

London evaluations in the 1990s

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The surveys

PROFESSIONAL archaeologists have become accustomed over the last few years to repeating a litany of words and phrases from PPG 16, such as "a material consideration in determining planning decisions", "a presumption in favour of physical preservation", and "evaluation before determination". But what has been the effect of the provisions of PPG 16 on the types of archaeological evidence uncovered in London?

A study of the impact of PPG 16 nationally was undertaken by Pagoda Associates Ltd and reported in January 1992. However it had nothing to say about the special circumstances of London's archaeology; the London arrangements were in state of flux at the time. The Standing Conference on London Archaeology therefore decided to commission a study to assess the effectiveness of PPG 16 in London in the light of the new arrangements. This study examined the calendar years 1992 and 1993, and looked particularly closely at the two sample boroughs of Hillingdon and Islington, in order to illuminate the routine of dealing with archaeology in the planning process.

In London the advent of PPG 16 led to an overall rise in the number of fieldwork projects. The balance of fieldwork also changed, with an increased emphasis on evaluations and a decreasing proportion of watching briefs and full-scale excavations (see Fig. 1). About 25% of field projects in 1992 and 1993 were watching briefs and about 10% were excavations, preserving the archaeology by record. Excavations most often arose from positive results obtained by evaluations; more than 70% of them occurred in this way.

The increasing place of the field evaluation in archaeological practice was one of several aspects of the archaeological scene in London which clearly required further research. SCOLA has therefore decided to commission a further survey of the conduct of field evaluations in London, and their role in protecting its archaeological resource. This will form an adjunct to the first SCOLA survey, and an amplification of some of its most important sections. It will also serve to update some of its basic findings. The statistics of the first survey will be

used for the purposes of comparison of long-term trends, and new statistics will be collected from evaluation exercises within a twelve-month period. The new survey will go ahead during the course of 1997. It will focus on the selection of sites for evaluation, the field techniques employed, the balance between positive and negative results, and the numbers leading to preservation by record or preservation *in situ*.

Where necessary, the report will proceed to make recommendations for good practice in the conduct of evaluations in London. While specific to archaeology in the Greater London area, this encompasses such a wide variety of site types that it should be of interest to archaeologists working outside London, for application elsewhere.

The nature of evaluations

Sites for which development is proposed in planning applications are selected for field evaluation for a number of reasons. It is often because they lie within archaeological priority zones outlined on planning constraints maps, which cover about 15-20% of the Greater London area. Within the site boundaries may be isolated find-spots on the Greater London Sites and Monuments Record, or structures which appear on historic maps. Other important factors include significant topography or geology, or even the size of the proposed development. The decisions for selection are made by archaeological curators, that is planning staff in the City of London and Southwark, and English Heritage staff for the rest of Greater London.

The aim of these evaluation exercises is to excavate a representative sample of the proposed development area, and assess the extent, character and importance of any archaeological remains which may be disturbed. Their ultimate purpose is two-fold: they serve the requirements of the development industry to obtain planning consent, and they form part of the continuing endeavour to study London's past and communicate the findings to the general public.

The results of a field evaluation are the key to the future treatment of the archaeology of a site. It is crucial that it should be conducted to a high standard and produce reliable results, as important

decisions will rest on its findings. The results provide the basic information for the future conservation and management of the archaeological resource. In the immediate future it may lead on to a watching brief, an excavation, preservation *in situ*, or a combination of these elements.

An evaluation which reveals archaeology, and leads to excavation or preservation, is not necessarily more successful than one which does not. A successful evaluation is one that correctly assesses the site. However, a negative rate which is too high across the whole range of evaluations suggests a waste of effort and talent, and may even raise suspicions that there is a financial motive for undertaking more than is necessary. The first survey's analysis, based on reading site summaries in *London Archaeologist* round-ups, site-code lists and contractors' annual reviews, and also on evaluation reports, interviews and correspondence, found that 28.6% of evaluations were positive in 1992 and 29.2% in 1993 (see Fig. 1). The figures could be challenged as based on subjective judgements, but the rate is surprisingly consistent. There was a higher proportion of positive results in the inner London boroughs such as Islington and Westminster.

The positive rate may seem low compared to figures from outside London, but there can be no direct comparison. Techniques such as aerial photography and fieldwalking are of little assistance in assessing sites here, and the rate in some areas was quite high. It is accelerating as increased knowledge leads to more successful prediction, especially in some prehistoric periods, and may eventually reach about 50%. In 1994 the positive rate in the prehistoric settlement areas on the alluvium of the north-eastern boroughs may have reached

this magic figure, that is five evaluations out of ten. The hit rate is improving as knowledge of the priority zones improves.

Negative evaluations also contribute useful information to the body of data for the whole of London. They provide details of past landscapes, negative evidence about settlement and form patterns of low densities of finds. Their results are noted in the Greater London Sites and Monuments Record, and may in the future trigger evaluations of nearby sites.

The results

The increased use of evaluations has allowed a broader sampling of the archaeological resource. This has increased the number of locations of discoveries for each period, and should therefore have given us a wider knowledge of both prehistoric and historic periods. The results of positive evaluations in 1992-3 were analysed by period. Those sites which produced evidence of several periods were given scores for each (see Fig. 2).

The totals for the prehistoric periods were encouragingly high and accelerating, the total score of 43 for 1993 showing an improvement on that of 29 in 1992, over an increase of 20% in the total number of evaluations. These were sites which produced prehistoric features and real evidence of occupation, not just stray flints in plough-soils.

Where the period was specified, a comparison of their results shows significant variations. The palaeolithic did not appear at all in either year. Palaeolithic evidence was perhaps not found because of a lack of opportunities to investigate the interface between gravel and brickearth strata, as was noted in some evaluation reports. Finds from the neolithic and iron age periods appeared quite fre-

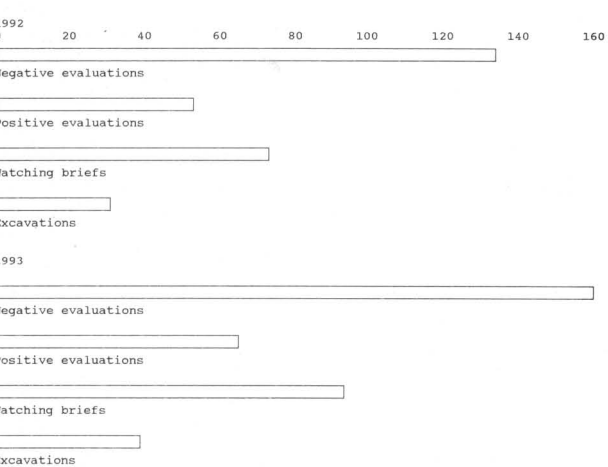


Fig. 1: types of fieldwork project 1992-3

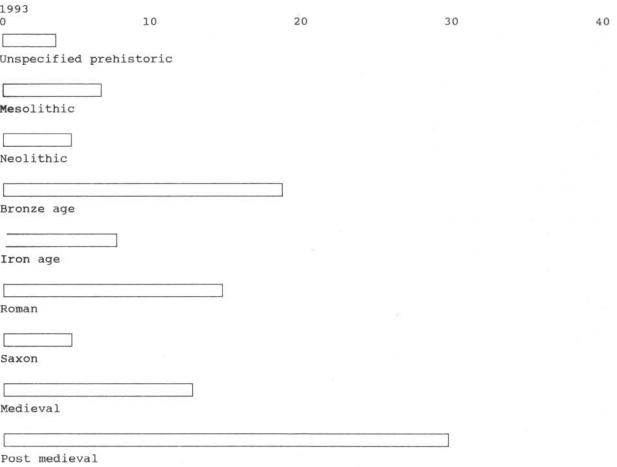


Fig. 2: results of positive evaluations

quently, but the real success story was the bronze age, especially in evaluations done in 1993.

The outer boroughs like Croydon, Hillingdon and Newham had the highest prehistoric scores, but this evidence also appeared strongly in Southwark. Bronze Age discoveries have been distributed fairly evenly across Greater London. In the north-eastern boroughs the positive results have mostly come from the peat strata in the Thames alluvial floodplain. Here preserved wooden structures have been found, particularly trackways.

Roman evidence was most frequently found in the predictable areas of the City of London and Southwark, with more scattered finds coming from the outer boroughs. However, the Saxon period fared worse than the mesolithic, showing most strongly within the City of Westminster. Medieval evidence was more evenly distributed, but as with the Roman period, probably occurs in more easily-predicted locations. Post-medieval discoveries of various types were almost ubiquitous.

The period scores of the watching briefs and excavations in 1992 and 1993 were also analysed in the same way and showed a similar pattern. Again the bronze age showed most strongly of all the prehistoric periods, and the prehistoric rate was accelerating. As most of these field projects arose from positive evaluations, this pattern might be expected.

Research and synthesis

Are evaluations therefore working as a prospecting tool, exploring aspects of London's archaeology hitherto little known? Is it feasible to advance knowledge by publishing syntheses of groups of evaluation results, divided by theme or by area? With this end in mind, can a research element be expressed in evaluation briefs and specifications?

A research framework may be difficult to incorporate into the limited objectives set out in an evaluation brief, but it should be regarded as an important consideration at the stage of devising a mitigation strategy. Positive evaluation results should lead to research questions. The long-awaited *London Assessment Document* may provide a means for framing these research questions within a strategic context for all of London, but it is probably already dangerously out-of-date.

Evaluation reports need to set their results in the context of background research. If there has been no preceding desk-based assessment, this should include basic cartographical and documentary research. A large proportion of evaluation results concern historic periods, and if they are not related

to historic evidence there is a risk of the evaluation being a sterile exercise.

Indeed, until some systematic use is made of the information gathered it is questionable how far the evaluation process is leading to an increased knowledge and understanding of London's archaeology. It is certainly adding small pieces to a vast unsorted pile of data. However the extent of the dissemination of evaluation reports and the publication of their contents seems insufficient for research needs. This problem is particularly acute at present because of the current difficulties of access to the Museum of London archives at Lever Street.

Some thematic syntheses of the information that evaluations are discovering are required to reveal their composite meaning. These could prove very valuable as predictive models to inform decisions about the selection of proposed development sites for evaluation in the future. As such they would be an improvement on the current priority zones marked on constraints maps and find-spots noted on the GLSMR. Slotted onto the foundation of the *LAD* they could provide the building blocks to construct a strategy for the general management of the archaeological resource in Greater London. The positive evaluation hit rate could then be expected to rise to the desired level.

Thematic and area syntheses of evidence from the multitude of minor fieldwork projects are possible within the work of the larger archaeological contractors, but have not been undertaken yet. Some of the sites can be incorporated into their long-term publication projects. Some areas and themes are now covered by the evaluations of several contractors, such as the four south-eastern boroughs and those east of the River Lea. In these contexts, area syntheses might best be tackled by locally-based societies and individual researchers, while thematic syntheses could be covered by professionals working within contracting units or consultancies. Small area studies are often effectively done by consultants for desk-based assessments, but these are not suitable for publication and are not generally available to the public.

There is no provision for this work of synthesis in PPG 16; it is outside the planning process and therefore not under the purview of the English Heritage advisory section. It is however a consequence of the work generated by PPG 16 and will somehow have to be dealt with by London's archaeological community. The mass of *evaluations* is only of *value* if it can be used to develop an overall strategy for London's archaeology.