

25 glorious years

Gary Brown, founder and director of Pre-Construct Archaeology, takes a personal look back over the company's first quarter century in London.

As *London Archaeologist* celebrates its 50th anniversary, Pre-Construct Archaeology celebrates its 25th. Although quite different in concept, both promote and celebrate the diverse, and sometimes unique, archaeological landscape encapsulated by the boundaries of Greater London.

Pre-Construct Archaeology was born out of a chance comment during a conversation in May 1993 between the author and Brian Simmons, former Director of the Trust for Lincolnshire Archaeology, who had been my Director between 1983 and 1985. Although I was by 1993 long domiciled and working in London for the Department of Urban Archaeology, I had family reasons to go back to Lincolnshire fairly regularly and would call in on Brian and his wife Sarah on the way. It was two and a half years since the introduction of PPG16 and the opening up of the archaeological market. This was one of the topics of our conversation on that day and one of us said, perhaps naively, and not necessarily seriously, that 'we could do that'. Nothing more was said, but a few days later I called him to see if I had read the situation correctly – I had. Our intention was to set up a business to undertake commercial archaeological projects in Lincolnshire and the adjacent area. Brian was to be the experienced manager, I was to undertake desk-based work and Colin Palmer-Brown would lead fieldwork projects.

At that time I was a Senior Archaeologist at MoLAS and with the blessing of the then Director, Peter Chowne, I left to set up this venture. I recall one of my many somewhat bemused colleagues at MoLAS sincerely telling me that although he admired what I was doing it was, due to the prevailing market conditions, in his opinion the wrong time to be doing it. He could have been correct, but I suggest, as we celebrate our Silver Jubilee, that he might not have been!

Luck, timing, or both may have had something to do with PCA's success in London and across south-east. Initially based in Lincolnshire, my permanent home was in London and I was increasingly commissioned to undertake small pieces there. This led to the decision, in 1994, to move and separate from my partners on an amicable basis but, importantly, to retain the trading name of Pre-Construct Archaeology, which I had come up with in the first place. There was then little credible London-based competition to MoLAS and, in the spirit of PPG 16's intention to allow developers a choice of contractor, there needed to be. PCA was able to provide an, albeit small, alternative provider in the London market.

I was relatively well known to a number of people operating as archaeological consultants in the London market, including Richard Hughes (Arups/IHCM), John

Maloney (Archaeological Aspects), Duncan Hawkins (LPE) and Eric Norton and Simon O'Connor Thompson (Norton Thompson Associates) who required the credibility for their clients of having alternative suppliers. Richard Hughes provided the first significant break with a commission to undertake a watching brief during construction of the Canada Memorial in Green Park in 1994. The less than spectacular archaeology was more than made up for by the location. I loved my early morning jaunts through the park, but regret missing by minutes the overflight of the naked paraglider Jim Miller who landed on the roof of Buckingham Palace. This project was to be the first of many increasingly large projects undertaken by PCA for Arups or IHCM.

Having contacts was one thing, but to undertake larger and more complex projects I needed a team, and my time spent in London came to the rescue. In 1994, the major excavations at Heybridge in Essex were coming towards a conclusion. Two former DUA colleagues, Vicki Ridgeway and Barry Bishop, were supervising at the site. Initially I contacted them and arranged to meet in The Lamb in Leadenhall Market; Barry came on board soon after and Vicki not long after that. This was fortuitous timing as PCA was commissioned by Archaeological Aspects to undertake an archaeological evaluation at the site of the Baltic Exchange in the City of London, now the site of the Gherkin. Amongst the team were former DUA stalwarts Ron Harris and Su Leaver, but also Jenny Proctor, now Regional Manager of our Durham office. It is a reflection

BELOW Lefevre Walk Estate in 1996. Our excavations recorded in plan and section a stretch of almost 60m of the road first identified by Harvey Sheldon in the late 1960s. (all photos Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited)



of how different things were back then that, having successfully completed the evaluation of the site, we were not confident that we had sufficient resources to undertake the excavation. It is a decision that Vicki and I agonised over, and even now, 25 years later, we still question whether it was the correct decision.

1996 was another landmark year, with regards to key team members joining PCA. We had been fortunate in gaining the services of Robin Taylor-Wilson, formerly of DGLA, ultimately the founder and manager for many years of the PCA Durham office. Several of that core 1996 intake arrived through the demise of Newham Museum Services (NMS). I approached my former colleague Frank Meddens, a Project Manager at NMS. He was keen but, in a move reminiscent of Ricardo Villa's move to Spurs in 1978 ('I will come if you also bring in my pal Ossie Ardilles as well'), felt more comfortable if I could accommodate fellow manager Peter Moore. So it was that these two, now Directors, came to PCA. A few months later NMS announced its closure and several other members of staff joined PCA, including Al Douglas and Chris Jarrett, both still with us (as Assistant Project Manager and ceramics specialist), and others who have moved on including David Divers, Ken Sabel, Alison Telfer and Mark Bagwell. Two other ex-DUA exiles joined us in the same year: Jon Butler (now Post-Excavation Manager) from Germany and Dougie Killock (Senior Archaeologist) from Verona. We now had both a strong managerial and field team and were capable of undertaking projects of considerable complexity.

By 1995, we had upgraded our premises courtesy of a client, Len Wallis, whose company, Greenwich Reach Developments Ltd owned land fronting on to the Thames on both sides of Deptford Creek. Len had commissioned PCA to undertake a Desk-Based Assessment (DBA) of the land, adjacent to the Creek off a very atmospheric lane known as The Stowage. Somewhat cheekily I asked Len if I could rent an office from him, and thanks to his generosity I paid a peppercorn rent of £15 per week. This was just the kind of 'leg-up' a small and new company needed and Len remains one of the nicest people I have ever had the pleasure to do business with.

Shortly after I secured another DBA that perhaps had more profound long-term influence on both me and PCA. The recently formed Tower Hamlets Housing Action Trust had been tasked to redevelop three major estates in Old Ford, the Monteith, Lefevre Walk and Tredegar originally constructed in the late 1960s–mid-1970s. The archaeological potential of the area was well known through the pioneering work of Harvey Sheldon, where he recorded the London to Colchester road, and associated occupation activity, as it approached the crossing over the river Lea.

The DBA led to excavation at Lefevre Walk and 91–93 Parnell Road. Many sites have produced better archaeology than that at Old Ford, but these were influential in terms of proving the capability of PCA on large scale projects (see photo previous page). On solid archaeological grounds only representative sections of the road were fully excavated to natural, but such was the brouhaha that a question was actually raised in the Houses of Parliament. I am forever grateful for the robust support we received from GLAAS, and particularly the then Head of Service, Jez Reeve.

Pre-Roman activity here included a Palaeolithic handaxe found in a Roman quarry pit, and of possible ritual significance, but the earliest demonstrable evidence of human occupation dates to the Neolithic, with pits containing a substantial Peterborough Ware bowl assemblage. Mid–late Bronze Age pottery vessels and artefacts were recorded, as were later Iron Age agricultural features and a ring gully. Lining the road were three clay and timber buildings, elements of field systems and part of a small cemetery, first identified by Sheldon whose investigations found the foot end of one burial accompanied by a single vessel. When we came to fully excavate this grave, minus its feet, it contained the remains of a young woman, aged c. 23 at death and buried with several items of jewellery, including a 145-glass-bead necklace, jet bead and copper-alloy bracelets. On her left hand she wore two rings, one iron the other of gold ring with an intaglio. The most lavish of all burials recorded to date in Old Ford, this remains the most opulent excavated by PCA.

In addition to Vicki and Jenny there are three other 'survivors' from the 1995 Old Ford team, Cate Davies, now our typesetter and member of the graphics team, Dawn Morgan-Owen, a bookkeeper with the company, and Strehon Duckering, company photographer. All contribute significantly to PCA's on-going success and demonstrate that it can be possible to make the transition from the field team to other equally rewarding but quite different roles within the organisation.

PCA has now participated in literally thousands of archaeological investigations, the majority in London and its hinterland. From those, it is relatively easy for me to select particular highlights: Drapers' Gardens with its fabulous level of preservation and the exceptional late Roman hoard of mostly copper alloy tableware (LA Vol 7/1 and Vol 12/6), Tabard Square where a hitherto unsuspected religious complex was uncovered, and where the first inscription bearing the settlement's name

BELOW Excavations at Trinity Street, Southwark in 2007 revealed the remains of a predominantly 3rd- and 4th-century inhumation cemetery. Many of the burials were accompanied by grave goods, including ceramic vessels, a zoomorphic lamp, and glass vessels, three of which were still complete.



was recovered, or Hopton Street in Southwark, another early, but exceptional site with contrasting prehistoric and industrial era archaeology (LA 9/3 & 4), the Olympic Park (undertaken jointly with MoLAS) and of course the Shadwell Roman Bathhouse. However, it is easy to forget some of the other important, but less high-profile projects PCA has been involved with in the London region. This was brought home to me in a recent poll of twenty-five long serving members of the PCA team, who selected their top 25 PCA sites: in total 215 different sites were selected, 133 from Greater London. These projects included sites of all eras, size and complexity; I have no intention of listing them all, but will briefly highlight a few.

Prehistoric era

Excavations in advance of building **Ashford Prison, Middlesex**, evidence of Mesolithic flint tool manufacture, a Neolithic monument was erected and extensive Bronze Age field system. Iron Age round houses continued to respect the Neolithic monument. Hats off to the project supervisor Tim Carew, for the micro-contour survey which showed that although much of the site was apparently level, all of the round houses were built on marginally higher, and presumably drier ground.

Two sites in Southwark, **Three Oak Lane and Hopton Street**, provided evidence for late Neolithic and Bronze Age agricultural activity. At Hopton Street a late Neolithic bowl, containing a flint blade and core, was buried, perhaps in a dedicatory function prior to ploughing the land for the first time. This ploughing was demonstrated by regular 'V'-shaped striations cut into the top of the natural sands (LA 9/3). Further east, excavations at Three Oak Lane perhaps went one better, recovering the tip of a Bronze Age timber ard share itself.

At **Westcroft Lane, Carshalton**, close to one of the springheads feeding the River Wandle and downslope from a Bronze Age hill fort, a number of Bronze Age pits and gullies contained objects that had clearly been deliberately placed, rather than being disposed of as waste. These included a semi-circular ditch containing a horse skull surrounded by fragments of quern stone and burnt clay. A nearby pit contained a fragment of red deer skull and antlers arranged around the edge of the pit. Numbered amongst the many sceptics who refute ritual explanations for such findings, was a reviewer of the publication text who asked: 'Do you believe that the horse's head in the bed in the Godfather was a ritual deposition?' Well, yes, obviously...

Roman era

Alongside much publicised sites such as **Drapers' Gardens, Tabard Square** or the **Shadwell bathhouse**, PCA has investigated numerous interesting and important Roman era sites, many of them in Southwark.

At the **former Sorting Office, Swan Street**, early field ditches and drainage gullies included a large ditch which may have been the settlement boundary marker. By the mid-2nd century, a series of pits and wells or ritual shafts had been dug, which produced ceramic

vessels that had holes drilled into them, prior to burial. Such 'killing' of objects has been recorded at other sites in the vicinity, including Tabard Square. One shaft contained a human skeleton, buried head down, and others contained complete or partial dog burials. Theories abound, but these pits, shafts and wells could all have associations with the 'Other World'.

Excavations at **Harper Road**, a short distance south of Swan Street, arguably produced one of our important finds: a compacted gravel road which dates to the early decades of the Roman occupation. On the same general alignment NE-SW alignment as ditches at nearby Swan Street, this probably

represents the previously unidentified Stane Street. A later 3rd-century mausoleum west of the road was later cut into to insert a stone sarcophagus. Sadly robbed in the 18th century, we know from the few fragments that were left behind that interesting goods probably accompanied the woman and baby interred within it.

East of Harper Road excavations at **28-30 Trinity Street** investigated part of a cemetery (see images opposite). The earliest burials were of 2nd century date, but the majority dated to the 3rd and 4th centuries, and comprised predominantly inhumations, of which 44 were recorded, on variable orientations. Most of the inhumations were supine, but crouched burials were also evident.

Medieval era

We have worked on some very high profile and major ecclesiastical complexes and royal palaces, but here I intend to focus on some perhaps less obvious sites.

These include several Middle Saxon sites located in or near Covent Garden including the **Lyceum Theatre, National Portrait Gallery**, and sites on **James Street**. The results of these sites have mostly been summarised in an early PCA Monograph, and in the case of the Lyceum Theatre, also in this august tome (Vol 8/6). Craft industries include weaving, evidenced by loom weights, bone and antler working, iron manufacture and bee keeping – part of a carbonised bee colony (skep) was found at James Street. One thing I have learned about



ABOVE Price's Candle Factory site in Battersea, excavated in 1998, provided evidence for the Bishop of York's London Residence, built AD 1474. The complex was extensively modified in the early post-medieval period, but enough of the original palace survived to obtain a very good understanding of the layout and grandeur of the original building.

the Middle Saxons was how much they liked their meat, as evidenced by significant quantities of food debris (bones) and butchery waste. The monograph's cover, designed by Jacob Lunt (storyboard designer for *Star Wars*), pictures two men sitting on a log, one practicing his writing whilst the other chews on a bone; the image was inspired by a sheep's thoracic vertebrae from the National Portrait Gallery bearing the names, in runes, of two former occupants of *Lundenwic*: *Dric* and the eponymous *Tahtbert*.

At **Earls Terrace, Kensington**, where we anticipated Roman roadside activity we found two Saxo-Norman dwellings. Represented by shallow foundation trenches and postholes, probably packed with clay tempered with straw and with beaten earth floors and thatch roofs, these were built on the same alignment as the modern road, possibly indicating its continued use. Plough marks suggest an agricultural landscape, and the presence of quernstones imply cereal processing.

Excavations at the former **Prices Candle Factory** near Clapham Junction investigated almost the entire southern part of the Bishop of York's moated palace, with five rooms and two courtyards investigated (see previous page). Octagonal corner towers would have adorned the junctions of the east and west walls. External walls demonstrated evidence for windows and one semi-basement room contained a garderobe that emptied directly into the moat through a small culvert.

BELOW Excavations and standing building recording at King's Cross Goods Yard recorded a myriad of railway-related features: hydraulic systems and turntables for locomotives, and even subterranean stables for the ponies that worked the yards. The remains of the foundations of Platform 1 can be seen below.

Post-medieval era

I have always had a soft spot for our work at the **Inner Temple**, a medieval foundation still flourishing today. There was one aspect of the early post-medieval occupation I am particularly tickled by. Large assemblages of broken green glazed drinking vessels recovered from pits accord with records of 1559–60: *'that from henceforth not any ashen cups be provided, but the House to be served in green cups, both of winter and summer'*. Inventories show them regularly being bought, presumably due to breakages. One event, in 1630, records a near riot when the junior members

attacked the Benchers who: *'hasted down tumultuously, and calling for pots, threw them at random towards the Bench table and struck divers Masters of the Bench'*. Student lawyers in the 16th century seem to a large extent to have behaved much as students did in my day, that is they drank too much!

The former **Deptford Power Station** revealed two completely different types of post-medieval archaeology. To the north, adjacent to the Thames, lay part of the English East India Company's Dockyard comprising timber wharves, slipways, and revetments. Structural elements dating to establishment of the Dockyard in 1614 incorporated parts of broken-up ships including a rudder, a capstan and a windlass alongside shipbuilding waste. The remains of the Trinity House almshouses, originally built about 1514 but rebuilt successively in the 17th and 18th centuries, lay to the south-west. Each almshouse, a single room with its own hearth, would have provided safe refuge to an old sea dog.

Industrial archaeology at the **King's Cross Goods Yard** to the rear of the passenger station comprised an array of buildings associated with produce brought into the capital by rail, including everything from coal to potatoes. At the **Imperial Gasworks** alongside gas holders were retort houses, furnaces and flues. The work has totally transformed the landscape and will result in three monographs, the first of which has been published.

PCA has a proud tradition of publishing the results of our endeavours, in the most appropriate format, including *London Archaeologist*. Our articles feature regularly in the *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society*, and the county journals for Kent, Surrey and Essex. I would like to commend the curatorial staff of Greater London and the surrounding counties for building into planning conditions the requirement to publish and disseminate the results of fieldwork. We also publish, where the results merit it, in national journals such as *Britannia*, *Medieval Archaeology*, *Post-Medieval Archaeology* and in our own Monograph series. We are particularly proud of these volumes and much of the credit should go to Vicki Ridgeway, the Monograph Manager, as well as the authors, specialists and graphics team.

Throughout our team remains very important to us. We have some of the finest archaeologists in the country both working in the field, on excavations and recording buildings, but also analysing a wide range of artefacts and ecofacts, preparing reports or managing aspects of the company. It is our job to encourage them to stay and grow with us, but occasionally some do fly the to become university lecturers, Inspectors of Ancient Monuments, Consultants, local authority archaeologists, or even to join other contracting units. To each and every person who has, in whatever capacity, worked for PCA I would like to offer my sincerest thanks for helping us to be what we are today. I would also like to think, although I will not be at the helm to see it, that like *London Archaeologist*, PCA will be around in another 25 years to celebrate its half century.

