

# Reports on our past lectures in 2024

26 January 2024 (Online via Zoom)

14th Nick Fuentes Memorial Lecture

'Before and after the Great Fire of 1666: debunking some myths'

John Schofield

John began by pointing out that in the Great Fire, only 20% of total built up area was destroyed as can be seen by the map of Wenceslas Hollar.

In the same street it would have been possible to see the break between pre and post fire housing at the boundary of the fire area, but the Ogilvy and Morgan map has a wavy line to show the fire boundary. On the map there is no visible difference in the plans of the buildings either side of the line which shows that rebuilding followed the old boundaries as people wanted to get their lives and businesses restarted as soon as possible after the fire.

The fire began off Pudding Lane - this area was excavated in 1981 and there are also house plans in existence. An earlier 1974 excavation found a pre-fire cellar with a pine floor and a fire bucket.

Pre-fire London had some houses of note, with pilasters in brick and timber to attempt to emulate Roman classical style. There was also a Dutch influence pre and post fire which lasted until the end of the reign of William and Mary. It is likely that pargetting and weatherboarding could also have been present on houses in the fire area. Timber frame housing could have persisted after the fire although there were regulations post-fire about only building in brick and on the sizes of houses, but not about the function of houses. Buildings post-fire were very similar in function and use.

John used plans drawn by William Leybourn in 1686. These show that shops remained in their pre-fire form, with no glazing until around the 1730s. It is also noted that corner properties could be higher. John mentioned some areas where research is needed such as Weatherboarding on buildings ; this existed on houses shown in watercolours of Southwark so did it also exist in the fire area; Inns, which were numerous, although these are being researched; also it would be instructive to make comparisons with properties of a similar period in colonial America.

John has recently published a book London's waterfront 1666 to 1800. Go to [www.archaeopress.com](http://www.archaeopress.com), and search for Schofield. The complete book can be downloaded as a pdf for free.

*Colin Jenkins*

23 February 2024 (Online via Zoom)

## What we can learn from the records of the Wandsworth and Clapham Union Workhouse

Adrian Finch

Andrew began by explaining how the system of poor relief changed drastically in 1834 and how this change affected the experience of the poor in the transition to the new system of union workhouses post 1834.

Before 1834 a system existed that dated from Tudor times, based on the idea that every poor person had a parish to which they belonged and the support was by the parish. Mostly 'out-relief' supported people at home and the parish officials were members of the same parish.

The Napoleonic wars put pressure on this system and led to change. The idea of the deserving and undeserving poor came to prominence and a commission devised a new Poor Law in 1834. This was based on unions of parishes with a move to people entering workhouses, with the principle that life in the workhouse would be deliberately and uniformly miserable, so no one would choose to go there. There was to be minimal 'out-relief' under the new system.

The Wandsworth and Clapham Union consisted of six parishes. Each donated their existing workhouse to the union and the plan was that these would be sold and one workhouse created. A census of paupers was made in 1836-38 and Putney was the first of the parish workhouses to go. Plans to expand either Wandsworth or Streatham met opposition so a new Union workhouse on East Hill (now St John's Hill) was built and opened at the end of 1838. Extensions were added in 1842 and an infirmary in 1866. This later became St John's Hospital which was demolished in 1975 so photos from the 1960s show what it looked like. (The poor law system was abolished in 1930 and the NHS created in 1948).

In the workhouse, men, women and children over 7 was separated. Food was weighed and detailed records of what was provided survive. The children did receive schooling. As workhouse employment was neither prestigious nor lucrative, and no training was given, the workhouse found it difficult to hold onto staff. The inmates were unhappy and the Vicar of Battersea complained to the Poor Law Commissioners in 1844 which led to an enquiry. The entire management were sacked.

The transition from old to the new system was very painful and the Wandsworth and Clapham Union twice became a national scandal in the early years, but this was not unusual and it could be cited as a typical example of the new system. Things improved post 1840s although even in the 20th century such was the horror of workhouses that people did not want to go into St John's hospital even when it was part of the NHS.

*Colin Jenkins*

22 March 2024

## 'The Joy of Post-ex: A summary of the post-excavation work so far on Tideway Site 4: Barn Elms'

Mike Curnow, Museum of London Archaeology

Mike began by introducing himself and giving us an overview of the site at Barn Elms. This is a pristine landscape that has never been developed for housing or industry so has a high potential for the survival of archaeology. WHS dug in the area in 1974, there have been recorded historical finds and items logged under the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

MOLA carried out an evaluation in 2015-16 and the most recent dig is due to the super sewer works from 2019 to 2021. There were 5 excavation areas including the shaft, coffer dams and connecting culverts with so we were told, 712 contexts and 154 postholes. The finds included pottery, Potin coins, looms weights, crucible fragments and weaponry. The phasing of the site is a complex task of grouping contexts and has produced 8 phases, from Early Paleolithic, Late Paleolithic, 4 Iron Age phases, a Roman to early Post Medieval and finally a later Post Medieval phase.

The talk concentrated on the four Iron Age phases and their likely dating. One set of dates were taken from contextual evidence, but because food remains were observed adhering to the pottery it was possible to obtain carbon-14 dates. There have been fed into a 'Bayesian' statistical model but this has produced different dates.

Mike concluded by talking about the Iron Age diet, evidence has been found for barley, wild oats, cherry or plum stones and in terms of meat, beef, lamb, pork and possibly horse. No direct evidence for the consumption of fish however.

The post excavation work continues in particular around the issue of dating the Iron Age occupation where more data and modelling are needed to resolve the conflicts.

*Colin Jenkins*

26 April 2024

## 'The Calico People'

John Sheridan, The Wandle Industrial Museum

John Sheridan of the Wandle Industrial Museum recounted the history of calico-working along the Wandle. Printing and dyeing had been practised along the fast-running river but in the late 17th century import restrictions were imposed on printed calico from the subcontinent and there was an upsurge in domestic processing - by 1805 a survey lists 12 such mills along the Wandle. At Merton Lodge in Wandsworth Henry Gardiner, who imported and finished calico, could overlook his fabric bleaching

in the area that is now King George's Park. Several other families set up printing businesses, the most noteworthy were the Littlers, who owned the long-established Merton Abbey Mills from the 1830s until selling to Liberty in 1904 and William Morris's famous nearby concern. Both mostly used pearwood blocks, but there were also the more modern engraving and screen-printing processes. Bennett's of Phipp's Bridge used copper cylinders.

John showed us photographs of the old dye house at the Abbey, the printing process at long tables in the Morris Works as well as block-cutting - some designs needed as many as 15 differently coloured blocks. Demand declined in the early 20th century and in 1940 the Morris business was finally wound up. At Merton Abbey, Merton Printers, who took over from Liberty, soldiered on until finally closing in 1982.

*Celia Jones*

**31 May 2024**

### **Exploring the lives of London's 19th-century poor - The burial ground of St George the Martyr Battersea**

Rachel Williams and Dr Ceri Boston, Wessex Archaeology

This talk was in two parts, the first covered the history and archaeology of the site and the second was on the analysis of the bones.

The church was built in 1828 to the design of the architect Sir Edward Blore. It was extended in 1874, again in 1894-96 and was demolished in 1960 following a fire. With a plain interior in the Early English Gothic style there were seats for 596 worshippers. The first burial in the graveyard was in 1829, there was a gap from 1858 to 1861 but it was then re-opened and used until 1870. Clearance took place in 1969, with the bodies being moved to Brookwood Cemetery, however the clearing was done using an excavator so a number of graves were left behind. These remaining graves, estimated as 3% of the total burials were the target of the recent archaeology and bone analysis.

The area where the church was built was still rural in the early 19th century but then industrialised with the coming of the gasworks and railways. Workers houses were built and the area was mostly inhabited by working people but there was an area of extreme poverty in a corner isolated by the railway and gasworks.

The bone analysis was fascinating and only a few points can be related here. The sample was only of the graves that happened to remain after the clearance; those close to the wall of the churchyard; so there was a distinct bias towards females and infants. The age at death showed a peak at 1 to 5 years indicating high infant mortality. Bones can also show evidence of some diseases, such as Scurvy and Rickets as well as if the individual has been severely malnourished. There was evidence for all of these. It is possible from isotope analysis (ratios) to obtain some indication of the origin of someone and also about their diet. This was used to identify

one individual as likely to have been an immigrant from Ireland. Rather unexpectedly given that these were working class women there was evidence of the effect of wearing corsets. There was also a woman who had been killed by a knife wound to the head.

*Colin Jenkins*

**28 June 2024**

### **'The Great Houses of Putney from the 15th to the 19th century'**

Dorian Gerhold

Dorian's survey revealed the surprising number of large houses built in and around Putney from the late 15th century onwards, when wealthy City merchants began to want pleasure or summer houses that were easily accessible from central London. Often these were lavishly decorated and furnished, had no land attached and were used purely for entertaining and show. Initially located around St Mary's Church, beside the river and around what is now the High Street, gradually great houses began to be built southwards towards Putney Hill and east towards Wandsworth. By the mid-18th century such houses began to be built even further out, higher up the hill and on the edge of the common, where there were better views to be had.

Eventually these great houses began to be demolished, although those around the common survived longer. Dorian closed by describing the last years of Fairfax House between the High Street and Montserrat Road. The house probably originated in the 16th century but was altered and extended in the 1630s, and by the 19th century had big grounds with notable trees and a stabling yard. Fairfax House was home to several generations of the Pettwards family until the 19th century and there are a number of interior as well as exterior views. Despite strenuous efforts to save it, the house was finally demolished in 1887.

*Celia Jones*

**26 July 2024**

### **'Revisiting Some Finds and Discoveries from the Borough following recent research, identification and interpretation'**

Pamela Greenwood WHS

This talk was a reflection on 60 years of archaeological work performed by the Wandsworth Historical Society. The first 'Mudlark' along the Thames Foreshore at Putney took place on the 4th August 1964 and was recorded by a photo in the Wandsworth Borough News a week later.

Pamela went through a number of finds indicating how new knowledge and research techniques can change our view of them. For example in July 2021 we had a talk from

Dr Meredith Laing on analysing fingerprints and finger impressions on prehistoric pottery. Neolithic pottery from the site at 10 Bemish Road has such markings so can be reinterpreted in the light of her research. In November 2015 Bob Wells showed a number of objects from the Thames which are still not fully identified.

There is the 'traditional' date of 410 AD for when the Romans left Britain. This is now being questioned in the light of evidence that Roman ways continued well into the 5th Century. Roman pottery from Putney is similar to that from the Billingsgate Bathhouse and has been dated to 350-450 AD. Both the Battersea and Wandsworth shields have detailed decoration that would only have been visible to the person carrying the shield but this is not yet understood.

*Colin Jenkins*

**27 September 2024**

**'Octavia Hill and Wandsworth: how her work in the Wandsworth area sheds lights on her wider reforms.'**

Elizabeth Baigent

Dr Baigent gave us a brief resumé of Octavia Hill's life and work, stressing the relative poverty of Hill's early life and how this influenced her later work. Although Hill was much involved in the provision of accommodation for the poorest section of society, it was her concern that the urban poor should have access to green spaces (and live a 'noble life in nature') that is most closely referenced in her links with Wandsworth. She was the founder, co-founder and an early and persuasive participant in a wide range of organisations that fought to preserve open land, including the National Trust and the Commons Preservation (now Open Spaces) Society, both of which still exist.

Her involvement in the preservation of Wandsworth Common was less direct than it was in the creation of the River Wandle Walk. This project was begun by Hill and her sister Miranda, a local teacher, co-founders of the Kyrle Society whose object was to 'bring beauty home to the poor'. The two sisters encouraged the CPS and NT to purchase land along the river in the early 1900s, and it was this that ultimately led to what today is the well-used and loved Wandle Trail, a splendid example of Octavia Hill's belief in the benefits of green spaces for city dwellers.

*Celia Jones*

**25 October 2024**

**'The Thames on the eve of Londinium, exploring a late Iron Age landscape'**

Craig Campbell

The subject of his forthcoming PhD thesis formed the basis of Craig's talk to the Society. Craig has been inspired by the recent excavations at Barn Elms to reopen

the subject of late Iron-Age London, most particularly why so little scholarly attention has been given to the period. He has made an exhaustive search of both published and unpublished findings for the length of the Thames and identified several smaller settlements that can be dated to the same period (suggesting that some of the recorded finds from these, and other sites, have possibly been misdated). These smaller, probably defended clusters would seem to control access to the river and stretch from Erith and Purfleet; City of London and Southwark; Putney and Fulham; Barn Elms.

Some north of the river finds are perhaps less convincing, although Craig suggests the area around Stamford Brook and also the St Mary Abbot's, Vicarage Gate and Holland Park area in Kensington show signs of late Iron-Age activity. The Barn Elms site itself can now be described as a substantial proto-urban settlement, with evidence of textile manufacture and coin-minting as well as a large community with some evidence of wealth, proving conclusively that the period has long been unjustly neglected.

*Celia Jones*

## **29 November 2024**

Our last Friday meeting of the year is given over to short talks by members. The Friends Meeting House was closed for building works so the talks were held in St Anne's Primary School Hall.

This year the following were featured:

**Jean Davidson** has followed the histories of two former First World War soldiers whose clipped-edge gravestones in Earlsfield Cemetery indicate that they died after the cut-off date for an official war gravestone. Both were problem soldiers, and one appears to have seen no active service at all, having spent his time either punished for being AWOL or on sick leave being treated for VD. The other saw service in Gallipoli and on the Somme, but also contracted VD. Both died early of TB.

**Nigel Black** has been researching London's developing road schemes between 1856 and 1872, including work on the Embankments, Queen Victoria Street and Holborn Viaduct. He has traced the financial history of the schemes, as well as Metropolitan Board of Works surveyors' work in re-routing and redesigning streets to improve access for trade, but also for the Fire Brigades and other services. Most demolished much of what lay in their way, but there are a few remaining pre-development buildings still to be seen.

**Pamela Greenwood** introduced the Trowel Blazers, pioneering women geologists, whose names are linked with Wimbledon and Wandsworth. All struggled successfully to overcome the prevailing prejudice of the time (despite being hampered in their fieldwork by 'suitable' clothing) and all made notable contributions to their fields of study.

*Celia Jones*