

THE MUSEUM OF LONDON: ARCHAEOLOGY, EDUCATION AND THE PUBLIC

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INTRODUCTION

This paper describes how in the last 5 years the Museum of London has tried to build upon its established role as the prime focus for archaeology in London to reach and engage with new audiences. Our overriding philosophy has been to use existing methods for communicating archaeology, but to recognise that for many people archaeology as displayed in museums is not inherently fascinating and that we must work hard to maximise interest in the subject and thus maximise its educational - and entertainment value.

THE MUSEUM OF LONDON

The Museum of London is (I am told) the largest urban history museum in the world. It is publicly funded from both regional and national government and has collections, galleries and staff with a remit to tell all of London's rich history. It was opened in 1976 in

a new specially designed building in the City of London. Its staff and collections were an amalgamation of two previous institutions: The London Museum that had told the story of Greater London through social history and costume collections. And the Guildhall Museum that had been an archaeology museum for the City of London (Sheppard 1991, Ross & Swain 2002).

These differing origins have arguably had, at different times, a disjoining, but sometimes healthy influence on how the Museum has told its stories and how it perceives of itself and is perceived externally. It has meant that we have traditionally drawn on strong social history and archaeology collections but tend to use them separately for separate stories. This is even reflected in the Museum's current curatorial departments. The Department of Later London History covers 1700-the present day, organises itself by material type and tends to focus on contemporary social life. The

Department of Early London History which covers the period from prehistory to 1700 organises itself by period and tends to focus on archaeology and the results of excavation.

The Museum's permanent galleries tell London's story from prehistory to the 20th century. Temporary exhibitions draw on our extensive collections including archaeological material. Extensive public and educational programmes supplement these.

The Museum has also traditionally carried out the vast majority of archaeological excavation and research in London. It continues to do this through the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) despite archaeology now being run on commercial lines in Britain. There are now about 5 archaeological organisations regularly undertaking work in London and many more who do occasionally. So the Museum must contend with not having prime access to all excavation results, but still being the repository for all excavation archives, thus needing to put in place mechanisms to ensure archives from different organisations are compatible once in the Museum. The Museum holds the archives for

about 5000 excavations carried out in London in the last century. Archives for about another 1,000 excavations are held by archaeological organisations and will be transferred to us in the future.

MUSEUM AUDIENCES IN LONDON

Greater London, as with all Europe's great cities is now amazingly culturally diverse. Its inhabitants speak about 300 different languages. It includes some of the richest and poorest parts of Europe.

The Museum of London then must set out to reach and engage many different audiences. In recent years as a conscious effort we have tried to get more Londoners to come to the Museum and move us away from being largely for foreign tourists -although we will continue to be an important destination for such groups.

Currently about 35% of our 370,000 annual visitors come from abroad; and 54% from London and the surrounding area, 11% from elsewhere in the UK (Museum of London 2001, 31).

Education has always been a

key part of the Museums work. Currently about 78,000 children come to the Museum every year as part of an organised group. Obviously there is also an educational role to play when engaging our other visitors; and this is perhaps becoming more the case with the UK government's interest in the concept of Life Long Learning. The Museum also has many formal and informal links with British universities.

One way of considering the Museum's actual and potential audiences is through the idea of a triangle or pyramid. At the bottom or base of the pyramid is the largest audience group:

those who do not go to museums at all. In London maybe 5 million people. At the top or apex of the pyramid is the smallest audience group: PhD students studying Museum collections, a group of maybe 5 individuals at any one time. As you work up the pyramid you will pass audience groups that get smaller and smaller, but easier and easier to engage with (museum going public, school children, members of local societies, undergraduates, professional archaeologists). Importantly the groups nearest the base are largest and require most investment in order to reach. This is a sobering realisation, but an important one to recognize. Once the



Museum has catered for its core audiences, making a major impact on new audiences will be difficult, slow and potentially expensive.

ARCHAEOLOGY IN LONDON

Archaeology in London, as in the rest of the UK, is now mainly carried out on a commercial, market run basis. It is very well managed in the sense that property developers have to take archaeology into consideration when they plan new buildings, including the provision of time and money (see for example Hunter and ralston 1993). It has become a big business with perhaps £10million being spent directly by developers every year in the capital, with possibly as much as £40million being spent in total including the alterations to development plans. However this commercialisation has had an adverse effect on the public involvement in, and knowledge of archaeology.

The public can visit very few sites, get involved in even fewer, and in many cases do not even know what work is going on. The complexity of the archaeological process also means that full results are often not published for many years after an

excavation has taken place. Although there is un-doubtedly a lot of money in archaeology most of it is tied to the 'front end' of projects, where it is spent ensuring archaeology is quickly and efficiently removed from deve-lopment sites. Very little is then left for effective dissemination and public involvement in archaeology.

Nevertheless archaeology remains a potent method for constructing and communicating London's early history. Much new work is going on all the time. Wide segments of the public are excited by the potential of archaeology, and





have at least a vague familiarity with its methods and the periods it covers. Material culture also has the ability to engage people in a way that historic records often can not. In archaeology you often have to dispose with personal narratives - although excavated human remains often give us back this opportunity - but being able to work with particular locations and actual objects from the past give us other opportunities. The challenge is to take the potential of archaeology and use it to enthuse existing audiences and reach new ones.

MUSEUM OF LONDON: COMMUNICATING ARCHAEOLOGY

In recent years the Museum of London has developed a strategy for communicating archaeology better to Londoners and our other audiences. Our methods can be divided into four main areas:

DEVELOPING THE LONDON ARCHAEOLOGICAL ARCHIVE AND RESOURCE CENTRE

-Displaying new discoveries

-Innovative exhibitions and events

-Taking archaeology out to London communities

All are centred around building on the Museum's existing strengths in carrying out fieldwork, holding archives for London archaeology, and possessing the in house expertise to study and interpret London's archaeology. Added to this is the belief that to engage as many of the public as possible in archaeology they need to be brought as close as possible in time and space to the point of discovery.

DEVELOPING THE LONDON ARCHAEOLOGICAL ARCHIVE AND RESOURCE CENTRE (LAARC)

The LAARC is an actively curated and sustainable home for the archives from excavations in Greater London. It is probably the largest such facility in the world. It currently holds the archives from over 5000 individual excavations in about 140,000 boxes of bulk finds, plus a further 250,000 individual registered (Swain 2002).

The LAARC has no immediate public appeal. Thousands of boxes of bulk archaeological

finds are not easy to explain to people or a particularly useful tool to use to enthuse them. However having the LAARC, and more importantly having the people who understand what it contains, and its potential, are the foundation on which many of our other activities are built.

The London Bodies and High Street Londinium exhibitions I will mention later relied on material held in the LAARC. Similarly the event The Dig, and our Roman School Boxes scheme relied on material de-accessioned from archives in the LAARC.

The LAARC is though ideal to serve other smaller audiences. We have developed formal links with three London universities teaching archaeology and informal links with several others. Students on a large number of courses visit LAARC, and a number undertake work placements here, and most importantly undertake their dissertations on material held in the archive.

Similar links are being developed with London's amateur archaeological societies. They too are being encouraged to carry out research projects at LAARC as a way of having a



practical involvement in London archaeology.

DISPLAYING NEW DISCOVERIES

The Museum also takes full advantage of its close working links with MoLAS, and indeed other archaeological contractors in London. Many people's fascination with archaeology starts with the element of discovery. Similarly the media, television, radio and newspapers, will often only cover an archaeology story if it is new 'hard news'. We therefore look to tell people about new finds as soon after discovery (sometimes in the next couple of days) as possible, and then put them onto display in the Museum. This requires a high level of flexibility

from staff but has paid dividends with lots of press and TV coverage and many visitors to the Museum.

Our most successful example of this approach was the so-called 'Spitalfields Roman' (Roberts and Swain 1999). An extremely rare Roman stone sarcophagus was discovered on 12 March 1999 at excavations in Spitalfields close to the City. The removal of the lid revealed a decorated and well-preserved lead coffin contained within. This was only the third find of this type ever in London and the first this century. Recognising the importance of the discovery, its potential to reveal new and fascinating evidence about the Roman period, and the interest it was likely to generate amongst the general public, the decision was

taken to bring the sarcophagus, still containing the unopened coffin into the Museum. This was done on 19 March. The coffin was installed in one of the galleries, interpretation boards were hastily prepared and the public were allowed to see the coffin. Curators gave regular short talks about the find and were always present to explain their significance to visitors. Indeed this was the principal method by which the finds were interpreted.

Arrangements were made to open the coffin on the evening of 14 April in the presence of a small audience and two TV camera teams. Very complex preparations had to be made to ensure the well-being of the coffin, its contents and of those involved in its opening. National and local press and radio also covered the whole process.

All went according to plan. The coffin was found to contain the well-preserved skeleton of a young woman lying in a layer of silt that was found to contain rich organic remains. New interpretation panels were prepared and in effect, the Late Stuart Gallery was turned into a temporary exhibition space for the coffin, skeleton and associated finds. Work continued on the coffin while the

public were allowed to view the finds. At one point a curator was able to announce the discovery of a glass phial in the silts - between the sarcophagus and coffin - literally minutes after conservators had first found it. As analysis work continued, the organic silts in the coffin revealed evidence for leaves and textiles, including gold thread.

It is estimated that an extra 10,000 people visited the Museum specifically to see the finds. After two weeks all was removed for further conservation and analysis. Some material was temporarily re-displayed to coincide with a special local TV programme in June. All was put back on show for the first showing of a national TV programme in January 2000. This had 4.3million viewers. We published a booklet on the find, written by writers not archaeologists, to coincide with the TV programme. We are also in discussions with a publisher who wishes to work with us on a fictionalised account of the woman's life, something that will hopefully help us reach more new audiences.

The whole exercise proved beyond doubt the huge interest there is in archaeology, espe-

cially if finds can be brought to public attention rapidly after discovery and can be interpreted in an imaginative way.

Since the Spitalfields Roman the Museum has regularly displayed new finds, normally combining them with press releases, public events and lectures. Finds put on display include waterlogged medieval ship timbers; a hoard of Roman gold coins and parts of a Roman water lifting mechanism.

The Museum's web site obviously also plays a key role in communicating recent discoveries to the public, and we also produce a regular newsletter 'Archaeology Matters' which is sent free subscribers.

EXHIBITIONS AND EVENTS

The Spitalfields Roman, and similar 'new finds' are one way of engaging with the public. However you cannot rely on a constant stream of new discoveries, and they do not allow you to take a more considered view of the subject. The Museum has also sought to involve its audiences in archaeology through larger more planned exhibitions and events. Three are worth mentioning:

London Bodies, High Street Londinium, and The Dig.

London Bodies was a major exhibition put on in 1998 (Werner 1998, Swain & Werner 1998, Swain 1998). It attempted to chart the changing physical appearance of Londoners through time. A key part of the exhibition was human skeletons from our extensive archaeological holding of human remains. The exhibition, which was very successful, could not have been possible without the archive and the archaeological expertise in the Museum combining with museum design and interpretation techniques.

Similarly High Street Londinium (Hall & Swain 2000, Swain 2001), the most popular exhibition the Museum has ever staged, took the results from a single archaeological excavation in the City of London to actually reconstruct part of Roman London for visitors to walk through. The reconstructions were the most popular part of the exhibition but were given academic strength by the display of the actual finds from the site and a video that explained the archaeological processes involved in allowing the reconstruction.

The Dig was a family event

aimed at explaining how archaeologists work (Martin 2002). It used real archaeological finds from the archive buried in a 'reconstructed' site. Children had to excavate the finds but also interpret what it was they were finding. Again it proved very popular and a reduced version is still being used for family events in the Museum.

TAKING ARCHAEOLOGY OUT TO LONDON'S COMMUNITIES

Finally the Museum must acknowledge the limitations of its site. Not everyone will or can visit a museum. Some are constrained by practical and



economic factors, others for social and cultural reasons. Although the Museum will do it can to break down these barriers, in the meantime we can go to those who won't come to us. Also the Museum is about all of London, yet is restricted to a particular site in a particular part of the City.

We also acknowledge that a very good way of engaging audiences is by showing them what has been discovered in the parts of London they are most familiar with.

This approach has manifested itself in three ways: outsites, the Roman School Boxes Scheme and Community Projects.

OUTSITES

Outsites are an attempt to display some of London's archaeology back where it was excavated (Museum of London 2001, 41-2). It relies on the good will and often the finances of property developers or other organisations. In effect small Museum displays are installed in public areas where they can be maintained and are deemed secure. Some are permanent, some temporary. A number are already in place, including one

at a railway station. It is hoped that they will both help to communicate archaeology to those who don't visit museums, enhance the sense of community in the places they are located, and act as useful adverts for the Museum.

SCHOOL BOXES

One element of the LAARC project is to sort and rationalize the material we already have. This includes the deaccessioning of much material that is of no academic value, either because it is unstratified or because of its bulk repetitive nature. In effect this means that we have a lot of material in the archive that by current standards would be recorded and discarded on site. It is taking up valuable space, but contributing nothing to the Archives long-term academic value.

The Museum is therefore developing a groundbreaking project to improve schools' access to its unique and popular collections of Roman and early post-medieval archaeological material. It plans to place a 'mini-museum' of Roman material, housed in a box, in every state primary and special school in London - around 2,200 schools in total (Hall and Swain

2000A). All English school children study the Romans, and Tudors as part of their curriculum. Most will not have access to actual artefacts and many will not be able to visit museums.

This will be the largest ever deposition of artefacts to British schools and we hope it will form a model for other institutions seeking to increase educational access to museum collections.

Each box will create a Roman 'mini-museum'. The most important element will be up to 10 artefacts. Replica objects, teachers' notes, classroom work-



sheets and a training and demonstration video will support these. Each box will be tailored to provide excellent teaching material for one key theme in the National Curriculum: domestic life, diet/health, work, building materials, religion, literacy and communication.

The artefacts are the most critical part of the box. They will be high quality and reasonably large, chosen to be easily appreciated and understood when used for non-specialist teaching. Replicas will enhance the learning potential of the partial remains of original artefacts, enabling pupils to visualize the whole object.

The Museum has received government funding and sponsorship for the first phase of this project that involved creating 200 boxes for a one-year trial in schools. On the completion of this, after taking on board the results of the trial we hope to press ahead for sponsorship of the whole project.

COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Even with all we do we recognise that large sections of society do not benefit from the Museum's work; and some sections of society do not

consider museum going as part of their social life. To reach these groups there must be the recognition that even more radical ideas are needed and investment will be high. However the rewards can be very great. Two projects highlight the sort of approach we are now considering.

LOOK AHEAD WITH ARCHAEOLOGY

This was a project undertaken with a group of homeless men with special care needs. We worked with them at the hostel in which they live to develop an exhibition on the archaeology from the surrounding area (Green 2002). The men were totally involved in the process thereby gaining a whole series of skills and hopefully increased self-confidence as well as finding out about the past. Only a few people were involved in the project; although many more saw the exhibition once it was installed in the hostel. But these were probably people who under normal circumstances would never think of visiting a museum.

COMMUNITY DIGS

The one thing that everybody knows that archaeologists do is

digging in the ground to find old things. But as stated above this is one area where fewer and fewer people can get actively involved. Last year the Museum supported a project where the residents of a council owned block of flats actually undertook an excavation in the courtyard of their building prior to it being re-landscaped. The archaeological potential of the site was low, but the important thing was that it was these peoples home, so everything was of significance! The findings from the site, mainly related to the 19th and 20th centuries influenced the new landscaping of the courtyard and an exhibition of the findings was put in the building.

CONCLUSIONS

Archaeology has fantastic educational potential. Many people are fascinated by history; it is tied into most school curriculum's. People are also excited by the idea of discovery, and can be stimulated by contact with real objects. As professional archaeologists or museum professionals our goal should be to improve the quality of life of as many people as possible.

In Britain despite a large influx of money into archaeo-

logy, its dependence on market forces and the planning and building development process means that if anything public involvement and knowledge about the archaeology that effects their communities has lessened. This is made more ironic by the fact that archaeology has been given a high profile recently on British television.

The Museum of London has worked hard to use archaeology to educate and entertain its existing audiences, and to reach new audiences. We have done this by recognising the need for core scholarly and museological good practice as the basis for all we do. But also by recognising that the more we can get people involved in the process of discovery the more they will be engaged.

We have also attempted new and imaginative methods of communicating archaeology, but always firmly rooted in the ongoing archaeological process. We have also recognised that there are many different audiences for archaeology, and that the largest need the greatest investment. Our approach has been successful in that it has brought in new audiences, many of who have returned. We have also received very high satisfaction ratings

from those using the Museum. But in reality we have only just begun. Large segments of society are still largely untouched by what we do. They represent the challenge ahead.

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