotunda, which was still used for storage and wet work. Penny was often to be seen tirelessly wheeling trolleys of finds across the bridge that linked the two sides of London Wall. Once the offices moved to Queen Victoria Street in 1996, finds processing and the archaeological archive underwent various moves to temporary locations such as Surrey Quays and Lever Street. Each upheaval was a logistical nightmare, but all went to plan thanks to Penny's incredible organisational skills. From 1999 a permanent solution to the problem of accommodation was found by moving the archive and archaeologists to the Museum of London premises at Eagle Wharf Road. Even here, however, things were difficult at the start, all washing and drying taking place in portacabins in the car park, whilst the integrated processing facilities that Penny had long sought were constructed, with dedicated rooms for power hosing, hand washing, drying and recording.

It is acknowledged by everyone who worked with Penny that she was the best manager they knew, ever patient and encouraging. She made the job her own, eventually filling at least three roles, but was never fazed. Calm but fun to be with, methodical but inspiring, tireless and never complaining, Penny just got on with whatever faced her. Although all too easy to take her input for granted, as so much of her work was carried out unseen behind the scenes, it was she who underpinned many aspects of work in the DUA, MoLAS and MOLA, from site to publication. In addition

to the finds recording systems, still in use today and adopted by other organisations, she contributed to on-site policies and decisions regarding sampling and conservation, and liaised with others to provide estimates for budgeting. She had perfected the art of putting on a superb display of finds in the minimum time, and thus played a key role at the interface of archaeology and development of sites across the city. DUA publications of finds corpora and subsequent MoLAS series have all relied heavily on her input, for despite dealing with thousands of objects, she had a phenomenal sense of recall and could say almost without fail where something could be found.

An immensely generous and gregarious, profoundly intelligent but modest character, with a wonderful understated sense of humour, Penny was part of the beating heart of London archaeology. Mortimer Wheeler House is a much poorer place without her and she will be forever missed by the great many people whose lives she gently touched upon. We would like to acknowledge here the care she received at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery in Bloomsbury and St Joseph's Hospice in Hackney prior to her return to Ireland, where she spent her last weeks with her partner Patrick at his home in Larne. A more personal eulogy celebrating her life, with numerous anecdotes and happy memories of Penny supplied by friends and colleagues, was compiled for her funeral, which took place at Carnmoney Cemetery outside Belfast, and is available from Ian Blair (iblair@museumoflondon.org.uk) on request.



Penny as we remember her