

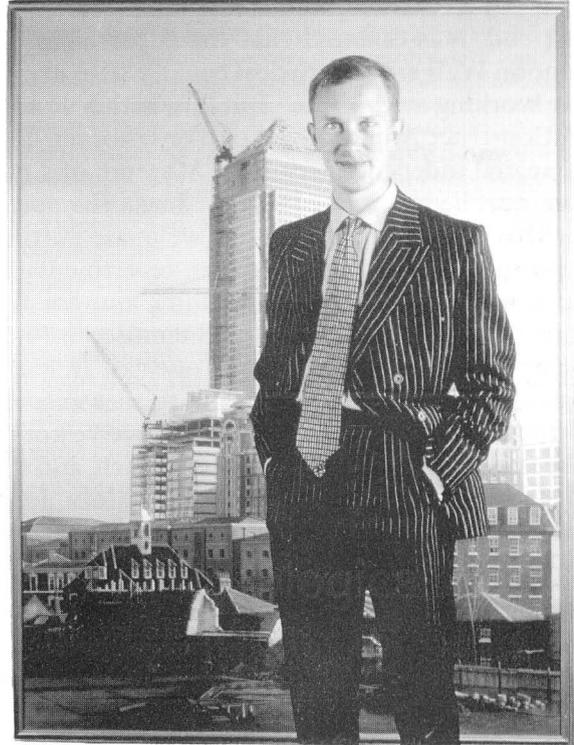
# An interview with Simon Thurley

Fiona Haughey

SIMON THURLEY has now been in office for six months as the new director of the Museum of London, and *London Archaeologist* thought this might be a good time to ask how he was finding his new job. His new office, in the Museum's Early Department, looks both south towards St. Paul's and east along London Wall, and is reminiscent of the bridge of a great ocean liner, with Simon Thurley very much as its captain. The old office, which was down the end of a long dark corridor, has now been put to other uses. The new director likes being in the middle of it -- "in the hurly-burly". Coming to the Museum of London from being the first curator of the Historic Royal Palaces, he has found it a very different world. With realisation dawning that the expertise, skills, and resources of the Museum were infinitely greater than he could have imagined, he is involved in trying to find ways of harnessing those resources for the greater good of people interested in London, particularly those in the archaeological world. He described the learning curve as being "vertical ... in many ways" but also enjoyable.

A new director to the Museum heralds new ideas and approaches, and Simon Thurley is no exception. Two of the initiatives he is currently setting in train are LAARC and a research strategy for London. LAARC (the London Archaeological Archive Research Centre) is to be based at the museum's Eagle Wharf Road site within five years. The archive had been closed due to a lack of funding, resulting in a build-up of newly excavated archaeological material being left in limbo, as well as making it inaccessible to researchers. Simon Thurley sees this as a priority issue, with the archive underpinning the whole Museum's activities. There is a need to house the archive properly and to ensure that it has proper sustainable funding, to forestall closure at a later date. Also it is necessary to make sure there is full and public access (to archaeologists, academics, archaeological societies and inter-

ested members of the public), as well as to make sure there is a service which meets all their needs. Critically and crucially, tied into that, there is a project to help coordinate an archaeological research strategy for Greater London. "Without the underpinning of the archive, it will not be clear how we are going to begin to tackle that archive in the future". Currently it contains the equivalent of 120,000 shoe boxes full of finds, and a dispersal policy needs to be discussed to slim this down as not all needs to be kept, over the first ten years of LAARC to, hopefully, give it a further decade of life. The director has various ideas of funding the centre, as the need to sustain it is crucial and he hopes that through forging alliances and partner-



Dr. Simon Thurley, the new Director of the Museum of London

(photo: Museum of London)

ships with a number of voluntary bodies (such as LAMAS, COLAS, and other archaeological bodies within London), there may be a way to harness the large number of people who would like to have a part in the archive and to help open it for everybody. Detailed discussions are also under way with two major academic institutions to include LAARC in undergraduate courses, and hopefully, post-graduate studies.

The research strategy will help in other ways too. It will give the Museum an idea of what its priorities are in publishing – an area in which its record has not been as good as it should have been. It will also be a useful tool used by both archaeologists and the Museum, in order to raise money for research from the funding bodies, as it will help define archaeological research priorities within the Greater London area.

Simon Thurley sees the Museum moving to a closer liaison with a wide range of archaeological units. It has two arms – the curatorial section and the largest archaeological unit in the U.K., MOLAS. He views the curatorial function as maintaining a great expertise on London archaeology and, to that end, it is essential that the departments at London Wall are seen to deal equally with everyone working within the capital, whether MOLAS, PreConstruct Archaeology, OAU or whoever. The curatorial independence of the Museum of London must be maintained – “I will be a champion for that”. The director would welcome further opportunities for the curatorial departments to work with all archaeological units, and for the units to put on exhibitions at the museum. “My view certainly is that London is one vast archaeological site . . . and for us to begin to answer some of the big questions about London, we’ve got to take a much more collaborative approach, and the museum curatorial departments certainly are a very good place for that approach to be coordinated from”.

Hedley Swain (an ex-head of find at MOLAS) has recently been appointed as head of the Early Department, which is sending off a very deliberate message that archaeologists in the curatorial section of the Museum must be thoroughly aware of what is going on in the field. Simon Thurley makes sure that he goes to an archaeological site once a fortnight – “come hell or high water”.

There is a new commitment in the museum to get things out of the ground and into the showcase in a very short turn around. An example of this can be seen in the work going on at the Royal Opera House site in Covent Garden. Archaeologists are still at work on the site, but there is already a small exhibition showing called *Saxons at the Opera*. Even though post-excavation work will continue for another two or three years, the preliminary information is available. Archaeology needs to be more immediate to the public – the success of such programmes as the *Time Team* with their results being seen straight away, has proved this.

On a personal note, Simon Thurley’s interests are fairly wide ranging – “I have infinite intellectual curiosity on all things”. His current research interests are about a very important building in the heart of Westminster, Whitehall Palace, and he is working on a variety of publications relating to it, including an exhibition at the RIBA from their drawings collection. This will take him through to the end of the summer, after which time he has a lot of other personal projects up his sleeve. Coming from Historic Royal Palaces (where his responsibilities included both above- and below-ground archaeology, and a very wide range of artefacts from AD 1066 at the Tower of London to the nineteenth century at Kew) he brings with him a broad scope of interests, and is delighted to have the opportunity to personally be able to expand them.

The burning question (“Have you ever dug?”) was greeted with a resounding affirmative. He did admit to being “not a very good archaeologist, in the digging sense” but he did enjoy it very much. He was brought up on a Roman site at Godmanchester, where he dug in the school holidays, and with his first “proper job” as an Inspector for English Heritage, he continued to dig. He feels that it is important to know not only the incredibly exciting and thrilling side of archaeology but also “the very, very boring stuff that has to be done”. It is necessary to understand both sides in order to achieve anything in the field.

It would be interesting to speak to Simon Thurley again in, say, a year, to see how his vision has changed and what he feels he has achieved by then. Watch this space!