

# Happenstance on the waterfront



*Gustav Milne happened into archaeology via the City waterfront. With sporadic forays into other periods, other areas and occasionally other countries, his career has been anchored in what he found – and learned – along the Thames in the 1970s.*

**ABOVE** The oldest surviving complete medieval trumpet, which may have been used for ship to shore communications before being dropped in the water in the late 1300s, was found by archaeologists monitoring building work at Billingsgate Lorry Park in 19. (©Museum of London)

**BELOW** The remains of Baynard's Castle, largely destroyed by the Great Fire, were discovered during works for the redevelopment of Lower Thames Street in 1972. A frantic rescue excavation was prompted by public outcry and attracted Gustav Milne's attention. (©Museum of London)

It had never occurred to Gustav Milne that archaeology might be his future. Wandering by the Thames one day in 1972, he found a group of people intently excavating a waterfront site. This was where Baynard's Castle, the 15th-century noble and later royal residence, had stood until destroyed by the Great Fire, the remains of which were soon to be swept away for a brutalist office block for BT. Intrigued, he then began volunteering at weekends, with the volunteers from the City of London Archaeology Society on the medieval Custom House site, directed by a student from the Institute of Archaeology called Tim Tatton-Brown.

With economic insecurity growing nationally in 1973, Gustav lost his job selling Marshall amplification so he accepted the offer of a very short-term contract: pushing wheelbarrows for Tim for the last fortnight of the site. In this first job as a professional archaeologist, his wages were delivered in cash in a brown envelope during the Friday tea break. The very next month, archaeology in London changed dramatically. Whereas up to then a sole archaeological officer based in the Guildhall Museum had been trying to monitor all the work in the City, on December 3rd 1973, the Corporation of London

launched the Department of Urban Archaeology (DUA), initially just with four diggers (including Gustav) and a new leader, Brian Hobley, who arrived a few days later.

Although other important sites were to come to light in the City, the waterfront was being redeveloped end to end, and for the next thirty years, rescue excavations on the deeply-stratified, well preserved medieval waterfront became an almost non-stop activity – at Custom House, Billingsgate, Seal House, Swan Lane, Cannon Street, Thames Exchange, Vintry, Baynards Castle, Mermaid Theatre, Fleet Valley, for example. Martin Biddle had predicted in 1973 in *Future of London's Past*, that 'the history of the waterfront is critical for all periods of London's archaeology.' His words proved particularly prescient for the medieval harbourside, since the finds recovered from those sites arguably equalled or surpassed any other such site in Britain or Europe in quantity and range. While not wishing to downplay the significance of the Roman material from the London riverside sites, Gustav has selected the investigation of the totality of the City's medieval waterfront as both his own and London's most significant site.

Conditions in that early period were rather ad hoc but a coherent methodology, both conceptual and technical, became essential. The techniques, methods and organisation developed for excavations at the time grew into a set of professional standards that had a lasting influence not just in London but elsewhere across Britain. Rather than being led in a pre-defined direction, however, the DUA tended to develop along the lines of the interests and special skills of its staff. Serendipitously, the talents then present proved to be exceptionally broad and appropriate to the task. Presented with five tons of pot sherds, people like Alan Vince and Clive Orton became experts in computer analysis: their metrical approach changed British archaeology. Others, such as Geoff Egan, progressed from a starting point as a digger to become a world renowned specialist in small finds. Damian Goodburn developed an abiding expertise in all things wooden. Penny MacConnoran's comprehensive understanding of leather, finds and archiving was likewise a product of her time on the riverfront. Tools,





such as the Site Manual resulted from procedures and processes developed at the time – the ‘red book’ (the first edition was grey) has become an international bestseller.

Through this heady period, Gustav worked on several waterfront excavations, supervising some of the key sites and visiting most of the rest. He appreciated precisely what a major resource the riverfront offered, promoting it assiduously through publications and conferences. Even as the methodologies developed rapidly, the model of archaeological work pioneered by Tim Tatton-Brown and born of emergency measures of the 1970s continued. Severe financial and time pressures prevented the total recovery of the archaeological evidence, but a blend of volunteer involvement, professional oversight and academic research provided a focused, practical response. Archaeological societies, principally CoLAS in the City, had become well-organised, systematic contributors to the excavation efforts. Many students and volunteers – some with years of experience – would undertake work at weekends and during their holidays, effectively extending the work undertaken by the professional DUA team during the week. In the early 1990s, however, the symbiosis of this integrated system began to disappear, as an unintended consequence of PPG16 package put paid to the era of rescue archaeology.

At the same time, having picked up post graduate qualifications along the way at Birkbeck (with a study of the medieval waterfront, of course) Gustav moved from the DUA to the Institute of Archaeology as a lecturer. There, first on a part time and eventually a full time basis, he tried to replicate this system. His own students – including Nathalie Cohen, Mike Webber and Andrew Reynolds – were given opportunities for genuine hands-on research and publication, with the rigour of professional standards, close contact with the Museum of London and with a feel for public engagement. Although this now sounds straightforwardly obvious, it was a step change at the time.

### Finds and analysis

As important as these developments in archaeology are, the prime significance of the waterfront site for Gustav – and indeed for London – is the astonishing quantity, variety and quality of the archaeological remains, and the uses that could be made of them. Put simply, pretty much the complete story of 500 years of medieval London can be told from that site and the associated artefacts, from the nature, speed and chronology of the riverside encroachment itself to environmental change, social history, street planning, international trading and economic development.

The extent and growth of structures encroaching into the river reflected periods of massive expansion and change elsewhere in the City. Developments in the late 13th century waterfront, for example, soon



prompted changes inland to cope with adjustments in trading practice – a pattern of topographical features also seen in developments post plague and fire in the 17th century.

The history of medieval timber-building is revealed in the series of revetments built to increase wharfage over five centuries. For example, the change from earth-fast to timber-framed structures was precisely dated through the application of the (once) revolutionary technique of dendrochronology, first used in London in 1973 on the Custom House site.

Such was the scale of the waterfront finds that HMSO and Museum of London commissioned a series of ground-breaking studies on medieval artefacts and their social milieu, including textiles, shoes, dress accessories, household objects, horse fittings and pilgrim souvenirs. Thanks to the dendro dates, trends in, for example, consumerism and fashion can be

**ABOVE** Excavations in 1974-6 at Trig Lane revealed a series of timber and stone riverfront revetments and associated features erected on the foreshore from the mid-13th to mid-15th century. It was possible to plot the differing development and rates of riverfront extension during this period on three adjacent properties. (©Museum of London)

**BELOW** The lower edge of a check-patterned woolen sleeve that had 12 buttons and silk faced buttonholes, found at Baynard's Castle site. It may have been lined and slightly flared at the edge (left of picture) and was certainly part of a fashionable outfit, and the work of a skilled tailor. (©Museum of London)







**ABOVE** The late 16th-century Agas map shows the density of medieval waterfront development. Archaeological work on sites such as those labelled here as Baynard's Castle, Paul's Wharf, Trig Lane, Broken Wharf and Queenhythe have provided massive new insights into the culture and society of London. (©Museum of London)

**BELOW** Gustav (left) investigating and recording a newly revealed timber structure, thought to be a medieval jetty, on Greenwich foreshore in 2011 with the Thames Discovery Programme (see also Wragg, p 188). (Becky Wallower)

pinpointed accurately. Similarly, manufacturing developments can be traced, while the gradual increase in the use of cutlers' marks on knives over time mirrors the rise in the control exercised by London's guilds.

Because the dating was so precise, the ceramics found in bewildering quantity were also able to be analysed more usefully than ever before. Not only could domestic pottery usage be measured through new computer techniques, but patterns of trade with the Hanseatic league, Islamic countries and beyond were also investigated. The City's emerging merchant community was also traced through dating the introduction of permanent warehouses, initially in the Vintry and the Steelyard areas of the waterfront, where the Anglo Norman and German merchants had their base. This development was contemporary with the appearance of larger custom-built trading vessels, the presence of merchant seals, tally sticks and tokens, as well the novel gold and silver coinage used by these new middlemen.

### Continuing story

The last of the City's waterfront sites to be investigated – Three Quays near the Tower – was completed last year and is now in the post-excavation phase. The majority of the archaeological evidence for the medieval waterfront from the Tower to Blackfriars Bridges is thus as complete a dataset as it will ever be. The analysis, assessment and reassessment of that evidence is far from finished however – it will continue to bring new insight to research questions for decades to come (see Schofield, p 181). Further afield, the waterfront sites at Southwark, Westminster, Greenwich and Kingston all have potential for similar studies.

For his part, alongside teaching Medieval Archaeology at UCL (and initiating building surveys at St Bride's and St Bartholomew's, and Southwark Cathedral, for example), Gustav headed back to the Thames, this time to the foreshore. He first oversaw the Thames Archaeological Survey from 1993–99

(which itself followed up the first foreshore survey undertaken in 1976–7) and then became director of the Thames Discovery Programme from 2008. With a workforce of some 350 volunteers and students, guided by a small professional team, this challenging project monitors change on the foreshore and surveys the fate of hundreds of structures and remains. "That collaborative unity of purpose goes directly back to lessons learnt from 1970s waterfront archaeology," he says, "rescue archaeology conducted by a collaborative team of professionals, avocational archaeologists and students supported by a museum and a university: its the ideal blend of expertise, energy and enthusiasm. It worked at the Custom House site in 1973, and it works on the foreshore in 2013."

Whether by good fortune or influence, Gustav has been at the heart of Thames-side investigations for 40 years, carrying that central ethos every inch of the way, and playing a key part in the development of London's archaeological framework. His career, he feels, has nevertheless all been happenstance. "What might have happened," he wonders, "had a different set of people – and skills and talents – come together in the DUA in 1970s and 1980s? Where would archaeology be now?"

*~ Gustav Milne was talking to Becky Wallower*

**In addition to writing and contributing to numerous other books and site reports, Gustav Milne published an overview of the waterfront in 2003, *The Port of Medieval London*, The History Press. LA is very grateful to Cath Maloney at the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC) for retrieving images from the archives, and to the Museum of London Picture Library for use finds images.**

**Further information on the waterfront sites and details of publication can be found in the LAARC online catalogue: [www.museumoflondon.org.uk/laarclcatalogue/](http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/laarclcatalogue/). See for instance site codes BC72, CUS73, TL74, TIG84, TEX88, LTS95, TQH02.**

**Many of the waterfront finds can be seen in the Medieval Galleries of the Museum of London.**

