

Charles Roach Smith- (1807-1890) Pioneer Rescue Archaeologist

BRIAN HOBLEY

TODAY'S excavation in the City of London continues to consolidate Charles Roach Smith's (R.S.) position as a major figure in the history of London's archaeology. His stature as an antiquary and archaeologist in the wider scene of the growth of British archaeology has never been assessed. This brief article attempts both to summarize the main events in his long life, and to demonstrate that in the middle decades of the 19th century he was an early pioneer of today's approach to rescue archaeology and publication. He was the precursor of undisputed giants such as General Pitt Rivers (1827-1900).¹

Roach Smith was a man of many parts, and thus typical of the age in which he lived—businessman, collector and museum curator, traveller, prolific author, illustrator and editor, gardener, and student of viticulture and Shakespeare, and in character a prodigious fighter for his beliefs. But these many and varied interests did not make him a dilettante, for his approach was always truly professional, especially in his antiquarian pursuits. Throughout his 27 years in London he showed a single-minded dedication towards the protection of antiquities which few could emulate today. However, the need for such an approach should serve as a reminder today that many of the problems he faced are still with us over a century later.

Charles Roach Smith was born in Landguard Manor House, near Shanklin, on the Isle of Wight, on 20th August, 1807. His father's ancestors had held freehold lands on the island from the time of Charles I and probably earlier. His father died when he was very young and his mother did not remarry. She was also from an old landed family, that of the Roaches of Arreton Manor. Thus, by 19th century standards, he had a prestigious family background which was to make him acceptable in aristocratic circles later in life.

R.S. was educated locally and at the early age of fourteen was working in the office of a solicitor at Newport, while he boarded and continued his education at a nearby school. He did not, though, obtain a university education and had to relinquish the possibility of a commission in the Royal Marines



Fig. 1. Charles Roach Smith

because of insufficient finances. Instead he was apprenticed to a chemist in Chichester.

From the outset he knew this choice was a mistake, but persisted for the sake of his mother. The alleviation of boredom began when he noticed a Roman coin of the elder Faustina in the shop's till, which led him to the tracking down of local coin hoards. Next came a visit to the Roman villa of Bignor, which made an enormous impact on his receptive mind, as did constant re-reading of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

In about 1828 he moved to London and upon the before Roach Smith died. By this date R.S. had completed all his major archaeological discoveries and publications.

1. Pitt-Rivers began the miraculous excavation and publication of Cranbourne Chase in 1880, just ten years

death of his mother entered business on his own account. His shop was situated in Lothbury, behind the Bank of England. This move came at a time when the City Corporation was making considerable sewerage improvements by laying culverts deep under the City's streets.

R.S. immediately began to collect and record the antiquities uncovered by the excavations, and to commence a twenty-seven year running battle with the Corporation authorities to recognize their responsibilities towards the antiquities being destroyed and stolen in the course of these improvements. Within a short time he was invited by the Society of Antiquaries to exhibit his finds and to read a paper. The response was such that he was urged to become a candidate for a Fellowship, which he obtained and thus began his fifty-four years as an active Antiquary. His business flourished and so did his archaeological observations, but constant censoring of the Corporation over their continuous disregard for what was being lost cost him dearly when his Lothbury premises were demolished for road widening and the Corporation failed to reinstate his business near the original site. R.S. had to bring an action-at-law which the Corporation eventually settled out of court. His new business premises in Liverpool Street, Bishopsgate, were poorly located but spacious enough to house his ever-growing collection, which he now established as 'The Museum of London Antiquities.'

After twenty years of fieldwork R.S. had a collection of local Roman, Saxon and medieval antiquities of over one thousand items which was without parallel in Britain. In 1855 he sold it to the British Museum and retired to Strood, where for the next thirty-five years he continued to publish his excavations and pursue his various interests. He died at the age of 83 on 2nd August, 1890, after a long illness.

A few days before his death a medal in appreciation of his 54 years devoted work to the service of archaeology was given by the archaeologists of Britain. (Fig 2) The medal, bearing his likeness, was presented with a testimonial by Dr. John Evans, President of the Society of Antiquaries. The testimonial read, "From fellow antiquaries and friends in recognition of life-long services to archaeology." Subscriptions over and above the cost of the medal and testimonial realized a cheque for 100 guineas. This presentation indicates his capacity for making friends and retaining them throughout his life.

His correspondence also reflects a kind and charitable attitude to all those showing a genuine interest in archaeology. He was well-known and accepted by

2. Christian Thomsen was the founder and curator of the Danish National Museum of Antiquities in Copenhagen and originator of the threefold division of prehistory into the ages of Stone, Bronze and Iron. Professor Jacob



Fig. 2. The special medal presented to Roach Smith shortly before his death in 1890.

French archaeologists, being a member of numerous archaeological societies in France. His intervention with the Emperor Napoleon III in favour of the preservation of the Roman walls of Dax (*Aquae Tarbellicae*) was surprisingly well received, as a medal was struck to commemorate their being saved from destruction.

The two fellow pioneer Danish antiquaries, Christian Thomsen and Jacob Worsaae, both corresponded with R.S. and visited his museum². Professor Worsaae gave valuable assistance in identifying bone skates found in London, and Thomsen wrote an unsolicited testimonial of the outstanding importance of the museum's collections.

The truly impressive scale of these collections and the scholarly manner in which R.S. published them brought the support of friends, when he became a candidate for a Fellowship of the Society of Antiquaries. The acting secretary, Sir Henry Ellis, resisted his election on the grounds that R.S. was in "trade" and thus unfit to become a Fellow, but after canvassing by friends the subsequent election produced a vote in his favour, which was one of the largest majorities ever known in a Society ballot.

R.S.'s outstanding collection of local British, Roman, Saxon and medieval antiquities was in line

Asmussen Worsaae has the distinction of being the world's first field archaeologist after he became the Inspector of Ancient Monuments for the Danish government and personal archaeologist to King Frederik III of Denmark.

with other European countries, but contrasted with British neglect at this time of its own national antiquities. Therefore, the work of R.S. was of fundamental importance. The 1854 catalogue of the Museum of London Antiquities lists over 1,000 items but R.S. knew that this collection contained only a small proportion of the antiquities found during "improvements," and that many more were being sold unrecorded. Accordingly, he strongly believed that the collections should remain intact and become the basis for a Museum of City Antiquities³.

Consequently, when he decided to leave London he offered it to the Corporation for £3,000. Some 40 volumes of world-wide correspondence were produced as witness to the collection's intrinsic value and an independent monetary evaluation showed the price asked to be a modest return for 20 years "salvage archaeology" and curatorial care. The time sacrificed must have been considerable and at such a cost to his business that consequently R.S. could not afford to present it free-of-charge to the Corporation. Further, he feared, from the experience of past losses, that they would not act responsibly towards the collection if he did so.

By Act of Parliament in 1845 the Corporation were fully empowered to establish a museum⁴ but decided instead to hold a meeting on 5th November 1855 in the Mansion House for ratepayers to decide the issue⁵. The case against establishing a museum was successfully argued on the grounds of financial liability to the ratepayer of one penny in the pound⁶. In vain museum supporters argued for a more appropriate farthing rate⁷. Subsequently, Lord Londesborough, first president of the British Archaeological Association and close friend of R.S., sent a cheque for £3,000 for the collection. This was immediately returned as no guarantee could be given that the collection would be kept intact. Instead, an offer of £2,000 by the Trustees of the British Museum was accepted in 1856, after a petition

3. He considered the City "the most proper receptacle of what may be termed a portion of its own 'title deeds'."

4. The Guildhall Museum was created by the Court of Common Council in 1826 (for the specific purpose of caring for "such antiquities as relate to the City and Suburbs") as an adjunct of the Library and in 1840 the small room adjoining the Library was fitted out as a museum at a cost of £200. In 1876 the new Library and Museum in Basinghall Street was opened. The museum occupied the large basement and was the responsibility of the Librarian. In 1898 the Librarian was allocated £25 per annum for the employment of an occasional museum assistant when required. The first full-time "Museum Clerk" was appointed in 1907.

5. The object of the meeting was to determine whether the "Public Libraries and Museum Acts" should be adopted in the City. R.S. wrote, "it would almost seem that the announcement of a proposition for a public library and

to the House of Commons signed by over 250 eminent antiquaries was presented by Mr. Gladstone in July, 1855. A further consequence of the Corporation's decision not to accept the Museum of London Antiquities' collections was that the Kirkman collection of local antiquities, worth £800 at least, was withdrawn from free presentation to the City.

Thus the most valuable collection of local British antiquities was lost to the Guildhall Museum, opened in 1876, and so now to the Museum of London, due to be opened in 1976. It has, though, formed the nucleus of the British Museum's prominent display of the Antiquities of Roman Britain since 1922. It must be clearly evident that R.S.'s constant struggle with the Corporation must have weighed heavily against his obtaining a favourable acceptance by the City to his offer.

His fieldwork was aided by many young helpers who kept a constant vigil on excavation sites to prevent workmen selling the finds and destroying structures⁸. A recommendation that the Corporation appoint a dozen or so antiquaries to watch the workmen, recover and record the antiquities exposed was not adopted. On the Royal Exchange site not only did he have great difficulty in gaining access to the excavations, but he was threatened with expulsion by force. At Bevis Marks he prevented a foreman from selling a 26in. high stone figure, by recovering it from outside the City (Fig 3). For this he was brought before the Lord Mayor as a receiver of stolen property. He was cleared by the civic bench, being supported by workmen, witnesses and *The Times*.⁹

By today's standards R.S. paid too little attention to site plans and sections in his City observations, but did give locational information by streets and these can prove invaluable to present research. Priority of discovery is his for many discoveries, especi-

museum must have been put forth as a joke by some satirical critic; and that it could hardly have been intended to reveal to the world the intellectual nudity of the City."

6. R.S. wrote, "The decision of this meeting was really a very fair exposition of the state of mind of the majority of the shopocracy of the City. If the sentiments of the industrious artisans, of the clerks, of the apprentices, and of the youth in the City, who are not ratepayers, could have had weight a free museum would have been voted forthwith."

7. Before the meeting the Lord Mayor visited the museum and R.S. waited for a decision for four months — no reply was ever recorded.

8. He recorded the destruction and removal of painted wall plaster being ". . . carried off by cartloads", *Retrospections* (1886) 201.

9. *Ibid.*, 198-199.



Fig. 3. Stone figure of Atry's the shepherd-priest of Cybele.

ially he originated the theory of the existence of a Roman riverside wall. In 1975 discoveries under Upper Thames Street, immediately east of the Mermaid Theatre, supported his observations further east between Lambeth Hill and Queenhithe. During

10. "As the name (F)ab. Alpinus Classicianus is in the genitive case, it may be attributed to the father of the person to whose memory the monument was erected. The name Classicianus is of very uncommon occurrence, and

sewerage works he witnessed the removal of the remains of a massive wall, some 3 metres (10ft.) wide. Further, as in the 1975 discoveries, there were many reused large sculptured and ornamented stone mouldings. R.S. argued that his discoveries seemed to confirm the testimony of FitzStephen in the 12th century that such a riverside defensive wall had existed. Sir Mortimer Wheeler also favoured this viewpoint, but it was not until 1975 that the balance of probability inclined strongly towards universal acceptance of the existence of the riverside defensive wall.

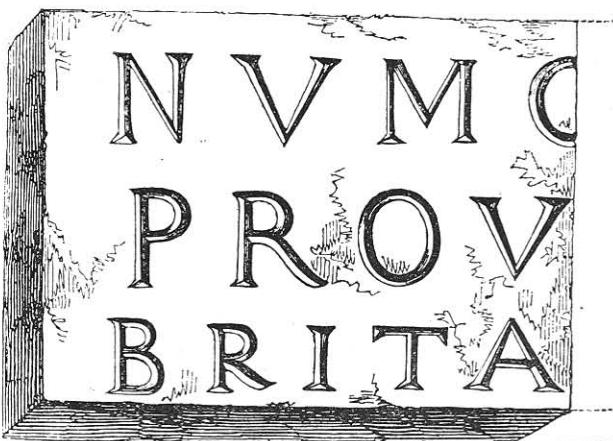


Fig. 4. Part of the inscription from the tomb of Julius Classicianus.

Another splendid "first" for R.S. was his correct interpretation in 1859 of the fragmentary inscriptions found in 1852 at Trinity Place, Tower Hill, from the tomb of the procurator Julius Classicianus. Not until 1935 when further inscribed sections of the monument were found including the title PROC. PROVINC. BRIT, was R.S.'s scholarly conclusions accepted as correct¹⁰. Again, the only evidence for a temple of the state cult of the Emperor in London came as a result of R.S.'s trench observations at the corner of Nicholas Lane and Cannon Street in 1850. A large stone some 3ft. long and with a dedicatory inscription in 6in. letters NVM PROV BRITA was deposited for safe keeping at the foot of the Guildhall Library staircase but was lost shortly afterwards. Fortunately R.S. had made a measured drawing before the stone was handed over (Fig. 4).

In the critical search for the location of the Roman as Julius Classicianus filled the office of procurator in Britain in the reign of Nero, it is quite within the bounds of probability to suppose that this tomb was of Julius himself".

bridge R.S.'s work is of paramount importance. His observations of ballast heaving on the bed of the Thames near London Bridge may be the only evidence that will be ever forthcoming. No bridge structures were revealed but the large number of Roman coins and objects found strongly suggests the bridge's location. Recent excavations to locate the Roman bridgehead on the last available sites on both banks of the river have failed to disclose any significant structures. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that the bridge's position as postulated by R.S. will ever now be really challenged.

In 20 years R.S. collected over 2,000 Roman coins, mainly from the bed of the Thames¹¹ and dumped with gravel to consolidate the bank of the river at Barnes and the Surrey canal. Virtually no record of ancient coins had been made in the City before R.S. made his catalogue. In 1883 the Numismatic Society presented R.S. with the first medal conferred by its council for his work on Roman coins.

Some of the most outstanding bronze objects ever found from the Roman period in Britain were saved by R.S. from the Thames riverbed. The near life-size head of the Emperor Hadrian, possibly from a statue set up in the forum, is now a major exhibit in the British Museum, as is also a pair of beautifully decorated ritual forceps, with the heads of Attis, Cybele and the eight planetary deities of the Roman week, possibly for use in male castration (Fig. 5). Smaller bronze objects included several statuettes and a peacock whose tail was eventually matched with the body by persistent search¹².

Throughout his long life R.S. never spared himself as an author or editor. His main publication was the *Collectanea Antiqua* which ran to seven volumes. Other publications include *Illustrations of Roman London* (1859), *A Catalogue* of his *Museum of London Antiquities* (1854), *The Antiquities of Richborough, Reculver and Lynne*, and Reports of *Excavation on sites of Castra at Pevensey and Lynne*. While the scholarly writing is exemplary, it is in his approach to archaeological finds draughts-

11. R.S. worked on the decks of the barges collecting the gravel and helped to pick up the coins as they "poured out in the gravel upon the deck". The coins were all well preserved and some of the gold-coloured brass deceived collectors who brought them off the labourers as gold. This classification under brass and not bronze has recently been proven by work at the British Museum. He records they were mainly from the early Empire, especially of the reigns of Claudius, Nero, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, Trajan and Hadrian.

12. R.S. was not only highly conscious of the archaeological value of commonplace objects, but as General Pitt Rivers later confirmed, that of "... private dwellings,

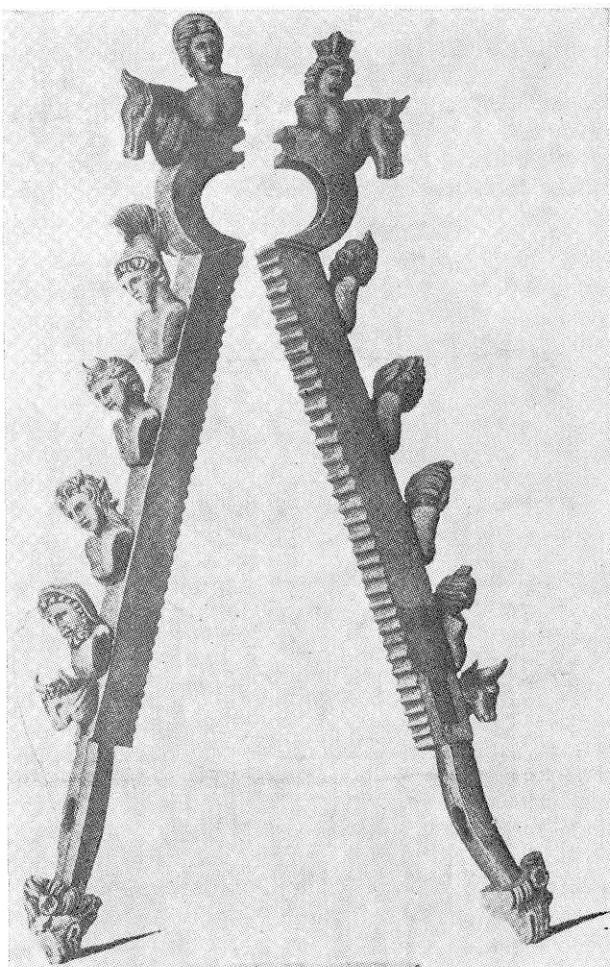


Fig. 5. A pair of ritual forceps from the Thames

manship where his real pioneer work must be recognised. In the preface to the first volume of *Collectanea Antiqua* in 1843 he wrote: "Publication descriptions of archaeological objects should be well illustrated and that drawings did not have to be elaborate"¹³. The pages of line drawings used in his reports can in many cases match those in today's model reports. His own finds draughtsmanship was

artisan workshops and all varied humbled structures which make up the bulk of cities and towns", *Illustrations of Roman London* (1851) 1.

13. Roach Smith continued, "For purposes of science it is not necessary that sketches should be elaborately prepared and artistically finished. Truth and fidelity to the objects portrayed are indispensable; but these requisitions may be ensured by a little care and attention, better an outline drawing if supplied liberally, than that they should be limited in number for the sake of elaborate execution". This is as true today as it was over one hundred and thirty years ago and is exactly how the history of finds illustration has developed.

excellent (Fig. 6) but his failed to see the value of detailed measured plans and sections until late in his life, after he had left London. His 1865 reports on his excavations of the Saxon Shore forts at Pevensey and Lymne include both illustrations and plans of the main gate and bastions. These are now proving of value to Professor Barry Cunliffe in his present research on these sites.

His editorial work included two important books, the *Inventorium Sepulchrale* of Saxon Antiquities from Kent and *A Dictionary of Roman Coins*. He was completing the third volume of *Retrospections—Social and Archaeological* when he died at the age of 83.

One of the most important actions of his life was the part he took in the inception of the British Archaeological Association. During a meeting with antiquary friends in his house in 1843 he suggested the need for a society to bring to the attention of government and local authorities the destruction and loss of archaeological sites thus anticipating the objectives of "Rescue," the trust for British Archaeology, by over 130 years¹⁴. A committee was formed immediately and during the same year the British Archaeological Association began its activities, shortly to be followed by the Royal Archaeological Institute. Both these organisations are the parents of many similar societies throughout Britain.

Roach Smith died shortly after John Clayton, and a noted northern antiquary and their mutual friend Dr. J. Collingwood Bruce, published twin obituaries in the *Archaeologica Aeliana* of the Newcastle Archaeological Society in 1890. This last society was the only one in Britain to establish itself before the movement originated by Roach Smith in 1843.

Though a businessman by profession, his true vocation was that of an active antiquary and therefore he must rank as one of Britain's first part-time field archaeologists. In an age when few cared he not only collected antiquities but housed them in a museum open to the public. His interest was not only acquisition but in scholarly research and historical interpretation. The scholarship of his ensuing publications is all the more remarkable for his lack of a university education. His contribution to London's archaeology continues to the present when many of his deductions continue to be verified by today's excavations and to R.S. must go the priority claim for

14. R.S. wrote, "Until the day shall arrive when the Government shall be awakened to a sense of the value of ancient national remains, societies and individuals must work on with zeal and earnestness; but they should never relax in forcing upon the attention and consideration of the representatives of the people, the conservation of the anti-



Fig. 6. An example of some of Roach Smith's line drawings of Potters stamps

many discoveries. His constant concern for local antiquities is a salutary lesson for all those who express today an interest in British archaeology.

During 1976 the Museum of London will open its doors to the public for the first time. Let it not be forgotten that the first museum with this name was there to house City antiquities collected by Roach Smith. It is now a tragic lesson of London history that one of the greatest treasures of British archaeology will not be seen in this new building. However, his pioneer contribution to both the archaeology of London and Britain is of such importance that a permanent tribute in the form of a commemorative plaque or a display should be made as his memorial.

quities of the kingdom" (*Collectanea Antiqua*, 1848). R.S. clearly recognized the need for rescue urban archaeology when he wrote, "As a rule, we find that prosperity of towns has been the most fatal cause of the loss of their ancient configuration and of their monuments", *Illustrations of Roman London* (1859) 2.