

Finding a niche

Jackie Keily and Stuart Brookes both migrated to the UK in the 1980s and both worked in commercial archaeology before settling into their current careers. Both are in sectors facing difficult times as cuts bite, and both are active in local societies and outreach programmes. With all that in common, what sets a Museum of London curator and an Institute of Archaeology research fellow apart? For the latest of our In context interviews, Becky Wallower went looking for the answers.

Jackie Keily grew up in Cork, surrounded by archaeology; a fascination with history was almost inevitable. After getting a degree in History and Archaeology from University College Cork, she headed for the UK, where her sister helped inveigle her into the Museum of London (MOL) as a volunteer finds processor. A job there followed in 1987, taking her to landmark sites like Dowgate, Bull Wharf and the Guildhall. As MoLAS developed its own identity, Jackie trained as a finds specialist, first in building materials then in Roman and later small finds, and contributed to numerous publications. Finds identification work at MOL during a FLO vacancy helped push her towards museum work, leading to appointment as a curator in the Early London department in 2005. After helping with the opening of the new Medieval London gallery during her first year, she has since worked on the big Jack the Ripper exhibition and others, as well as coordinating the Museum's Outsites displays and completing an MA in Museum Studies.

Stuart Brookes, like many of his Australian compatriots, headed to Europe straight out of school. For five years, he worked as a contract digger on the circuit around the UK and the continent, until excavation directors in Germany convinced him that, despite his experience, he would never progress without a degree. By the time he had taken a BA in Medieval Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology in London, however, the financial crisis of the 1990s had reduced archaeological opportunities to almost nil everywhere in Europe. He returned to study for a Masters at UCL with AHRB funding, and took his PhD



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Jackie Keily, with a late medieval shoe from the Museum collections, and Stuart Brookes, at a conference in the Gustavianum, Uppsala, Sweden.

in 2003. He's been undertaking research, and lecturing at the Institute, and in continuing education at Birkbeck and Oxford ever since. Last year he worked on a project helping the Thames Discovery Programme to create electronic record systems, and he is currently working on *Landscapes of Governance*, an interdisciplinary research project on assembly sites in medieval England.

What made you decide to move away from commercial archaeology?

JK: For myself, I felt I needed to go in a different direction after ten years, away from the tyranny of the timesheet in a commercial unit. I was incredibly lucky to have an opportunity arise in the Museum that just suited all my finds experience and let me get back to that combination of history and archaeology I prefer.

SB: The short term contracts, travelling, lack of continuity finally got to me. I've ended up in academia because I like the big synthesis, the multi-disciplinary approach and the university research environment. I still work with the units though – editing reports for example – and can see the frustrations of limited time and resources.

What is the biggest pleasure of your job? And the biggest irritation?

JK: The collections – they're just fantastic, especially the huge quantity in storage that we can rarely display. I love having handling sessions where more people get the chance to use the material. The biggest irritation is communications. It's just difficult over three sites.

SB: Pushing forward the boundaries of knowledge! That sounds so pompous, but being able to think about the big sociological, ideological and cultural

processes in a research environment is exciting, and I've managed to write three or four books in the last few years. The irritation is that the contracts are still short, so too much time has to be devoted to writing project funding applications.

How are budget issues affecting your organisation and your work?

JK: The most dramatic effect has been on our archaeological unit, with lots of job cuts; we've had warnings about budget cuts to come in the Museum now too. Financial uncertainty also makes fundraising both a bigger priority and much harder.

SB: I – we – haven't done too badly so far, but I suspect there may be a time lag and the 6% cuts that are projected may become 20% as it has in other unis. There's also a knock on effect in limitations being imposed on services like HR and the libraries. It's also worrying; most of my Birkbeck courses aren't running this year.

Apart from artefacts, what does archaeology contribute to museums?

JK: New stories. Understanding and communicating the past is all about interpreting stories. Archaeology – Lundenwic is a classic example – brings us new evidence, new stories to help make that past real.

SB: Context! Objects are interesting in their own right, but only the wider discipline of archaeology can provide information about the context: national, regional and local, social, economic, the landscapes from which these objects derive, and all that. And archaeology provides new lines of enquiry as well as new understandings.

Which is more important for universities to provide: practical training of future archaeologists or research?

JK: I'd say practical training – coupled with an understanding of why you're doing it of course. It's just so hard for people to get decent experience now, and without it, you'll be passed over for the lowliest contract digger jobs.

SB: No, neither. Both are part of the discipline, but archaeology as an academic subject is bigger than that. Understanding human culture using the remains of the past has to be and will continue to be a social science, incorporating numerous disciplines.

Treasure hunters and metal detectors

have made major finds in the last year: does this benefit or undermine archaeology and heritage?

JK: No doubt the big stories are good for archaeology as they bring interest and publicity to the field, and people into museums too. But for myself as an archaeologist it's all about context, and treasure hunting just ignores that. Responsible metal detecting in conjunction with archaeologists has a valid place but I hate knowing that so much is lost to us.

SB: Neither. We can't necessarily tar responsible metal detectorists with the treasure hunter brush. A lot of good work can be done on the back of metal detected finds, now that the Portable Antiquities Scheme has succeeded in getting more recorded. It is a supplementary record though. Most could have been predicted and would have been uncovered eventually, but they can support other sources of data.

What is London's greatest archaeological treasure?

JK: The waterfront, by a long way. I love archaeological leather, so I'm always knocked out by the amazing preservation of organic remains on the river. The huge range of sites and periods represented continuously across centuries is so important for our understanding of London's past.

SB: The Thames. There is a stupendous amount of material there: multi-period, different types of monuments and findspots, great preservation. I also like the fact that understanding the riverside background makes you think of all sorts of geographically related material and broadens your vision.

It's 2030 – what is the museum / university of the future like?

JK: I'd hope that all the MOL collections would become more accessible over the next 20 years, especially online, so that people can discover what we have and use it for more, better, broader research. Ideally we would also have improved access to the stored collections too so that there is room enough to extract selections for examination.

SB: I'd like to think that the archaeology department could be replaced by an overarching, multi-disciplinary social science unit studying the interrelationships of all the humanities together – history, archaeology,

anthropology. Pay and conditions would be better and there would be more funding. But realistically, I see a two tier system emerging where the elite universities create new rules that mean that less money goes into humanities and more is geared towards marketable outcomes. They will probably be populated by ever more academics crawling over research students to provide publication material, looking very unhealthy.

You're involved in local archaeological societies – do they have a future?

JK: I hope so! LAMAS, where I'm Honorary Secretary, is holding its own in membership terms by offering a research fund, an excellent publication, *Transactions*, the two big conferences and the lectures. The local history and historic buildings sides also broaden our appeal I think. But getting new people actually involved is a major challenge, especially for societies like ours which don't excavate.

SB: I hope so! I'm assistant editor for the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, and as long as we can manage the endowment we can carry on. Obviously dwindling membership in local societies needs to be addressed though. I think more people would be drawn in if we could undertake a major rebranding exercise for archaeology and broaden the discipline from fieldwork and survey to the bigger picture, the landscape, geology, natural history and all the cultural and sociological processes. I'd like people to get involved because they've been out on a ramble and become fascinated by how and why some field banks came to be where they are.

Tell me something no one knows about MOL / IOA...

JK: A team from the Museum of London beat the *Eggheads* from BBC. I can't claim to have been part of the triumphant team, but clearly we're not just pretty faces.

SB: The Institute of Archaeology used to have a Morris Dancing Society.

What is the last book you read?

JK: Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*. Fantastic. Go buy it!

SB: Philip Roth's *The Plot against America*. But the best thing I'm reading now is an 1899 study of Military Geography by Miller MacGuire. Absolutely fascinating.