

Archaeology with an Islamic community

To make the construction of the Baitul Aziz Islamic Cultural Centre viable, future users of the Southwark mosque took part in the pre-development excavations of the site. John Maloney reports on the community project.

Community Archaeology has begun to figure increasingly in the work of Pre-Construct Archaeology (PCA). We spent a summer season in 2012 excavating with school groups and other members of the public in the walled garden at Fulham Palace, west London.¹ More recently, we have been collaborating with members of the Baitul Aziz Islamic Cultural Centre, Dickens Square, London SE1, in an exciting project, which has entailed the excavation of archaeological remains ahead of redevelopment with community involvement and training.

The singular circumstances of the Dickens Square project have no doubt contributed to making it such a huge success. From its origins in a tiny shop basement in Newington Crescent, a small mosque was built on the current site at Dickens Square in 1990–91. With access for men only and a capacity of 400 people, the mosque began to get quite crowded during prayers. The new Baitul Aziz Islamic Cultural Centre – including a much larger mosque – received planning permission in 2006 and was built in front of the old mosque, on a skew to the Harper Road frontage, facing directly south-east towards Mecca. It holds around 2500 people and provides

facilities for women as well as space for prayer and study. Such is its popularity that an extension over the site of the original mosque has been much needed for quite some time; during Friday prayers, mats are laid down outside the mosque in order to accommodate even more worshippers.

The archaeological potential of the site was never in dispute: Roman law forbade burials within settlements, so cemeteries developed along the main roads leading from the town. Within the immediate area, numerous records of Roman burials support the suggestion that the subject site lay outside, and to the south of, the main Southwark settlement. Antiquarian findings at Deveril Street² have been more recently supplemented by the discovery by PCA of 44 skeletons and two cremation burials in urns at nearby Trinity Street,³ and 14 burials uncovered at Harper Road by AOC, as well as the famous ‘Harper Road woman’.⁴ Beyond the burial grounds, Roman land use appears to be mainly agricultural with evidence for field and boundary ditches and plough soils.

That archaeological excavations can be expensive for developers posed a particular problem for the mosque as its income is derived solely from donations



from the congregation. After some careful thought by PCA Managing Director Gary Brown and some discussions with Dr Chris Constable, Senior Archaeology Officer, London Borough of Southwark, a practical solution was arrived at which involved members of the mosque’s community working alongside PCA’s professional archaeological team. This approach was perceived to bring wide ranging benefits. Using volunteer labour from the mosque would assist in offsetting some of the costs to the congregation. The project would foster community archaeology and demonstrate how outreach can have a meaningful impact. The scheme would not only provide work experience, but also an opportunity for a group of young men

ABOVE The volunteers outside the mosque © Strephon Duckering / PCA
LEFT Site supervisor, Neil Hawkins examines pottery from the variety of household goods excavated by the volunteers from an 18th-century well © Strephon Duckering / PCA



to gain an insight into commercial archaeology and the local history of the area, and to assist their own Muslim community.

Arrangements were made for eight volunteers to attend an intensive week-long training session at PCA's Brockley offices. This covered health and safety, archaeological practice and recording, use of surveying equipment, sorting and classification of objects, environmental processing and site photography. This provided the volunteers with a basic understanding of archaeological purpose and practice. For their part, because the volunteers found the training interesting and stimulating, they were more confident about putting theory into practice on the site.

From the outset, the trustees and members of the Baitul Aziz Islamic Cultural Centre expressed their fervent wish to engage with their neighbours and the local community at large. They very much wanted to break down any barriers and to show that the mosque was a place of learning and worship with a welcome for everyone. To this end, a number of outreach efforts were agreed. Information boards were provided around the site and PCA set up a blog dedicated to the project, to provide regular updates and interviews with the volunteers. Also, at the initial discussions with the trustees it was agreed to have an open day just before the end of the excavations to set out the results and to provide an opportunity for visitors to have a guided tour of the mosque.

The PCA blog,⁵ Twitter,⁶ and Facebook⁷ sites were also used to publicise the project and have proved a success with, for instance, over 1800 'visits' from countries outside the UK, as diverse as the USA, Canada, South Africa, Australia, Singapore, Mauritius, Belgium and Ireland. This drew interest from a Belgian TV company and mosque volunteers were interviewed live for a Bangladeshi radio station.

Key aspects of such a community archaeology project are the provision of training and the choice of a suitable site. Dickens Square was ideal. Given its location, we knew that it was unlikely that there would be complex stratigraphy or a great number of features. It was a relatively small site and not under onerous time constraints;

and, most importantly, it was not likely to be hazardous to first-time volunteers who hadn't worked on such sites before. In the event, there was more than enough archaeology to engage and retain the interest of the volunteers. We had anticipated the possibility of Roman burials and were not disappointed: excavations revealed four Roman inhumations (some with grave goods) and a cremation urn overlain by a thick deposit of 'dark earth', which we were able to systematically excavate in spits and using a metal detector, with three dimensional recording of finds. Two late 18th-century wells were found but perhaps more unexpectedly we also encountered three mid-18th-century burials of whole cattle, which had most likely been infected with the rinderpest disease (cattle plague).

Excavation concluded with a highly successful Open Day which attracted numerous members of the mosque congregation who had come to Friday prayers, and other local residents who appreciated the welcome that they received and the refreshments provided.

After nine weeks on site, the volunteers have enjoyed and valued the experience. Some have been so enthused that they would like to continue participating on an amateur basis, or to try and extend their experience and gain paid employment at some future time. Two members of the team are currently assisting with processing the vast quantities of finds produced during the excavations. Analysis of the numerous metal and other small finds from the excavation's dark earth is being facilitated by a

collaborative project with the University of Newcastle. Under the direction of Dr James Gerrard, second-year archaeology students will benefit from the opportunity to work with a large and exciting assemblage of material, whilst the results of their research will feed back into the analysis and publication of the excavations.

The project has thus been and continues to be a tremendous success. The client, Ahmed Uddin, wrote: *"Thank you John and Gary for all your efforts and I would just like to thank you so much on behalf of the mosque and the wider community."*

Acknowledgements

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1. <http://www.fulhampalace.org/community-archaeology-dig-walled-garden/>.
2. A.J. Kempe 'Discovery of Roman Antiquities in Deveril Street, Southwark' *Archaeologia* 28 (1836) 466–70.
3. D. Killock *Excavations at Trinity Street Pre-Construct Archaeology Monograph*, in prep.
4. C. Edwards *Harper Road (Symington House), London Borough of Southwark – a Post-Excavation Assessment Report*. AOC unpublished report (2011).
5. <http://preconstruct.wordpress.com>.
6. <https://twitter.com/SE42PD>.
7. <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Pre-Construct-Archaeology-Ltd-PCA/669247616418678>.

BELOW Burials of cattle affected by rinderpest disease (cattle plague) were an unexpected find © Strehon Duckering / PCA

