Fig. 1: location of Prescot Street site and previous archaeological excavations nearby. Prescot Street is the east–west street to the south of the site.

Watching the past unfold before your eyes

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This article presents the interim results of an excavation currently being undertaken by L – P : Archaeology at a site on Prescot Street, Aldgate, East London. Typically, archaeologists would wait until a site is completed before publishing an article about their work, but there is a very good reason why we wanted to publish an interim report in *London Archaeologist* at this stage, which is to encourage readers to get online and follow the progress of the dig *via* our website.[1] The website acts as a place were we can informally publish a whole range of material about the site as it is being excavated. The site

is archaeologically significant because it is a large area (*c.* 3000 sq m) close to the centre of London's Eastern Roman cemetery. The aim of this article is to introduce the site and our outreach activities, and to give you a taster of the information that you will find on the project website.

Interim summary of the archaeology
The site at Prescot Street lies close to the centre of what is known as the Eastern Roman cemetery, a roadside cemetery situated in Aldgate, near to the City of London (Fig. 1). The site lies around 500 m to the east of the Roman

city wall. The earliest recorded activity on site dates from the Roman period, and as is typical of the archaeological record in central London, there is little evidence of prehistoric activity.

The site is one of the last remaining unexcavated large areas of the cemetery and the archaeology it contains is invaluable for interpretation of the cemetery site as a whole. L – P : Archaeology carried out an evaluation in 2006[2] which uncovered two inhumations from the Roman period, and evidence for late medieval activity and post-medieval structures. Evidence from this evaluation, and other sites and

finds in the vicinity, gave a strong indication of the extent and quality of archaeology that we are now finding during the excavations.

Roman

The excavated evidence so far reveals that the initial Roman activity was quarrying for the brickearth, sands and gravels that form the underlying natural deposits of the site area. These would have been used for construction purposes for roads and foundations. We have recorded quarry pits provisionally dated to this period, with one very large pit indicating that quarrying was carried out on an industrial scale.

After the quarrying, the site was used as a cemetery for cremations and inhumations (Fig. 2). The presence of redeposited human and animal bone in other features indicates the reworking of the soil in the area of the cemetery over time. We have recorded a number of burials *in situ*, although many have been truncated by later activity, notably

quarrying in the late medieval period, and Georgian and Victorian construction. It is possible that structures were also present on the site during this period, as we are currently finding structural remains associated with metalled surfaces.

Ditches found on the site followed the typical cemetery alignment and almost certainly form part of the layout of the cemetery. They will inevitably prove important for understanding how the cemetery changed over time.

Medieval

Documentary sources indicate that the site lay in fields belonging to the Abbey of St Clare during the medieval period. However, the excavated evidence shows that the medieval activity on the site has a more industrial and urban character than would be expected from fields in purely agricultural use. As an example, a large late medieval quarry pit was backfilled with material that included large amounts of cobblers'

waste, including shoes and leather off-cuts (Fig. 3). There appear to have been successive dumpings, showing that the site was a known location for the deposition of discarded processing material.

Mid and late post-medieval

A distinct soil horizon dating from the post-medieval period and running across most of the site area, seals the majority of earlier features. It is a silty brown soil with relatively few inclusions. The most likely explanation of this soil is that it was a cultivated deposit. This corresponds with the cartographic evidence which shows the site in fields in the late 17th century.

These soils have been truncated by a series of soakaways and drainage features that relate to the first phase of development of the site, which occurred in the 18th century, and involved the construction of Prescot Street itself.

Fig. 2: Roman burial with possible placed stones on knees

Fig. 3: leather shoes recovered from late medieval pit

During the 19th century the density of housing is greatly increased. This phase has been characterised by the construction of the basemented buildings that lined the northern and southern frontages of the site.

The Digital Project

From the earliest planning stages we wanted to use this project as a test-bed for ideas which we feel might have the potential to change the way archaeology is done, even if only in a small way. The project's website is a great example of several of the things we are doing.

The digital project is underpinned by our project-wide commitment to the creation of digital data on site. This includes the written descriptions, interpretations, photographs and plan data (Fig, 4). The plan data is published directly from our site GIS as the data is created. As soon as the primary archive records are checked by our field officer,

the digitisation process begins, meaning that there is a delay of only a week or so between a context's excavation and its entry onto the system. From a field archaeology perspective this is an extremely efficient way to work, in that records are checked and scrutinised at the earliest possible stage, and errors can be eliminated while contexts are still fresh in the excavator's minds. The data is more secure as there is always a digital backup of everything. We can use the GIS on site as a tool for identifying patterns of features and structures as we dig, and this can be fed back into the excavation strategy. The use of such a method on site during the dig is in itself quite radical, but L – P.'s Archaeological Recording Kit (ARK) means that this data is published live to the web at the same time. The availability of this data as an online resource created the need for most of the other sections of the website, which provide a means to read and understand this very 'fine grained' data.

As we start building the contexts up into their sub-groups, groups and phases, the data will start to crystallise into larger units to which we can attach interpretations. The interpretation at this level we have termed 'middle level narrative', by which we mean a level of interpretation between the raw site data and the formal publication text. In many cases this middle level is only represented by the grey literature report. While the group narratives will be formed from an intensive analysis of the stratigraphic records, we have also created a journal section of the website that gives us the opportunity to discuss the archaeology as it is dug.

The idea of the journal was to give voice to those daily discussions that we as archaeologists have amongst ourselves but rarely write down. In some way this gives us an opportunity to hark back to the 'field notebook', while keeping the organisational power of the single-context system. We appreciate that this type of approach

has been done by other projects, notably at Çatalhöyük,[3] but we feel that it has practical benefits for field archaeologists as well as in terms of publication. One of the constant complaints of field archaeologists (aside from terrible pay) is that they have become excavating machines without a voice in the interpretation of the site. Our aim here is to provide narrative written by the creators of the data that links directly to the records themselves. The journal is not optional, and at least one entry is required to be made every day, it forms an essential part of the creation of the collective narrative. It might not always be the finished or official interpretation, but it is valuable in and of itself.

We are also undertaking a videography project, which offers a further very seductive and important medium for demonstrating what we do. The aim is partly to create an archive of our work in progress, but is also to show something of life on site, created by the archaeologists themselves. Our filmmaker Anies Hassan (Fig. 5) has tried to keep the editing as honest as possible and avoid too many of the 'tricks' of TV. The videos also pick out themes and processes from our site practice with a view to demystifying and explaining them to the wider public. The videos form part of our *Galleries* section which also allows us to pull in media from around the web. The excavators take digital pictures of the site, of their finds, of each other and

of things they find relevant, and these are all included into the overall narrative. More formal archaeological photography also has its place within the system following our view that we can accommodate a wide variety of different voices.

The *The Site* section gives us space to provide more structured 'jumping off' points for users who are new to archaeology. This section is particularly pertinent to the discussion about how far the 'expert voice' prevents people from forming their own opinions. Readers new to archaeology need this kind of general chronological information even to begin understanding how the site can be fitted together. On the plus side, this section gives us scope to add in those sources that never find a place in modern archaeological literature such as folklore, antiquarian observations and oral history. The *Learning* section provides a really similar role but this time aimed at kids. In this way we can try to engage the widest possible audience.

We recognise that our website does not replace the formal peer-reviewed publication which will follow the final stages of post-excavation analysis, perhaps in two or three years, but we do think that the other media we produce ought to have this level of recognition as a valid part of the project. This approach offers us a range of benefits, not least of which are the commercial benefits in terms of

improved efficiency and more effective use of labour that can be achieved. The online publication gives a richness in terms of the range of different types of media and number of contributors that can be included. The online element of the project also provides a live resource for the outreach or public archaeology element of our work.

Outreach

Developer-funded archaeology has effectively curtailed public involvement in the majority of archaeological excavations that take place in England today. Professionalisation of the sector has narrowed the opportunities for interested 'amateurs' to become actively involved with hands-on archaeology. Yet the public appetite for the past is, if anything, increasing. Visiting historic attractions is the most popular cultural activity in the UK, and popular TV such as *Time Team* and *Bonekickers* regularly pull in viewer figures in the millions. In London, community archaeology projects, local archaeology and history societies and Young Archaeologist Clubs play an active role in maintaining some public involvement in the discipline, through their own projects and post-excavation research. The work undertaken by these voluntary bodies is an important aspect of maintaining ordinary Londoners' links with their local heritage and sense of place and space.

Involvement with aspects of the past, including local history and archaeology, are important elements of encouraging the identity and perception of places as part of communities. The pressure is on for developers to promote sustainability, as government policy leans towards community participation in environmental decision-making and consultation. Archaeology can be a priceless opportunity to encourage a sense of past and present in a new development, by capitalising on the process and importance of archaeology during an excavation to engage local people. Commercial archaeological excavation has, with a few exceptions, taken place out of the public eye behind hoardings, and there are many reasons why developers and archaeological units may be reluctant to widen public awareness of

Fig. 4: example of site geophoto (context 870)

Fig. 4: filmmaker Anies Hassan in action

do not have a middle step towards the majority of the information available on the Prescot Street website that is generally useful and easily understandable. We have assumed from the beginning of this website that most of the mystery of archaeology can be dispelled if the language used is kept simple and a glossary of concepts and definitions is made key. Fostering opportunities for people to question assumptions about the past, based on the provision of background history, regular photos, journal posts and videos, all supported by an archaeological vocabulary, and what we as archaeology professionals take for granted through access to data, are small steps towards the creation of an archaeology for the public, albeit impeded by the fact that, at the moment, we are providing a form of outreach to the majority of users that is a one-way conversation. Even the journal entries of the site staff, which it was originally hoped would provide alternative thoughts and suggestions to what is happening on site are, by virtue of the site staff's background education in archaeology and work experience, 'top-down'.

The archaeology of Roman London is a truly specialist area, and the evidence from the Prescot Street excavation, at least at this stage, does not really open itself to an approach that would consider other agendas, interpretations and collaboration. However, the Prescot Street digital project is an organic process, and those involved are committed to maintaining and improving the information contained within as we move into the post-excavation project, when narratives can begin to be tied to data and specialist information, and a collaborative conversation with the multiple audiences of archaeology can be fully explored.

Acknowledgements

archaeological excavations as they take place. Commercial excavations are rarely safe enough for the general public to visit without complicated health and safety arrangements and insurance in place, and the difficulties in organisation can be off-putting to time-pressed archaeology units working within tight financial margins. Digital community involvement and outreach *via* the Internet may be one solution to these obstacles.

Interpretation, dissemination and dialogue with the public on the Internet are widespread, and the majority of websites are written by heritage-sector organisations with experienced and qualified archaeologists creating the content. As can be imagined, they are diverse in quality, content and accessibility. The fundamental problem

with attempting to provide a public digital window on a complex archaeological excavation is that the usefulness of digital media relies on effective communication of content, careful website design and easy comprehension by the general audience. The downsides of unidirectional traditional outreach and education reveal the strengths in using a digital platform for promoting archaeology *via* hypertext, allowing users to make their own associations between data, images, text and links.

The idea of the Prescot Street digital project is not to try to accommodate the needs of *every* potential audience, but to create a resource that will expand over time. Without prior knowledge of the vocabulary, history and methodology of archaeology, the public

1. http://www.lparchaeology/prescot

2. Site code PCO06

3. http://www.catalhoyuk.com/