



Fig. 1: engraving of Stonehenge by William Stukeley (Renfrew, C. and Bahn, P. *Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice* (1996) 20)

# A history of prehistory in Greater London and beyond

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The Middle and Lower Thames valley and its tributaries have yielded a number of nationally important prehistoric sites. These include discoveries such as the Neolithic house and Late Bronze Age revetment at Runnymede Bridge;<sup>1</sup> Early and Middle Bronze Age trackways in east London;<sup>2</sup> an Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic site in Uxbridge<sup>3</sup> and, just outside Greater London, the discovery of Early Man at Swanscombe.<sup>4</sup> All these discoveries save the last have been made relatively recently, suggesting that modern archaeological practice has revealed the prehistoric past like never before. But how did prehistoric study fare before this 'golden age'?

## Early thoughts

Just as Rome had its founders Romulus and Remus, the British, particularly through the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth (writing *c.* 1130 AD),<sup>5</sup> discovered their founder to be Brutus, a prince of Trojan blood. This fictitious pedigree gave a sense of importance to the British.<sup>6</sup>

A false etymology for London was based on a mistaken reading in Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, which turned the tribe of the Trinovantes into a city named *Trinovantum*. In Geoffrey's *History* this conveniently became *Troia Nova*, or New Troy.<sup>7</sup> In this, London was not unique; many towns had a mythical past. Indeed in Totnes, where Brutus was first supposed to set foot in Britain, the authorities erected the 'Brutus Stone'.<sup>8</sup>

## The beginnings of antiquarianism

With the Renaissance these old mythical histories fell into disrepute, although as late as 1674 Brute was cited in the *Oxford Almanack* as the first king of Britain.<sup>9</sup> For the next two hundred and fifty years there would be a tradition of limited excavation and almost unlimited speculation on the origins of the Britons.

London was the centre for the intellectuals. The Royal Society was given its royal charter in 1662.<sup>10</sup> The remit of this society was incredibly

broad. John Evelyn recounts the activities of 5th October 1664, when a new harpsichord was displayed. On 23rd July 1668 'natural curiosities' recovered during construction of the fort at Sheerness were found to be shark's teeth.<sup>11</sup> This wide base of interests narrowed in the early 18th century. In 1707 the first society of antiquaries in the world was informally established at a tavern on the Strand. Its journal *Archaeologia* was published from 1770 onwards.<sup>12</sup>

In the mid 17th century, John Aubrey spent much of his time in London but his archaeological work took place predominantly in Wiltshire, famously at Stonehenge.<sup>13</sup> London served only as a residence for the earliest archaeologists. After the Great Fire of 1666, however, the history of London was briefly seen in exposed Roman ruins under the medieval ones, and *Londinium* became the focus of interest.<sup>14</sup>

### The birth of archaeology

In the early 19th century the scholar Richard Colt Hoare, expressing the prevailing mood of the time, insisted 'we speak from fact not theory. I shall not seek among the fanciful regions of

Romance an origin for our Wiltshire Barrows'.<sup>15</sup> Archaeological theory was, however, restricted by the short time scale of human existence imposed by the church. In 1650 James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh, was able to demonstrate, by studying Genesis, that the earth was formed in 4004 BC.<sup>16</sup> This meant that the entire amount of archaeological material dating to the pre-Roman period had to be squeezed into just four thousand years. This became increasingly difficult to reconcile with the growing body of evidence.

William Conyers had made one of the earliest discoveries of flint artefacts associated with animal bones at Grays Inn Lane, London, c. 1690. He believed the flints were man-made tools and the animal an elephant (though it was more likely a mammoth). John Bagford, in 1715, accepted the conclusion but suggested the elephant was part of the Claudian invasion of AD 43.<sup>17</sup> The association of human and extinct cave bear bones found in 1771 by Johann Esper in a cave in the German Jura could not be accepted, even by the excavator, as a true association.<sup>18</sup>

This state of affairs continued until the finds of flints and bones of extinct animals in gravel

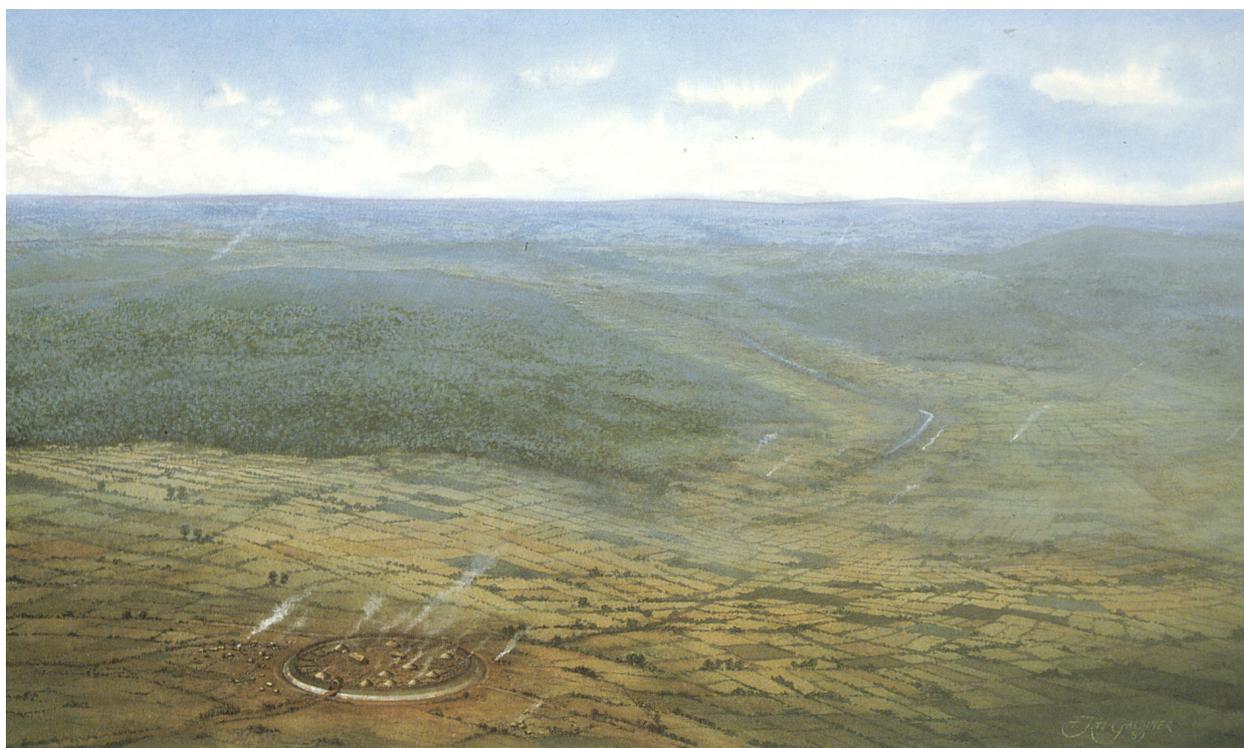


Fig. 2: reconstruction of the Queen Mary's Hospital site, Carshalton (*op. cit.* note 27, 30)

quarries in the Somme valley by Jacques de Perthes.<sup>19</sup> He was only believed after a visit by two eminent archaeologists, Joseph Prestwich and John Evans. The two came back to London and gave respective lectures to the Royal Society on 26th May and Society of Antiquaries on June 2nd 1859.<sup>20</sup> So London played a part in archaeological evolution but not in terms of its own prehistory.

## A hundred years of archaeology

Once the antiquity of man was accepted investigations into London's prehistoric past intensified. Some of this investigation was influenced by events elsewhere. For instance, in 1854 on the shores of Lake Zurich pile structures were exposed and associated with prehistoric artefacts.<sup>21</sup> Lake dwellings became *de rigueur*. In a paper to the Anthropological Society of London, Lieutenant-Colonel Augustus Lane Fox suggested that "pile dwellings" found on the bank of the River Walbrook must have been the work of pre-Roman inhabitants of London despite their association with a huge number of Roman artefacts. He could not believe that Romans would have built houses on marshy ground.<sup>22</sup>

Other early archaeologists working in London included Akerman who opened barrows in the mid 19th century; or Roberts who reported on urn cemeteries from gravel quarries in 1871.<sup>23</sup> Worthington Smith noted Palaeolithic 'living floors' at Stoke Newington in the 1880s.<sup>24</sup> There was also a great deal of collecting from gravel quarries and rivers. Some had large collections of prehistoric material, such as Thomas Layton (d. 1911). Out of forty Wandsworth-type rapiers of the Bronze Age known in Britain, nine are in the Layton collection.<sup>25</sup>

In the early 20th century observers were employed in London to watch development and recover artefacts.<sup>26</sup> They were primarily City-based and so little or no prehistory was investigated. The discovery of any prehistoric finds was accidental, such as the skull from the Swanscombe gravel pit (not strictly in London), found in three parts from 1935 to 1955.<sup>27</sup> The early 20th century in the rest of the country was characterised mainly by the great fashion for hillfort digging, for instance T. C. Hencken at Bredon Hill, Gloucestershire<sup>28</sup>, I. T. Hughes at Midsummer Hill Camp<sup>29</sup> or H. St George Gray at Cadbury Camp, Somerset<sup>30</sup>. This enthusiasm spread to London. Queen Mary's Hospital, Carshalton, was investigated in 1903-4 and again in 1937-9.<sup>31</sup> The site was initially thought to be an Early Iron Age hillfort (but see below; Fig. 2).<sup>32</sup>

## After World War Two

By 1975 Glyn Daniel was able to write of certain important prehistoric sites which had recently been dug such as the Mesolithic sites of Star Carr, North Yorkshire, Lepinski Vir in (former) Yugoslavia and Iron Age sites such as the Heuneberg in Germany or Vix in France.<sup>33</sup>

In 1947 the Roman and Medieval London Excavation Committee (RMLEC) was established with W. F. Grimes at its head.<sup>34</sup> Grimes had had some experience of working on a prehistoric site, having excavated Caesar's Camp, Heathrow, found to contain remains of a landscape shaped by human activity from the Neolithic.<sup>35</sup> Grimes' work for RMLEC did not involve anything prehistoric, however, as would be suggested from the name. The City of London was in need of redevelopment, giving archaeologists the

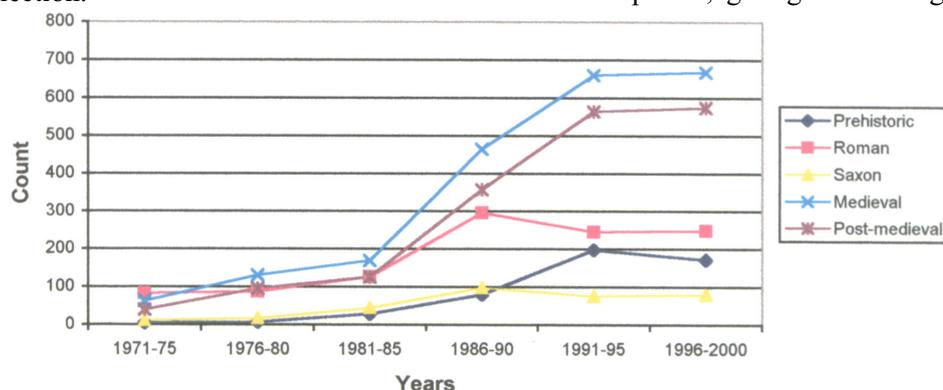


Fig. 3: number of London excavations by period from 1971

opportunity to study the Roman and medieval city once again.<sup>36</sup> The study of prehistoric London fell into the shadows.

By the 1960s it was common “to have in archaeological reports the findings of specialists who have worked on pollens or on snails, on soils or on grain impressions”.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, environmental archaeology in London was boosted when Professor Zeuner joined the team at the Institute of Archaeology as a lecturer in geochronology in the 1930s.<sup>38</sup> Up to the 1970s prehistoric sites in London, however, had no radiocarbon dates.<sup>39</sup> London was generally lagging behind the scientific developments made in prehistoric research after the war.

### The professionals

In 1973 the Department of Urban Archaeology (DUA) was to become the first professional unit in London.<sup>40</sup> This mirrored developments across Britain. Most of today’s units were originally urban based and were established in the late 1960s or early 1970s.<sup>41</sup> The emphasis was not on prehistory but rather what it had been for many years, the Roman and medieval town. In following years other units were established in Greater London by local and regional societies.<sup>42</sup> The *London Archaeologist* started publishing round-ups of excavation in Greater London in 1972. Fig. 3 shows the number of archaeological sites in London divided by period over the last thirty years (the information has been collated from the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre web-site, which includes information from the *London Archaeologist* Round-up: multi-period sites have been counted more than once). The Roman, medieval and post-

medieval cities have been consistently investigated from the 1950s. In contrast, prehistoric and Saxon London have only been studied from the late 1970s. From the late 1980s archaeological investigation in general has greatly increased. There appears to be a slowdown in archaeological investigation in the last seven or eight years perhaps reflecting the backlog of data waiting to be computerised.

The number of investigations in London with a prehistoric element, however, has never matched that of the Roman or medieval cities. This may be due to the nature of society in the two periods. It is a fair assumption that the prehistoric population was smaller than the medieval one, therefore leaving proportionately less archaeologically recoverable material. Also, the much longer period of time that has elapsed since the prehistoric period will have affected the relative survival of the remains. Conversely, prehistoric Londoners had some 450,000 years to make their mark, compared with 500 or 600 years for medieval Londoners to do the same.

One of the major advances in prehistory in the last thirty years was the backdating of so-called Deverel-Rimbury pottery from the Early Iron Age to Late Bronze Age. Queen Mary’s Hospital was reassessed and backdated but there were few sites to fill this new period, until Runnymede Bridge and Petters Sports Field were discovered.<sup>43</sup> London, or sites just outside it, has come to the fore in terms of Late Bronze Age archaeology.

### After PPG16

PPG16 (Planning Policy Guidance note 16), published in November 1990,<sup>44</sup> and other developer-funding solutions, have had a

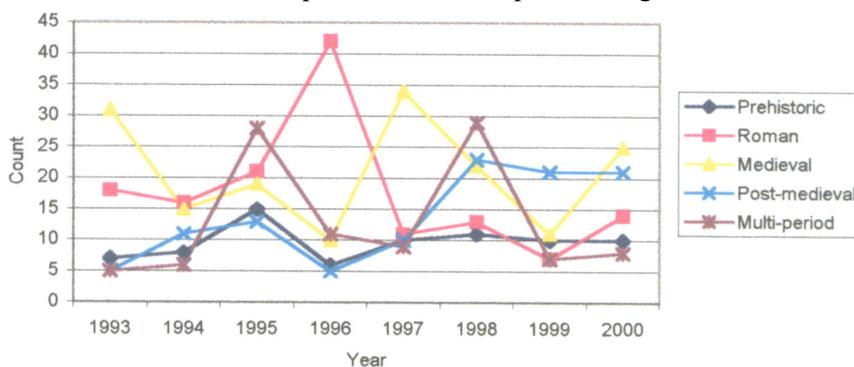


Fig. 4: number of publications by period in *London Archaeologist* bibliography

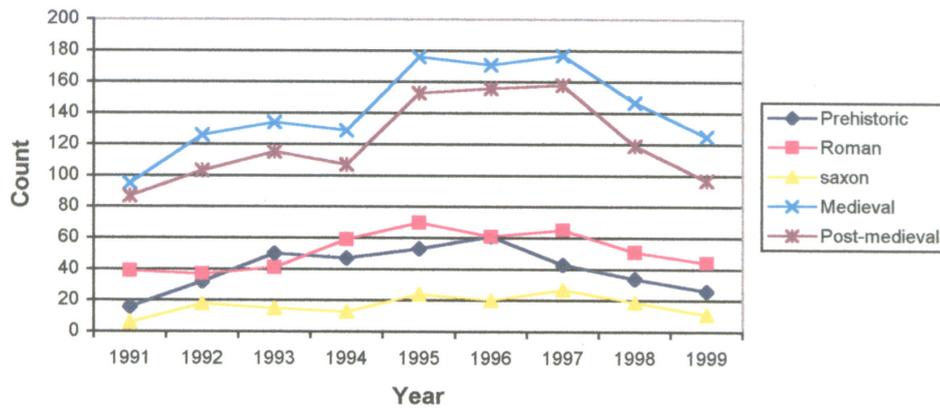


Fig. 5: number of London excavations by period since 1991

significant affect on London’s archaeology. A study focussing on the years 1992 and 1993 found that, in terms of the study of the prehistoric past, the Bronze Age in London had benefited most from government guidance.<sup>45</sup> Fig. 4 charts the publications by subject over the last decade since PPG16, and it is clear that medieval archaeology still makes it to publication more often than prehistoric activity.

The level of publication of prehistoric archaeology has been consistently low, whereas in the mid-1990s that of both medieval and Roman archaeological publication peaked. The latter part of the decade has seen an increase in post-medieval publication, mirroring the increase in its excavation in the late 1980s (Figs 3, 4 and 5). Fig. 5 shows in more detail the trends in excavation over the last decade (again collated



Fig. 6: map of Bronze Age sites investigated before 1992 (from LAARC web-site)



Fig. 7: map of Bronze Age sites investigated since 1992 (from LAARC web-site)

from the LAARC web-site). The mid-1990s were a particularly busy time for London's archaeologists. The number of excavations in the last couple of years of the 1990s is probably an underestimate.

One of the great successes of PPG16 has been the investigation of zones of differing drift geology.<sup>46</sup> The Thames floodplain has been a particularly rewarding area (Figs 6, 7).<sup>47</sup> The discoveries of a Bronze Age bridge at Vauxhall<sup>48</sup> and ard-marks under alluvium at Lafone Street in Southwark<sup>49</sup> are two examples.

But many sites are still found by accident when searching for other features. The Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic site at Three Ways Wharf, Uxbridge was discovered while looking for a Tudor arch.<sup>50</sup> The ring-ditch at Fennings Wharf was discovered very close to the footings of the medieval London Bridge, whose discovery had been the primary objective.<sup>51</sup> This accidental

discovery of prehistoric features must be due largely to the inefficiency of traditional archaeological reconnaissance techniques in an urban setting. Prehistoric research finally took advantage of scientific advances in the 1990s. Radiocarbon dates supporting typological sequences are also used with greater frequency.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

The prehistory of Greater London is now recognised and much research is taking place, partly encouraged by the MA in the Archaeology of London at the Institute of Archaeology. For many years this was not the case thanks to the 'urban imperative'<sup>53</sup> whereby research was geared towards finding a pre-Roman antecedent of London. Most early discoveries in prehistory occurred in places far removed from the City. The first half of the 20th century, however, saw a step in the right direction for prehistory in London, but

this was delayed by the Second World War and the investigation of the Roman and medieval city. It was not until the birth of professional units and then the wide implementation of developer-funding in archaeology that the rich prehistory of

London started to come to light. The redisplayed prehistory gallery at the Museum of London, which opened in October 2002, reflects the great advances made in prehistoric research in London over the past few decades.

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8. J. S. P. Tatlock *The Legendary History of Britain* (1950) 52.
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15. *Op. cit.* note 13, 30.
16. *Op. cit.* note 13, 27.
17. *Op. cit.* note 13, 26.
18. *Op. cit.* note 9, 51.
19. *Op. cit.* note 13, 59; R. Munro *Prehistoric Britain* (1913) 31.
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50. J. Cotton *pers. comm.*
51. J. Sidell *pers. comm.*
52. *Op. cit.* note 36, 38.
53. J. Cotton, *pers. comm.*

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## Excavations and post-excavation work

**London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre**, Mortimer Wheeler House, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7EE. Contact Archive Manager, John Shepherd (020 7566 9317).

**Croydon & District**, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collections of pottery fabrics, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Jim Davison, 28 Blenheim Park Road, South Croydon, CR2 6BB.

**Borough of Greenwich**. Cataloguing of excavated and other archaeological material, the majority from sites within the Borough. Contact Greenwich Heritage Centre, Building 41, Royal Arsenal, Woolwich, SE18 6SP (020 8854 2452).

**Hammersmith & Fulham**, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from the Borough. Tuesdays, 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. At Fulham Palace, Bishops's Avenue,

Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 85 Rannoch Road, W6 9SX (020 7385 3723).

**Kingston**, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society (KUTAS). Processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Thursday (10 a.m.) at the North Kingston Centre, Richmond Road, Kingston upon Thames KT2 5PE. Enquiries 020 8546 5386.

**Surrey**, by Surrey County Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Rob Poulton, Archaeological Unit Manager, Surrey History Centre, 130 Goldsworth Road, Woking GU21 1ND (01483 594 634).

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