



Fig. 1: the Roman sarcophagus and lead coffin found on the Spitalfields excavation.

# Taking London Archaeology to Londoners

Hedley Swain

THE WEEKEND of April 17th-18th saw the Museum of London inundated with visitors wishing to see the Roman stone sarcophagus and its contents recently excavated from a site at Spitalfields. Members of the public were quite happy to queue for an hour to see the finds. This exercise put into focus the immense interest the public has in archaeology and the core role played by the Museum in the archaeology of London. The Museum of London Archaeology Service continues to undertake the lion's share of excavation in the capital. Through its links with the Museum MOLAS also has the ability to bring findings such as the sarcophagus to speedy public attention.

Apart from MOLAS, The Museum of London has other key archaeological roles. It not only cares for the vast majority of what we know about London's archaeology in the form of the London archaeological archive, but it also through its public service role has the responsibility for disseminating the riches held in that archive to the general public. Archaeological archives are not the most accessible of museum collections. Thousands of boxes of pottery and complex archaeological records do little to communicate London's past to the uninitiated. The Museum's role is to act as mediator and interpreter for this information. Two major initiatives, closely interlinked, are under way to perform this role: the

creation of the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre, and the formulation of a research agenda for London archaeology.

### **The London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre**

A recent survey has shown that the London Archaeological Archive (the accumulated remains from all London excavations) is over three times larger than any other in Britain. At present it includes 120,000 boxes of objects, 4,000 environmental samples, and 265 timber pallets of medieval stonework. In all, the Museum of London has the archives for over 3,000 individual excavations. The figure grows every year.

The problem is where to put all this material and how to use it to its best advantage. The Archive has been stored in a building rented by the Museum. For several years this has been full and now the lease has expired. The Museum is now planning a completely new approach to caring for the Archive. There are two main challenges. First, the effective storage of the Archive to ensure its long-term preservation. Second, and perhaps more important, is the access and use of the Archive. Everyone accepts that archaeology is important and the study of our past is fascinating. However it is very difficult to translate this into giving wide public access to some very complicated records, and to boxes and boxes of flints and sherds of pottery. Obviously much of the job of providing access falls on museum curators who study the material and explain it to the public through galleries, exhibitions and books. However it is the Museum of London's goal to provide a far more exciting level of access to this material.

The Museum's plans for the Archive involve the creation of the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC). This facility will be based in the Museum's Hackney resource centre that currently holds the extensive social history collections -- thousands of items that just won't fit into the Museum itself. The building will be enlarged to take the vast quantity of archaeological material. Also included will be public areas and the Museum is working closely with local archaeological societies, universities and other educational groups to design a programme of access and events which will make LAARC the Centre for archaeology in London. The plans will rely on money from the National Lottery, and support from government and others concerned with London's heritage. So far the plans have been greeted enthusiastically and the Museum is confident of success.

The creation of LAARC, which will also include the internationally renowned team of Museum of London finds and environmental specialists, will give new impetus to all the Museum's archaeological activities. The Museum's galleries, exhibitions, and other public programmes are reliant on researching new information from collections. The London Archaeological Archive holds the secrets to the lives of past Londoners. The Museum views London as one big archaeological site

and each individual excavation contributes a little bit to the big picture. The more information that is readily available means the more we can get to grips with the past.

### **A Research Agenda for London Archaeology**

Taking the lead from English Heritage and the importance they have given to research agendas, both encouraging others and preparing their own, the Museum of London has been involved in leading such a project for London. A series of initiatives have been taken and others are underway to involve as many as possible in identifying priorities for researching the capital's rich past.

The problems facing anyone trying to get to grips with the archaeology of London do seem daunting. We are dealing with an urban centre that has been more or less continually occupied for 2,000 years. For much of that time London has been the largest and most important centre in Britain, acting as a major international port, national capital, industrial centre and imperial capital. Greater London also covers a wide area of complex landscape that has been occupied by prehistoric communities, and later agricultural settlement. London's suburbs also now cover a series of urban centres, such as Kingston and Uxbridge, whose history makes valuable contributions to medieval and later archaeology. Not only is there a very complex story to tell but many with a stake in telling it. London has over 40 local archaeological and historical societies with an estimated 10,000 members. At the last count 19 different archaeological contractors and consultants were undertaking work in the capital. Due to its significance academics from many British and foreign universities take an active research interest in the city. And on top of all of this London remains one of the most heavily developed areas of Britain with continuing demand for redevelopment in the very areas where the archaeology is richest. English Heritage who provide the archaeological planning advice service for the vast majority of London also therefore have an important part to play in defining archaeological research in the capital.

How can all the existing information and the diverse priorities be managed into a research framework all can be happy with? For the Museum of London priorities are clear. We have responsibility for the London archaeological archive and wish this resource to be put to maximum use both by others and ourselves. A clear research agenda will help in this process. Similarly it is the Museum of London through its permanent galleries, publications and public programmes which is most involved in communicating information about the past to the general public. Another important role of the research agenda is to help identify what it is that people want to know about the capital's past and how we can best communicate it to them.

Before we can prepare any statement as to what we still want to know about London archaeology, we need to be clear about what it is we already know and the evidence



Fig. 2: part of the Archaeological Archive at Eagle Wharf Road.

from which this is derived. Several publications are contributing to this process. In November 1998 the Museum published with support from English Heritage three volumes which summarise the contents of the archive. This information is also available on-line through the ADS and, in time will also be provided through the Museum's web site. To accompany the archive gazetteers the Museum is finalising another EH supported project: the *London Assessment Document* (LAD). This volume is a chronological discussion of our current state of knowledge about London's archaeology and will make a major contribution to focusing our minds on what we still need to know. The LAD is a major project and the final volume will be around 120,000 words long, a reflection of the amount of London archaeology that needs to be written about. In order to provide a more manageable document that can be used before the LAD's publication the Museum has also produced a shorter summary of existing knowledge: *The London Archaeological Resource Assessment* by John Schofield was issued as a consultation draft in the autumn. This document has been widely distributed and it is hoped it will elicit ideas that will contribute to its revision into a document that truly reflects London's diverse and complex archaeological resource.

Two final elements are contributing to this assessment or state of knowledge phase. An archaeological research register has been opened on the Museum's website. This summarises ongoing research by individuals into London, and is being constantly revised. We are also beginning to solicit the views of Londoners as to what they are interested in. Currently as part of the Museum's ongoing market research, visitors are being asked some basic questions about which elements of London's archaeology they find most interesting. It is hoped to extend this survey into a smaller borough museum and possibly to a non-museum environment.

The next stage is to prepare the research agenda itself. The Museum has identified funds from its core budget to commission work over the next year. This will be accompanied by a series of period specific seminars to bring together some of the academics with a research interest in London. We will also continue the process of wide consultation with the different elements of the London archaeological community. LA readers can monitor progress through the Museum's web page (<http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk>) or by subscribing to the Museum's free bi-monthly newsletter *Archaeology Matters* (call 0171 814 5730).