

London's archaeology in lockdown

During the period of lockdown in early August, three archaeologists muse on changed work programmes, while three units have been busy on different aspects of staff and site safety to allow work to continue.

Business as usual!

Alexis Haslam, Community Archaeologist

The grounds at Fulham Palace re-opened at the end of June, so we have been readying ourselves for a return to somewhat more structured operations and working conditions. As I'm on a fixed term contract, I was not furloughed. My wife (Becky), working for PCA, was, but they have been so busy she has gone back to work. This made it very difficult over childcare – archaeologists are not viewed as keyworkers – but many have had to work throughout the pandemic.

Fulham Palace has suffered from closure: no events, weddings or volunteers. Staff have been furloughed and we have kept a reduced team. The gardeners are in daily while the rest of us have been operating on a rota system – helping to check the building, open windows, check alarms, etc. It has been eerie, with the grounds and buildings so empty.



I have spent the time writing up the Fulham Palace publication, going through all the previous Palace excavations and re-phasing them for the specialists at PCA to begin their final pieces. This has involved trying to decipher the excavations undertaken by the Fulham Archaeology Rescue Group (FARG) between 1972 and 1986 –

their records are not fantastic. We are, however, learning a great deal more about the history of the site, which becomes increasingly more fascinating, almost on a daily basis. With nearly 2,000 struck flints, it transpires we have one of the largest lithic assemblages in the London region! I think I may have also identified the Palace's early medieval hall.

One major loss for me has been the fact that we have not been able to run our YAC sessions. I was supposed to be starting an archaeological programme for 16–25-year olds entitled 'Dissecting the Dirt'. It is designed to provide archaeological training and theory to those interested in taking up archaeology. YAC has been very difficult to lead in a purely digital format and will need a big publicity drive when things return to some form of normality.

As a community archaeologist though, it has also been important to provide stories and information to the general public, so I have been composing blogs and recording lectures (see the Fulham Palace website). In short, I have actually been ridiculously busy, despite the lockdown! But it has given me an opportunity to really crack on with the publication and to start to look in depth at the history of the site with far fewer daily distractions than I'm used to. As my desk is in the education centre, I'm used to noisy kids – that's what they invented ear defenders for!

SoDA to come onstream!

Jessica Ogden, L – P : Archaeology

In June 2020, L – P : Archaeology was awarded a grant of nearly £15,000 from the Historic England Covid-19 Emergency Response Fund to produce a free and open 'Social Distancing for Archaeology Toolkit' (SoDA) to help archaeologists enact social distancing during archaeological field and post-excavation work.

The impact of Covid-19 on the archaeological sector has been immense. At the start of lockdown, the freeze placed many building works on hold, resulting in large numbers of commercial archaeologists being furloughed. A Historic England survey (March 2020) into the effects of Covid-19 on the sector showed that 97% of archaeology companies or sole traders cited the loss or postponement of work as a major effect of Covid-19 – with nearly half having to furlough or lay off staff (see [https:// tinyurl.com/yxahdeo2](https://tinyurl.com/yxahdeo2)). The impact on the non-commercial sector has also been unprecedented, with community and academic fieldwork stopping indefinitely.

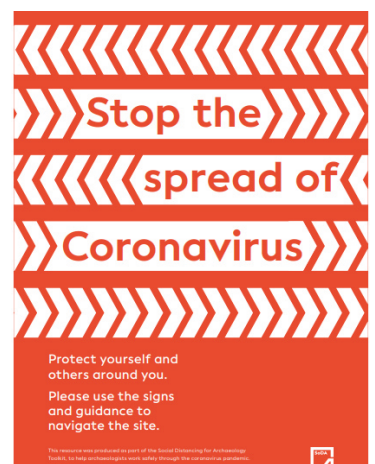
One of the overriding concerns about re-opening construction and archaeological sites and facilities is the difficulty of implementing safe working conditions that incorporate social distancing guidance. Since March, the industry working group (composed of Clfa, FAME and the Prospect Union) has been working towards providing sector-specific guidance for ensuring safe working conditions in commercial archaeology. To complement this work, L – P have designed and produced a series of short videos to demonstrate



ABOVE: Safe working in practice at the PCA site at Holywell Priory

LEFT: Alexis in a very quiet palace garden, tape measure in hand for measuring social distancing

BELOW: One of the high-impact posters, part of the signage produced by L – P : Archaeology



this guidance in practice, as well as other resources (signs, stickers, a toolbox talk and risk assessment workflow document) for archaeologists.

The development of these resources have been informed by L – P’s experience working during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic as essential workers on sites in London and elsewhere. The short films and resources cover basic scenarios encountered in archaeological works, including getting set-up and distancing on site, in welfare and during breaks, post-excavation tasks and in the office. L – P also commissioned high-impact signage to communicate strategies for ensuring proper hygiene and distancing on and off site. In addition, and at the suggestion of stakeholder groups and our own team members, we have placed explicit emphasis on mental wellbeing in the signage and resources, to encourage all to take a holistic approach to their health.

From September, these resources will be freely available through the project website (<https://soda-toolkit.info>) under an open licence model with the aim of enabling the sector (commercial and non-commercial) to build capacity and safely get back to work and research. The toolkit will become even more relevant as all sectors of archaeology attempt to tackle the new and constantly evolving restrictions.



ABOVE: Alexandra in an earlier trench excavated against the late 17th-century Barrack Block at HCP

Ready, willing and waiting!

Alexandra Stevenson, archaeologist for Historic Royal Palaces

You are in luck! You happened to catch me on the one day (16 June) that I have been unfurloughed since April, and it’s wonderful to be back at Hampton Court Palace (HCP), even if it’s just for one day.

Sadly, all archaeology and all but essential projects have had to be stopped at Historic Royal Palaces (HRP). However, urgent works, maintenance and repairs continue, so I can be called out of furlough at short notice to carry out archaeological mitigation and recording at any one of our London sites. Today I was sent off to HCP for structural investigations on a late 17th-century cantilevered Wren staircase, where the late 17th-century and early 16th-century buildings meet on the south side of the palace. Although most projects have ceased for the time being, it goes without saying that we abide by Historic England requirements ensuring that we protect and record all of our archaeology to a high standard.

The gardens are looking wonderful, and despite the Gardens Team struggling on much reduced staff levels they are working hard to keep on top of things. I can’t recommend enough a visit to the gardens, as they are simply beautiful. HRP is finding itself in a precarious situation right now, so every visitor will help!

NB Although HCP and its gardens have opened on certain days from mid-July, and the Tower of London and Kensington Palace opened in August, Alexandra remains on furlough.

RIGHT: Map of the London Boroughs showing sites that were worked on by PCA through lockdown

Pandemic, but not pandemonium!

Background – Gary Brown, PCA Director

On 2 March, I discovered that a fellow archaeologist had been diagnosed with Coronavirus. That suddenly brought home to me how close this new ‘exotic’ disease had come. Work on many sites was curtailed or postponed – this began well before the official lockdown, but the government’s announcement on 23 March, exempting construction from the shutdown, assisted in our decisions.

Many clients or Principal Contractors preferred to remain open and for archaeological works to continue, but this presented significant challenges, including getting staff to site, particularly in London. In parallel, it was important to keep our clients informed that PCA was still operating in a safe and compliant fashion, and that, where we could not dig, we could still undertake the full range of off-site operations.

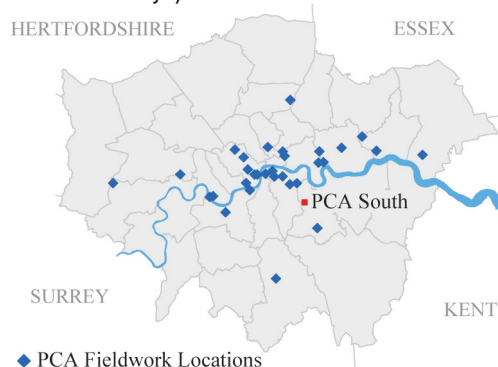
Doing it safely – Alistair Douglas, H&S Manager

By early March it was apparent that the full storm of the pandemic was about to break. On 4 March, PCA’s Health and Safety (H&S) Team, following Government advice, issued a Covid-19 memorandum to all staff on how Coronavirus was spread, the symptoms and where to obtain medical advice. The H&S Team also realised that a very robust H&S package of measures would have to be put in place if we were to continue operating. We sought advice from the industry working group, devised clear working protocols, and on 25 March issued our Site Operating Procedures. Regularly updated, in late July we are now on Version 5.

PCA would like to thank all our clients and their Principal Contractors who have willingly put in place increased welfare and mess facilities so that social distancing could be maintained. This included one way systems; enhanced cleaning procedures; and temperature monitoring of personnel to provide reassurance that all workers are symptom-free. On site, staff are not permitted to share tools or equipment and the site supervisor allocates all context numbers.

At PCA, weekly Covid-19 meetings online between the H&S Manager, the Director responsible for H&S and Prospect Union H&S representatives have allowed staff and management to work together to review working systems, raise concerns and devise solutions. Covid-19 has certainly shown just how important staff

Archaeological fieldwork projects worked by PCA between March 23rd and July 10th 2020



communication and consultation is in fostering a sense of inclusivity and a positive H&S and wellbeing culture, leading to a safer and happier workplace.

PCA has continued to carry out fieldwork in London (and via our regional offices). At Holywell Priory in Shoreditch, construction work and archaeological excavation continued uninterrupted on the ‘critical path’ to completion of the ‘Shoreditch Village’ project – a major redevelopment on the edge of the City. The excavation has revealed exciting new discoveries including a 3rd-century Roman corn drier, part of the south transept of the priory church and over 200 medieval skeletons. These will make a significant contribution to understanding London’s archaeology.

Making use of spare time!

Natasha Billson (aka Tash_Archaeo)

Back in March, I noticed across social media, and in particular on Instagram, the hashtag ‘#inthefield’. Lecturers and students around the world were speaking out about their disappointment at cancelling their 2020 field schools due to Covid-19. I recall seeing hundreds of throw-back dig photos from previous years, and soon realised that there were A LOT of bored archaeologists sitting at home.

I was briefly furloughed by PCA. As a London archaeologist, I am used to the hustle and bustle of the city: sites with complex, deep stratigraphy; hearing the never-ending concrete breakers in the background; and waiting for the muck-away lorries to arrive so we could create a new spoil heap. As you can imagine, I was pretty bored after two days!

However, I saw this as an opportunity to learn more about the history and archaeology of London, and to search for comparisons with other sites across the UK as well as further afield. So my YouTube channel *Behind the Trowel* was born. It is where ‘archaeologists sieve-out-the-dirt on their research and experiences’ with a special weekly, live-streamed interview on my show ‘Archaeologists in Quarantine’. Since 22 April, I have interviewed archaeologists across the world: field archaeologists, students, lecturers, government officials – the list is endless.

As it is a live-stream with no borders, it has become an interactive platform, where anyone from anywhere in the world can ask questions via *Behind the Trowel's* YouTube, Facebook and Instagram accounts. London-based interviews are beginning in August with Joe Brooks, PCA, on Westminster Abbey. Future interviews will include: Working in London’s Commercial Archaeology; Southwark’s Hidden Gems; and Intertidal Archaeology with CITIZAN.

In addition, I have a new series called ‘London Archaeology’, due for release in late 2020, which I hope will get more people interested in the city’s long history. So, watch this space!

Keeping sites working!

Melissa Melikian, Director of AOC Archaeology

Prior to lockdown, we had implemented our Covid-19 Action Plan – a plan to ensure the resilience and

continuity of AOC and, crucially, ensure all 130 of our staff continued to work in a safe environment across all five of our UK offices and live sites.

Pre-Covid we were fortunate to be working on large-scale infrastructure fieldwork projects classified as ‘essential works’. As long as we could (rightly) ensure that we were following strict H&S guidelines, we could continue to work on these projects.

On site we worked very hard on implementing Covid-19 measures. This was no easy task: relationships with our existing suppliers have been key to sourcing welfare, vehicles and accommodation – all in short supply. Site excavation and recording methodologies were also updated, so that designated individuals were responsible for all site photography and survey.

In London, where space can be limited, we had to think very carefully about where we could safely proceed with site works. This included checking the feasibility of social distancing on site and making sure welfare provision was in place. We also had to consider how staff could safely get to work and additional vehicles were hired in. GLAAS requested that schemes of investigation and method statements contained Covid-19 measures and, although no GLAAS on-site monitoring was available, they made great efforts to be particularly responsive.

Our infrastructure projects include HS2 and the East West Rail Alliance. These sites are in rural locations, covering large areas, which helped keep staff socially distanced. Advice and support were provided by the enabling works contractors as we adapted our ways of working and introduced Covid-19 measures. Infrastructure provided a vital income stream and kept most of our staff busy, with only 10% of our staff furloughed. As the lockdown has eased, more sites in other areas have opened up. All our offices and sectors are now fully operational and, as of August, all our staff are back to work.

Covid-19 has hit our industry hard and we will not know the full effects for many months to come – AOC was very fortunate to have a good existing mixture of work that provided a buffer. But the key has been our exceptional staff, making huge personal sacrifices by working away from home, and living in isolation for many weeks. We were touched that some people who were working or on furlough offered to take wage cuts to help colleagues. It is a well-worn cliché that ‘a company is only as good as their staff’, but the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted this perfectly.



ABOVE: Natasha's logo, designed for her online interviews on YouTube



BELOW: AOC's socially-distanced excavations on a railway site