

Thomas Layton, F.S.A. (1819-1911)

'A misguided Antiquary'

DAVID WHIPP
LYN BLACKMORE

THOMAS LAYTON died in 1911 at his home in Kew at the advanced age of 92, one of the most enigmatic and fascinating characters of London archaeology and yet one of the least well known. In the course of his lifetime, Layton built up an enormous library of books, maps, prints and manuscripts, much of it relating to the history and topography of London and Middlesex. Layton was also the possessor of probably the largest collection of London antiquities ever amassed by a single individual. He was notoriously reluctant to allow outsiders to see his collection and it was only after his death that its size became apparent.

In bald figures the Layton Collection now comprises 11,000 volumes of books, 3,000 prints and maps, 3,000 coins, tokens and medals and 900 pottery and glass vessels and tiles. There are also 2,600 assorted antiquities dating from the prehistoric to the medieval periods and in addition a large number belonging to the post-medieval period.

Sadly since Layton's death, and it must be said during his lifetime, the collection has been neglected and is now divided into two. Fortunately the antiquities are now in the care of the Museum of London whilst the books and prints languish in a dilapidated building in Chiswick. At the time of writing it is not possible for the casual visitor to see the books or many of the antiquities and it seems unlikely that this situation will change in the foreseeable future.

Only two serious articles have appeared in print concerning the Layton Collection, both of which were published early this century shortly after Layton's death and these were concerned only with making known some of the principal treasures of the collection and contained very little biographical material. Brian Hopley in an article in the *London Archaeologist*¹ has given a valuable brief biography of Charles Roach Smith, perhaps London's foremost antiquary and collector. The present paper sets out to do the same for Thomas Layton, an enthusiastic though much misguided collector. However, despite his inability to recognise the importance of recording the provenance of his objects he did provide London with a remarkable collection of antiquities and books.

1 B. Hopley, "Charles Roach Smith—(1807-1890) Pioneer Rescue Archaeologist", *London Archaeol.* 2 no. 13 (1975) 328-33.

Both he and his collection deserve to be more widely known.

Biographical details

The son of a Thames lighterman and coal merchant, Thomas Layton was born in 1819 at Strand-on-the-Green. Little is known of the family background except that Layton was apprenticed to his father in the family business and that he in turn had been apprenticed to his father, Nathaniel Layton. In 1825 the family moved to 22 Kew Bridge Road, a fine 18th century house on the Brentford side of the bridge, opposite the Star and Garter public house, and formerly used as a resting place by ladies visiting the courts at Richmond and Kew. With the house went ownership of the old seven-arched wooden bridge and its tollgate. The house came to be known as Layton House and was Thomas Layton's home until his death in 1911. Little has been written about Layton and we know virtually nothing of his boyhood, education or childhood interests, and not a great deal more about his adult personality. Nonetheless there seems to be a striking contrast between his private and public lives.

Outwardly Layton played an active part in the life of Brentford and he was a highly respected local figure. Community affairs seem to have taken up a good deal of his time from quite an early age. At 21 he was a churchwarden of St. George's (now a piano museum), a church he was to remain closely associated with all his life, and he later became a member of the Burial Board for the district. In middle and later life he devoted much time to his two main interests, local politics and the collecting of antiquities. Between 1853-1898 he occupied a seat on the local council, serving firstly as chairman of the old Local Board and then as the first chairman of its successor the Brentford District Council. Greatly interested in the Library movement he was the first chairman of the Library Committee and one of the main forces behind the establishment of the original Brentford Library in Clifden House, which he formally opened in 1890. In 1904 he opened its more capacious successor, the new Carnegie Library. This involvement in local affairs was of the greatest importance to Layton and when at the age of 79 he was defeated in the local elections he was so upset that he threatened to withdraw his promise to leave his col-



Fig. 1: Thomas Layton.

lection of antiquities to the town on his death. As a result of this, he was co-opted as Chairman, but he then began to slowly withdraw from public life though remaining as nominal chairman of the Library Committee until his death.

In his private life, Layton was not so outward looking, and seems indeed to have been something of a hermit, a solitary character in a world of his own within the walled garden of 22 Kew Bridge Road, with only his faithful housekeeper and five pug dogs for company. In later years his life style seems to have had an extraordinary structure. After sleeping all the day he would rise at about 5 p.m., eat his breakfast and then read the papers and perhaps write a little until midnight. He would then lunch and following this take his dogs for a walk in the direction of Gunnersbury Lane. It is to the daughter-in-law of the vicar of St. George's that we owe our thanks for the few glimpses we have of Layton's private life. The Rev. Henry and his son Philip were frequent visitors to Layton House and in later years Philip described to his wife his visits to Layton. Another visitor was Dr. Fincham, whom Layton paid like a "Chinese Mandarin" to keep him well. Fincham used to call on his way home from evening surgery for a

night-cap at which time Layton was imbibing a mid-morning glass of madeira. Layton used to entertain the young Philip Henry with stories about the highwaymen near Hounslow and the time that the Lord Mayor was robbed. As they walked through the garden, Layton would often stop to pick a fig from one of the many fig trees, eat it solemnly and then throw the skin over his shoulder before resuming the conversation. He never tended the garden and as a result fig trees grew everywhere vying for space with sheds and outhouses full of antiquities. It was the house itself and the relics which it contained which made the deepest impression on the boy. He described rooms piled high with swords, spearheads, axes, elephant tusks and hippo ribs. This picture of a veritable Aladdin's Cave was not the result of the confused memories of a small boy. Fred Turner, the local librarian who later classified the collection, wrote of ". . . numberless treasures . . . collected in the uncongenial recesses of a house never intended for such a purpose. . . . No words can describe the amazing and distressing state of disorder which existed in so restricted an area." Sir Hercules Read, then President of the Society of Antiquaries, also viewed the collection and described it as "the most original and most confused private museum I have ever seen".

It is not known when Layton's interest in antiquities first began but during the 19th century it was considered fashionable to have a small cabinet collection of curiosities and living so close to the Thames it is possible that Layton spent much of his boyhood mudlarking and picking up objects washed up by the river. What we can be sure of is that once bitten by the collecting bug it never left him. He maintained close contact with the river people and he was well known to the men who worked the dredgers between Strand-on-the-Green and Isleworth. Any finds they made were always taken to Layton because he paid so well, and before long he had a monopoly on all the finds made between Wandsworth and Kew.

Layton's interest in collecting became obsessive and soon he was amassing objects from places other than the Thames including Greece and Peru. Books and prints were bought in immense numbers from London dealers and a multitude of sheds had to be built in the back garden to accommodate them. The precise origin of the objects was not important to him. Some had hand-written labels glued to them but as the collection grew objects were simply heaped into tea-chests. Eventually it came to the point where he could not resist the temptation to acquire new things and yet could not bear to part with even the most trivial. After he died, the executors of his will found boxes bursting with new shirts, hats and suits and many other items of unworn clothing. Fred

Turner describes how he came across “many little rolls of paper and opening them up found that each contained a piece of blotting paper, a piece of foolscap, and a District Council agenda which Layton had used when chairman, each tied up with a bit of tape”. A servant who once attempted to give some semblance of order to the collection was admonished with the words “Leave it to those who come after us”.

Throughout his life he guarded his collection with a fierce possessiveness. In his younger days he exhibited twice at the Society of Antiquaries and in 1868 was elected a Fellow. He does not seem to have been particularly active in the affairs of the Society but in 1872 he loaned a number of swords to their Bronze Age Exhibition at Somerset House. A few privileged scholars were allowed to visit Layton House and see the collection. The Rev. William Greenwell, Dean of Durham Cathedral and barrow digger extraordinary, often acted as intermediary between Layton and the fortunate third party. Documents stored with the books and prints show that Layton was not slow to combine business and pleasure. Correspondence sent to him bearing letterheads of the Atheneum Club and the Society of Antiquaries praise him for the quality of the antiquities he had exhibited on various occasions and go on to complain about the sulphurous and slaty coal which he had sold to them.

It is difficult to condone or condemn Layton’s attitude to his collection. His motives in collecting were clearly not financial as he had often stated his intention to leave the collection to the people of Brentford. However, his collecting standards were poor even judged by those of his day. He was quite ignorant of the need for recording the provenance of finds and of the necessity for even elementary care and protection of his objects. The general condition of the collection at the time of Layton’s death was graphically described by Fred Turner.

“In one room so small that a big man could hardly get into it, I found books stacked right up to the ceiling, the bottom ones in each pile resting on little stools. A corridor between two rooms was so choked up with books and various obstacles that I could not get through and some of the bookshelves had volumes placed on them four deep. When I looked at them first I thought this would not take me long but when I removed one volume I found another behind and another behind that and yet another till the wall was reached. In an outhouse I found a lot of books simply spoiling with damp and the cover of one—a valuable work on ornithology—could not be seen for mildew.

One room full of books had not been opened, I was told, for seven years. There were no means of letting air or light in, and I had to work in a narrow

space in the bitter cold of the winter by candle light and with a row of grinning skulls looking at me from a shelf where they had been put. They were skulls that had been brought to him from time to time and he bought them and threw them on one side.

Piles of books had been put away in fireplaces and heaped up in chimney stacks. A valuable copy of Boydell’s *Thames* was found under a couch where it had been shoved to stop up a mousehole.”

This then was the state of the Layton Collection in 1911, and it has been aptly described by Ivor Noel Hume as “a pathetic memorial to a misguided antiquary and a dreadful warning against the evils of collecting for the sake of collecting”.

The Collection

Books, prints and maps

At the time of Layton’s death, the collection boasted some 22,000 books but almost half of these were duplicates or considered worthless and were discarded in 1913. Of the remaining works, 6,800 deal with history and topography and these include originals of such works as Speed’s *History of Great Britain* 1614, Dugdale’s *Monasticum Anglicanum* 1655, Camden’s *Britannia* 1610, Ogilby’s *Britannia* 1675, and perhaps most extraordinary of all is a copy

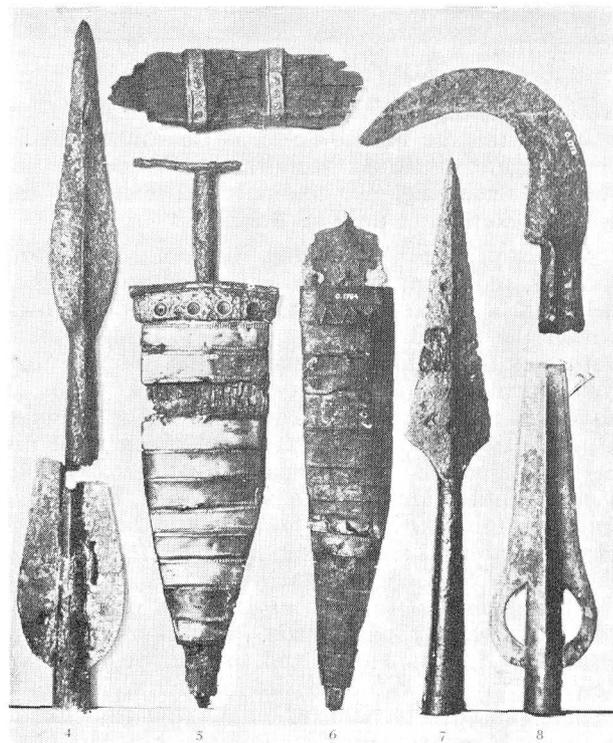


Fig. 2: Selection of objects in Layton Collection.

of Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, dated 1577. This work is generally accepted as being one of the sources used by Shakespeare as the basis for his historical plays. There are many archaeological "classics" on the shelves such as pristine copies of Pitt Rivers' *Excavations on Cranbourne Chase*, and two copies of William Greenwell's *British Barrows*. Other items are a first edition of Strypes edition of John Stow's *Survey of London*, and a copy of the results of a Parliamentary Investigation into the Fire of London, published shortly after the event. The works of many London topographers and historians are represented including those of Loftie, Maitland, Faulkner and Lyssons. In addition there are illustrated books showing innumerable views of famous London buildings from the 17th century onwards and these must be of immense value to architectural historians.

Of the 3,000 prints in the collection about 700 items relate to the topography of London from the 16th century and there are original maps by Visscher, Speed, Hollar, Morden and Lea, Horwood, Buck and Rocque. The collection has prints and drawings of many London views and buildings. Middlesex is also extremely well catered for with 512 prints and old maps. Artistic works are represented by prints of Pugin, Canaletto, Morley, and Hogarth. There are also a number of Hogarth originals. When the Hogarth Museum was opened in Chiswick, Layton was approached with a view to allowing some of his prints to be made available. Layton is said to have refused with the words "Fancy them wanting my Hogarths".

The Antiquities

The collection of antiquities left by Layton and intended by him to form the centre of a local museum now lies several miles away in the Museum of London. The size and scope of the collection together with a shortage of resources has prevented even a simple list of the contents of the collection being published. The only full inventory ever taken was in 1913 when Brentford Library acquired the collection. Although this was a remarkable achievement by Fred Turner, the librarian, it is inadequate now for scholarly purposes being unillustrated, too vague and too brief in its descriptions. It is of course very much out of date in its method of classification. Many scholars have of course visited the collection and used it as a quarry for the raw materials of their researches but few of them could have been aware of the value of the collection in fields outside of their own.

Of the 3,000 coins in the collection only 1,200 are British and of these some 200 were minted after 1760. Included in the collection are 10 Belgic coins, 463 Roman and 3 Anglo-Saxon. According to the Brentford Library Accessions book none of the coins

were provenanced and apparently Layton kept them all in a sack together with the trade tokens and medals.

The pottery collection is fairly small, probably because Layton only interested himself with complete vessels. As the dating of pottery is much more precise now than was possible earlier this century it is difficult to know without seeing the pots just how accurate were the identifications given in 1913. However, bearing in mind the possibility of error the Accessions book tells us that by the time Layton died in 1911 he had acquired 1 Neolithic pot, 4 beakers, 4 vessels dating to the Bronze Age and 20 to the Iron Age. The Roman period is represented by 162 pottery vessels and lamps, and 15 glass vessels. Four pots belong to the Saxon period, 4 to the 13th century, 10 to the 14th century, 29 to the 15th, and 54 to the 16th. In addition there are many more recent and foreign vessels and an interesting collection of floor tiles dating from the 13th century.

Prehistoric artifacts are particularly well represented in Layton's collection and it is the prehistorian who has greatest cause to be grateful to Layton and to curse him for not adequately recording the provenance of his finds.

Of the flint implements listed in the inventory, and excluding flakes, 162 are Palaeolithic and 600 Neolithic and Mesolithic. Of this 600 over half are axes and adzes. It is in the study of Bronze Age and Iron Age bladed weaponry that the Layton Collection assumes its greatest importance. The number of some types of artifact in the collection makes it the starting point in any typological study of those artifacts, and also demonstrates the importance of the River in those periods. For example, a particularly fine type of Middle Bronze Age rapier is the Wandsworth Class. This has a long slender cast bronze blade, elegantly moulded and has a trapeze-shaped butt. The type seems to have been made in the Thames Valley around 1200 BC, and to judge from the frequency with which they are found outside the area, many were exported. There are 40 or so provenanced examples known from Britain and of these, nine are in the Layton Collection. The Barnes Class of rapier is rather later in date and is less elaborate, but again the distribution is centred on the Thames Valley. Thirty or so provenanced examples are known and the Layton Collection has 10 of these. Even the Lisburn Class, which has a largely Irish distribution is represented by seven Layton examples. In addition to the rapiers the Collection's Bronze Age section contains 63 axes, 30 knives and daggers, 69 swords and 66 spearheads.

A good deal of work has been carried out in this country on Early Iron Age daggers, principally by

Professor E. M. Jope. The importance of these artifacts is twofold. Firstly, they often have elaborate handles and sheaths, with important significance for the development of Celtic Art, and secondly they were amongst the earliest objects to be made in Britain from iron. They are extremely rare and of the earlier Hallstatt series only half a dozen are known from this country. The Layton Collection has three of these. Still in the Iron Age, the Continental Hemigkofen sword can be used as yet another illustration of the importance of the Layton collection. The Hemigkofen sword was the first type to combine a leaf-shaped blade and a flanged hilt. A true slashing sword had to have a flanged hilt to give strength to the handle and this feature was not present on purely thrusting weapons such as the swords and rapiers of the Bronze Age. The leaf-shaped blade distributes the weight of the weapon whereas a pointed sword carries most of its weight in the handle and upper blade which makes it difficult to wield. The Hemigkofen type is rare in Britain, and yet almost inevitably Layton managed to acquire a specimen.

Arguably the two most spectacular pieces in the collection are also Iron Age. One is a handled tankard standing some 6in in height and made from oak staves cased in three pieces of bronze sheet (Fig. 3). Similar finds are known from the so-called Aylesford-Swarling Culture of South-east England. The other fine piece is what appears to be the horn cap from an Iron Age chariot (Fig. 4). This is a two-piece bronze casting soldered together. It has a decorative plate embossed with scrollwork and there are traces of red enamel. The cap has holes in its neck which would

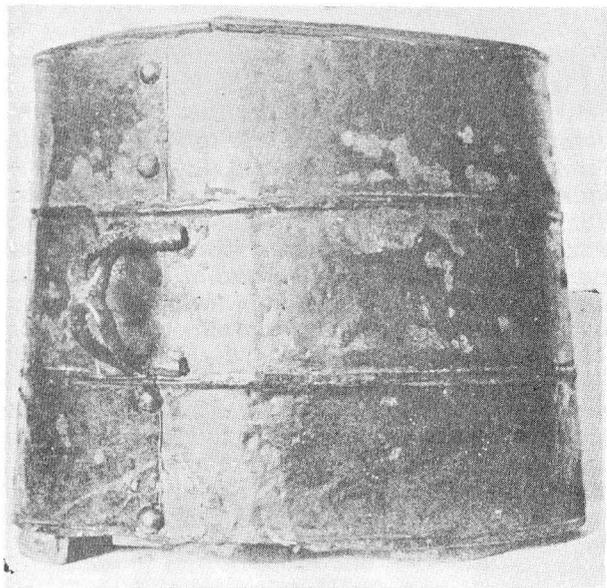


Fig. 3: Iron Age tankard.

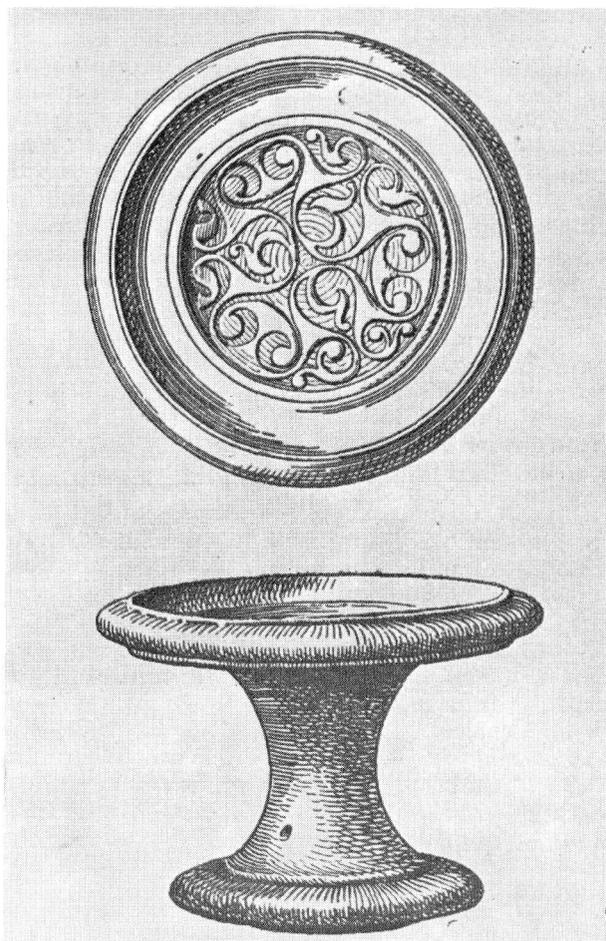


Fig. 4: Horn cap from Iron Age chariot.

have been used in securing it to the yoke of the chariot.

One more splendid Layton find deserves mention although it no longer forms part of the collection. This is a Roman short sword found at Putney in 1873. This object was presented by Layton to the British Museum and is one of the very few items he allowed to leave the collection. The hilt of the sword is missing but the scabbard is decorated with two bronze panels, one with leaf and floral scroll motifs, butterflies and rabbits, and the other depicts Romulus and Remus with the she-wolf. The piece is recognised as the best example of its kind in Britain (Fig. 5).

History of the Collection from 1911 to 1977

Layton's will was generous to Brentford and among the many bequests he made was £1,000 for a peal of bells to be installed in St. George's Church, and a sum of £15,000 left to a trust and to be spent on local charitable works. £20,000 and his collection of books

and antiquities were left to form the nucleus of a Layton Museum at 22 Kew Bridge Road. Somewhat perversely, Layton stipulated that admission to the museum was to be refused to persons under 21 years of age. Unfortunately, the notion of a Layton Museum, though admirable in theory, could not be carried out in practice. The biggest stumbling block was Layton's insistence that the museum be housed at 22 Kew Bridge Road. This of course had not been large enough to store the objects in Layton's lifetime, still less display them, and matters were exacerbated by the fact that Layton in his will had left the house to Thomas Fullard, his late wife's nephew, and it was only after the demise of Fullard, his spouse, and offspring that the premises could be used for museum purposes. A further difficulty was that even if Layton House had been suitable and immediately available the cost of supervising the museum would have been prohibitive.

The problem seemed insurmountable, and all the time the conditions of the collection deteriorated. In 1913 the matter went before the High Court of Chancery where Mr. Justice Washington confirmed Fullard's widow as the life tenant of Layton House, but he ruled that the collection itself could be moved to more appropriate quarters at Brentford Library for storage and display. Following this judgement the antiquities were moved to the library and a start was made on classifying the finds. Even the accommodation here was limited, however, and many of the books had to be stored in the crypt of St. George's Church, the vicar being one of the members of the Layton Trust. These storage conditions were most unsuitable, the crypt being both damp and the subject of break-ins. It was not unusual for valuable books to be found lying in nearby fields following vandalism at the church.

By the early 1960s the growth of the library at Brentford was being hampered by the amount of space which Layton's collection was taking up and it became clear that it would have to be moved. It was also recognised that something would have to be done about the books because in the church they were inaccessible for scholarly use and were deteriorating in condition.

In 1963 the finds were transferred to the London Museum now the Museum of London, though who actually owns them at the moment seems a little unclear. The bulk of the material is not on display though it is of course available for study purposes. The tankard, many of the swords and some of the pottery can be seen to good advantage in the interesting though disappointingly small area which is allocated to the prehistoric period. Given that the Museum displays do not divulge the names of donors of individual pieces, perhaps it might be appropriate

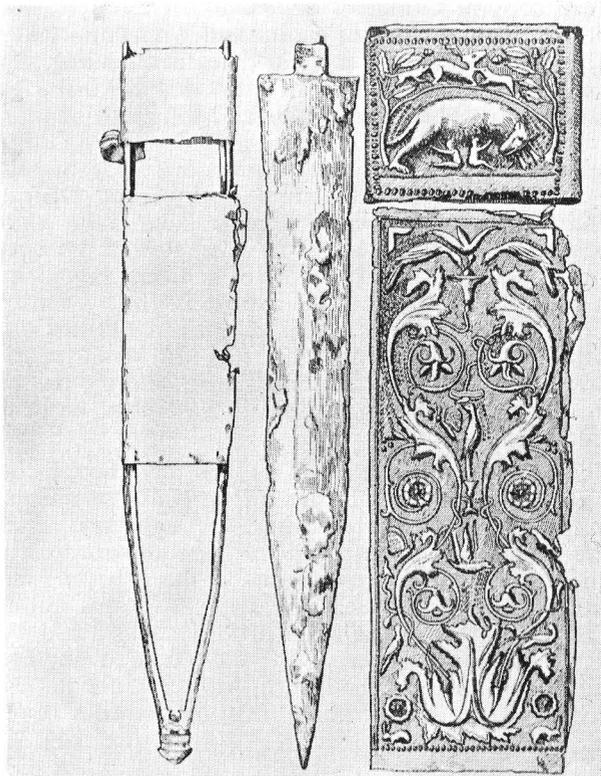


Fig. 5: Roman short sword found at Putney.

for a small display somewhere to outline the careers of Roach-Smith and Layton as they provided the Museum with so much of its material. It is surely the duty of the Museum also to provide an adequate catalogue to the collection, preferably published so that student have some idea of what it contains. At present there is only the handwritten inventory which was compiled at Brentford, the shortcomings of which have been outlined above.

The present condition of the book and print collection gives rise to grave concern. The building in which it is kept is the home of vermin and stray cats which gain easy access through cracks in the structure and broken windows. The unframed prints and maps are fortunately in good condition being mounted on card, wrapped in polythene and stored in map chests. The majority of books are racked on Dexion shelving and although an urgent programme of rebinding is required these too seem to be in generally good condition. Many of the most valuable works, however, are oversize and do not fit on the shelves. These books simply stand on the floor beneath an unsound roof and many are in a dreadful state. They have quite obviously received the indelicate attentions of small furry animals over a considerable period. A

1610 copy of Camden's *Britannia*, for example, lies on the floor, extremely damp and with unmistakable teeth marks on the faded leather binding. Its neighbour on the floor, William Stukely's *Itineraries* has apparently been less troubled by animals but has come adrift from its binding and is simply falling apart. Other volumes decorating the floor of this extraordinary library include works by Speed, Ogilby, and Rocque. Handling of books like these with broken bindings cannot fail to cause further damage, and one questions the wisdom of allowing any books from the collection to be included in the Inter-Library Loan Scheme, which occurs at present. Prints and paintings with broken glass frames also stand on the floor, propped up against bookshelves and the risk of further damage being caused to these must be considerable.

There is an urgent need for this collection to be visited by an expert and for a programme of re-binding and conservation to begin. Most important of all the Collection should be moved to more appropriate and much more secure premises. If this is beyond the resources of the Trustees (the Layton Trust is still in existence), then perhaps an arrangement should be made for the transfer of the collection to another institution such as happened with the antiquities. Already there is talk of the existing premises being

required for other uses and that the books will have to be moved to an empty building on the Great West Road. This must not be allowed to happen. It is important that the books be conserved and made available for scholarly use, as Layton would have wished.

Acknowledgements

The writers wish to thank the following for their help:

- 1 The staff of Chiswick Reference Library for help in the search for biographical material.
 - 2 Jean MacDonald of Museum of London, for allowing access to the Brentford Library Accessions Book.
 - 3 Mr. H. Murray for photographic assistance.
- Fig. 1. Courtesy of Chiswick Reference Library.
All other figs. courtesy of Society of Antiquaries of London.

Principal sources used

Smith, R., "Specimens from the Layton Collection", *Archaeologia*, **69**, (1917-19).
Henrey, R., *The King of Brentford*, London 1946.
Turner, F., *A short history of Brentford Library*, Brentford, 1911.
Brentford and Chiswick Times. Various articles from 1911 up to 1969.

Excavations & Post - Excavation Work

City, by Museum of London. Department of Urban Archaeology. A series of long term excavations. Enquiries to Brian Hobley, Chief Urban Archaeologist, DUA, 71 Basinghall Street, E.C.2. (01-606 1933/4/5). For information on post-excavation work, contact Penny MacConoran at this address.

Brentford, by West London Archaeological Field Group. Excavation and processing. Enquiries to Alison Laws, 71-72 Brentford High Street, Brentford, Middlesex. (01-560 3880).

Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group.

Late Neolithic site, Lygon Almhouses, Fulham Palace Road, S.W.6. (Saturdays only). Enquiries to Keith Whitehouse, 56 Tamworth Street, S.W.6. (01-385 6938).

Hammersmith, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. All types of work and finds: Neolithic, Roman and later. Tuesdays and Thursdays, 7-10 p.m., St. Peter's Church Hall, Varna Road, S.W.6. Contact: K. Whitehouse, 56 Tamworth Street, S.W.6. (01-385 6038).

Inner London Boroughs, by the Inner London Unit. Several rescue sites in various areas. Enquiries to Irene Schwab (01-242 6620).

Kingston, by Kingston-upon-Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Marion Smith, Kingston Museum, Fairfield Road, Kingston (01-546 5386).

North-East Greater London, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, E.15. (01-534 4545).

Putney, by Wandsworth Historical Society. Two acre site at junction of Felsham Road and High Street lies on

Roman and medieval settlements. Alternate weekends. Enquiries to Nicholas Farrant, 7 Coalcroft Road, S.W.15. (01-788 0015).

Southwark, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee. Several sites from the Roman period onwards. Enquiries to Harvey Sheldon, S.L.A.E.C., Montague Chambers, Montague Close, S.E.1. (01-407 1989).

Staines, by London and Middlesex Archaeological Society. Excavations in the town centre. Enquiries to Kevin Crouch. (09-328 62874 evenings).

Surrey, by Surrey Archaeological Society. Enquiries to David Bird, Field Officer S.A.S., Castle Arch, Guildford, Surrey. (0483-32454).

Vauxhall Pottery, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society. Excavation at weekends only. Processing of excavated material continues three nights a week. All enquiries to S.L.A.S., c/o Cuming Museum, 155 Walworth Road, S.E.17. (01-703 3324).

GENERAL EXCAVATIONS

The Council for British Archaeology produces a monthly Calendar of Excavations from March to September, with an extra issue in November and a final issue in January summarising the main results of fieldwork. The Calendar gives details of extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The annual subscription is £3.00 post-free, which should be made payable to C.B.A., 7 Marylebone Road, N.W.1.