

Bill White

The passion, intellect and good company of a leading expert in the field in human bioarchaeology are celebrated by Jelena Bekvalac and other colleagues

Bill White, who sadly died last year, was an expert on human skeletal remains who helped found the Centre for Human Bioarchaeology at the Museum of London and became the inaugural Curator of Osteology for its Wellcome Osteological Research Database (Word) project. He played a pivotal role in establishing the Centre as a benchmark of excellence in the field of bioarchaeology and in bringing to fruition the Wellcome-funded project.

Born in Harlesden, north-west London, Bill attended Acton County grammar school. While some of his fellow pupils formed the world-famous rock band, The Who, Bill went on to study chemistry at Salford University and enjoyed a 30-year career as an organic chemist with GlaxoSmithKline.

Initially, his interests in history and archaeology had been hobbies, but after leaving GlaxoSmithKline, he went on to study them more seriously. He gained a diploma in archaeology followed by a post-diploma course in

human skeletal remains in archaeology at the University of London, which he said made him realise immediately that this was what he really wanted to do with his life.

In the mid-1980s Bill began a long association with the Museum of London initially as a freelance osteologist working on the medieval skeletons from the church St Nicholas Shambles, which led to the first of his publications, *Skeletal Remains from the Cemetery of St Nicholas Shambles* (1988). Bill went on to volunteer in the Museum of London's environmental archaeology section later becoming part of the osteology team at the Museum of London Archaeology Service, and participating in excavations.

Bill was involved in numerous projects at the museum, many of international significance. He was also instrumental in the development and success of two important exhibitions based upon the human remains curated by the Museum of London. The first, *London Bodies* (1998), showcased the "changing shape of Londoners from prehistoric times to the present day" and proved to be one of the most popular exhibitions the museum had shown. The second was an equally successful exhibition held at the Wellcome Trust, *Skeletons: London's Buried Bones* (2008) that highlighted, through the analysis of skeletons from Roman, medieval and post-medieval periods, the changing face and development of London.

Bill was a founder member of the British Association of Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology, and a member of several other societies including the Paleopathology Association, the Richard III Society and his local archaeology. He was an active correspondent and commentator in journals and newspapers; notably on the Council for British Archaeology website, where frequently he demonstrated his vast spectrum of knowledge, from human remains to



Museum of London

woolly mammoths. He was a fellow of the Royal Society of Chemists and Society of Antiquaries of London, contributing to the latter's tercentenary exhibition in 2007.

Bill was a quiet man, with a sharp sense of humour, deeply respected and loved by all who met and worked with him. His intellect ranged across such diverse subjects as mummification in ancient Egypt and popular music, of which he had an encyclopedic knowledge. Such a glorious variety of knowledge was put to devastatingly good use on the BBC quiz-show *Eggheads*, when as captain of the Museum of London team the resident eggheads were defeated.

Although he retired from the museum in 2009, Bill became an emeritus curator and remained very much a part of the Centre for Human Bioarchaeology, where his erudition, sincerity, kindness and passion for his vocation were greatly appreciated.

He is survived by his wife, Jenny, and their children William (also known as Bill), Eleanor, Frederick, Roland and Richard, and six granddaughters.

ABOVE Bill White with a research skeleton in the Centre for Human Bioarchaeology at the Museum of London, which he was instrumental in establishing. His work there was the subject of one of London Archaeologist's best attended Annual Lectures of recent years.

LEFT Bill and colleague Jelena with the plastic articulated skeleton christened 'Dr W'



Lynne Cowal

Geoff Egan

Beth Richardson salutes a foreshore pioneer, global traveller, teller of tales and superior scholar – the master of trifles, toys and trinkets

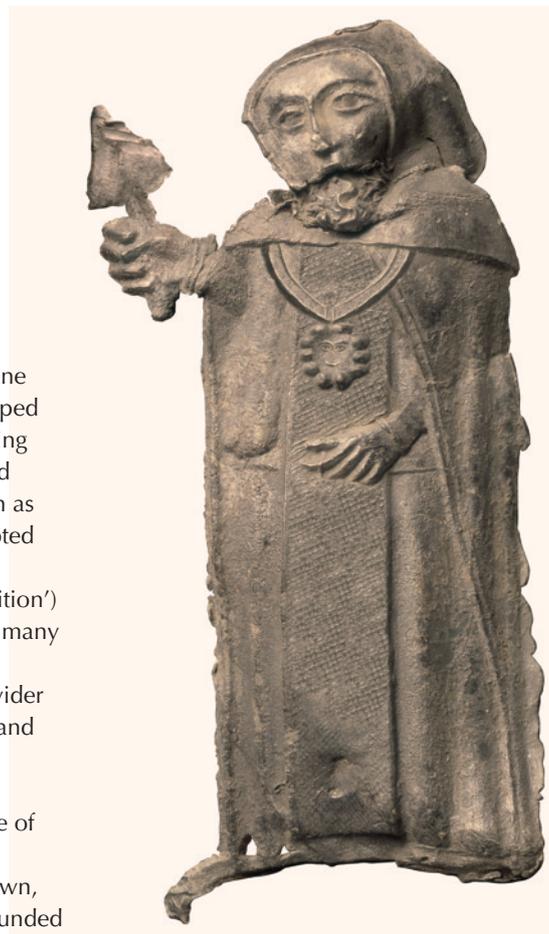
Geoff died suddenly just before Christmas. He was a much loved world authority in his field of medieval and post-medieval finds, and tributes have poured in from colleagues and former colleagues, mudlarks, metal detectorists, academics and museum curators, all stunned by the loss of a great archaeologist, mentor and friend.

Geoff was a lifelong Londoner, but travelled more widely than almost any of his colleagues. As a small boy he discovered the joys of mudlarking on the Thames waterfront; he dug with his cousin or school friends on the foreshore at Chiswick and Blackfriars, and had a bedroom museum of clay pipes and other treasures. After school in Harrow and university at Cambridge (Classics and Archaeology) Geoff joined the Museum of London's Department of Urban Archaeology in 1976 at the beginning of those halcyon days when the combination of government funding for the new archaeological units and a massive programme of building work in London meant that scores of young archaeologists could settle in one area, gain local knowledge and become specialists in their chosen fields. Geoff worked on and later directed excavations at the major medieval

waterfront sites including Swan Lane and Trig Lane, and quickly developed an interest and skill in understanding whole groups of objects which had scarcely been noticed before, such as cloth seals and lead toys. He adopted the late-medieval and early post-medieval world (the 'Age of Transition') as his special field at a time when many archaeologists focused on earlier periods, and made expert use of wider historical evidence such as prints and drawings to illuminate these dark corners.

Geoff of course knew the value of what he was doing, and became impatient, and ultimately worn down, by the bureaucracy of developer-funded archaeology. He saw his escape to full-time work on the Portable Antiquities Scheme at the British Museum in 2010 as the culmination of his career, something that was a source of great joy to him. It was a tragedy that his time there was so short.

Many things about Geoff stand out, notably his complete independence in the way he worked – most importantly, in retrospect, in forging links with the Thames mudlarks and metal detectorists well before other archaeologists thought to do so. His ability to work both on his own and with curators and other specialists at the Museum of London – his huge body of more than 100 scholarly finds catalogues and other publications will remain standard works. Traditional values, at least in relying on a bulging briefcase and vast library, rather than Google – Geoff had a notoriously uncomfortable relationship with computers. Plantsmanship in his garden in North Wembley and elsewhere – something few people knew about, but his mastery of which may have come second only to the past. Creature comforts at work – a cup of strong and tilting tea, a massive jigsaw puzzle in the tearoom to be assembled without reference to the picture on the lid, and pleasure in telling a good story or discussing the



latest museum or archaeological news, which he always seemed to know before anyone else. The frequent classical allusions, and lengthy quotations in Greek and Latin – even extracts from the Kalevala in Finnish (initially mistaken by some of us for Greek or Latin...). Epic travels, especially in Europe and Scandinavia – the basis of countless discoveries that in turn inspired learning the languages to research them. Sociability – scholarship wasn't the only reason Geoff attended so many conferences and meetings, and he took great pleasure and pride in his livery company, the newly established Company of Arts Scholars, Dealers and Collectors of which he was Master in 2009. Above all, kindness and generosity: Geoff was the least stuffy or stand-offish of people, and always thinking of others.

ABOVE A much enjoyed leaving card from colleagues at MOLA took the form of a mock catalogue page, featuring pilgrim souvenirs expertly manipulated by Andy Chopping to illustrate Geoff's life. This uncannily familiar figure was captioned: 'A lead secular badge MWH10<2>+ depicting Geoffrey of Harrow enrobed as Master of the Guild of Arts Scholars and carrying the mystical trowel with which he conquered much of medieval London.'
LEFT Geoff, wearing the actual robes and regalia of Master of his guild in 2009.



The Company of Arts Scholars, Collectors & Dealers