

# Tony McKenna, 1932–2012

## an appreciation by Harvey Sheldon

I first met Tony in 1968. He joined a City Lit archaeology class where students were learning about Roman pottery, examining and classifying the material recently excavated from the manufacturing site in Highgate Wood. Tony, then in his mid-thirties and living in East Finchley, near to the site, was drawn to the class through a combination of his interests in history and science, the latter apparently sparked by his reading of Hooke's *Micrographia* at the age of 10! He was not new to archaeology: earlier in the 1960's he had worked on the Winchester excavations and completed, with Distinction, a London University Extra-Mural class on prehistory.

The Highgate vessel forms were much more straightforward to classify than the fabrics, and soon Tony began to apply his technological expertise to ascertain the physical character of the pottery. He built a spectrograph to analyse the mineral content of the clay, made thin-sections of the vessels and produced magnified colour photographs revealing the quantities, shapes and sizes of the quartz, feldspar and other incorporated minerals. Such work helped not only to characterise the products manufactured at Highgate but also help to answer questions as to

whether the 'Highgate pottery' found on sites in *Londinium* and elsewhere came solely from here, or included vessels made on other, as yet unidentified, kiln sites, used by the Highgate potters.

Looking back, it's clear that this, Tony's first archaeological project, revealed the mix of enthusiasm, commitment, resourcefulness and technological expertise that characterised his approach to solving archaeological problems, often related to conserving artefacts or structures, once he joined the archaeological team working in Southwark and Lambeth later in the 1970's.

Nowhere was this more amply demonstrated than on the Winchester Palace site, close to Southwark's Bankside, excavated in 1983, the year that the Southwark and Lambeth team became part of the Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology (DGLA). During the excavation, under Brian Yule, what appeared to be a large dump of wall-plaster, lying face down, was found overlying the remains of a Roman hypocaust. Tony recognised the potential importance of this find, should it transpire to have had a decorated surface. He took the lead in preparing the plaster for lifting, packaging and transportation, so that it could be cleaned, conserved and studied under laboratory conditions.

The result was spectacular. A relatively plain second phase painted surface had, fortunately, sealed an earlier finely decorated fresco originally positioned just beneath a vaulted ceiling. Central was a naked Cupid, standing within an architectural landscape which included garlanded columns supporting a portico. Tony's involvement with the wall painting continued: he wrote it up for publication with Roger Ling and supervised the installation of the now-restored fresco to the prominent position it currently occupies within the Museum of London Roman gallery.

Tony worked with the DGLA until 1991, when it became part of the Museum of London Archaeological



Tony inspects the Roman wall-plaster at Winchester Palace

Service. Retirement from the Museum of London in 1996 coincided with his increasing involvement in American Civil war re-enactment, but by 2000 failing health forced him to become inactive as a military participant.

Perhaps because of the unsettled nature of the war years Tony had an interrupted education. He came from a military background – his father was a professional soldier, an officer in the first world war. Tony volunteered for the army in 1949 and served with the RAMC in Korea, where he was captured and held by the Chinese for two years. That experience too might help to explain a series of temporary jobs, here and abroad, during much of the rest of the decade. After marriage to Mary in 1960 he settled down, and when I first met him he was working as a lithographic printer for a small firm based near Waterloo. Despite the lack of qualifications from his early formal education Tony was passionate about learning, especially in subjects related to developing his work and the interests he pursued. His enquiries into the technical aspects of the Highgate pottery led first into Chemistry A level and then, in the mid-1970's, to the achievement of an OU degree.

Mary's tragic death in 1977 inevitably brought immense sadness and dislocation into Tony's life. Fortunately his marriage to Jenny in 1979 allowed stability to return. The anchor provided by her love and support sustained and encouraged him thereafter, until his death on 14th October 2012.



Tony supervises the removal of the timber drain at the Rose theatre