

The Greater London excavation index

Andrew Sargent

Introduction

Since 1978 the National Archaeological Record (NAR) of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) has been compiling an index of archaeological excavations carried out in England. This project has four main objectives:

1. To compile a definitive list of all archaeological excavations.
2. To locate original documentary and visual archive from each excavation.
3. To locate the finds from each excavation.
4. To indicate excavations for which reports are published.

The project has progressed on a county by county basis, and the Greater London Excavation Index was compiled between August 1987 and August 1989. With the completion of the London Index, national coverage has been achieved. At the time of writing, the Index contains over 25,000 records nationally, including over 1,750 for London; and this total continues to increase. The project has now entered a new stage, that of maintaining and updating the Index.

An interim notice on the nature and purpose of the London Index has already been published¹. This article will summarise the results of the project.

The distribution of excavations (Fig. 1)

It goes almost without saying that the dominant and unifying feature of London's archaeology is its urban setting, which extends nearly to the 'county' boundary in every direction. This has influenced the distribution of archaeological exploration, and also the types of sites recovered and the periods represented.

The main focus of excavation in Greater London is the City, the extreme west of Tower Hamlets, and the northern portions of Southwark and Lambeth, which together account for over half of the excavations in the 'county'. Most of this has taken place over the last 30 years, as the pressure of development has increased. Outside this central core, beyond the Roman and medieval city, the inner London boroughs have seen little excavation.

Over the rest of London the number of excavations is generally low, although the DGLA, Passmore Edwards Museum, and many local societies ensure that no borough is left without an archaeological presence. An active society may produce a local concentration of work, e.g. the Enfield Archaeological Society (TQ 3095), the Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society (TQ 3065), or the Wandsworth Historical Society (TQ 2075). The redevelopment of a town centre, such as Brentford (TQ 1575) or Kingston (TQ 1565), or a particular site such as Hampton Court Palace (TQ 1565) or the Roman site of Sulloniaca (Brockley Hill) (TQ 1590), explains certain concentrations seen in Fig. 1.

Periods and types (Table 1)

The breakdown of excavations in London by period shown in Table 1 may be compared with the national proportions generated by the Excavation Index project. A relatively small number of excavations have yielded Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, or Neolithic material; but their representation in London compares favourably with the national proportions. Although many excavations have only produced residual flint implements or pottery, a number of important sites have been examined. An Acheulian 'living floor' was found at Stoke Newington Common in 1972, and an Upper Palaeolithic chipping floor was dug for the British Museum at Creffield Road, Acton, in 1974-5; a Mesolithic chipping floor was explored on Hampstead Heath in 1976-86, while a Neolithic 'ritual monument' was excavated in 1963 at Launders Lane, Rainham. Settlement evidence is widespread, particularly for the Neolithic.

| | London | National average |
|----------------|--------|------------------|
| Palaeolithic | 0.5 | 0.8 |
| Mesolithic | 1.7 | 1.5 |
| Neolithic | 2.0 | 3.9 |
| Bronze Age | 2.1 | 15.4 |
| Iron Age | 3.9 | 8.1 |
| Roman | 30.0 | 27.7 |
| Early medieval | 5.9 | 6.9 |
| Medieval | 27.3 | 19.7 |
| Post-medieval | 23.7 | 9.7 |
| 'Unknown' | 2.9 | 6.3 |

Table 1: percentage of excavations by period

1. S. Clarke and N. Beagrie 'The London Excavations Index' *London Archaeol* 5 no. 16 (1988) 437-42.

2. N. Merriman 'A Prehistory for Central London?' *London Archaeol* 5 no. 12 (1987) 318-26.



Fig. 1a: the distribution of excavations by borough.

The Bronze Age and Iron Age are seen to be heavily under-represented by comparison with the national figures. Similar findings were made by a recent study² which noted that post-glacial prehistoric material from central London was quite sparse. The shortage of excavations producing Bronze Age material may be explained by reference to the types of Bronze Age sites explored elsewhere. The vast majority are burial mounds, which are seldom preserved in an urban context. Barrows have survived in some of London's open spaces, where, as elsewhere, they have attracted 'diggers': the eighteenth-century antiquary, James Douglas, opened *c* 50 barrows in Greenwich Park and *c* 20 on Wimbledon Common (these are not recorded separately on the Index because they cannot be individually located). Despite these examples, Bronze Age field monuments have seldom been preserved in London, so that most material has been recovered by chance. Iron Age earthworks may have been similarly

destroyed, although several large defensive sites have survived and been excavated in the outer boroughs: e.g. Caesar's Camp, Heathrow; Caesar's Camp, Holwood; Queen Mary's Hospital, Carshalton; or Uphall Camp, Ilford. Aerial photography, field survey, and other prospection techniques are normally inappropriate in the urban context, so that only fragments of landscapes similar to those found on the Thames gravels in Oxfordshire are known in London.

For the Roman period, excavation has concentrated upon the City, where there is a remarkable degree of preservation. Elsewhere in London the focus is upon villas (7 excavations) and bath-houses (13 excavations), with a mausoleum and 'ritual shaft' found at Keston.

Anglo-Saxon occupation in the area around the Strand and the later re-use of the City are testified by an increasing number of ephemeral timber structures

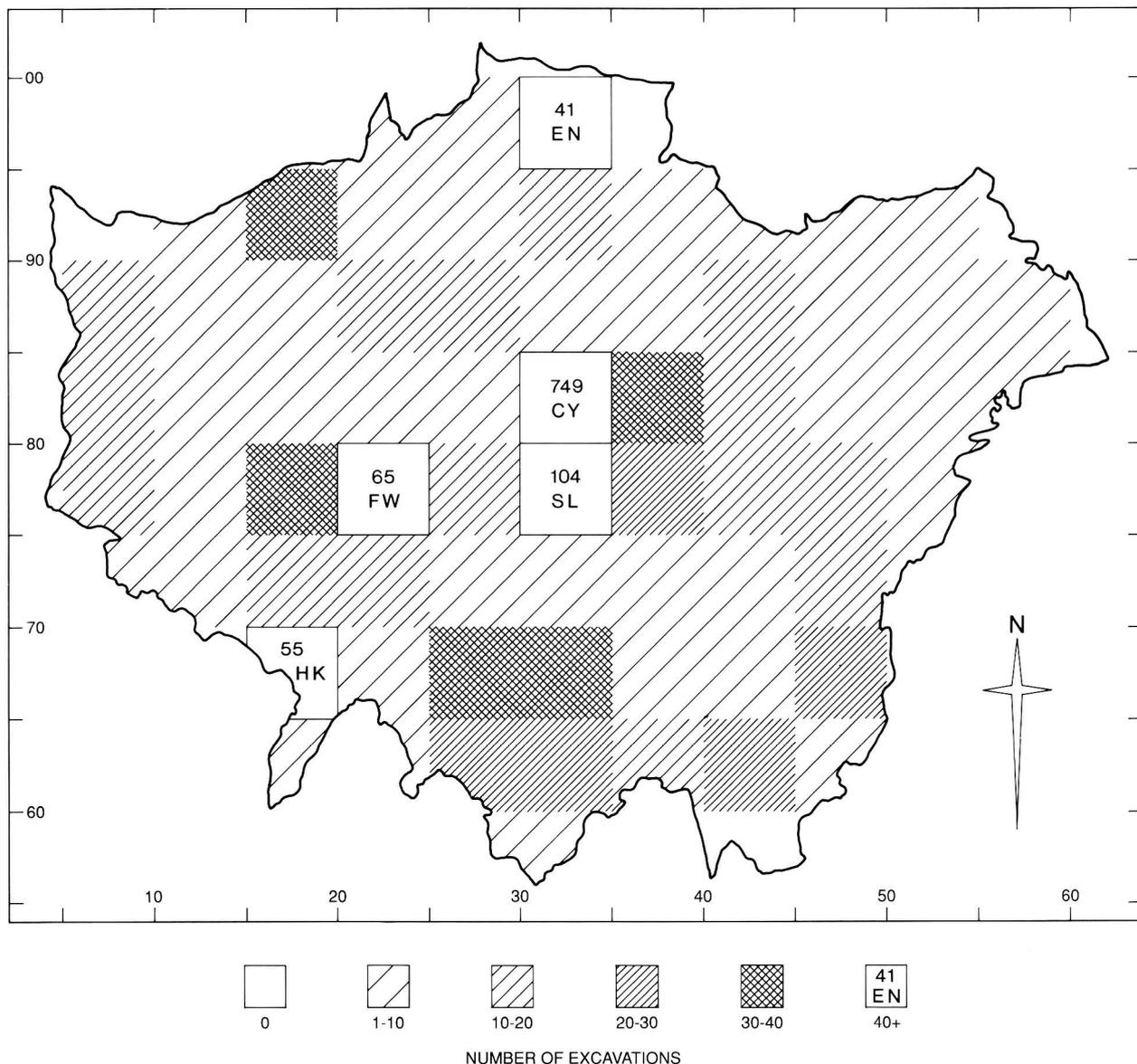


Fig. 1b: the distribution of excavations. Each square is 25 sq. km.
 CY – City
 EN – Enfield
 FW – Fulham & Wandsworth
 HK – Hampton Court & Kingston
 SL – Southwark & Lambeth

which may well have been overlooked by earlier archaeologists. Elsewhere in the ‘county’ traces of Anglo-Saxon settlement have been recognised widely, although they are usually discovered by chance.

The medieval and post-medieval periods are substantially over-represented when compared to the national situation. This is not surprising in the context of an urban centre with a long history. Modern urban spread has, however, meant that medieval material outside the City is seldom interpreted in terms of its settlement pattern: few medieval villages are recog-

nised, because their landscape is masked. Many post-medieval sites have been explored, including industrial sites like the Fulham Pottery Works and the Royal Dockyard, Woolwich: industrial archaeology is flourishing in London.

Royal palaces

The royal palaces of London are sufficiently numerous to merit noting separately. Excavations have been conducted at Bridewell Palace, Buckingham Palace, Eltham Palace, Elsynge Palace, Greenwich Palace, Hampton Court Palace, Kennington Palace (the Black

Prince's palace), Richmond Palace, Rotherhithe Palace (of Edward III), the Tower of London, Westminster Palace, and Whitehall Palace. The earliest royal palace excavation was in 1744 when excavations were made in the courtyard of Buckingham House (as it then was) to collect evidence that the Buckingham family had encroached on St. James' Park! Another palace, the Tower of London, has the distinction of being the most excavated site in the country, with 28 separate excavations conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Works and its successors.

Dates of excavations (Fig. 2)

Only nine 'excavations' have been recorded for the 17th and 18th centuries, but they clearly illustrate the interests of the period, focusing on Bronze Age and Anglo-Saxon burial mounds, and religious houses. The earliest excavation so far noted in Greater London was conducted in 1630 at Lesnes Abbey by Sir J. Epsley, who cleared the monastic church to floor level. In 1720-24 Smart Lethieullier carried out a similar project at Barking Abbey. The famous antiquary William Stukeley opened a number of Bronze Age burial mounds on Wimbledon Common c 1760, and James Douglas opened many more in 1786. Two years previously Douglas had opened a group of barrows in Greenwich Park. About 1760 'a person from London' opened an Anglo-Saxon barrow in the group on Farthing Down.

Little excavation took place during the first half of the 19th century, although in 1834 Charles Roach Smith began to make a collection of Roman material from London, which later formed the nucleus of the Guildhall Museum. One notable discovery was made, however, when in 1828 A. J. Kempe and T. C. Croker dug at the Roman site in Lower Warbank Field, Keston. They immediately identified it as the lost town of Noviomagus, and celebrated by founding a dining club named *The Noviomagians!* 1841 saw the first occurrence of that now-indispensable feature of London archaeology, 'developer funding', when a Mr. Moxhay paid for a mosaic floor to be moved from his building site in Threadneedle Street to the British Museum. In 1854 the newly formed Surrey Archaeological Society chose a Bronze Age barrow in Teddington as the site of its first excavation. J. Y. Akerman was invited to demonstrate excavation technique; he set an admirable example by publishing his report³ the following year.

Excavation became frequent in the City in the late 19th and early 20th century. Philip Norman and F. W. Reader observed building work and conducted a

number of excavations. E. Birley, G. C. Dunning and F. Cottrill were successively appointed Inspector of London Excavations for the Society of Antiquaries, with facilities in the London Museum. As the title implies, much of their time was spent in observing building work, though they made a number of small-scale excavations.

The Second World War brought considerable opportunity for archaeology. For the first time since the rise of antiquarianism, large areas of London were available for excavation. As the City rose from the ashes, Prof. W. F. Grimes and the Roman and Mediaeval London Excavation Council (RoMLEC) excavated, concentrating particularly on the Cripple-gate Roman Fort. At the same time, Kathleen Kenyon began excavations for the Southwark Excavation Committee (SEC) on the initiative of the Surrey Archaeological Society. In the 1940s alone RoMLEC conducted 13 excavations, while Kenyon directed six. Much of RoMLEC's funding came from donations, and considerable public support for archaeology was generated by their excavation of the Walbrook Mithraeum from 1951-54. RoMLEC continued to be active into the 1960s, while SEC eventually became part of the DGLA of the Museum of London.

The Guildhall Museum appointed its first field officer in 1938, and continued to excavate after the War as its resources permitted. In the 1960s its officers were very active: these were the days of 'rescue archaeology', so that often it was possible only to observe destruction or to dig quickly if there was opportunity. Despite these handicaps, a lot was achieved by the Museum. The discovery and hurried excavation of the Roman baths at Huggin Hill in 1964 and again in 1969 caught the imagination of the public and did much to promote the needs of archaeology. As a measure of this, many archaeological societies were formed in the 1960s, and a few history societies experimented with archaeology.

Since 1973 the DUA of the newly formed Museum of London has conducted a growing number of excavations and watching briefs each year. In 1989 alone they dealt with over 50 sites. In 1983 the DGLA was formed out of the existing regional units. In 1989 they were involved with over 60 excavations.

Finds and archive locations

The location of finds and archives from excavations are two of the main objectives of the Excavation Index. The London project has been successful at locating archives, with material recorded for 69.4% of

3. J. Y. Akerman 'Notes of Antiquarian Researches in the Summer and Autumn of 1854' *Archaeologia* 36 (1855) 175-6.

4. Report by a working party of the Ancient Monuments Board for England Committee for Rescue Archaeology *Principles of Publication in Rescue Archaeology* (1975).

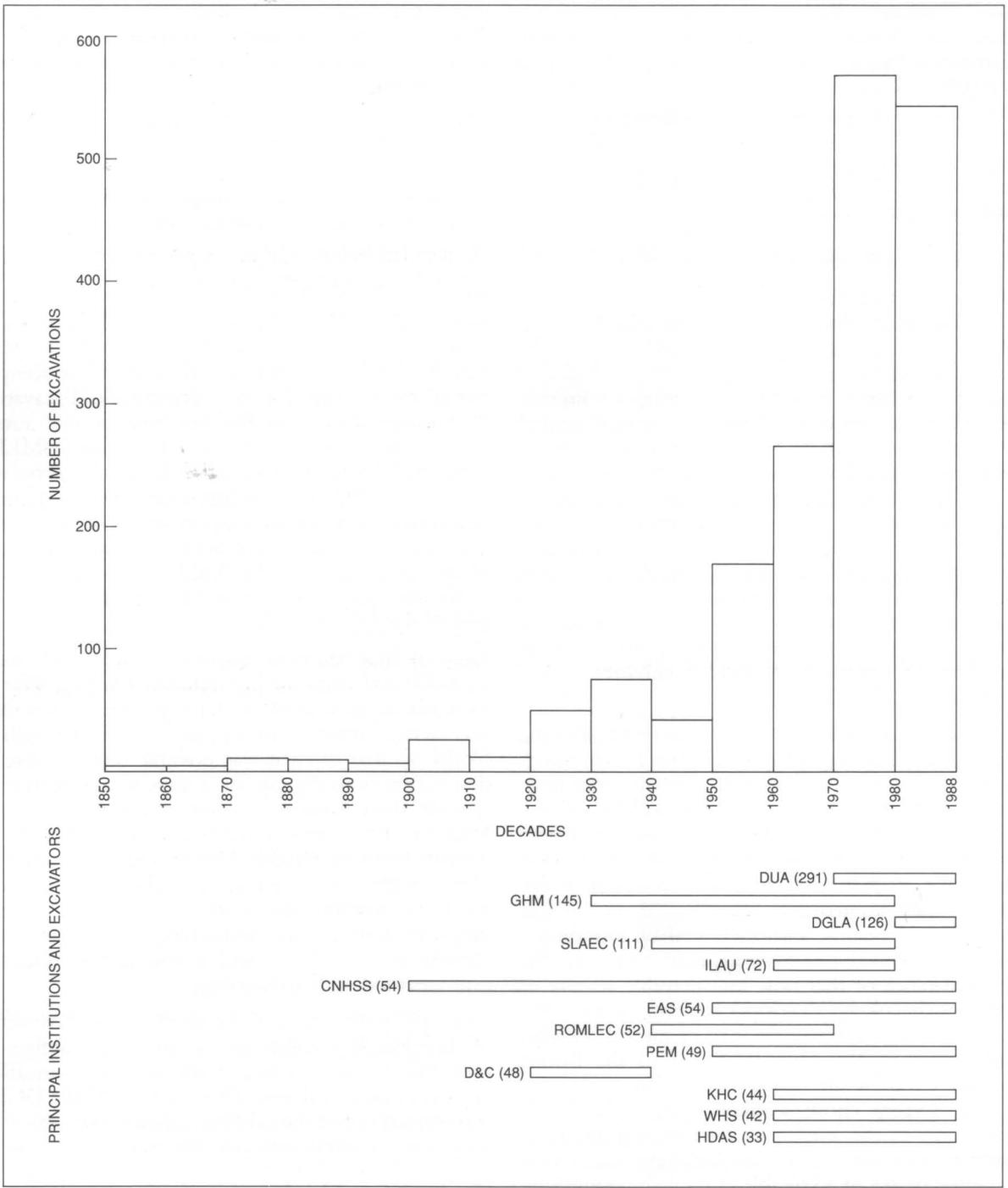


Fig. 2: number of excavations by decade since 1850, and principal institutions (with numbers of excavations).
 DUA – Dept. of Urban Archaeology, MoL
 GHM – Guildhall Museum
 DGLA – Dept. of Greater London Archaeology, MoL
 SLAEC – Southwark & Lambeth Arch. Excavation Committee
 ILAU – Inner London Archaeology Unit
 CNHSS – Croydon Natural History & Scientific Soc.
 EAS – Enfield Archaeological Soc.
 ROMLEC – Roman & Mediaeval London Excavation Council
 PEM – Passmore Edwards Museum
 D&C – Dunning & Cottrill (Inspectors for Soc. of Antiquaries)
 KHC – Kingston Heritage Centre & Kingston Archaeological Soc.
 WHS – Wandsworth Historical Soc.
 HDAS – Hendon & District Archaeological Soc.

excavations. It has been less successful with regard to finds, with locations recorded for only 60.8% of excavations. The reverse might have been expected, as archaeologists formerly tended to be more concerned with artefacts than with the documentation of their work. In contrast, a publication of some type, even if only a note in an ephemeral newsletter, exists for 87% of excavations recorded.

The high level of success in locating archive and finds is due in part to the centralised nature of archaeology in the 'county' over the last three decades, focusing on the Guildhall Museum, the Museum of London, and the Passmore Edwards Museum. These institutions have set high standards of excavation and recording, and have provided secure repositories for the material generated. Many local societies have also taken a responsible approach to the documentation of fieldwork and the centralised storage of material. Many have deposited their collections with local museums, or in some cases curate museums of their own. Seventy-four institutional repositories have been identified for London.

It would be unrealistic to expect finds or archive locations to be identified for every excavation. Documentation and even the finds will seldom survive from antiquarian or early twentieth-century excavations. Other excavations are too small or rapid to produce much material, and some excavations do not recover artefacts or features. To this may be added those excavators who retained their material and have left the district, or whose material has simply been lost or accidentally destroyed.

Microfilming

In response to the Frere Report on the principles of publication in rescue archaeology⁴, the NAR of RCHME provides a microfilming service for archaeological archives. It houses an expanding collection of records on microfilm which is available for public consultation. One function of the Excavation Index is to assist in the identification of archives which may be appropriate for microfilming.

Using the Index

The database created by the Excavation Index is a national archaeological resource. It is computerised, allowing information to be retrieved from any combination of fields in the record.

Printouts of the Index for London may be purchased from the NAR library, and these contain a full catalogue with indices for date of excavation and periods represented on excavated sites. It is usually more satisfactory to frame enquiries using specific criteria of interest, e.g. location, excavator, or site type. Information is available in this format for the whole of England. Enquiries can be made by personal visit, or by telephone or letter addressed to the NAR as detailed below. On-line searching of the Index is possible via a computer terminal in the NAR Library in Fortress House, London, where staff are available to guide you through the enquiry screens. This service is free. A wide range of catalogue and index options for printouts are available, for which a nominal charge is made to cover the cost of printout.

Future prospect

Now that the compilation stage of the national Excavation Index has been completed, it is important that it should be regularly maintained and new information added. In London this is being undertaken in close co-operation with the Greater London Sites and Monuments Record. A questionnaire will be sent at the start of each year to every active archaeological society and individual in London, and the accuracy and value of the Index will in part depend on the replies received. If your society does not receive the questionnaire, please contact us!

Contact address

National Archaeological Record,
R.C.H.M.E.,
Fortress House,
23 Savile Row,
London,
W1X 2JQ.

Telephone: 071-973-3151

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