

Digging London

'Digging London' is a newly launched website to record the 20th-century rise of archaeology in London and the archaeologists who participated. Here Ian Blair and John Burke-Easton invite people, past and present, to record their memories.



ABOVE 'Digging London' website banner

Introduction

Since World War II, London's archaeology has changed from the domain of local archaeological societies to the profession it is today. Remembering the many archaeologists who trained in London and have since passed through – some to greater things and others to anonymity – leaves you wondering where they are all today. The purpose of this new website [<https://www.digginglondon.org.uk>] is to create an expansive photographic and documentary archive detailing the life and times of those archaeologists, who collectively have played a part in rescuing London's past for the future.

During the 50th anniversary conference of *London Archaeologist* in October 2018, several references were made to a little known, and somewhat niche, website called *Hobley's Heroes* [<https://www.hobleysheroes.co.uk>]¹ with photographs from the site, dotted throughout various presentations and worthy mention made in several of the papers in the

conference publication.² That site has now been in existence for over 10 years, having been launched in 2010. The aim and *raison d'être* of the site was to try to document the life and times of the hundreds of largely forgotten archaeologists who worked for the Department of Urban Archaeology (DUA), by collecting the photographs, videos, newsletters, fragmentary scraps of paper, and other ephemera, that

collectively document their lives, at work and at play, on excavations across the City of London in the period from 1973 to 1991.³

It had long struck us that, on most of the excavated sites which have later featured in publications, the archaeologists had become little more than faceless forgotten extras, consigned to minor supporting roles on the periphery of photographs. The primary aim in creating *Hobley's Heroes*, was to start to redress this imbalance and provide a platform for the full cast to finally be acknowledged and brought into the spotlight.

Post-war leading players

The DUA, though central in the story of the development of large-scale urban rescue archaeology in the City of London is, nonetheless, only a small piece in a much larger story that has its origins in the aftermath of World War II, where working among the ruins of the blitzed City, the pioneering work of Professor W F (Peter) Grimes and Audrey Williams for the Roman and Mediaeval London Excavation Committee (RMLEC), and Ivor Noël Hume and Audrey Baines working for the Guildhall Museum, formed the corner stones of the profession we know today.⁴

Noël Hume left in 1957 to take up a post at Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, where he became chief archaeologist and director of the expanded archaeology programme, using lessons learnt during his time with Guildhall Museum. His successor at the Guildhall Museum was Eve Rutter assisted by a 'young amateur', Peter Marsden, who took over after her departure in 1959, and provided nearly all the archaeological coverage on rescue sites in the City until 1973.⁵

BELOW A sign of the times – tea break at New Fresh Wharf, 1974 (Louise Miller)



Marsden's efforts were aided immeasurably during the late 1960s and early 1970s by Nick Fuentes (then known to friends and colleagues as Nick Farrant) who, together with the volunteers he led, helped to 'keep archaeology alive in the City of London',⁶ and who had the foresight to establish *London Archaeologist* as a quarterly magazine in the autumn of 1968. The stage was set.

During the 1960s, with an ever-increasing number of archaeological sites under threat from developers, an important pivotal role was played by an increasing number of newly-formed local archaeological societies, most notably the Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society (SLAS) formed in 1965,⁷ and the City of London Archaeological Society (CoLAS) formed in 1966.⁸ With the exponential increase in sites during the 1970s and 1980s, CoLAS members volunteered alongside the archaeologists on some of the key sites in the City of London.⁹ Many societies were led by archaeologists whose enthusiasm and driving force were the catalyst for the success of these societies and provided an entry into archaeology for many young people.

At the same time, the Institute of Archaeology (University College London) was expanding and teaching the archaeology of far-flung places – the growing numbers of students wanting to study archaeology (not due at this point to the likes of Indiana Jones!) were drawn by the many eminent archaeologists based there. London's archaeology was on the doorstep and led to many students seeking work experience both during and after they qualified. Some then moved on to other parts of the country and abroad. It would be interesting to find out just how many archaeologists cut their teeth in London before moving elsewhere taking the methods and practices with them.

However, many of those coming into London's archaeology of that time had degrees in different subjects. What made them chose archaeology as a career?

**Do you have any memorabilia of the time?
Or were you one of these students?**

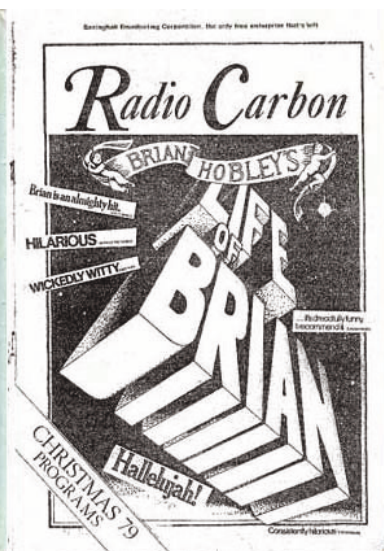
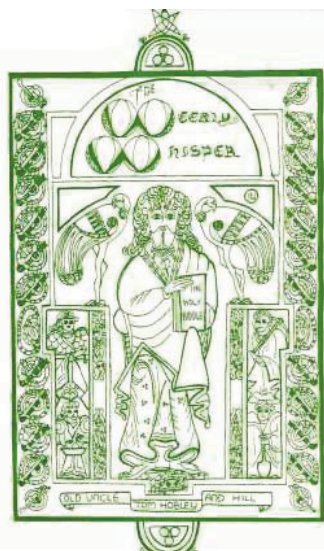


ABOVE Spot the long-serving archaeologists at Newgate, 1978 (Jon Bailey)

In the early 1970s, much of the fieldwork in London was part of a general 'rescue archaeology' movement taking place across England. *Rescue; the British Archaeological Trust* was founded in 1971 as a pressure group by a team including the archaeologists Margaret Jones (director of the multi-period site at Mucking, Essex, 1965–78) and Philip Barker, a professor at Birmingham who also helped establish the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA).¹⁰

During this period, and as a result of both rescue archaeology and the speed of post-war redevelopments with little legislation to protect the archaeology, a number of professional and semi-professional archaeological units were established – these included the DUA, based in the City as part of the Guildhall Museum; the Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee (SLAEC); the South-West London Archaeological Unit (SWLAU), set up by the Surrey Archaeological Society; the West London Archaeological Unit (WLAU), which grew from the London Museum team; and the Inner London Archaeological Unit (ILAU), set up by the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society (LAMAS).

BELOW The successive in-house DUA magazines – the very early predecessors of the new website



RIGHT Ralph Merrifield, Deputy Director and Keeper of the Prehistoric & Roman Collections, explains to Her Majesty the Queen about the Mithraic discoveries at Bucklersbury at the opening of the Museum of London, December 1976 (Museum of London)

The Museum of London takes charge

A logical development saw these services coming together under the stewardship of the Museum of London, at that point led by Max Hebditch, who had an archaeological background, and thus the Museum became the linchpin for all the units.¹¹

When the Museum opened its doors in 1976, it made a point in its early galleries that archaeology was largely the reason for the survival of the wonderful objects on display. The archaeological collections at the Museum of London told the early history of London, something no other museum could do to any great extent. It continued when Dr Simon Thurley took over as Director in 1998, also an archaeologist. He recognised the media attraction of archaeology and regular features about London's archaeology could be heard, seen, or read about at a time when the excavations of large important sites were in progress.¹²

From the mid-1970s to 1991, and politics aside, there was a strong regional approach to archaeology, with three organisations taking 'responsibility' for different areas of Greater London. Almost all the professional archaeological work in the northern, western and southern Greater London boroughs was carried out by the Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology (DGLA). The Museum's DUA covered the City of London. The north-east London boroughs were covered by the Passmore Edwards Museum, part of Newham Borough Council, and archaeological work in the south-east was carried out by the Kent Archaeological Rescue Unit (KARU).¹³

The Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS), created in 1991, saw the merger of the DUA and DGLA. It separated from the Museum of London



in 2011 to become an independent limited charitable company, rebranding as Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) in 2013. This shifted the organisational landscape in terms of cutting a very powerful relationship in archaeology between fieldwork, curatorship and public dissemination.¹⁴

MOLA has, over time, become an archaeological gas giant, whose work-net is now cast far outside its former London heartlands, as it seeks to secure large-scale work on national infrastructure projects. It has now been joined by other units, large and small. Some have been formed by archaeologists drawn from existing London units, plus other units coming into London, and all competing for work.

It is sad to reflect that this, allied to a reduction in the number of development sites in the centre of London, marks a major turning point for a generation of archaeologists, who have dedicated their working lives to London's archaeology, in what was undoubtedly its golden age.

The purpose in summarising the complex chronology of the development of modern urban archaeology across Greater London since World War II, is to highlight just how many organisations and individuals were involved and played an active part.

Might you have anything lurking in drawers or cupboards from that time?

Chronicling our history and evolution

With this in mind, and in order to allow us to chronicle more fully the archaeologists and the archaeological units who have helped to excavate the phenomenal, buried city beneath London, we felt that the time was right to expand on the limited remit of *Hobley's Heroes*, by creating a new website called *Digging London* [https:// www.digginglondon.org.uk]. In doing this, we will no longer be constrained by a single period or organisation. Given the fluid and itinerant nature of field archaeology in London over the decades, which has seen many archaeologists moving between different units to seek work, this is only fitting and right.

BELOW Time for a rest at Merton Priory, excavations by DGLA, 1986



It is intended that *Digging London* will be multi-layered, thus allowing new material to be added into named sections for any archaeological body, which can be readily expanded as required. The hope and aspiration is to create a living growing mixed-media archive, with photographs at the forefront, detailing the thousands of archaeologists, past and present, who have collectively helped to save London's past for the future.

Whereas *Hobley's Heroes* has largely lived in the archaeological shadows since its inception, driven along by two archaeologists who believed that it had a purpose and value, it is hoped that the announcement of the birth of *Digging London* in *London Archaeologist* will bring the new website to the attention of the widest interested and relevant archaeological audience possible.

It is purposely designed to not have any single affiliation and have no borders when it comes to different archaeological bodies – past, present, or future – contributing to its pages.

Clearing out during lockdown? What treasures might you find?

Your website needs you!

Please do have a look at the fledgling site, which is



still very much under development, and feel free to comment, make suggestions, but – **most importantly** – send us new material that can be added to the site.

It is undeniably the case, that the multiple pieces in this fragmentary jigsaw, which documents the life and times of thousands of London archaeologists, are currently spread far and wide, but individually it is undoubtedly the case that we all have a missing piece or two to contribute to the picture. Please do so!¹⁵

ABOVE The excavation team at Regis House, excavations by MoLAS, 1994 (Ryszard Bartkowiak)

1. The site took its title from the second of four in-house staff magazines, named after Brian Hobley, the Chief Urban Archaeologist of the Department of Urban Archaeology (DUA). It was preceded by *The Weekly Whisper* and followed by *The Underground Magazine* and *Radio Carbon*.

2. V Ridgeway, D Briscoe, J Hall & B Wallower (eds) *Fifty Years of London's Archaeology* (2020).

3. *Hobley's Heroes* was conceived by Ian Blair and John Burke-Easton, both former members of the DUA, airing on Facebook in 2013.

4. See Noël Hume's 'Requiem Remembering London's Archaeology' *London Archaeol* 15 (9) 247–52, detailing his experiences working on the St Swithun's House site in 1949.

5. See J Schofield with C Maloney (eds), *Archaeology in the City of London 1907–91: a guide to records of excavations by the Museum of London* (1998) 1–21; and P Marsden, H Sheldon & J Maloney 'Archaeology in London 1968–2018' in V Ridgeway, D Briscoe, J Hall & B Wallower (eds) *op cit* fn 2, 1–34. They detail the history of London's archaeology in their particular area and time.

6. P Marsden *Roman London* (1980) 201.

7. Its aim was to organise volunteer diggers to deal with the large amount of material already excavated, and take on new sites, under the auspices of the Southwark Archaeological Excavation Committee.

8. Directed by Peter Marsden and initially called the

City of London Excavation Group (COLEG), it worked on sites such as the Billingsgate Roman House and Bath between 1967 and 1970.

9. Including Trig Lane, GPO Newgate Street, Billingsgate Market and the Roman forum and basilica at Leadenhall Market.

10. M Biddle, D Hudson & C Heighway *The Future of London's Past: A Survey of the Archaeological Implications of Planning and Development in the Nation's Capital* (1973). In this pivotal survey, it was predicted that given the rapid pace of development across the City of London that 'little will be left of ancient London in fifteen years' time'. Fortunately, this assessment proved to be incorrect, as nearly 50 years of subsequent archaeological excavations across the City have demonstrated.

11. A comprehensive reorganisation took effect in April 1983 following initiatives from the GLC for the establishment of a 'London Archaeological Service'. Under this re-organisation, the Museum of London became responsible for carrying out rescue archaeology in 23 of the 32 London Boroughs plus the City of London, and indirectly in another four.

12. On his website, Thurley described the Museum of London as the perfect job [<http://simonthurley.com/>]. It was a social history museum with the country's largest archaeological unit attached to it. 'On the one hand we did a wonderful innovative exhibition programme and on the other we did some of the most exciting urban archaeology of the late 20th

century. We used archaeology to push the museum's profile and our visitor numbers soared'.

He further added 'The Museum of London's greatest strength was the fact that it had a major archaeological unit attached to it. This meant that we could bring amazing finds straight from the trenches and put them on display. We initiated a series of archaeological displays in 1999. One of the early displays was the spectacular Spitalfields Roman woman excavated in March 1999 and visited by 10,000 people in a fortnight. Other highlights included the hoard of 43 Roman gold coins we excavated at Plantation Place, a 13th-century Mikveh (Jewish ritual bath) and Roman waterwheels at Blossom's Inn'.

13. See T Nixon, B Sloan & H Swain 'Assessing the archaeology of Greater London' in MoLAS/English Heritage *The archaeology of Greater London: An assessment of archaeological evidence for human presence in the area now covered by Greater London* (2000) 2–5.

14. H Morel 'Policy and Practice of London's Historic Environment' *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice* 10:2 (2019) 152–77 Available from DOI:10.1080/17567505.2019.1574098.

15. If contributors to the site could, where possible, put names to the archaeologists who feature in their photographs, this will fulfil one of the principal mandates of *Digging London*, that of naming and celebrating the forgotten archaeologists who have played a part in rescuing London's past.