

Take two archaeologists...

London Archaeologist talks to Simon Blatherwick and Nigel Wilson

*Twenty seven years ago, **Simon Blatherwick** - left - picked up his first trowel on an amateur dig in Ashdown Forest. In between selling books and booze, fieldwork continued on the UK circuit and in the Sudan until after university, when he had to decide between a contract with Bradford University in the Shetlands and one with the DGLA in London on Bermondsey Abbey. London won, and he moved through the ranks of what became MoLAS, supervising digs such as Platform Wharf, and co-directing the Rose Theatre excavations. He took the opportunity of voluntary redundancy to set up on his own in 1997, eventually moving into consultancy, first with Gifford and now RPS.*

*If it hadn't been for careers advisers pointing him towards more lucrative professions, **Nigel Wilson** - right - might have become an archaeologist decades ago. Instead he spent 20 years at Thames TV, working in the drama department on programmes such as *The Bill*, before he took up his interest seriously. His route in was through joining local archaeological societies and Plateau, an amateur group concentrating on the Palaeolithic, and a certificate course in field archaeology at Birkbeck. After three training digs and some short stints with professional units in around London, he was offered a job as a site assistant with MoLAS in June 2006.*

You've changed roles in archaeology: was it a good move?

SB: It was, yes, for quite a lot of reasons. The best is the capability to get involved at an early stage and influence how the development will proceed. I sometimes miss the field side, but there are plenty of aspects I don't miss at all.

NW: Of course. It's what I always wanted to do, and do professionally. I took a long round about route, but I got the training I needed, especially on the Birkbeck digs – which I see as the gold standard of professional practice – and persistence paid off. Just shows that it's possible, even for someone of mature years and miscellaneous experience.



What's your favourite museum?

SB: I could think of six, but bearing in mind I usually go with my kids, location and setting can be as important as the collections. So I'd go for the National Maritime Museum, because we can play football in the park, wander over to the Cutty Sark, get something to eat, as well as exploring a fantastic museum.

NW: It has to be the Museum of London. Archaeology is about human activity, and I always find MoL exhibits are so evocative of that, from the Battersea Shield to the fantastic recreation of the Roman water lifting mechanism from the Gresham Street dig.

When's the last time you got excited about archaeology?

SB: The most exciting time has to be the Rose: we were uncovering a type of site that had never been found before and on top of the archaeology, we had all the politics and cabaret that went with it. More recently, though, from consultancy, it would be the gradual realisation that what we were working on in Colchester was the first Roman circus found in Britain. They're similar in that they're completely new discoveries, with huge impact nationally.

NW: The last time was actually the first time I turned up something significant on a dig – it was a Roman ring on a temple site near Baldock in Herts. I'd never found jewellery before and it struck me as a very personal link to the past.

Is archaeology a profession, a vocation or a psychological condition?

SB: All three. For me it started off as a psychological condition, became a vocation and moved on to be a profession. I think everyone goes through a multiplicity of feelings about the work, depending on where you are and what you're doing.

NW: It's certainly a profession, but there has to be a vocational element for anyone taking it up because it's



so poorly paid. No one becomes an archaeologist for the money. My brief experience has confirmed that it's definitely a psychological condition for some people though. You get some strange and obsessive characters around archaeological sites...

Is there room for the amateur in archaeology these days?

SB: Definitely. The constraints of commercial archaeology may not allow much involvement on site, but there's certainly room in research led projects. The commercial units just don't have the time to undertake huge areas of research, and amateurs could make a major contribution to those. I'm working on a project in Nottingham at the moment where a local group is involved with some preliminary fieldwalking and metal detecting. We'll see how that might progress...

NW: I'd like to say yes, having come from that route myself, but I'm not sure there is. Professionals don't seem to care for amateur involvement because contract archaeology is so competitive. Local societies can be useful to the profession when they're good, like Richmond Archaeological Society for example, who do valuable work. It's intensely frustrating when even the most experienced volunteer isn't able to get involved in professional digs.

What is the biggest issue affecting your day to day work?

SB: Where the next job is coming from. The inflow and turnover of work is a constant issue for all the consultants and commercial units.

NW: Rates of pay. The saddest thing about it is that it leads to a lot of resentment in the ranks, especially amongst the new grads who feel like they'll never be able to afford to do what they've trained so long for and what they've always wanted to do. I've joined the IFA, but whether they'll ever be able to do

anything about it is a big question.

What's your favourite book on London?

SB: I like the non chronological approach of Peter Ackroyd in *London, The biography*, the idea of London as a multi-layered city with issues – noise and light for example – interleaving and affecting other aspects of life. It helped me to imagine what a day at the Rose might have been like.

NW: *London under London*. I've always been curiously fascinated by that aspect of archaeology - underground passages and tunnels and all the things going on unnoticed beneath our feet. And it ties in with my lifelong interest in Egyptology somehow too.

What archaeological mystery would you like to see solved in London?

SB: What was happening at the Rose between 1587 when it was built and 1592, when we next get some documentary evidence. It's a quite specific mystery that could be solved by excavation or discovery of further Philip Henslowe sources, and would give us a window on an interesting time when the south bank was seeing a shift from animal baiting to playhouses.

NW: What is dark earth perhaps? Or will we ever find a prehistoric settlement site?

Who should determine the future for London's archaeology?

SB: Not any one person – there are too many interested parties for anyone to have the breadth of knowledge or empathy needed. Some people may feel excluded by the status quo, but it works, after a fashion. It all comes back to the question of whose heritage is it anyway?

NW: It should be in the hands of professional archaeologists in my view. But whoever it is it absolutely should not be some contemptible government minister like David Lammy, who is so ignorant of the field that he can look at the looters and pillagers who call themselves metal detectors and see them as guardians of our national heritage.

If you were the king of archaeology for a day, what would you do?

SB: Improve wages and salaries – permanently. I'd like to see conditions reflect the levels in the development and construction process. Both fields are labour intensive, and there's no excuse for archaeologists not having proper, decent pay and conditions.

NW: I'd find a way of raising rates of pay on to a respectable living wage. People who love what they do shouldn't be penalised for it.

IN CONTEXT profiles two people involved in London's archaeology and heritage by posing both of them ten questions. Who should we interrogate and what should we ask? You're welcome to contribute ideas for either interviewees or topics by contacting the features editor: becky.wallower@dia1.pipex.com.