

Domestic menagerie in Greenwich?

What were rabbit, guinea pig and parrot bones doing in an early 19th-century well? Kevin Rielly of Pre-Construct Archaeology investigated the bones and the animals' historical context.



An unusual collection of animal and bird bones was discovered when excavating the site at 4–19 Stockwell Street¹ in advance of development by the University of Greenwich. It consisted of the partial skeleton (skull, mandibles, scapula and a pair of pelvis) of an adult guinea pig, the sternum (breastbone) of a parrot and the remains of at least four large rabbits, representing one adult and three youngsters (kits). These were taken from the early to mid-19th century fills of a well located in the backyard of one of the southernmost properties in this street.

Turning first to the rabbits, the relatively large size of these animals, as well as the high proportion of youngsters, strongly suggests that they were domesticated. There is a long history in Britain of keeping rabbits, generally for their meat and skins, and this certainly continued into the 19th century.² However, this period also witnessed the establishment of show breeds, starting with the long-eared 'lop' rabbits. These were initially exhibited at agricultural shows in the 1820s prior to a greater level of organisation – a club formed in 1840 devoted to the promotion and regulation of exhibitions of 'Fancy Rabbits'.³ The absence of cut marks on the Stockwell Street rabbit bones would suggest they were kept as pets rather than for their meat or skins, and it is conceivable, considering the date of deposition, that they actually represent

the remains of discarded, perhaps diseased, animals from a local rabbit fancier.

The guinea pig, during this period, was often kept as a 'hutch companion' due to the belief that rats tended to avoid them. In this way they acted as 'protectors' of newly born and young kits.⁴ Whether effective or mere hearsay, this belief may well explain the juxtaposition of the rabbit and guinea pig bones. There is obviously the possibility, as with the rabbits, that this animal was essentially kept for its meat. In this case, the age of the animal, perhaps confirmed by the advanced degeneration of the left pelvic joint, as well as a similar absence of butchery marks, strongly suggests it was a pet. Indeed the guinea pig had undoubtedly become a relatively common household 'companion' by the beginning of the 19th century and while presumably added occasionally to the pot, its meat was generally considered 'far from good', here quoting Thomas Bewick writing in 1807.⁵

The final participant of this supposed 'menagerie', the parrot, is likely to belong to the genus *Amazonia*, and is very similar to the Lilac-crowned Amazon.⁶ This bird may have been procured *via* one of the German aviculturists who were involved in the breeding of various exotic birds in the 19th century. Otherwise, it may have been imported from the Americas, testament to the live parrot trade across the Atlantic which had been in existence since Christopher Columbus returned from the New World in 1493 with some 'forty parrots of most lively and delicate colours'.⁷ There are of course parrots from other parts of the

tropical world and there is a long history of parrot-keeping in Western Europe, these birds renowned for their plumage but especially for their ability to mimic human speech. These valuable birds became popular amongst the medieval aristocracy, arriving in Britain rather late, probably in the early 16th century. Notable early examples of parrot-keeping in this country include the African greys owned by King Henry VIII and the Duchess of Lennox and Richmond, who was so attached to her parrot that she gave instructions in her will for the bird to be stuffed and buried with her, which duly took place a few days after the death of the Duchess in 1702. The association with aristocracy or at least with the wealthier members of the population continued to the 19th century when such birds became more freely available.⁸

Guinea pigs apparently followed a very similar social evolution, since their



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TOP The lilac-crowned Amazon parrot, as depicted by the Victorian naturalist artist Joseph Smit/Smith (see www.oiseaux.net)
ABOVE Lateral view of the parrot sternum from Stockwell Street



ABOVE On display at the National Portrait Gallery's exhibition *Elizabeth I and her people* until January 2014 is this painting of 1580 by an unknown artist which may represent the earliest depiction of a guinea pig (from a private collection)

BELOW Ventral view of the guinea pig skull, showing its very distinctive maxillary teeth

arrival in Europe, from Peru, in the early to mid-16th century, whence they became prestigious pets, with one notably owned by Queen Elizabeth I, through to their general popularity in the 19th century.⁹ This social pattern may go some way to explain the extreme rarity of either guinea pig or parrot bones on British archaeological sites. There is just one instance each of pre-19th century finds of parrot and guinea pig, from late 16th/17th-century deposits at Castle Mall, Norwich and Hill Hall Manor in Essex respectively, notably both from high-status sites. The

early parrot is yet to be identified. This contrasts with three examples of guinea pig from early to mid-19th-century excavations (including the Stockwell Street bones), all of which were found in London. Surprisingly, there are no further instances of parrot bones.¹⁰

While it cannot be absolutely stated that all three species were taken from the same household, it can be conjectured that a variety of household pets, some decidedly exotic, were being kept in Stockwell Street during the early part of the 19th century. One final word of caution concerning the parrot is that there was, at this time, a continuing trade in the feathers of exotic birds, principally used as adornments for hats. Further research is required to establish if such items were exported separately or still attached, and of course whether the various *Amazonia* parrots produced the right sort of feathers. However, it is

known that at least two milliners were based in Stockwell Street in 1826 and another was living at 9 Stockwell Street in 1851.¹¹

Acknowledgement

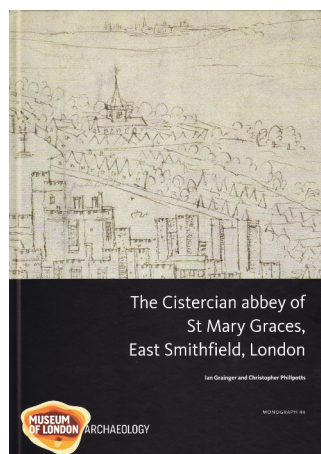
Pre-Construct Archaeology is grateful to the University of Greenwich for funding these investigations.

1. A Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd site excavated in 2012, supervised by Douglas Killock and Sarah Barrowman for Geoffrey Osborne Limited on behalf of the University of Greenwich.
2. There were at least two major rabbit-keeping establishments in London in the early 19th century principally involved in meat production, each with some 1,500 to 2,000 breeding does: Mrs. I. Beeton *The Book of Household Management* (1869) 222.
3. B.D. Whitman, *Domestic Rabbits and their Histories: Breeds of the World* (2004) 228.
4. Mrs. I. Beeton *The Book of Household Management* (1869) 510.
5. T. Bewick *A General History of Quadrupeds* (1807, reprinted 1980) 377. This author clearly could not understand their popularity, stating that these animals "have neither beauty nor utility to recommend them. Their habits and dispositions are unpleasant and disgusting".
6. Identification of the parrot was based on a study of the extensive bird bone collections at the Bird Group, Department of Life Sciences, Natural History Museum, Akeman Street, Tring, Hertfordshire. The Lilac-crowned Amazon is indigenous to the mountainous regions of north-western Mexico, and while rather scarce today, it was clearly far more numerous at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries: P.R. Paradise *Amazon Parrots* (1979) 37.
7. The aviculturists are mentioned in J. Boosey *Parrots, Cockatoos and Macaws* (1956), and the earliest imports in B.T. Boehrer *Parrot Culture: Our 2500-year-long Fascination with the World's Most Talkative Bird* (2004) 54.
8. Points concerning the history of the parrot trade are taken from J. Boosey *Parrots, Cockatoos and Macaws* (1956), who also mentions that the stuffed African Grey is now on show at the Undercroft Museum, Westminster Abbey and is reputedly the 'oldest stuffed bird in the world'.
9. C. Michael *World Prehistory and Archaeology: Pathways through Time* (2008), and see F. Pigière, W. Van Neer, C. Ansieau and M. Denis 'New archaeozoological evidence for the introduction of the guinea pig to Europe' *Journal of Archaeological Science* 39 (2012) 1020-1, and for the 19th century the evidence provided by T. Bewick *A General History of Quadrupeds* (1807, reprinted 1980) 377.
10. Guinea pigs in S. Hamilton-Dyer 'Animal Bones' in P. Dury and R. Simpson *Hill Hall; A Singular House Devised by a Tudor Intellectual*, Society of Antiquaries/ EH monograph (2009) 345-51, 346; P.L. Armitage, 'The animal bones' in A. Douglas *Excavations at Babe Ruth, Shadwell PCA Report* (in prep); J. Morris, L. Fowler and N.A. Powers 'A hospital with connections: 19th-century exotic animal remains at the Royal London Hospital' *Post-medieval Archaeol* 45(2) 367-73 (2011); and the parrot from U. Albarella, M. Beech and J. Mulville *The Saxon, medieval and Post-Medieval mammal and bird bones excavated 1989-91 from Castle Mall, Norwich, Norfolk Ancient Monuments Laboratory Report 72/97*, English Heritage (1997) 51.
11. Pigot and Co. *Commercial Directory, Cities, Towns, Sea-Ports and Villages in Middlesex, Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Surrey and Sussex* (1826), 436; HO107/1587/ 42:26, 1851 Census Greenwich, Kent.



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The Cistercian Abbey of St Mary Graces, East Smithfield, London



Ian Grainger and Christopher Philpotts

MOLA Monograph 44

2011

204 pages
115 illustrations, bibliography, index

£27

Reviewed by Clive Orton

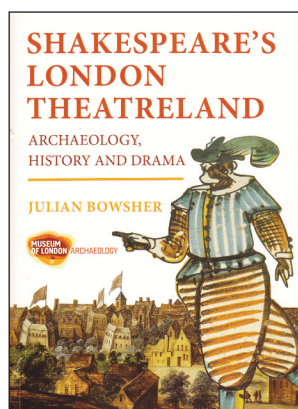
The abbey of St Mary Graces has always been something of an enigma: the last Cistercian abbey to be founded in England, the most 'urban' foundation of a famously rural order, built on a small and constrained site virtually next door to the Tower of London. The opportunity to discover more arose in the 1980s, when the Royal Mint had moved to Wales and its London site came up for redevelopment. Large-scale excavations by the (then) DGLA of the Museum of London have finally (25 years later) led to the publication of three monographs on three distinct phases of this site's life: the Black Death cemetery (MOLA Monograph 43), the abbey (reviewed here) and the Royal Navy victualing yard (MOLA Monograph 45).

The present volume summarises the pre-cemetery and cemetery phases, but naturally concentrates on the building period (c. 1350–1400), later additions (c. 1400–1539) and the short-lived manor house (c. 1539–1560). Building on a site already occupied in part by a major cemetery and in part by tenements gave both problems (how long do you wait before building over a cemetery? how quickly can you gain possession of the tenements?) and opportunities. To complicate matters, the abbey was not initially well endowed (despite being a royal foundation), and suffered periods of mismanagement.

The excavations revealed an atypical Cistercian layout, rather more like a friary, partly due to the difficulties of shoe-horning it into a restricted site, and partly idiosyncratic – for example, the large refectory built at a time when they were going out of fashion. Modifications are difficult to date, as is the sequence of demolition and re-use as a manor house, both because of the short time-span involved and because of the damage caused by the construction of the victualing yard from 1560 onwards.

The report follows the standard MOLA pattern of an 'integrated' report, with key finds evidence embedded in the report, and is straightforward to follow. There is much documentary evidence, with (for example) the names of all the abbots and many of the monks. However, even this level of integration has not prevented a certain level of repetition – for example, the reasons for the abbey's foundation are discussed on pages 2, 7 and 75. It should also be said that about 40% of the monograph consists of specialist appendices – valuable to other specialists, but of little relevance to the general reader. It is interesting to read that parts of the complex survived even the 20th-century rebuilding, and are (just) visible in the basement of Murray House, though not apparently listed in any tourist guide. They deserve to be better known.

Shakespeare's London Theatreland archaeology, history and drama



Julian Bowsher

Museum of London Archaeology

2012

256 pages
Numerous illustrations, photos, maps; sources and reading list; index

£20

Reviewed by Becky Wallower

Designed as both an introduction to the development of London's theatre in the 16th and 17th centuries, and as a walking guide to related sites, this book packs in bucketsful of material. Coverage includes the myriad venues, theatrical practice, literary references, historical accounts, the political environment, social interaction and impact, the players and playgoers, the related animal baiting 'entertainments' and, of course, the leading role

that the archaeological evidence has played in understanding of the phenomenon of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre.

Having directed the excavation of the Rose in 1989 with Simon Blatherwick, Bowsher has continued his research as new documentary and archaeological evidence has emerged, becoming a top authority on theatre of the period. As with his monograph on the Rose and the Globe (MOLA Monograph 48) he distinguishes between playhouses (open to the air), theatres and other varieties of venue (eg royal palaces, inns of court) – a useful device to help clarify the stages and types of theatrical development, but not yet a universal convention.

The style is informal and readable, though clearly exceptionally well informed. The great number of photos, site plans, drawings, contemporary images and documents are superb, in terms of both coverage and quality. The archaeological images and information are nicely integrated, helping to demonstrate the depth of research and its contribution.

The last 47 pages are devoted to eight walks across Greater London, with Richmond, Greenwich and Hampton Court represented as well as the City and surrounding districts. Photos of contemporary cityscape augment directions, although a few editorial inaccuracies unfortunately crop up in the walking maps.

Judging from the engrossed demeanour of those I've seen bearing copies in the City, this book is serving its purpose well as a field guide. For anyone not thoroughly au fait with London's theatrical history, it's as good a starting point as you could find.