

# Exotic Deptford

Philip L Armitage ponders how an aspiring Deptford family came to have walrus bones from the Arctic and pelican bones from America

Among the finds discovered during excavation of a post-medieval masonry-lined cesspit at the Borthwick & Payne's Wharf site Deptford SE8 were "exotic" zoological specimens: the bones from the foreleg and flipper of a young walrus,<sup>1</sup> and the bill and part cranium of a brown pelican.<sup>2</sup>

Excavations at the site were carried out by Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd.<sup>3</sup> in 2007, revealing a series of post-medieval features, including the cesspit believed to have been located to the rear of a property fronting onto Butcher Row. Recovered potsherds and clay tobacco pipes securely dated the final backfilling of the cesspit to 1820–1830; a time-period that fits historical records for the conversion (by 1826) of the property and one other adjoining into the Bell Public House. Finds from the cesspit backfill were interpreted as domestic material, probably from household clearance prior to this conversion. An ivory comb and ivory brush among the recovered objects suggested the household had been reasonably well-to-do. Discarded kitchen/table refuse indicated a further degree of affluence, revealing the inhabitants enjoyed a varied diet of fish, goose, pigeon, duck, hare and rabbit, in addition to prime cuts of beef, mutton and pork. Archaeological evidence also revealed they drank imported Dutch wine. Two toy cannons indicated the presence of children.

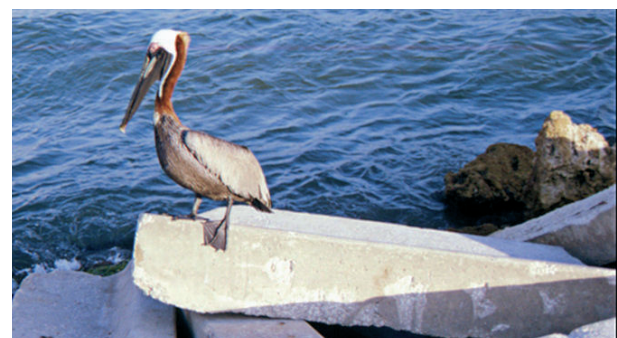


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How then do the "exotic" specimens above fit into this domestic picture? The answer may lie in Deptford's maritime connections during this period. By the late 18th century and throughout the early 19th century, Deptford was the fitting out port and return destination of some of the British Admiralty's most important epic voyages of exploration, resulting in significant advances in navigation, geophysics, geology, botany and zoology.

Regarding the walrus bones from the Borthwick & Payne's Wharf site, it is of interest that many of the ships engaged in Arctic exploration at that period, on their return, berthed at



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**ABOVE:** A brown pelican in Florida.

**BOTTOM:** The brown pelican skull from Deptford (top) compared to a modern one.

**LEFT:** The Deptford walrus flipper bones and a 19th century depiction of the animal.

Deptford. Although Europeans were aware of the existence of walruses since the 10th century, when their tusks (upper canines) were being exploited as an important, highly sought after raw material, very little was really known among scientific circles concerning the anatomy of such creatures, even as late as the early 1800s. This deficiency was addressed when Captain Douglas Clavering's Arctic Expedition of 1821–1823 returned with parts of walruses (including flippers), requested by Sir Everard Home (First President of the Royal College of Surgeons) who subsequently published a scientific paper on them.<sup>4</sup> Ordinary sailors on such voyages may also have taken the opportunity of bringing back preserved walrus parts as mementos, and perhaps later sold these off as curios to some of Deptford's inhabitants, including the Butcher Row household. Other returning sailors to Deptford, from the Americas, may likewise have brought back as curios pelican skulls or preserved pelican heads, which perhaps again provides an explanation for the presence of the specimen at the Borthwick & Payne's Wharf site.

1. Identified by Leif Jonsson, Göteborgs Naturhistoriska Museum, Gothenburg, Sweden. Walrus *Odobenus rosmarus* has a circumpolar distribution in the Arctic, inhabiting shallow coastal areas.

2. Identified by the author. Brown pelican *Pelicanus occidentalis* is a resident of the coastal marine habitats extending from central North America southwards to northern South America.

3. Site Supervisor: Alexis Haslam. Archaeological work financed by P & B Developments; Consultant: CgMs.

4. Sir Everard Home 'Some curious facts respecting the Walrus and Seal, discovered by the examination of specimens brought to England by the different ships lately returned from the Polar Circle' *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 114 (1824) 233–241.



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