

Jean Katherine Macdonald, 1920–2021

an appreciation by Jenny Hall,
assisted by Max Hebditch
and other colleagues



It is with great sadness that we report the death of Jean Macdonald, who had an illustrious curatorial career for nearly 40 years in both the London Museum and its successor, the Museum of London. She joined the London Museum in 1946 as secretary to Professor Grimes who had been appointed Director the preceding year, succeeding Sir Mortimer Wheeler. Grimes's widow recalls that her husband felt Jean could be more than a secretary and encouraged her to attend evening classes at Birkbeck leading to her gaining a history degree at the University of London.

forbearance while he was busy excavating City sites after WWII.

She first became Research Assistant and then Assistant Keeper of Prehistoric and Roman Collections at Kensington Palace and then at the Museum of London in 1973, where the first Keeper of the new Prehistoric and Roman department was Ralph Merrifield, with Hugh Chapman as Assistant Keeper of the Roman period. Merrifield and Chapman had transferred from the Guildhall Museum and Jean's leaning towards prehistory made a good match to create a respected, well-balanced department with prehistoric and Roman collections of national and international importance.

Curators at that time were busy with planning displays for the new museum and Jean was responsible for the content of the Museum's first prehistoric gallery telling the story of thousands of years of activity in the Thames Valley (Fig 2). She was so meticulous in detail that she always wanted to 'tinker' with the gallery texts and object captions that almost had to be wrenched away from her

in order to go into production.

As the only surviving member of that first department (I joined as Museum Assistant in 1974), I remember Jean as being very Scottish (although she lived most of her life in London!) and I was intrigued how her Scottish accent got stronger at times. She always seemed to have crisp Scottish £1 banknotes and we wondered how she acquired them with such regularity! This combined with a seeming aversion to

British royalty, and she made a point of not meeting the Queen when the museum was formally opened in December 1976, revealing that she was perhaps a Stuart royalist rather than being a Scottish nationalist.

Later, once staff and collections had moved to London Wall and outlying stores, curators had the task of merging documentation (luckily, the two museums had different numbering systems!) and the storage of the collections. It was at this point that Jean's early work came to the fore – since her appointment after the war, she had kept careful and detailed records of all the objects in the London Museum prehistoric, Roman and Anglo-Saxon collections, and she had recorded their acquisition and research details, work which led to many researchers beating a path to the museum to progress London's prehistoric story.

Jean herself made important contributions to the understanding of the prehistory of Greater London, contributing to various national tomes including the *Victoria County History*¹ but also to more London-centric publications.² Her reservoir of knowledge of the collections was invaluable and she could always deal with queries about London Museum practices at a time when there was only a small number of London Museum staff remaining to remember.

She was very kind and helpful, but also liked a good laugh! In later years she was caring for a demanding elderly mother which must have made her work-life balance very difficult. Her mother lived into her 90s so it comes as no surprise that Jean also lived to a ripe old age. She died on 27 June 2021 at the age of 101.

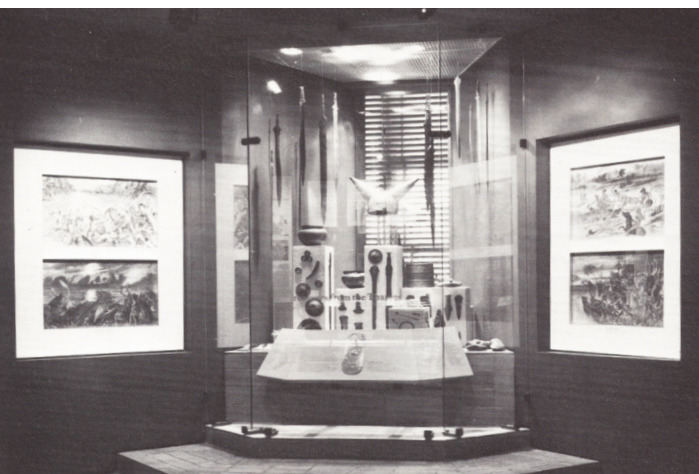


Fig 2: the first Prehistoric Gallery at the new Museum of London in 1976

With other members of the curatorial team who had relocated from Lancaster House in 1951 to create the London Museum at Kensington Palace, Jean provided the curatorial archaeological knowledge, acting as a link while Grimes was excavating sites in the City of London and publishing his wartime excavations. He acknowledged her input in his 1968 volume in which he paid tribute to Jean as his former secretary for her

Some memories

Given her long service, she worked with many curators and researchers to increase understanding of the prehistory of Greater London. Some recollections from former colleagues follow:

John Clark, then Assistant Curator in the Medieval Department of the new Museum of London remembers that her knowledge went far beyond prehistoric since she had also been responsible for the Roman and Anglo-Saxon collections at the London Museum. Much of the documentation now in the Museum of London accession folders in the archive room was down to Jean, bringing together information from the old London Museum correspondence files and associating it with the relevant accessioned object – requiring quite a bit of detective work! Many of the letters, copy-letters and other notes have Jean's handwriting. How much was done on Jean's initiative is unsure, but she must have been doing it while she was working as Grimes's secretary. She is certainly the person to thank that so much detailed information has been preserved in an accessible way.

Jon Cotton, who knew her first as an archaeologist, but who later succeeded her as Prehistoric Curator, remembers that much of her work was carried out behind the scenes and revolved around the meticulous documentation of the extensive prehistoric holdings within

the Museum collections. She put in place the solid foundations on which all later research has built. He and countless others benefitted from her knowledge – either generously and modestly imparted at first hand, or through her characteristically tightly hand-written and much annotated index cards still held in the Museum.

In many ways, Jon recalls, her records were far superior and more user-friendly than the computerised records currently in use! Much of this hard-won knowledge was on display in the first prehistoric gallery for which she was responsible.

Harvey Sheldon remembers how Jean was modest about her own abilities, always enthusiastic about archaeological discoveries and encouraging to everyone trying to investigate London sites. In early years in the Museum offices, however late he got away, Jean seemed to be still there, beavering away – Security, wanting to lock up, did not greatly appreciate this!

Davina Fennemore, who joined in 1954 as a secretary at the London Museum and was later to be PA to three London Museum and Museum of London directors, became a firm friend – a friendship that was to last for 67 years. She will always remember Jean's cheerful personality and sense of humour, which remained with her right through her life. Her love of Scottish dancing and also the study of the Gaelic language remained with her.

Even when disabilities overtook her and she went into a care home, Jean came through smiling. On receiving the card from the Queen on her 100th birthday last year, Jean said: 'How very kind, but very strange for her to send a card, as we have never met and I have never had dealings with her!'

Stuart Needham vividly remembers travelling up to the 'big smoke' on a hot summer's day with some apprehension for an early study trip to the London Museum at Kensington Palace. He was greeted by Jean, who, in her quiet unassuming way, gave the best of encouragement to young researchers – gentle enquiry, seamless provision of material and information, and awareness of precious time during opening hours.

A year later he found himself in post at the British Museum and naturally there were to be periodic contacts,



Fig 3: the Museum Director, departmental colleagues and an old friend gathered at Jean Macdonald's retirement, 1985. Left to right: Hugh Chapman, William (Peter) Grimes, Jean Macdonald, Max Hebditch, Christine Jones, Ralph Merrifield and Jenny Hall

especially given their common interest in later prehistory and his deepening involvement in Lower Thames archaeology, courtesy of excavations at Runnymede. For a big conference on London archaeology in October 1986, it was fitting that both he and Jean should be invited to work together on the Bronze–Iron Age paper. Jean, being the retiring person she was, would not contemplate presenting the paper on the day, but her vast experience of the material from the region inevitably meant her contribution was massive. In retrospect, he wishes it had been worked up for publication.

During her working life, Jean made important contributions to our understanding of the prehistory of Greater London. On her retirement, she maintained her interest in museums and London's archaeology, attending talks and conferences, until osteoporosis and other ill-health conditions made travelling too difficult. Perhaps, the most fitting epitaph should come from Francis Sheppard, who wrote of Jean in his history of the two museums, calling her 'a fine scholar with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the London Museum's collections'.³

1. J Macdonald – the later prehistoric chapters in *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume I (VCH, 1969)*.

2. J Macdonald 'Neolithic' in *The Archaeology of the London area: Current Knowledge and problems* London Middx Arch Soc Special Pap 1 (1976), 19–32; 'An iron age dagger in the Royal Ontario Museum' J Bird, H Chapman & J Clark (eds) *Collectanea Londiniensia: Studies presented to Ralph Merrifield* London Middx Archaeol Soc Special Paper 2 (1978), 44–52; J Hall & J Macdonald 'W F Grimes (1905–88)' in *Trans London Middx Archaeol Soc* 39 (1988), xi–xv; J Macdonald 'Stony Jack's Roman London' in J Bird, M Hassall & Harvey Sheldon (eds) *Interpreting Roman London – Papers in memory of Hugh Chapman* Oxbow Monogr 58 (1996), 243–51.

3. F Sheppard *The Treasury of London's Past* (1991), 121.



Fig 4: Jean in her retirement home, receiving a birthday card from the Queen in March 2020