

Commentary

by Gromaticus

It's like déjà vu all over again

This famous saying, attributed to Yogi Berra (the baseball manager), summed up my feelings when I heard that the Museum of London would move to a new site in Smithfield. It took me back to my early days as Editor, when we reported the opening of the Museum of London by the Queen on 2 December 1976. I still remember the slight editorial frisson of showing a photograph of the Queen at the opening.¹

The first indication that the Museum was considering a move came in 2014, when it announced that Smithfield General Market was being considered as one of three options for its future location.² West Smithfield became the favoured destination in 2015, and in July 2016 the winning design for a new Museum of London in West Smithfield was announced.³ The anticipated timing was for planning consent in 2018 and opening in 2022.

The planning application, submitted to the City of London Corporation and announced on 13 January 2020,⁴ seeks 'to transform a campus of market buildings in West Smithfield into a world-class, 24-hour cultural destination'. The project will more than double the size of the existing museum (from 12,500 to 26,000 square metres) and is hoped to attract upwards of 1.5 million, perhaps up to 2 million, visitors a year. The capital cost was (January 2020) estimated to be £337m (of which £42m was still to be raised) and the

opening date predicted to be 2024. In light of the experiences of Crossrail and HS2, there must be doubts about these figures. With a likely increase in running costs, will free admission continue to be possible?

The present market buildings are described as 'atmospheric but currently dilapidated'; parts have been derelict for up to 30 years. There will have to be a major programme of renovation and renewal before the Museum can move in, especially as climate control will be needed for many of the exhibits. I hope that as work proceeds, the old Museum motto of 'in its depths what treasures' does not become 'in its depths what horrors'.

The permanent galleries will occupy the basement of the General Market building, extending south under West Smithfield and the old Fish Market building, and there will be temporary exhibition galleries on the ground floor of the Poultry Market building. There must be concern about the lack of curatorial resources available for the new galleries, considering recent staff losses at the Museum.⁵ As one might expect, there will also be a Conference Centre and Learning Centre, a research centre and conservation laboratories, cafés and a restaurant, workshops and storage space.

The change of location should be a great improvement. The present Highwalk location has always been a source of complaint; the new one will be far more accessible, being at street

level and within easy walking distance of Farringdon station. The station itself has been transformed since the 1970s, when it was a minor stop on the Circle Line. It now boasts the Thameslink Line, with connections both north and south, and will shortly (we hope) host the Elizabeth Line, connecting eastwards and westwards, becoming a real transport hub. The new location is on the Culture Mile,⁶ a sign that the City of London is changing, placing greater emphasis on the cultural aspects of life than in the past.

There will be further changes in the area. The iconic Meat Market will move, possibly to Dagenham, making way for new shops and event spaces. Given the state of the retail market, this sounds optimistic. The old museum building is likely to be redeveloped into a Centre for Music, a joint project between the Barbican, the London Symphony Orchestra and Guildhall School of Music and Drama. It will be interesting to see how that will fit in to the unusual shape that will be available. One final point: the Museum in Docklands will not be affected, for which we should be thankful.

1. *London Archaeol* 3 (1) (1976), front cover.

2. 'Mosaic' *London Archaeol* 14 (4) (2015), 112.

3. Becky Wallower 'Target Market' *London Archaeol* 14 (10) (2016), 270–2.

4. See <https://museum.london> [accessed 9 March 2020].

5. 'Mosaic' *London Archaeol* 15 (12) (2020), 356.

6. See www.culturemile.london [accessed 9 March 2020].

General Meeting and Annual Lecture

Due to the COVID-19 lockdown, it was not possible to hold the AGM. In accordance with the requirements of the London Archaeologist Association Constitution, the Minutes of the 2019 AGM and the Annual Report for 2020 can be found on the website. Elections of the Officers will now be held over until May 2021, and members of the Committee will remain in post until next year.

The Officers remain as follows: Joint Editors, Diana Briscoe and Jenny Hall; Managing Editor, Peter

Rowsome; Secretary, Rosalind Morris; Membership Secretary, Jo Udall and Communications Officer, Helen Johnston. Remaining on the Committee are Les Capon, Sinéad Marshall, Daniel Nesbitt, Victoria Ridgeway, Natasha Billson and Alistair Douglas. Alison Telfer has been co-opted to co-ordinate the 2020 LA Book Prize.

Dr Jonathan Gardner left us to move up to Scotland and we thank him for his hard work. Following the death of Alastair Ainsworth (see his obituary, inside front cover), we regret that the

post of Treasurer is now vacant.

The Annual Lecture was held online as advertised – Association members and local societies were notified by letter and the lecture publicised on the website with free tickets for 110 places booked via Eventbrite. Adam Corsini spoke to the *Layers of London project: putting archaeology on the map*.

The presentation can now be watched via the *London Archaeologist* website: www.londonarchaeologist.org.uk/news.html. See the inside back cover for a summary of the lecture.