

Ivor Noël Hume, 1927–2017: his London years

an appreciation by Peter Marsden

Ivor Noël Hume became one of the founding fathers of post-medieval ‘historical archaeology’ when, in 1956, he moved from his post as archaeologist at the Guildhall Museum to be head of archaeology at Colonial Williamsburg in the USA. He transformed how the early English colonial settlements in Virginia were investigated.

Prior to that, from December 1949 to 1956, he was employed at Guildhall Museum, initially as a ‘temporary whole-time assistant’ to the museum’s Keeper, Adrian Oswald, and then on a permanent basis to visit the growing number of post-war building sites to find archaeological treasures of Roman and later times for the Museum’s collection. He had a natural understanding of archaeology, but no formal training, and he could work well with contractors on building sites. Noël had no tools, but he did inherit the museum’s pre-war vintage bellows camera repaired with surgical tape. He found he could not stand by as the remains of Roman and medieval buildings were briefly revealed before being destroyed while he rescued antiquities, so he set about recording

the remains, though this presented problems, not least when he was nearly killed by a drag-line excavator.

His discoveries during those seven years included the Roman public baths in Cheapside, a major Roman road crossing the Walbrook stream on the Bucklersbury House site where W F Grimes had found the Temple of Mithras, extensive traces of Roman buildings in Cannon Street and Watling Street, and the enigmatic ‘long walls’ of Knight Rider Street, undoubtedly a Roman public building of some sort, which he mapped. He also recorded parts of medieval buildings, and was especially expert in finding unusual objects in Roman and later wells and pits, including a Roman ladder, a young Roman girl’s leather bikini trunks, and an amphora that had been thrown into a pit on top of pots during the Boudican revolt in AD 60–1.

To those who came after him, his article in Ralph Merrifield’s festschrift in 1978,¹ brought home the difficulties of his early archaeological career at a time when archaeology was beginning to become recognised as part of the redevelopment process, and his

autobiography² is essential reading for anyone studying the history of archaeology in London. The London chapters are a depressing story, and, had I not experienced some of the same difficulties when I succeeded him in 1960, readers might think that he was exaggerating.

He was one of the first to demonstrate how much of London’s past was being destroyed at a crucial time just after the war

as redevelopment in the City began. In time his discoveries helped to show the need for professional archaeological investigations in the City, which began in 1973, thanks to Max Hebditch who established the Department of Urban Archaeology as the last gasp of Guildhall Museum’s existence before being merged with the London Museum to become the Museum of London.

Noël was born in London in 1927, and as a teenager collected wartime relics, aware that they had a story to tell, as he and his mother moved around England as evacuees. He was also given much older items, particularly a 17th-century mould for casting lead bullets, and some Greek coins thousands of years old, which excited his imagination. His first love, though, was as an actor and playwright, but he found no career in this. So, when aged 18, he heard on the radio the story of a fireman who had fallen into the Thames and surfaced clutching a clay tobacco pipe, he started searching the bed of the Thames and found historic objects. He took these to the City’s Guildhall Museum, where he met the Keeper, Adrian Oswald, who identified them.

The museum, then part of Guildhall Library, was mostly housed in the basement of Guildhall, and Noël began volunteering to help, first by washing finds from the excavations of Professor W F Grimes, and then by helping Oswald on a large building site at Bankside, Southwark, opposite the City. His natural understanding of what archaeology was about soon led him to write a report on a 17th-century pit that he had excavated, ‘the first relatively detailed record of a post-medieval site to enter the City’s archives.’ In 1949, he also helped Oswald to uncover and preserve the 3rd-century Roman mosaic pavement at 11 Ironmonger Lane, in the City, after which, ‘I was even more firmly on the archaeological hook.’



© Museum of London

Fig 1: Noël with his future wife, Audrey, on site at St Swithun’s House in 1949



© Museum of London

Fig 2: revealing the mosaic at Ironmonger Lane in 1949

Oswald convinced Raymond Smith, the Guildhall Librarian and Curator, to employ Noël as his temporary assistant, but a week after starting on 5 December 1949, Oswald caught pneumonia and had to resign, and the museum's assistant, G W Lawrence, also left. 'I found myself the museum's sole professional, responsible not only for maintaining the exhibits and the collections but also for keeping my finger in the building site dike.' He was aged 22 and unqualified to take on the responsibilities. He felt that Oswald 'may have sent me as a ... St George into the battle against the advancing mechanical dragons,' alone to face the archaeological 'slaughter on the building sites.' Noël's situation could hardly get worse – but it did!

Within days of Oswald's departure, Raymond Smith told him that the Guildhall Museum was in danger of closure, so it was up to Noël to ensure that it did not happen. There were, Smith said, powerful forces at work to get the Library Committee of the Corporation of London to transfer the City's archaeological collection to the London Museum, but Smith did not want to be the official to oversee the demise of the museum.

Noël was instructed to find a steady supply of complete and restored antiquities to show to the Library Committee at its monthly meetings, and to ensure that there were newspaper

reports of discoveries. He was successful, but incurred the disapproval of Grimes who, working on a financial shoestring on behalf of the Roman and Mediaeval Excavation Council, also wanted supportive publicity to maintain its meagre funds. Noël and Grimes were set 'on a collision course' – when Grimes later met Oswald, then at Birmingham Museum, he said Noël was 'a menace.'

At that time, post-medieval archaeology was not part of mainstream

studies, and Noël decided to develop this as it would give him 'a sporting chance of making an uncontested yet legitimate name for oneself.' He began by reconstructing the evolution of glass wine bottles from finds in the Guildhall Museum, and in 1948 was visited by an archaeologist from Jamestown in Virginia who was studying 17th-century glass. Noël later said that this was 'the most important encounter of my life.'

Noël led a small band of volunteer helpers called the 'Guildhall Irregulars'. They included Audrey Baines who brought some academic archaeological experience, having dug under Sir Mortimer Wheeler and Professor Grimes. He was delighted when in 1950 she was hired as his assistant, and on a muddy trip to a Roman site in the Upchurch marshes of north Kent he asked her to marry him. Together they 'were totally committed to the task of saving London's archaeological legacy.'

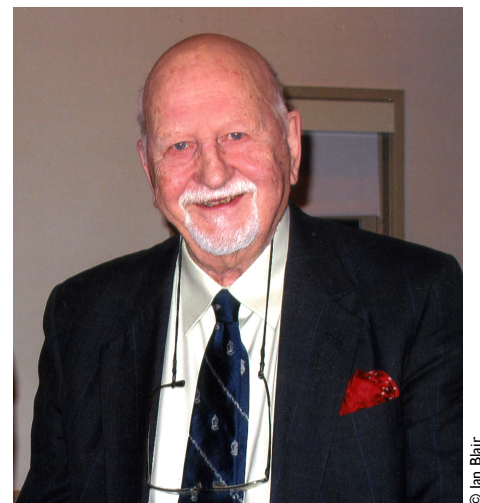
But the museum needed properly qualified staff, so in that same year the Librarian appointed Ralph Merrifield as Assistant Keeper. In future years Ralph became the quietly supportive rock behind Noël's site work. A few months later, Norman Cook arrived as Keeper of the museum, but when Noël wished to publish his archaeological findings, Cook said that he had to 'leave report writing until later.'

Noël subsequently bitterly wrote that 'Norman Cook was committed to ensuring my silence ... His decision has to have been one of the most unfortunate and ill-advised in the history of London archaeology, ensuring as it did that all but a few of the products of seven years' salvage work performed during the most

widespread rebuilding since 1666 would remain forever mute.' Shortly after that 'Cook told me that having no university degree I would be unwise to count on a career in archaeology.' This may seem to be an exaggeration, but my own experience in the 1960s was that these difficulties continued, culminating when Cook refused me permission to dig a trench on the Museum of London site – the first opportunity to investigate **all** of the defensive ditches on one site outside the Roman and medieval City wall.

Norman Cook managed to get the museum moved to a temporary home in the Royal Exchange in 1954, and asked Noël's wife, Audrey, to leave, replacing her with the amiable Bill Rector as the museum's conservator.

In 1956 Noël was invited to visit Williamsburg for three months to advise on how the colonial site could be



© Ian Blair

Fig 3: Noël at his Festschrift presentation in Williamsburg in 2013

archaeologically investigated in a more meaningful way than it had been. On his return, he found that his temporary replacement had restricted site work to collecting artefacts given to him by site workmen, which had resulted in lost opportunities. A month later Noël received a letter from Williamsburg inviting him to take up the post that led to him becoming Director of the Department of Archaeology. Thus the first chapter in London's post-war archaeology ended, and a new chapter in Noël's career began. He later wrote: 'Trudging the City, grey with cement dust and caked in mud, could not compete with Williamsburg sunshine.'

1. I N Hume 'Into the jaws of death ... walked one' J Bird, H Chapman & J Clark (Eds) *Collectanea Londiniensia – Studies in London archaeology and history* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Spec Paper 2 (1978) 7–22.

2. I N Hume *A Passion for the Past* University of Virginia (2010).