



**MUSEUM OF LONDON**

# **Archaeology Matters**

No 17, March 2002

# Mortimer Wheeler House

With the opening of Mortimer Wheeler House on 7 February, Europe's largest archaeological archive became accessible to the public. The conversion of this Hackney warehouse into a state-of-the-art research centre had taken over a year and cost £5 million. Opening the centre, former British Museum director Sir David Wilson (pictured below) commended it as a model to be followed by other museums; though he also confessed to a slight nostalgia for the old-style museum store – the unplumbed basement depths where treasures spilled from decayed chests and where crafty technicians ran illicit cycle-repair businesses.

The London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre has over 10km of shelves, stacked with 120,000 boxes which contain over a million finds – the oldest of them being a 20,000-year-old flint tool. Ranging from microscopic plant pollen to sections of a medieval boat, there are finds from all over the 600 square miles of Greater London, including many of the most famous archaeological sites: the Temple of Mithras, the Rose and Globe Theatres, and the Roman Amphitheatre.

The Centre is the recipient this year of the Ralph Merrifield Award. This award, made annually by the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, recognises the help the Centre is giving to archaeological societies and students. Societies or colleges can use facilities for finds-processing, and they can book rooms for meetings or workshops. The main research room, the Waller Room, takes its name from a benefactor whose generous bequest, secured through the City of London Archaeological Society, paid for many of those public facilities.

Mortimer Wheeler House is also home to the Museum of London Archaeology Service, the Museum of London Specialist Services (experts in archaeological conservation, finds and environmental study) and the Museum of London Social and Working History Collections. For further information, including a map-based catalogue of London archaeological sites, see the Museum's website –

<http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/laarc/>



Supported by the National Lottery through the  
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## Pigments of the imagination

Old Masters showing Bacchus and his followers are usually found in the capital's art galleries, not buried amongst rubble on a city building site. Yet these are what formed the focus for two popular weekend events at the Museum in February. While Bruce Watson, director of the 30 Gresham Street dig, conservators and curators explained how such high-quality Roman wall paintings had been discovered, other experts demonstrated the techniques of fresco art and pigment identification. Students from Wimbledon School of Art exhibited works inspired by the paintings, whilst dozens of children created their own masterpieces and displayed them on the walls of the gallery.

The Roman remains are tantalising. On one slab are a team of horses or sea-horses with flowing manes. On another the head of a young man (see front cover), about half life size, a woman with grapes and vine leaves, and fluted columns dividing the scene into panels. One detail gives an unambiguous clue to the subject. Just above the male head is a knobbed

stick – a thyrsus brandished by the wine-god Bacchus and his devotees during their orgiastic ritual celebrations. Is it too fanciful to imagine that the painting showed the god himself, dancing with female worshippers, framed by the sea-horses of Neptune or the chariot of the sun-god Apollo?

The colours and skilful figure-drawing are of a standard rarely found in Roman Britain. Perhaps dating to the 2nd century AD, the paintings may have come from a bath-house or the dining room of a wealthy town-house. Because the plaster was discovered in dumps of rubble, we do not know exactly where the building was, though it was probably situated nearby. The 30 Gresham Street site has previously produced part of a gilded Roman statue (on display in the Museum) and Roman water-lifting machinery.

The excavations were sponsored by Land Securities plc, and were carried out by the Museum of London Archaeology Service in collaboration with AOC Archaeology Group.

## Whodunit?

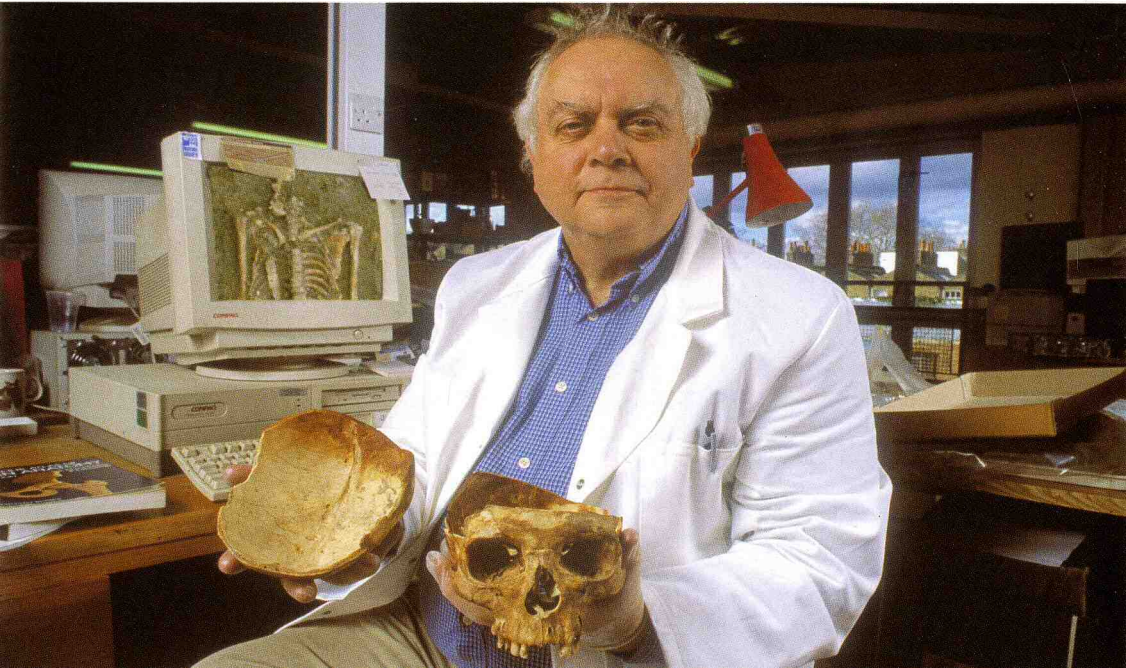
The pathologist, after a cursory inspection, pronounced them animal remains. However, the police had also summoned an archaeological team to investigate the bones turning up unexpectedly in residential Staines. Rapid excavation by Julian Ayre and Bill White revealed the body of a man 5ft 8in tall, carefully buried without grave-goods on a west-east alignment. Next week, while waiting for the results of radiocarbon dating, Bill was telephoned by a gloomy police superintendent. A second body had come to light. 'I congratulated him on finding a previously unknown Roman cemetery', Bill remembers, 'but he was convinced that there was a mass murderer at large'. Shortly afterwards the results came through, placing the burial firmly in Roman Britain.

This incident is one of many in which the Museum's human bone experts have co-operated with police investigating deaths in mysterious circumstances. Often the bones are clearly ancient, and a quick search through historical

records is enough to locate a long-forgotten churchyard. Sometimes, as in the case of the mutilated skull from Tottenham Court Road, the discoveries are more bizarre. Bill recalls that the skull had 'a strange appearance, but when I looked more closely I could see that the top had been cut off cleanly with a saw. How many murderers perform a post-mortem on their victim? I came to the conclusion that the corpse had been autopsied'. Later it emerged that there had been a graveyard here, belonging to a church destroyed in the Second World War.

Doctors and pathologists indeed cause many headaches. One bone, delivered by the police to the Museum in an Evidence Bag, turned out to be marked in ink 'Left Femur' and presumably came from a hospital teaching collection. But who took a beautifully made plaster skull from an anatomy lab and buried it beneath a patio in Purley? That remains a mystery.

*Bill White is a human bone expert with the Museum of London's department of Specialist Services.*



## Isleworth porcelain

The Isleworth Pottery was one of only a few factories making porcelain in London during the 18th century, but until recently virtually nothing was known of its output. Our knowledge improved significantly in the 1990s when local researcher Ray Howard began to collect waste porcelain and other finewares from the Thames foreshore below the site of the Pottery. Then, last month, excavations in Hanworth Road, Hounslow brought to light a massive deposit of porcelain waste that had been dumped in a large quarry pit from which the Pottery had been digging clay for many years.

The factory was opened in about 1757 by Joseph Shore. It made fine pottery and porcelain throughout the rest of the century, before eventually turning to relatively humble combed slipware. Shore's descendants purchased land in Hanworth Road in 1811, and relocated the Pottery there in 1830. The excavated porcelain dump, which now fills 40 large sacks, must at some time have been carted from Isleworth to Hounslow. It is a find of immense importance, enabling us to

study the products of a London porcelain factory from discarded manufacturing waste that had accumulated over 40 years – the entire span of production.

Porcelain is fired once (the biscuit firing), then decorated and glazed, and fired again. Thousands of biscuit porcelain and Creamware sherds were discovered – both plain and decorated with Chinese-style patterns and floral designs – as well as many glazed and decorated sherds. There are plates, bowls, saucers, cups, teabowls, teapots, tureens, sauceboats, invalid feeding cups, fish drainers, pickle dishes and many forms previously unknown in Isleworth porcelain.

We are working closely with the English Ceramic Circle to process and analyse this ceramic cornucopia, a find which is set to revolutionise our knowledge of an important London pottery which for so long has been an enigma.

Jacqui Pearce  
Museum of London Specialist Services



# Merton Mills

In 1805 one observer concluded that the Wandle was 'the hardest worked river for its size in the world'. Today in Merton that intensive industrial landscape has all but disappeared and can barely be imagined. Gradually, however, a research programme involving both local historians and professional archaeologists is revealing the valley where there were once 90 water mills and where in 1881 William Morris set up his workshops.

A particularly important discovery, made during a recent 12-week evaluation, are the foundations of the medieval mill and its mill pond. Merton Priory mills had previously been assumed to lie higher up the Wandle, near the site of the former Copper Mills on the south side of Merton High Street. Now it is clear that at least one mill was located close to the historic course of the river, near the south precinct wall of the priory.

During the Tudor period the medieval chalk walls were rebuilt in brick and the pond was

partly back-filled to make room for a new head race. The race was lined with large re-used medieval Reigate stone blocks, forming a channel 2.7m wide. Two wooden 'starts' – small blocks that fix the blades of a water wheel to the rim – were found. In the 17th century the site began its transformation into a major textile manufacturing centre, mainly for calico, a fine cotton cloth imported from India.

The most impressive remains found recently belonged to a calico mill opened in 1802 by one John Leach. By 1820 his son-in-law, Thomas Bennett, was manufacturing colourful handkerchiefs there. The brick wheel pit and gear pits were discovered in good condition (see picture), together with a small millstone that may have been used for grinding dye stuffs. The millstone can be viewed at weekends in the wheelhouse of the Merton Abbey Mills craft market.

Dave Saxby  
Museum of London Archaeology Service





Photo: Mike Webber

A unique archaeological project has started on a council estate in Clerkenwell. Community archaeologist Mike Webber and Barbara Jacobson, with tenants of Charles Rowan House, have been digging the courtyard of their block. The dig forms part of an environmental improvement project. 'The old courtyard,' Barbara recalls, 'suffered greatly from graffiti and vandalism. Our aim is to raise residents' awareness of the history of their neighbourhood and to instil a sense of belonging.'

The local community has seen no evidence of archaeological exploration until now, despite massive redevelopment of the neighbourhood. Planning for the courtyard was given without any archaeological conditions, but English Heritage voiced an interest in the project. The contractors, Blakedown, provided access and helped with machining, and the Museum of London loaned tools. The dig ran for three freezing weekends over Christmas, and many residents took part, including primary school children.

Uniquely for an urban redevelopment site, this offered a chance for community involvement at every stage. Residents were able to make direct and personal contact with their predecessors. The foundations of 18th- and 19th-century buildings survived. Artefacts were unearthed that represent various aspects of the daily life of the working-class Londoners who lived there. Seeds and bones provide evidence of what they ate. Regardless of such academic considerations, one kid was particularly impressed by the thought of 'a pit full of 200-year-old poo? Phew!'

The dig produced useful archaeological and historical information; but what effect did it have on the residents? The weather may have kept some from digging, but every passer-by stopped to ask questions. The architects, Farrer Huxley, are looking at ways to incorporate the discoveries in the new design. The project will continue, provided that means are found to support the research, publication and display which are needed to share this vision of life on a London back street.

## Events

### Medieval muster

Saturday 13 & Sunday 14 April  
12pm & 3pm  
Tickets: £6 (£4 concessions)  
Book now: 020 7814 5777

It is May 1471, the Wars of the Roses are raging, and the City walls are under attack. Can London hold firm?

Step back in time and witness the spectacular muster of colourful weapons, cavalry and soldiers in Guildhall Yard. Watch the Mayor gather his archers and gunners to defend the City. After the battle, come back to the Museum to see a craftsman making shoes, to be entertained by a jester, and to enjoy the tales of mystery that were once told in medieval taverns. Visit a medieval encampment nearby, where the townsfolk will show you their tents, cooking, armour and archery.

For information about other medieval events in late March and early April, please telephone the Box Office on 020 7814 5777 or go to our website.

### How to dig a hole: understanding archaeological excavations

Mondays, 15 April to 1 July (12 meetings)  
6.30 – 8.30pm  
Fee: £65 (£33 concessions)  
Tutor: Harvey Sheldon, BSc, FSA

How are archaeological sites found? Why are they investigated? What do they tell us about landscapes and townscapes? This course will examine how sites are located and surveyed; what methods of excavation and recording are used; and how the finds and records are researched, prepared for publication and archived.

This is a Birkbeck College Accredited Course. Code V15Y30.

For further information, please telephone the Box Office 020 7814 5777.

### Roman defences and medieval industry

By Elizabeth Howe  
MoLAS Monograph 7, £12.95

### Roman and medieval townhouses on the London waterfront

By Trevor Brigham with Aidan Woodger  
MoLAS Monograph 9, £12.95

### The London Charterhouse

By Bruno Barber and Christopher Thomas  
MoLAS Monograph 10, £14.95

### Excavations at 25 Cannon Street, City of London

By Nicholas J Elsdon  
MoLAS Archaeology Studies Series 5, £7.95

### The London surveys of Ralph Treswell

Edited by John Schofield  
London Topographical Society Publication 135, £16.00  
(To order direct, please see: <http://www.topsoc.org>)

Book orders: please phone 020 7814 5600. Payment by credit or debit card. Prices as stated, plus post and packing.

Front cover: the head of Bacchus on Roman wall painting from 30 Gresham Street

## Evening class

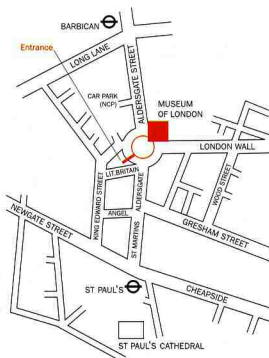
## Publications



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