

# Taking a ride for the past or the past for a ride?

Clive Orton

THE TOWER Hill Pageant<sup>1</sup> is described in the advertising (if you can find it) as 'London's first dark ride museum'. The implication is that every self-respecting tourist centre should have one. So what is it, and what does it offer the tourist (or native, come to that)? Our visit was on a wet Saturday afternoon, with tourists remarkably thin on the ground. As we entered Tower Hill Terrace, our first encounter was with a tee-shirted Charon, anxious to make sure we did not miss the way to the Pageant. We left the real world in a lift which took us through a 'typical' London stratigraphic sequence to our waiting time-car, two floors below ground.

Once seated in our cars, we were off past a series of what used to be called dioramas, illustrating the history of London as a port from the Roman Conquest to the Blitz. This art-form has advanced greatly since my dimly-remembered schoolday outings to the Science Museum: what one passes are skilfully designed three-dimensional models, life-sized in the foreground and shrinking rapidly to the background to create an illusion of depth. For, as the twisting and turning of the car reminded us, we were in a very restricted space, and it was surprising how much could be crammed in. Another advance is the addition of sounds and smells, the latter overlaid, especially at the start, with a sort of 'new paint' smell which will no doubt soon fade. The Great Fire caused cries of "crispy bacon" but the eastern spices were very effective, even if what they recalled were the gaunt warehouses of the early days of Southwark archaeology. Comparisons with the Jorvik Viking Centre are inevitable, but difficult to make: there, one rides *through* a single scene, a piece of recreated townscape; here, one *passes by* a series of historical vignettes. One gains a feeling of change, but loses the feeling of involvement.

Our journey over, we went upstairs to the Waterfront Museum, in which are displayed many of the 'small' (and not so small) finds from nearly 20 years' excavations of Roman and medieval waterfronts, some of which were familiar from the 'Capital Gains' exhibition of 1986. But it is not just an overflow display from the Museum of Lon-

don's vast collection; they are for example computer graphics showing how a Roman waterfront was built (courtesy of Autodesk Ltd.) and how dendro dating works. There is also a reconstructed section of a Roman ship and several sections of timber revetments (one of the few benefits of the modern technology of freeze-drying). The standard of the display is very good indeed — one can really get close enough to the small objects to look at them properly — at least on days when there are not too many other tourists — but there are problems with the captions, some of which are too far away to read unless you have exceptional eyesight.

All too soon, we were dragged on into the shop, which can be summed up as 'tasteful'. I especially liked the reproduction delftware (which I have not seen for sale elsewhere, except, on rare occasions, to staff at the Museum of London). If it proves popular, could it be augmented with pottery of other periods? — *moselkeramik* would be my commercial choice. After a total visit of about an hour, we emerged briefly into the rain before sitting down in Macdonalds to discuss our experiences.

Questions are raised: what did you like best? could you see and hear properly? what's it trying to tell us? will it succeed in the long run? Like any new project, it has its 'teething troubles' which can soon be put right — the lift descent is riveting, but a shade too fast, the quality of the sound commentary needs improvement, as does some of the captioning. Generally speaking, the children preferred the ride (and the shop!) and the adults the museum. The early scenes were on the whole more successful than the later, perhaps because they were less familiar: the obviously fibreglass cloud above the Heinkel bomber in the last scene caused some hilarity.

My own feeling was that the real 'meat' of the Pageant was the museum, and that the dark ride itself was really a bait to entice the tourists. Noth-

1. The Tower Hill Pageant is open 7 days a week, 9.30 a.m. — 5.30 p.m. (4.30 p.m. in winter). Tickets are £4.50 for adults, £2.50 for children and OAPs, £12 for families (see *Mosaic* in Vol. 6, no. 12 for more information).

ing wrong with that: would the casual tourist want to visit an exhibition of the small finds from waterfront excavations (they would enjoy it if they did, but would they go in, in the first place?). What we have here is the *raison d'être* of the Museum of London itself: a social and material history of London. By concentrating on one aspect — the port — and presenting it in a confined (but not claustrophobic) and intimate space, it focuses our attention and succeeds in bringing its part of the past to life.

With some imagination, the whole visit can be experienced as a memorial, a sort of chambered tomb. At one level, it captures the working relationship between London and the Thames (and what would London be without the Thames?) before it fades from memory, and recalls all those who have lived, worked and died on it or beside it. At another, it may find itself in the unexpected role of a memorial to the generation or archaeologists who, from the early 1970s to the early 1990s, have used the opportunity of the redevelopment of much of London's waterfront to rewrite its

history, as well as to provide us with many material insights into the lives and livelihoods of Londoners. This phase of London's story is now drawing to a close, as the process of transforming the riverscape from warehouses to offices nears completion, and surprisingly soon it too will be part of our past.

Finally, will it succeed? Which means first, will it survive? Building tourist traps is no longer a "licence to print money" (if it ever was) as the recent demise of the Barbican's *Royal Britain* and Southwark's *Space Experience* show. The *Tower Hill Pageant* has geography on its side (between the Tower of London and the underground station) as well as the British climate (it's warm and dry inside), but has so far been let down by its publicity, which must be improved. But success cannot be measured in terms of mere survival, or even a healthy return on capital, although they are prerequisites of real success. Real success will come if tourists and natives alike leave with a better understanding of what it means to be a Londoner, and if the latter at least are fired with an enthusiasm to find out still more. I believe the Pageant can achieve that.

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## Excavation and post-excavation work

**City**, by Museum of London, Department of Urban Archaeology. A series of long term excavations. Enquiries to DUA, Museum of London, London Wall, EC2Y 5HN (071-600 3699).

**Croydon & District**, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collection of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Mrs Muriel Shaw, 28 Lismore Road, South Croydon, CR2 7QA (081-688 2720).

**Greater London** (except north-east and south-east London), by Museum of London, Department of Greater London Archaeology. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to DGLA, Museum of London (071-600 3699 ext. 241).

Local enquiries to:

North London: 3-7 Ray Street, London EC1R 3DJ (071-837 8363).

Southwark and Lambeth: 38-40 Glasshill Street, London SE1 (071-928 9640 — office — and 928 0778/9 — finds).

West & South-west London: Town Mission Hall, Mission Square, Pottery Road, Brentford, Middlesex (081-560 3880).

**Borough of Greenwich**. Cataloguing of excavated and other archaeological material, the majority from sites in the borough. Enquiries to Barbara Wood, Greenwich Borough Museum, 232 Plumstead High Street, London SE18 1JT (081-855 3240).

**Hammersmith & Fulham**, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from Fulham Palace. Tuesdays, 7.45 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, SW6 (071-731 4498).

**Kingston**, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Kingston Heritage Centre, Fairfield Road, Kingston (081-546 5386).

**North-east London**, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, E15 4LW (081-534 4545).

**Surrey**, by Surrey Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to David Bird, County Archaeological Officer, Planning Department, County Hall, Kingston, Surrey (081-541 8911).

**Vauxhall Pottery**, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society. Processing of excavated material continues three nights a week. Enquiries to S.L.A.S., c/o Cuming Museum, 155 Walworth Road, SE17 (071-703 3324).

*The Council for British Archaeology produces the British Archaeological News (6 issues a year). It gives details of conferences, extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The annual subscription of £10 includes postage, and should be made payable to C.B.A., 112 Kennington Road, SE11 6RE (071-582 0404).*