

Ralph Merrifield

Harvey Sheldon

WITH THE death on 9 January of Ralph Merrifield, London archaeology lost its father figure. This universally loved and admired man did more than anyone else, both by example and influence, to establish the archaeology of the capital and its environs on a firm footing.

Merrifield came to London as Assistant Keeper of the Corporation of London's Guildhall Museum in 1950, following a career at Brighton Museum interrupted by war service with the RAF. This included postings in India and Java, and involved the interpretation of aerial photography, an activity not far removed from his archaeological enthusiasms.

He arrived in London at a time when archaeologists were attempting, in extremely difficult circumstances, to salvage what they could of the remains of Roman and medieval London from a city more than a third destroyed by German bombing, and which faced extensive redevelopment. These campaigns effectively culminated in the discovery by Professor Grimes in 1954 of the *Mithraeum* close to the Walbrook.

Merrifield's first important paper on new discoveries in London, published in 1962, was a study of Roman coins found in the bed of the Walbrook, not in Grimes' excavations, but later by building workers when archaeologists were no longer allowed on the sites.

Researching largely in his own time, Merrifield produced his impressive *The Roman City of London* in 1965. It brought together information gathered from post-war excavations and observations with earlier records to produce a masterful historical synthesis and topographical gazetteer. Described by Grimes as "a landmark in the study of Roman London", it established Merrifield's reputation to a wide audience. Other more general but indispensable introductions followed: *Roman London* (1969) which extended his researches beyond the City, and *The Archaeology of London* (1975) which surveyed the region from Stone to Dark Age.

Merrifield as Deputy Keeper of Guildhall Museum from 1960 to 1975 was much concerned with the preparation of the Prehistoric and Roman Gallery for the new Museum of London.

From the outset of his career Merrifield was a firm believer in the need for what he termed "archaeological sustenance" to support ideas about the past.

This to a large extent explains his Herculean efforts both at Guildhall, and later at the Museum of London, where he was Deputy Director from 1977 to 1978, to ensure that archaeological organisations were established in London which could deal with the destruction caused by the redevelopment of sites. These labours bore fruit with the establishment of the Guildhall Museum's Department of Urban Archaeology for the City in 1973, as well as field organisations for Southwark and other parts of London set up in the early 1970s, and which coalesced into the Department of Greater London Archaeology at the Museum of London in 1983.

Like many, he was uneasy about the changes imposed on London archaeology by English Heritage in the early 1990s, and he strongly supported the establishment of the Standing Conference on London Archaeology to monitor their effects.

Retirement from the Museum of London in 1978 left Merrifield free to write, and amongst his later achievements were two further substantial books. *London City of the Romans* (1983) was a detailed history of *Londinium* and its environs, drawing widely on the results of the many excavations that had taken place in the previous decade and a half. *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (1987) sprang from a long-abiding interest in folklore and religion and was written in the hope that it would correct "the tendency of archaeologists to let evidence for ritual activity sink without trace".

After many other papers Merrifield returned to the problem of the Walbrook Valley in the Roman period, a topic which allowed full rein to his expertise in matters relating to coinage, religion and topography. Here he showed, with intellectual persuasion, that contrary to the prevalent view, a ritual rather than a secular origin best explained the metalwork deposited in the stream bed.

Merrifield's powers in no way diminished with age; neither did his commitment to London archaeology. He maintained his wide range of interests and his enthusiasm to communicate them through writing and teaching. As recently as 3rd December he was in Northampton lecturing to extra-mural students on *Magic Protection of the Home*.

The deepest sympathies of all who knew Ralph will go out to his wife, Lysbeth, and his children and grandchildren.