Special section
London archaeology

In the last few years, there has been greater archaeological study of strata under the City of London than, we believe, under any other great city. Most work has been under unusual salvage conditions, permitted and often funded by the property developers who have been rebuilding the City at an amazing rate. It has been made possible by the generosity of those developers, aware of their responsibilities and their public image, and by a property market working with sums of money so staggering that a small percentage for archaeology amounts to serious money. It has also been made possible by the reputation of the Museum of London, its Department of Urban Archaeology (DUA), and Department of Greater London Archaeology (DGLA), as a team of business-like professionals who can be relied upon to finish their work and leave a site to the builders on the due date. The City experience has led to the code of practice for liaison between developers and archaeologists being seen as a model for urban Britain. Since 1974, the DUA has studied 256 sites in the City, employing up to 450 in its field crews – or more than the number of salvage archaeologists working out in the field in the whole of France.

Londinium, the Roman city, seems to have been a new foundation on the hill above the Thames river crossing. Although there are prehistoric finds – recently including ard-marks of Bronze Age cultivation on the south bank – the story of London archaeology begins with the Roman. Among specific finds have been the foundations for a Roman bridge across the Thames, and fragments of an amphitheatre under the Guildhall Yard – an open space today which appears to perpetuate that central open space of 18 centuries ago. Work across larger areas has plotted the moving face of the northern river-bank, with timber revetments of different periods preserved in waterlogged sediments one behind the other.

Papers in this special section examine aspects of London archaeology, from Roman to postmedieval:

Williams draws on the vast amount of excavated material from the City to offer a broad and insightful view of the foundation and development of early Roman London.

Heard, Sheldon & Thompson offer a comprehesive review of the threatened deposits of Roman Southwark.

Yule presents a novel solution to the enigmatic 'dark earth' employing both depositional and environmental evidence.

Milne & Goodburn present the development of the medieval waterfront questioning London's rôle as a major port in the early medieval period.

Hawkins presents an assessment of the demographics of the Black Death in London, and summarizes the evidence for its spread and scale.

Evans presents a critical exposé of the 'archaeology' of the East India Company through its architecture, iconography and historical context.

Interpretive studies like these build and integrate the mass of individual site records held by the DUA, and the mass of finds in the Museum of London's overstretched storage facilities. The final two papers explore how that information is handled and made into understanding:

Boast & Tomlinson outline the computing systems that are enabling effective access to the vast data in the DUA archive.

Cunliffe reviews some recent London publications, and comments on the range and nature of publication levels and access that they illustrate.

London archaeology has not always been like this, and perhaps has already ceased to be like this. The London property market, on which its access to sites and to funding depends, is famously cyclical. The boom of the 1980s, unprecedented in its spreading beyond the old City across to the South Bank and way downriver to the old docklands, is turning into recession. In just one day of May 1990, three developers went bust. We can expect London archaeology to become a quieter scene in the next few years, less spectacular in discoveries as less is destroyed and salvage chances are thinner. Until the up-turn in the market comes. . . .

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00078510 Published online by Cambridge University Press