

In or out...

London Archaeologist asks Richard Humphrey and Nick Truckle to compare working in London with their experience elsewhere

Richard Humphrey has packed a fair bit of variety into a still young career. With a BSc in Archaeology from Bournemouth in 2001 he found few jobs around, so decided to go on to do an MSc in Forensic Archaeology. Having started his career with Oxford Archaeology, he has now worked his way up to a supervisor's position with Pre-Construct Archaeology. Currently working on a hospital site in Harold Wood, he spent five months in Gosport, Hampshire earlier this year where he excavated several phases of a brewery established in the 18th century to supply sailors with beer, and later rum.

Archaeology has featured in **Nick Truckle's** life since he was eight, when his father, a keen member of the Salisbury Museum Archaeological Research Group, took him along to rescue digs in advance of early 1970s development. Having then excavated a Roman villa site at Corfe Castle every summer until he was 18, a degree at Winchester seemed a natural progression. From his first job with the Winchester unit in 1987, he moved to London where he joined the DGLA / DUA and later the Passmore Edwards Museum. In 1998 he took up a position with English Heritage as an archaeology advisor for the Greater London Archaeology Advisory Service covering East London. In a move he describes as "not quite gamekeeper turned poacher" he returned to Salisbury in 2004 to work for Wessex Archaeology as a project manager.

What's the biggest difference between working in London and working elsewhere in the UK, and which do you prefer?

RH: The density of occupation is the biggest factor. Where in London we get up to five metres of occupation layers, elsewhere it's common to find just one phase over natural – so archaeologists in London understand deep strat sites. As far as working conditions go, there's always more pressure to complete the archaeology as fast as possible in London because prices of land, labour and investment are so much higher. That makes it more stressful, I suppose, but I definitely prefer working in London. The complexity makes for more interesting work.

NT: In purely personal terms, London has a very sociable archaeological scene, where you tend to get to know everyone and what's going on over a pint. Outside London staff are more spread out, they often have to drive, so there's less opportunity to get together informally. In terms of the archaeology, London has a distinct story to tell: it's easy to link 2000 years of history together, and it's a genuine thrill to be part of the discovery of such a historic and important place. Having said that, I prefer working outside London now. It's great to get a picture of different aspects – like prehistory – and to be involved with a bigger range of sites.

What did you do on your holidays?

RH: Shot people. I'm a semi professional paintball player on the



European circuit so I've been to France, Germany and Belgium so far this year.

NT: Not archaeology any more – though I did in the early days. Having said that, we went to Pompeii and Herculaneum this year which was great, despite my wife suffering a bit from ruin fatigue.

If you could open anywhere in London for excavation, where would you put the trenches?

RH: I'm a bit of a Romanist at heart, so would probably go for the industrial end of the Walbrook – where we have Drapers Gardens at the moment – where the scale of the buildings being erected means there's a once in a lifetime chance to get at the archaeology. And that would disrupt people in suits, which I always think is a good thing.

NT: Around Shadwell – I was involved in the Babe Ruth Roman bathhouse dig and there's definitely something very interesting happening around there. I'd love to know if it was a later Roman port or some other isolated complex.

PPG 16: cure or curse?

RH: Compared to the situation before it has to be a good thing. I'd hate to think what would have been lost without it, and we probably wouldn't be in work. But the competitive tendering issue really needs sorting out. There must be some way of the units competing without having to bid so low that corners inevitably get cut. Common sense says that with the amount of work



around at the moment we could put in higher prices.

NT: As an enforcer for EH for six years I'd have to say it's a good thing. Archaeological investigation isn't down to the developer's whim any more, and publication rates have certainly improved. Where it falls down is in the site specific focus. Reports are inevitably insular and without funding from external sources like the Aggregates Levy there's little chance for synthesis. And there's no doubt that competitive tendering does keep wages low. But it's not inherently a bad system – we just need to make the best of it.

What is the best thing about working in London? And the worst?

RH: The best thing is being able to have a fixed base and to go home every night to your own bed. Also there's a noticeable difference in the emphasis on health and safety in London, which is reassuring when you're working in a pressured environment or, say, on contaminated sites. The worst thing is the transport – getting on a tube packed with suits when you're covered with mud always raises an eye. I've taken to riding a bike to avoid the crush and feel so much better.

NT: The best thing is that combination of the social side and fantastic archaeology. Politics is probably the worst – trying to persuade politicians that archaeology has something to offer, and a place in shaping new developments like Thames Gateway. I remember hearing some very worrying

statements from politicians disregarding London's history and buildings. Sure, it's not just London, but the major decision makers are there.

Which is more useful, three years at university or three years on site?

RH: On site absolutely. University courses should take on more fieldwork. They have to be realistic about what careers people will be going into. I was lucky at Bournemouth because the course was based on pursuing a career in field archaeology but it's not the case everywhere. With a skills shortage up and down the country we're getting diggers at the moment with hardly any experience going into deep strat sites in the City.

NT: I'd have to say university as we rarely employ anyone without a degree here. It does give you a framework and the tools – like writing skills – to move through the profession. Excavation techniques can be taught on the job to bright people, and most universities these days have some training in the field. It would be good if universities gave students a more realistic view of the work though – it's not like a summer training dig, and you won't always be in a trench.

Will the profession grow or decline over the next ten years?

RH: Grow I guess? The Olympics will help growth. And if people become aware of the nationwide shortage of skills, perhaps more will go into archaeology.

NT: At the moment we've never been busier, and I can see that carrying on. The government priorities for house building on brown field sites are going to open up lots of industrial areas. I would hope we would get more grown up too, be taken more seriously as a profession and paid accordingly.

Does London get too much of the archaeology money and attention?

RH: No not at all. You have to put it in perspective. History and archaeology can be a great help with the amount of tourism London gets. With a site in the middle of nowhere, no matter how good, fewer people will have a chance to look at it. We have a great chance to let people know what is under their feet in London. We could do better but we

can make a pretty good job of involving the local community on sites like Bermondsey Abbey, for instance.

NT: No, it's just the way the market works: it's all about margins and land values. London may have more money, but it's a lower percentage of the development budget. And the media will always be London-centric because they're mostly based there.

What's the next big thing in archaeology?

RH: Designer trowels maybe? Consultancy could well be a growth area, in the sense that developers will be looking for ways of getting away with less digging to get their consents, and on-the-ball consulting can steer them through the process. Not that that would be a good thing, but good consultants can always make the case that spending a bit more money on archaeology can have benefits for the development. It's not just PR – a decent developer can tie the development into what has gone before.

NT: The more recent sites, and also industrial archaeology I think. The days of machining off down to medieval are gone, and there's a greater understanding now that buildings are archaeology too.

The BBC has announced a new TV series with the aim of making archaeology "sexy, accessible and exciting." Does the profession need the likes of *Bone Kickers*?

RH: Aren't we already? I always thought *Time Team* did quite a good job of grabbing the imagination, and it reached people as far as Australia. *Meet the Ancestors* made the archaeology approachable by focusing on a single person. TV archaeology works best when it makes that connection to the individual of the past.

NT: I thought it already was! The title sounds dreadful, but I'm all for programmes that publicise archaeology. We can moan about the unrealistic three day format of *Time Team*, but archaeology has never been so popular and so visible. If *Bone Kickers* is based on archaeological characters, can they ever be as odd as the ones you'd find in any unit in the country?

... ~ Interviews by Becky Wallower