



Fig. 1: composite photo of the London before London Gallery at the Museum of London (photo: Museum of London)

London before London: piecing together London's Palaeolithic past

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'Our knowledge of the primeval or Palaeolithic savage and his mode of life is at present little better than a shadow.'

Worthington George Smith, *Man, the Primeval Savage* (1894) 2.

Introduction

There has never been a more appropriate time in which to take an interest in our environment's long-term evolution. With everyone questioning the possible impact of future climate change, there is unprecedented exposure of Pleistocene (Ice Age) climate change in the public domain. In addition, high-profile research focussing on the earliest prehistory of Britain, such as the Boxgrove Project, the Southern and English Rivers Palaeolithic

Surveys, and the Ancient Human Occupation of Britain project (AHOB I and II), have strengthened our knowledge of Pleistocene chronology and the environments that early humans occupied, as well as pushing back the earliest known evidence for human presence in Britain to c. 700,000 years BP.¹ However, the spotlight of interest has not been turned on London in recent years (as it has in neighbouring areas such as the Lower Thames valley), mainly because the extensive mechanised excavation and development in the city have hindered new research opportunities. Yet, London experienced prosperous times in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries in terms of Palaeolithic research, beginning with the discovery of a handaxe near Grays Inn Road in

1679. Some of the fossils and lithic artefacts discovered at this time are on display at the Museum of London in the *London Before London* gallery (Fig. 1) and smaller displays are scattered elsewhere in the capital, but the majority of the finds are held in public and private collections and are not given the opportunity to reveal their fascinating story. The result is a lack of public knowledge in London's Pleistocene and Palaeolithic history, and frequently a need for greater understanding within the archaeological community, for whom the pre-Holocene period remains largely obscure.

In an attempt to integrate recent advances in our understanding of Pleistocene chronology with the under-evaluated fossil and lithic record from

PALAEOLITHIC LONDON



Fig. 2: assemblage of flints from London

central London and its boroughs, a collaborative PhD research project was devised between the Department of Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London and the Early London History Department at the Museum of London. The studentship is part of the Landscape and Environment Research Programme funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The project will use state-of-the-art chronological and palaeo-environmental research and mapping tools such as GIS, as well as make new observations on the existing artefacts and fossils in order to piece together a more robust Pleistocene framework for the capital.

The Research Project

One of the major difficulties from the outset is that many of the specimens collected before the early 20th century lack details of their location or geological provenance. As Lewis clearly noted, of the Palaeolithic artefacts listed on the Greater London Sites and Monuments Record, only 193 of a total 711 entries have a grid reference precise to half a kilometre.² It was common for items to be considered primarily as curiosities and additions to enhance the collector's status, as well as something that could be traded by its finder (usually a quarry workman). Rarely would the wider significance of the object be considered and so (with a

few notable exceptions) it was not necessarily important for collectors to record the stratigraphical context of the item. Additionally, commercial gravel extraction, which provided many of the opportunities for collection of fossils and artefacts, was undertaken in a haphazard fashion, and construction in the capital was at a peak, both contributing to the poor recording of finds. The development of London consequently made the sediments unavailable for future investigations and the Middle Thames stretch of the river became something of a 'black hole' of knowledge when compared to the

terraces of the Upper and Lower Thames.³

In order to overcome these issues, the project will combine detailed information gathered from each fossil or lithic artefact with the current understanding of the Pleistocene of south-east England. Aspects such as condition, degree of abrasion, tool type and industry as well as the presence of particular mammal species in an assemblage are all being used to infer site formation processes, age and past environments. Collections held in locations all over London are being re-evaluated including those at the Museum of London, Natural History Museum and British Museum, as well as local museum collections in Greater London. The project therefore aims to take an integrated approach to researching this distant part of London's history, encompassing vertebrate palaeontology, archaeology, sedimentology, terrace stratigraphy, geochronology and biological proxy information such as that from pollen, molluscs or beetles.

There are many well-known sites within London that have yielded interesting assemblages of specimens. One of the most famous areas of London to visitors today is Trafalgar Square. In the 1950s, numerous mammalian fossils were unearthed from foundation work in Trafalgar Square,



Fig. 3: mammoth skull from Ilford. Fossil in the Natural History Museum (photo: Natural History Museum)

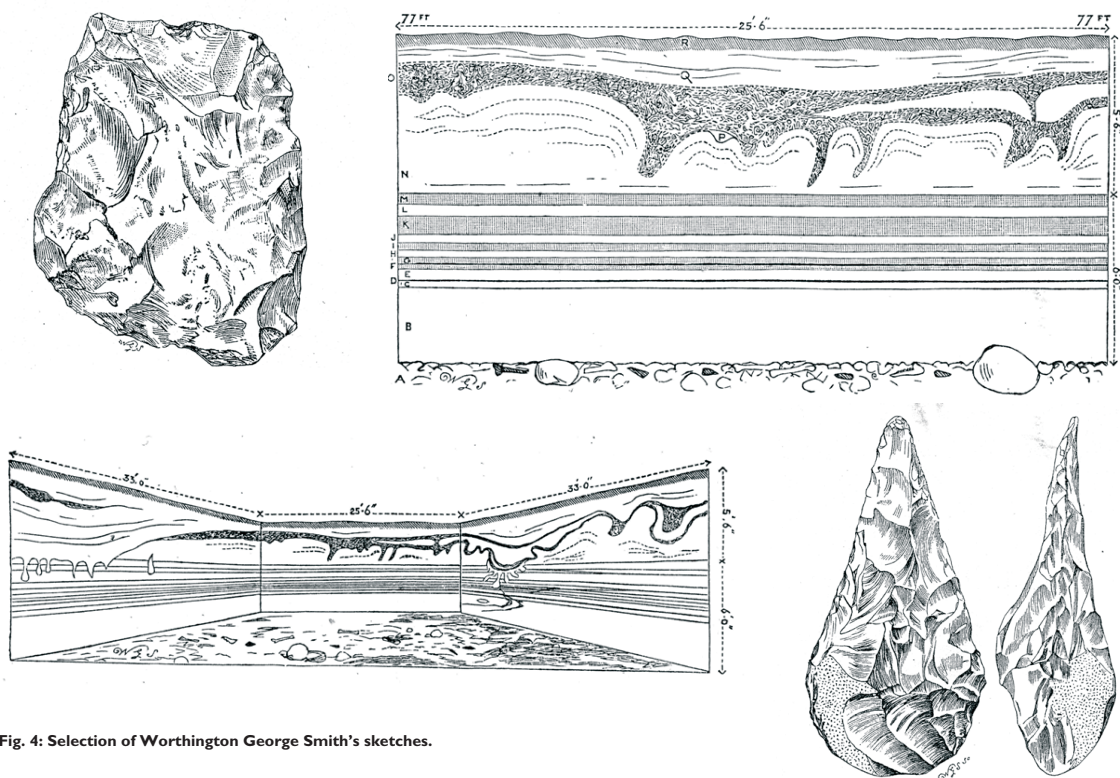


Fig. 4: Selection of Worthington George Smith's sketches.

Pall Mall, Lower Regent Street and Cockspur Street. These are the remains of hippopotami, lions, hyaenas, straight-tusked elephants, aurochs and bison, which patrolled the area approximately 125,000 years ago. It is also an unusual interglacial as it seems that humans

were completely absent from Britain. Despite the appeal and curiosity of the finds, only a small number of publications have discussed these sites.⁴ This highlights the need to maximise our understanding of existing material in an attempt to improve our

knowledge of London's Pleistocene history, especially as central London offers less potential for new excavations compared to less developed areas.

However it is not just central London that offers us intriguing finds. West London sites such as Acton and Yiewsley were home to some of the biggest Palaeolithic flint collections in London, yielding a prolific number of flint artefacts between them, including distinctive Levallois material produced by the earliest Neanderthals around 250,000 years ago. The old brickfields in Ilford yielded a fully intact skeleton of a steppe mammoth (Fig. 3), together with complete skulls of extinct narrow-nosed rhinoceros and aurochs, finds that even today arouse fascination over how they were discovered. Despite the numerous locations all over the capital that help to shape our understanding of the Palaeolithic in London, it is still a little understood period in our past. There remain misunderstandings between planners, developers and archaeologists about the nature and needs of the Palaeolithic, reducing the opportunity to evaluate surviving deposits. This has contributed to the current preparation of a new Research



Fig. 5: photograph of mammoth bone and flint tool from Stoke Newington by Worthington George Smith (as displayed in his sketch book) c. 1880. Handaxe now held at the British Museum.

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PALAEOLITHIC LONDON

Framework for the British Palaeolithic (funded by English Heritage and Natural England through the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund, and with the participation of the Prehistoric Society and the Quaternary Research Association), which aims to significantly influence planning policy and preserve surviving Palaeolithic/Pleistocene resources. The need for a new research framework clearly illustrates how little understood the Palaeolithic period in Britain is.

The Collectors

A further element of the project is to document the input of antiquarians into the collections. Fortunately, a few notable Palaeolithic collectors kept unusually detailed records of their finds compared to others of the era, documents that today provide an invaluable and unique insight into the deposits and their contents. Worthington George Smith, who was renowned for collecting stone tools in north London and Bedfordshire during the 19th century, recorded all his specimens in a catalogue, drew detailed sketches of specimens and sites (Fig. 4) and even in some instances took photographs (Fig. 5). John Allen Brown, who collected in west London, was also celebrated for his detailed sketches and photographs of the gravel pits he visited.

Sir Antonio Brady (Fig. 6) is a relatively unknown collector of Pleistocene mammalian fossils from Stratford, yet he collected in the region of 900 specimens from brickpits in Ilford, contributing the majority of all finds now known from the area. These included the huge 'Ilford Mammoth' skull which has tusks 2.64 m long and is on display in the Natural History Museum (Fig. 3).

Researching the early collectors' interests in the Palaeolithic and how

they went about their research is important because at the same time as Palaeolithic material was being discovered in London, antiquarians elsewhere were proposing radical new ideas concerning the antiquity of the human race. John Frere innovatively proposed in 1797 that flint artefacts found at Hoxne, Suffolk, were the tools of people from a very 'remote period indeed'. This went against contemporary thought (then very much driven by religious doctrine), yet over the next century the extent of our antiquity was gradually acknowledged with notable contemporaries raising the profile of evolutionary change, such as Charles Darwin's 1859 *On The Origin of Species*. This marked the start of a very influential and prolific period for the Palaeolithic collectors in London.

Summary

Re-evaluating the existing discoveries from London's Palaeolithic deposits is one of the principal ways we can learn more about London's prehistory. This project aims to contribute towards our knowledge and understanding of Pleistocene London and ultimately to help raise the profile of the intriguing Palaeolithic within the public and archaeological community. With high-profile research taking place in neighbouring areas, coupled with the current interest in past climate change, there has not been a more opportune time to highlight the relevance of Palaeolithic and Pleistocene research in terms of exploring human and animal adaptations to long-term environmental change and offering an extended perspective on our current climate concerns. The attention that neighbouring areas have received in recent years should also be directed at the capital given the abundance of material it has already offered. Where better to publicise the little known



Fig. 6: photograph of Sir Antonio Brady.
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Palaeolithic era to a much wider audience than our capital?

Any suggestions of archival material or collections that may be of interest to this project will be appreciated. Contact Caroline Juby, Geography Department, Royal Holloway University of London, Egham Hill, Egham, Surrey, TW20 0EX. C.Juby@rhul.ac.uk.

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