

Mosaic

Surprises from the City

IT HAS BEEN quite a year for archaeology in the City of London, with a series of finds grabbing the headlines. First came the discovery of a hoard of 43 Roman gold coins (*aurei*) on an excavation at Plantation House. The coins carry the images of ten emperors and two empresses ranging from Nero to Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180) so the hoard can be dated to the late 2nd century. They had been placed in a bag, probably leather, in a floor safe next to a partition wall within a large family house. It is not clear why they were never recovered, as the house continued in occupation for over 100 years after their deposition. The hoard has been donated to the Museum of London by The British Land Company Plc (the site's owners) and has been put on public display.

In January came the discovery of an early 2nd-century mosaic on an excavation at 10 Gresham Street. It was originally 4m square, mostly geometric with a central decorated panel, and in colour rather than the monochrome that is usual at that date. Its context was described by the Museum of London as "The house containing the mosaic was humble and unpretentious, occupying a long, narrow plot that extended back from the north-south street. Constructed in about AD 100-120... it was timber-framed but had colourful painted plaster on the walls. On one side was a kitchen, on another a courtyard. The building had a very short life, and its demise was violent and dramatic as the structure had been burnt down in a fire." (www.museumoflondon.org.uk). The mosaic was lifted by Museum of London conservators and will eventually go on display.

Other areas of central London have also yielded some unusual finds. From excavations in advance of the construction of a new wing at Guy's Hospital in Southwark came the first lettered die from Roman Britain. It is of stone, and in place of spots it has carved capital letters inlaid with pigment. The number of characters on opposing faces total seven as on normal dice: P opposite ITALIA, VA opposite URBIS, and EST opposite ORTI. No one has yet worked out how such dice were used. (*Archaeology Matters*, no. 12, December 2000)

Excavation by AOC Archaeology Group of the first Saxon cemetery in central London, at Floral Street next to the Royal Opera House, led to the discovery of a rare 7th-century Saxon brooch, the first of its kind to be found in London (see *front cover*). It is intricately worked with panels of gold, and set with garnets forming a geometric pattern around a central boss, indicating its owner was of great wealth and importance.

However, some of the most important discoveries have been topographical. At Plantation House, defensive ditches and a rampart were found directly above the ruins of *Londinium* wrought by the Boudican revolt of AD 60-1. Two parallel v-shaped ditches had been dug about 2.5m apart to form the north-east corner of an enclosure. The defences were traced for over 70m northwards before heading westwards towards the city centre. This find raises important questions about the role of the Roman army immediately after the revolt – was the entire core of the city fortified to allow clearance to begin in safety, or was this merely a small temporary base? The results of previous work in the area will have to be re-assessed in the light of this discovery. (*Archaeology Matters*, no. 12, December 2000)

Where your treasure is, ...

THOSE WITH an interest in coins and other 'small finds' will find much new information in the *Treasure Annual Report 1998-1999*, published recently by the Department of Culture, Media

and Sport. This is an illustrated catalogue of finds reported under the Treasure Act 1996, and includes some stunning items, such as a medieval silver-gilt figure of an Old Testament prophet found near Buntingford, Hertfordshire. I was surprised by the number of Iron Age coins, including two from Chessington (from a hoard of which four were found previously).

Free admission to national museums and galleries

MUCH OF THIS issue's news concerns activities in museums. Perhaps the most far-reaching was the budget announcement that Britain's main national museums and galleries will from September receive refunds of VAT when they allow free admission to the public. This will enable the Government to reconcile its commitment to universal access to these museums with the intricacies of VAT law, which prevent organisations whose activities are undertaken for no charge from reclaiming VAT on their purchases. The scheme is expected to cost £15m per year.

Africa returns to Bloomsbury

MARKING THE RETURN to Bloomsbury of the British Museum's magnificent African collections after nearly 30 years at their temporary home at the Museum of Mankind, the new Sainsbury African Galleries, which opened on 3 March, provide a substantial and permanent space for one of the finest collections of African art and artefacts in the world. In a series of changing long-term displays, the galleries will present both the riches of Africa's past and the vitality of its contemporary culture, showing work by some of Africa's foremost living artists. The collections comprise over 200,000 objects including both objects of everyday life and unique masterpieces of artistry, such as the world-renowned bronzes from the kingdom of Benin, Asante goldwork and the Torday collection of Central African sculpture, textiles and weaponry. The new galleries will be linked to the current North American and Mexican galleries and the planned new spaces for Central American, Asian, European and Pacific cultures on the north side of the Museum.

New Technology projects in Museums

TWO NEW PROJECTS have improved access to the collections of London museums through the use of internet technology. *The Victorians* project (<http://www.victorian-london.org.uk>) has created an extensive on-line educational resource focusing on aspects of the Victorian era in London including transport, health, commerce and the army. The information has been derived from existing paper-based resources within a large number of London museums, and includes downloadable worksheets and activities. The *East West Central* project (<http://www.eastwestcentral.co.uk>) has created an on-line resource bringing together the collections of three London-based museums: the London Transport Museum, the Ragged School Museum and the Grange Museum of Community History. These museums have very different collections and are each located in distinct parts of the city, but have been able to collaborate on-line to create an extraordinary richness and diversity of content.

Readers may also be interested in *Romans in Sussex* (<http://www.romansinsussex.co.uk>) and *Virtually the Ice Age* (<http://creswell-crags.org.uk/virtuallytheiceage>). All these projects are supported by the ICT Challenge Fund, managed for the DCMS by Resource: The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries.

Congratulations

The Horniman Museum has been awarded £63,500 from the DCMS Designation Challenge Fund in order to create an inventory of its ethnographic collections, to develop its website and to continue with its education outreach programme.