

Requiem: remembering London's archaeology, 1949–50

Ivor Noël Hume†

Introduction

As a follow up to the LA@50 celebrations in 2018, there follows a fascinating insight into the politics of London's earlier archaeology written by one who was there.

This paper was written by the late Ivor Noël Hume when reminiscing about his work in the City of London after the war and looking at the work on the site of St Swithin's House. This site had previously been recorded by Noël Hume himself in 1949, and formed part of the Walbrook site excavations conducted by MOLA in 2006–7. The article looks back to the Victorian and early/mid-20th-century discoveries which were the catalyst for London's past 50 years of archaeology.

19th-century beginnings

In 1871, city workers could watch an enormous hole being dug at the junction of Queen Victoria Street and Charlotte Row. It would house the foundations of one of the City of London's grandest mercantile buildings, that of the National Safe Deposit Company, now the City of London Magistrate's Court (Fig 1). Through the middle of the site from north to south lay the bed of the long-silted Walbrook stream, which in the medieval centuries may have cut the city in two, but which, some considered, had marked the westerly edge of *Londinium* when it was first laid out.

Previous 19th-century building and sewer digging had exposed small sections of the Walbrook and yielded numerous well-preserved Roman artefacts. Antiquary John E Price knew this and understood the Safe Deposit site's archaeological potential. Price kept a watching brief on the project and in doing so became one of the City's first rescue archaeologists. His

observations were invaluable and his recovered antiquities impressive, and at the end of his published report he wrote this:

'We institute researches abroad, sometimes on doubtful sites, and critically examine every shovel-full of earth, often with no prospect of reward; but in a comparatively small space situate at home, and illustrative alike of the origin and progressive growth of this city chief of the empire, sufficient interest has never yet been manifest to induce a properly organized investigation of any given site'.¹

In closing Price wistfully asked, 'Who can say what yet remains beneath the surface of adjacent sites to corroborate or correct opinions which have been expressed both by past and present

writers on the history of Roman London?' During the decades when the empire peaked and faded, none was archaeologically excavated, (but full excavation was to follow at the Mithraeum site in 1954–5 and again in 2011, and at 1 Poultry in 1994).²

20th-century progress

In the years leading up to World War I, two antiquaries focused their interests on city building sites. They were Philip Norman and Francis W Reader, both of whom published their findings and did so with admirable dexterity. After the war, Frank Lambert, the Guildhall Museum's clerk and its sole employee, played an active and intelligent role as the City's building site recorder.

Sadly, after his departure in 1924, his successor, Quentin Waddington,



Fig 1: frontispiece showing the new National Safe Deposit Company building from J E Price's publication, *Roman Antiquities*, of 1873



Fig 2: W F Grimes poses for the press during the post-war excavations at St Brides (Grimes Archive/MOL)

considered himself a keeper rather than a pioneering archaeologist. It was enough to send the museum's clerk to visit building sites and buy recovered antiquities from the labourers who found them. It took World War II to make the acres of bombed buildings available for archaeological study – providing anyone had the inclination, the time and the money to undertake something better than artefact recovery.

The Roman and Mediaeval London Excavation Council

In 1946, stimulated by the Society of Antiquaries of London, a Roman London Excavation Committee was formed and quickly widened its scope to become the 'Roman and Mediaeval London Excavation Council' (RMLEC). W F 'Peter' Grimes, then director of the London Museum,³ immediately accepted the second hat as honorary director and supervisor of the Council's fieldwork.

In the previous year, the Society of Antiquaries had set up a committee to partner with the City of London Corporation in raising the necessary funding. In his 1972 study of the city's archaeological problems, Martin Biddle noted that 'it eventually allowed its Librarian to sit on the [joint] Committee'.⁴

Those words disguised a territorial dispute that was to colour the uneasy relationship between Grimes and his

London Museum with the City's Guildhall Museum. The latter was an arm of the City's library whose librarian, Raymond Smith, also bore the title of the museum's curator.⁵ The London Museum had been created in 1911 – its collections were housed in Kensington Palace. Two years later, they were transferred to Lancaster House. They would remain there until after World War II, when the museum moved back to the Palace.

The Guildhall Museum, however, had a much longer pedigree, having been ensconced in the basement of the City's library since 1872. It considered itself the true repository for the relics of Roman London. As the then museum's deputy keeper Ralph Merrifield tactfully noted, 'in the early days of the London Museum, the rivalry was not always very friendly'.⁶

At the outbreak of World War II, the Guildhall Museum's treasures had been shipped out of London, leaving its galleries to be absorbed into the library. Consequently, when the collections were returned, there was little or no space to display them. Although Smith hoped to remedy the problem at some future date, he believed that Grimes was intent on taking over the seemingly defunct museum and incorporating its collections into the London Museum. This made practical sense (as later years would prove), but Smith had no intention of surrendering, any more than did its clerk, Adrian Oswald, who, with a trained dentist as his only assistant, ran the museum from a cramped office under the library's stairs.

Archaeology post-World War II

Long gone was the pre-1914–18 war expectation that now and then a building would be torn down and allow time for the leisurely observation of workmen pecking away with nothing more lethal than picks and shovels. Now bulldozers equipped like tanks roared across the sites. Huge bucket-waving grabs and violently flung draglines ate into the ground and threatened the life of anyone brash enough to step in their path. The future had the past in its grip and had no intention of letting antiquaries get in its way.

Oswald was the appointed receiver of artefacts from Grimes's excavations as well as being secretary of the

RMLEC. Although the two men maintained a gentlemanly civility, neither trusted the other. Consequently, there was no rapport between the museums and when rebuilding began in the City, each went its own way.

Oswald had inherited the duties of the previous clerk and so was responsible for the recovery of objects found by builders' workmen and recording whatever he could. In a 1949 lecture to the London Society titled 'Excavations in London', he explained that the title was a misnomer. The word 'excavation', he explained, 'implied a careful, detailed, slow progress, whereas what was taking place in London today was frenzied activity in all directions, with which the poor archaeologist could not keep pace'.⁷

Being cognisant of the chaos soon to erupt on the silent, rubble- and weed-strewn bombed sites, Grimes and his Council developed a plan to dig one trench on as many vacant sites as were available. They were well aware, however, that, if properly funded and staffed, area excavations would have been infinitely more informative. But grants and donations were hard to garner and, as Biddle noted, 'it left the Director virtually single-handed until 1953'.⁸

Early excavations

At its outset, the Council had two paid excavators, neither workman had any previous archaeological experience, but were able to learn quickly.

In the summer of 1949, the work force was increased by the presence of a volunteer who had a BA in Roman archaeology, had dug at Kingsweston Roman villa in Gloucestershire, and was taking evening classes with Mortimer Wheeler at the Institute of Archaeology.⁹ Her name was Audrey Baines and her impressions of the works' supervision differed from those described in Grimes's seminal study *The Excavation of Roman and Mediaeval London*.¹⁰ In it, while discussing a delinquent workman, he noted that the conversation ended 'by his taking me firmly by the top button of my waistcoat'.¹¹

The director had a museum to run and did not dress for digging (Fig 2). Although interpretive archaeology demands that every artefact be identified and studied *in situ* before



Fig 3: St Swithin's House, site photograph showing the building methods of 1949

being bagged, the excavators lacked the knowledge to do so, and the finds were often already bagged when the director came by. The Grimes excavations of later dates (post-1953) were of a much higher order, were far better supervised, and the permanent digging staff were augmented with skilled and dedicated volunteers.

In September 1949, the Council cut a 12m (40-foot) trench running east-west through the courtyard of the bombed hall of the Salters' Company. It revealed part of a Roman road surface and postholes dug through Roman strata. Grimes reported that 'They point to a succession of timber-framed buildings on the site, but, as always, there was no possibility of recovering even a partial plan.'¹² Grimes was well aware of any trenching's limitations, and wrote that 'it will be seen that the techniques of modern excavation are directed not merely at making "finds" but at elucidating the structures with which the finds are associated.'¹³

In October, the Council's focus shifted to an abortive search for the remains of Richard Whittington (died

1423) in the church of St. Michael Paternoster Royal on College Hill, and did not return to the Salters' Company site. From that point forward, the property became a building site for St Swithin's House and the archaeological responsibility of Adrian Oswald to rescue whatever he could.

The first re-building licences had been granted in 1948 with construction starting hard on their heels. One of the first was at the new Selborne House in Ironmonger Lane that provided Oswald with an opportunity to show what area excavations could accomplish.¹⁴

At the same time, however, across the river in Southwark, land was being cleared to build the Bankside Power Station. Southwark being considered part of the City, this too became his responsibility. With no tools and only a pair of legs for transportation, Oswald could only concentrate on one site at a time.

Being as interested in post-medieval sites as he was in those of earlier dates, he devoted more time to the Power Station than to sites north of the Thames. In consequence, the St

Swithin's House project, spanning the block between St Swithin's Lane and Walbrook, went forward largely unwatched.

At this point, the personal pronoun can no longer be avoided. Having no job, I had spent the first six months of 1949 as Oswald's volunteer pot washer. He repaid me by teaching me to recognise samian forms (distinguishing Drag 39 form from 37), the evolution of clay pipes and the difference between delft and pearlware. I soon realised that with the right teacher, there is no better way to learn than by washing fragments.

I also became Adrian Oswald's volunteer digging assistant at the Power Station site where 2.4m (8 feet) of post-medieval accumulation was being hauled away. Stratigraphy revealed in the foundation trenches allowed the rules of section-drawing to be quickly learned.

St Swithin's House

By mid-summer, the foundation hole for St Swithin's House had a high-rise McAlpine crane in its centre and, along with smoking mechanical monsters,



Fig 4: the St Swithin's House site looking east across the Bucklersbury House site (author/Ian Blair)

scores of labourers were digging, bucketing and framing, all hard at work and reminding me of Hieronymus Bosch's *Last Judgment* (Figs 3 and 4). 'This one is going to be yours', Oswald told me.

On the north face of the McAlpine big hole, about 7.6m (25 feet) of stratigraphy had reduced Oswald's layer lessons to their simplest form. The widely-spaced strata provided red welts of fires that had ravaged the city in AD 60–1 when Boudica sacked it; again c. AD 120, in the reign of the Emperor Hadrian, when a most substantially-built town burned for reasons unrecorded; and yet again in the Great Fire of 1666.

William Thompson Hill, *The Times* correspondent, was so impressed by these strata that he went back to his office to fetch his camera – but he was too late. As he later wrote:

'The mechanical grab continued its work that November day. So industrious and so efficient was it

that the next day the series of layers of old London was hardly visible. It was no longer possible to photograph the red streak of history as the writer had planned.'¹⁵

Amateurs or pros?

The RMLEC's trenching was conducted with paid labour and, Audrey Baines notwithstanding, amateur help was considered more disruptive than helpful, a decision that Grimes carefully explained in his book.¹⁶ The Guildhall Museum, however, had no money to pay labourers – without volunteers, little or nothing could be accomplished. I had quickly learned that one recorder could not simultaneously hold both ends of a 50-foot tape.

Beginning in December 1949, I was able to assemble a stalwart band of volunteers who for the next six years would do yeoman work as the 'Guildhall Irregulars'.¹⁷ Of these, only Audrey Baines had had previous archaeological experience. In 1973

Martin Biddle would write:

'the observation and recording of fragmentary evidence revealed on building sites requires a high degree of knowledge, skill, and experience. Only those who have been trained over several years on major excavations dealing with a wide variety of sites and covering the main historical periods, should be entrusted with this work.'¹⁸

However, needs must when the devil rides, and for Oswald I was all he had. In retrospect, I still believe that I had learned enough to do the job and, in 1949 with the arrogance of youth, I had been sure of it.

New responsibilities

In the autumn of that year, Oswald and curator Raymond Smith hired me as the Guildhall Museum's excavations assistant. Barely had they done so, than Oswald quit and so did his dentist colleague. For a short time therefore, I was the museum's sole employee.

Smith still believed that Grimes was plotting to take the museum to Kensington and, in one of my first meetings with Smith, he made it clear that it was going to be up to me to stop any such attempt. I was to convince the Library Committee that the museum was alive and well. Although still largely boxed, it had to be seen as an indispensable contributor to the newly rising City. To that end, the committee needed to be shown new discoveries and they had to see their museum in the newspapers and on the BBC.



Fig 5: copper-alloy trumpet brooch and chain, recovered from the Walbrook frontage of St Swithin's House



Fig 6: Ivor Noël Hume and Audrey Baines viewing the assembled 3rd-century AD box well after lifting and before going on display

The publicity was no problem. I was sharing a flat with a famed radio war reporter and his wife, and where the BBC Newsreel went, the daily press was sure to follow. *The Times* archaeological correspondent, William Thompson Hill, had been a personal friend of Adrian Oswald and *Illustrated London News* photographer, William Gordon Davis, was one of mine. Providing the awe-inspiring artefacts was more difficult. It was accomplished by setting up a ceramic reconstruction lab in the attic of the Guildhall and there turning fragments into pots. Librarian Smith was delighted, his committee members were impressed, and the museum was saved. But away in Kensington Palace, Grimes was enraged and doing his best to get me fired.

Finds from the site

Discoveries made along the Wallbrook-flanking frontage were reminiscent of the finds recorded at the National Safe Deposit site by John Price. From the river's black peat-like silt came brass objects in gleaming, golden-hued condition. A trumpet fibula of c. AD 120 came out at the end of a copper-alloy chain with its spring still operable and earned itself half *The Times's* back page (Fig 5).¹⁹

A substantial ragstone-built building

with *opus signinum* floors defied the builders' pneumatic drills for more than a day and it, too, wound up in *The Times*.²⁰ As did a 3rd-century timber-lined well (Fig 6) which yielded a complete Roman boot and a coin of the Emperor Postumus (AD 258–68).²¹ The well's timbers were saved, conserved, and exhibited in the museum's small gallery. More important, however, were finds from a refuse pit of the Boudican era (Figs 7 and 8), almost certainly evidence of her sacking of *Londinium* in AD 61.²² Seen as relics of the Iceni destruction, the deliberately smashed pottery was exhibited, not as pots, but as a defined and dramatic moment in London's early history.

What to focus on?

Just as a single trench cannot be expected to yield definitive answers, so a rescue archaeologist struggles to record bits and pieces exposed while the builders are at lunch. At St Swithin's House, 2,000 years of shattered history were showing up in profusion – a plastered and painted Roman wall fragment here, a corner of a medieval chalk structure there, and beyond, a stretch of stratigraphy that might mean something if hooked to something else.

Awed by the magnitude of the problem before me, I made a decision to concentrate on features like pits and wells in the belief that they were cultural time capsules whose contents could later be studied as captured moments in history.

The resulting publicity garnered by the 'Wallbrook Relics' brought national attention to Librarian Smith and his museum. In the midst of the euphoria, I had no idea that, in the complacently established world of British archaeology, I was cutting my own throat. It therefore fell to Adrian Oswald to warn me, from the safety of his new position at the Birmingham City Museum, that Grimes had dubbed me a menace and would do all he could to ensure that my archaeological career was brief. Oswald also warned that Smith was a skilled, if devious, politician, who knew what was happening, and was cynically prepared to throw me to the Kensington Palace wolves.

The St Swithin's House construction hole occupied the western two-thirds of the property, leaving the Salters' Hall

courtyard area reduced largely by hand and increasingly able to reveal Roman structures unseen in Grimes's 12m trench. Part of a domestic building with a ragstone wall and red tesserae on an *opus signinum* bed were mechanically revealed, thereby illustrating the kind of missed and rarely hit opportunities that stemmed from mere trenching.

To the west of these structural remains, a deep wood-lined pit was found cutting deep into the natural gravel. It was to yield some of the finest Roman glass then ever found in London (Fig 9). This, and the Boudican amphora pit, provided the site's most important artefactual finds. The latter, with its drawings and plans, was soon published by the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society.²³

More management arrives

Preparation of the glass pit and its many datable samian finds took longer and the report was still incomplete when the museum's new director, Norman Cook, was hired.

Knowing that for Raymond Smith's political purpose, a published archaeological report scored few points, I had written a popular booklet illustrating the most significant finds along with a plan of the site and its



Fig 7: Ivor Noël Hume revealing the top of a Boudican pit containing the pottery, which can be seen in Fig 8



Fig 8: Ivor Noël Hume displaying examples of the pottery from the Boudican pit. The discovery was widely broadcast, this image appearing in the Arabic press. (author/Ian Blair)

structural remains. Prefaced by a statement from Smith praising the efforts that had made the discoveries possible, the little publication provided what the museum visitors needed.

It was my conclusion then, and one that has stayed with me through the rest of my career, that to make any lasting impression, visitors have to be able to buy something to take home.

The arrival of the new director promptly prevented any more of the finds from St Swithin's House or from any other site worked in the next six

years from being properly reported and published. Norman Cook was firmly of the opinion that keeping ahead of the grabs and bulldozers was more important than report writing.

Unlike Adrian Oswald, his predecessor, he considered that building a bridge to placate Professor Grimes was more desirable than sharing the Guildhall Museum's discoveries with its peers and public. Thus, in 1965, when Ralph Merrifield published his book *The Roman City of London*, most of my contributions were attributed only to my 'unpublished notes and plans in Guildhall Museum' or to my *Discoveries in Walbrook, 1949–1950*.

Conclusion

In sum, therefore, this highly important site involving structurally significant buildings of the 1st to 3rd centuries AD, situated in the mercantile heart of Roman London, had been destroyed virtually unwatched.

By the summer of 1949, only its periphery remained to be studied and recorded by a single, only briefly trained, and roundly denigrated

individual. Indeed, the divisive politics of museums and archaeologists may be the most enduring lesson learned from trying to salvage the fragmented history of the St Swithin's House site.

Acknowledgements

London Archaeologist would like to thank Ian Blair and Susan M Wright of MOLA for their assistance; Ivor Noël Hume for donating his slides to Ian Blair; and the Museum of London and MOLA for other site images.

In 1949, Ivor Noël Hume, after several years as a volunteer and digging and excavation assistant, was the Guildhall Museum's sole employee until the appointments of Norman Cook and Ralph Merrifield as Guildhall Museum Director and Assistant Keeper in 1950.

After his struggle to record what archaeological finds were coming up during the major post-war redevelopments, he moved to Virginia, USA, in 1956 to become Director of the Department of Archaeology at Colonial Williamsburg, where he remained for the rest of his life.



Fig 9: rare Roman glass vessel, or skyphos, from the mid-Flavian pit – now displayed in the Roman Gallery, Museum of London (MOL)

1. J H Puleston and J E Price *Roman Antiquities Recently Discovered on the Site of the National Safe Deposit Company's Premises, Mansion House, London* (1873) 79.

2. W F Grimes *The Excavation of Roman and Mediaeval London* (1968); J D Shepherd *The Temple of Mithras London: Excavations by W F Grimes and A Williams at the Walbrook* English Heritage Archaeol Rep 12 (1998); J Hill and P Rowsome *Roman London and the Walbrook stream crossing: Excavations at 1 Poultry and vicinity* MOL Monogr 37 (2011).

3. Subsequently Professor at the University of London's Institute of Archaeology.

4. M Biddle, D Hudson and C Heighway *The Future of London's Past* (1973) 6.

5. The Guildhall Museum's fiefdom was limited to the City's historic square mile, whereas the

London Museum's mandate covered all of what is now Greater London.

6. R Merrifield *The Roman City of London* (1965) 9.

7. *Journal of the London Society* 303 (December 1949) 51.

8. *Op cit* fn 4, 6.

9. I Noël Hume *A Passion for the Past* (2010) fig 16; G C Boon 'The Roman Villa in Kingsweston Park (Lawrence Weston Estate) Gloucestershire' *Trans Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeol Soc* 69 (1950) 58.

10. *Op cit* fn 2.

11. *Ibid*, 225.

12. *Ibid*, 128–9.

13. *Ibid*, 7.

14. D Dawe and A Oswald *11 Ironmonger Lane* (1952) 111 ff.

15. W Thompson Hill *Buried London, Mithras to the Middle Ages* (1955) 38.

16. *Op cit* fn 2, 223–5.

17. I Noël Hume, *op cit* fn 9, 169.

18. *Op cit* fn 4, 7.

19. *The Times* 19 Nov (1949).

20. *The Times* 6 Jan (1950).

21. *The Times* 15 Feb (1950); *The Illustrated London News* 25 Feb (1950) 301.

22. *Op cit* fn 6, 38.

23. I & A Noël-Hume 'A Mid-First Century Pit near Walbrook' *Trans of the London and Middlesex Archaeol Soc* XI Pt III (1954) 249–58.

24. P Marsden 'Ivor Noel Hume 1927–2017: his London years' *London Archaeol* 15 (1) (2017) 8–9.

Becky Wallower: an appreciation

When we welcomed Becky Wallower to the Publication Committee in 2004, she was already known to us as the author of two articles on the Roman Temple in Greenwich Park, which she had written for us in 2002. Now that we have said good-bye to her as the Secretary of *London Archaeologist* at this year's AGM, we hope that our readers will continue to be educated and entertained by her insightful contributions to this magazine for many years to come.

The prosaic term 'Secretary' does scant justice to the work that Becky has done for the magazine over the intervening 15 years. She has done all those tasks expected of a committee secretary, such as organising meetings, taking minutes, dealing with enquiries and liaising with other bodies, with a quiet efficiency which can easily be taken for granted. But that was only the start; she also opened up to us the personal side of London's archaeology with a series of interviews, book previews and other personal insights into what makes us all tick.

Less obvious, but at least as important, was her work behind the scenes – contacting people, reminding us, checking our work and suggesting improvements in both content and design, the last being especially valuable to an editor with little or no design sense. I am keen that Becky should be given the credit she deserves for all this unrecognised work, for which it is only too easy for an editor to take the credit.

Becky was always eager to promote archaeology



Becky with *London Archaeologist* Chair, Les Capon, at the AGM (DCB)

whenever possible, and I especially remember working alongside her at the Festival of British Archaeology events, where her magnetic mosaics were always very popular with children.

At the AGM, I was pleased to be able to thank Becky publicly for all that she has done for me and the editors who followed me, for the magazine and for the readership over those years, by presenting her with gifts to express the thanks, esteem and appreciation of all involved in London's archaeology.

Clive Orton
Editor Emeritus

Postscript: Remembering Ivor Noël Hume (1927–2017)

I was to first make contact with Ivor Noël Hume, following the discovery of the remains of the Roman bucket chains in the bottom of two massive wells at 20–30 Gresham Street in 2001, and thus began a close professional and personal friendship that lasted up until his death at the age of 89 in February 2017.²⁴

In his tenure as the solitary Guildhall Museum archaeologist working in the City of London (1949–56), prior to his departure to Virginia in the New World, Noël had discovered the Roman Cheapside baths in 1955–6. In the base of a massive wood-lined well, similar to those found at Gresham Street across the road, he had salvaged the remains of two incomplete, but identical water boxes from the drag-line excavator – their true function remained unknown for almost 50 years.

In the intervening years, I often

found myself retracing Noël's large fossilised archaeological footsteps around the City, as numerous sites that he had worked on increasingly came up for redevelopment. The most significant of these, was the site of the new Walbrook Building (WAO06), which formerly consisted of a large block of three adjoining buildings, located directly across Walbrook from the Bloomberg Building and the Temple of Mithras.

The northernmost of these former buildings was St Swithin's House, the first site that Noël worked on in the City of London in the aftermath of World War II. As a consequence, throughout its subsequent excavation in 2006–7 and the ensuing post-excavation and analysis phase, we were frequently exchanging communications discussing our collective findings, albeit with a hiatus of almost 60 years.

I had asked Noël if he would like to write something on his earlier works at St Swithin's House, and his

'Requiem: Remembering London Archaeology, 1949–50' piece, published here, is the result.

Although it was originally intended to form an introduction to the forthcoming MOLA Studies Series publication of the Walbrook Building (due to be published later this year), it was decided that the wider scope of the paper left it more suited to inclusion in *London Archaeologist*. It is presented here in memory of Ivor Noël Hume.

My one regret is that Noël never got to see it in print, as he would often ask me as to its progress through the publication pipeline. Although I really miss him and find him often in my thoughts, I count myself lucky to have shared a wonderful friendship with an incredibly erudite man and fellow London archaeologist for 15 years, and for that I will always feel incredibly fortunate.

Ian Blair,
Museum of London Archaeology