Reports on our past lectures in 2016

29 January 2016

6th Nick Fuentes Memorial Lecture

The Late Roman Cemetery at 28-30 Trinity Street, Southwark

Dougie Killock of Pre-Construct Archaeology

Dougie Killock picked out some of the star finds from a six-month long excavation in Southwark, completed in 2007. The site, between Roman Watling Street and Stane Street, was part burial ground and, possibly, part shrine; it was also criss-crossed by an earlier network of ditches. Some of the graves revealed noteworthy burial methods: the remains of one man had been laid to rest on a bed of chalk while another coffin was lined with lead strips - a feature of Roman burials only found in London.

Amongst the many artefacts unearthed on the site was a 'Mercury Bottle' - so-called not because it contained mercury but because it was stamped with an image of the god Mercury; a delicate glass vase in near-perfect condition; items of jewellery; and a large number of coins, mostly from the mid-4th century AD. With many excellent photos taken during the excavation, Dougie gave us a lively and thought-provoking talk.

Janet Smith

26 February 2016

The first saints in Clapham - radical puritan merchants in the 17th century

Timothy Walker, local historian

Timothy Walker presented the results of his research into the merchant community in Clapham in the 17th century. A large amount of information is available from sources such as ratebooks and hearth tax records allowing him to show that Clapham had a particular attraction for successful merchants from the City of London. Only 4 miles from the city it was commutable in a day by horse or carriage. By the 1660s around 30 merchants had homes in Clapham and together with their families and staff the large merchants houses provided over half of the population of the village. Many of the merchants also had houses in the City and significantly these were mainly in the south of the city near to London Bridge.

The Clapham merchants had many trading connections and all knew each other. They were important in funding the Mayflower and helped to found the first overseas missionary society. They were significant administrators in the government under the Commonwealth and were of a distinctly nonconformist outlook. A large

number of nonconformist ministers also settled in Clapham and were able to preach despite the restrictions on such activity after the restoration in 1660.

Colin Jenkins

1st April 2016 (moved from 25th March due to Good Friday)

X-Ray Investigations into the Impact of Industrialisation on London Health

Jelena Bekvalac Curator of Human Osteology at the Museum of London

Jelena Bekvalac gave a fascinating talk on a major research project into old bones. The Museum is the repository of some 20,000 skeletons found in the London area but the project - to examine dry bones by X-Ray - is focusing on just 2,500 dating from the mid-16th century onwards. Researchers are looking for 7 main types of disease, including osteoporosis, joint erosion and cancer.

Modern technology means that portable digital equipment can be used, providing instant images and read-outs. The remains of more than 200 named individuals, buried in the crypt of St Bride's Church, Fleet Street, have also been examined. With the bonus of documentary evidence researchers are able to put the remains into context. They are largely of high-status people, who died between the ages of 50 and 90 years old. Examination of their bones shows that many of them died of diseases connected with old age rather than anything caused by their environment.

The aim of the 3-year project is to create as big a database as possible to allow comparisons to be made between different social groups; with remains found in rural areas outside London; and even with international data. Looking to the future, Jelena said that the project might even help with modern medical studies.

Janet Smith

29 April 2016

'Blueprint for Living' - The Story of the Fitzhugh Estate, Wandsworth

Sharon O'Neill, photographic artist.

Sharon O'Neill is a photographic artist living in a flat on the estate. She began researching its history in connection with a project that she was doing as part of her masters degree in photography. The estate is located on land next to the Royal Victoria Patriotic Institution and was built in the early 1950s by the London County Council to the design of one of the leading modernist architects Leslie Martin, who was also responsible for the Royal Festival Hall.

The blocks of flats were pioneering in their construction methods and were an attempt to apply the modernist ideas that Martin has put forward in 'The Flat Book' published in 1939. They were featured in the Architects Journal in 1956. Original built as

council flats, today only a proportion of council tenants remain following the right to buy scheme introduced in the 1980's.

Sharon has spoken to various residents and has created portfolio of photos of the estate. She obtained Arts Council funding for her work and held an exhibition in the Fitzhugh Estate club room from 31st May to 4th June 2016.

Following the talk there were a large number of questions from the floor reflecting the interest and passion on both sides that still surrounds the whole issue of modernist architecture.

Colin Jenkins

27 May 2016

Liverpool Street Station Crossrail Site

Alison Telfer of MOLA

Dozens, if not hundreds, of Romans may have lost their heads in London nearly 2,000 years ago but their skulls have survived the centuries in greater numbers than any other part of the human body, according to Alison Telfer of Museum of London Archaeology. In a gripping talk on the recent excavation of the Liverpool Street Station Crossrail site, she said that no fewer than 35 human skulls had been uncovered. They were found in an area close to the River Walbrook where an astonishing 300 skulls have been found in the past 200 years. Archaeologists are unable to say whether they came to rest there as a result of a massacre or a religious sacrifice or whether the site was just a regular burial place.

Amongst other finds were domestic pottery - possibly grave goods - and 17 iron horseshoes. Human skeletons have also been found on the site of the original Bedlam Hospital (1569-1739); they bore the traces of a wide range of causes of death, including syphilis, rickets and TB. Nine surviving headstones had allowed some personal histories to be researched, including that of a woman who had defied the odds to reach the grand old age of 105.

Janet Smith

24 June 2016

AGM followed by 'The Great Fire of London of 1666' - a talk with readings

Dorian Gerhold, former WHS Chairman

Dorian Gerhold provided maps and historical background interspersed with readings by several WHS members from journals, diaries and letters written by people who saw the fire, including Samuel Pepys, John Evelyn and others.

He was in the national press in February 2016 for identifying the site in Pudding Lane where the Great Fire of London of 1666 began, including the probable location of the baker's oven at the back of the site. Dorian takes up the story: "The discovery was based mainly on a plan and report made in 1679. On the plan was written 'Mr Fariners grounde there the Fyer began', and the irregularly shaped site could be identified on later maps." The discovery has been written up and published in an issue of the Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society. "Much of the press coverage claimed that this showed that the Fire did not begin in Pudding Lane, but the Fire clearly did begin in Pudding Lane; the site is now underneath Monument Street, but that was not created until more than 200 years later."

Dorian showed us a photo of this plan during the talk.

Colin Jenkins

29 July 2016

'A Wandsworth Foreshore Miscellany' - recent discoveries by WHS along the Wandsworth foreshore

Pamela Greenwood, Chair WHS

Pamela Greenwood updated members on the progress of the Thames Foreshore Survey begun by the Society in 1964. She said there had been clear signs of erosion in recent years with a loss of up to 10cm from the foreshore. This had possibly been caused by increased river traffic. The profile of the foreshore suggested it might once have been an eyot or island. While some earlier finds - such as an unidentified wooden structure near Brewhouse Lane - had largely disappeared, new structures kept appearing. The shadowy remains of a wicker-like structure had become very faint but a new set of wooden posts nearby had been revealed. Recent finds included what could be the base of a crucible (medieval?); a Roman flagon; an early Roman 'poppy-head' beaker; and fragments of a good quality fingernail decorated jar from the Iron Age.

Another WHS member, Bob Wells, then gave a run-down of some of the rings or 'bling' he had found on the foreshore. These included a gold band, possibly from the Bronze Age; an Iron Age copper alloy spiral ring; an early Tudor ring once set with a gemstone; and a gold mourning ring from 1680 given to a mourner as a 'momento mori'. Bob kept his most beguiling find to the end: a Georgian mourning ring inscribed with a name (John Thomas), a date (27 November 1749) and a number of mysterious symbols. Using the date of death as a starting-point, Bob had been able to find out that John Thomas was a sea-captain who'd sailed to Charlestown in South Carolina in 1733. The voyage had led to the foundation of Georgia, the 13th and final British colony in America. Thomas was married to a Huguenot and the ring had been made by a Huguenot - possibly one reason why it was found in Wandsworth, home to many Huguenot refugees from the 17th century onwards. In a magical end to the evening, all the finds were made available to members to look at and handle.

Janet Smith

30 September 2016

Henry Smith: His Life & Legacy

Lucy Lethbridge, author

Henry Smith was born in Wandsworth in 1549 and died there in 1627, leaving a generously endowed charity in his name. Beyond that, very little is known about him so author Lucy Lethbridge faced a considerable challenge when she was commissioned to write a book about him. A starting-point was the memorial to him in All Saints Church, Wandsworth, which includes a family-crest. From this, Lucy and her researcher, Tim Wales, were able to trace Henry's roots back to Chipping Camden in the Cotswolds.

Henry accrued his considerable wealth through his activities as an iron-trader and later as a money-lender. He also acquired some valuable tracts of land, not least in the hamlet of Brompton, now home to some of the most expensive real estate in London. The Henry Smith Charity was set up in his lifetime and, nearly 400 years later, disburses £27m a year to a variety of good causes. Read more about this fascinating man in Lucy's book.

Janet Smith

28 October 2016

Excavations at Brandon House in Southwark

Chris Mayo of Pre-Construct Archaeology

In a fascinating talk on a recent excavation in Southwark, Chris Mayo showed us slides of parts of a Tudor frieze last seen nearly 500 years ago. In 2011, following the demolition of an office block, Brandon House, which stood at the junction of Borough High Road and Marshalsea Road, archaeologists had the unexpected chance of investigating the site for six months.

An earlier Tudor building, thought to have been on the site, was the palatial home of Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk and briefly brother-in-law to Henry VIII. The house, built between 1518 and 1522, is identifiable on Wyngaerde's 16th century panorama of London. Beneath the foundations of a 1980s' and a 1930s' building archaeologists found remnants of Tudor and Roman walls, as well as more than 300 artefacts. Many of these were terracotta fragments from a Renaissance-style frieze, confirming the high social status of the earlier Tudor occupant.

Janet Smith

25 November 2016

Our last Friday meeting of the year is given over to short talks by members. This year the following were featured:

Charles Brandon Duke of Suffolk 1484? - 1545 by Janet Smith

A follow on with more information about the man who owned the house in Southwark that was excavated as described in the October talk. Charles Brandon 1st Duke of Suffolk was the son of Sir William Brandon who was standard bearer to Henry VII and fell at The Battle of Bosworth. The son was therefore very close to the Tudors and was described as the best friend of Henry VIII. He was a keen jouster and soldier who was heaped with honours including being created 1st Duke of Suffolk.

In 1514 the kings' younger sister Mary married the much older King Louis XII of France but that king died only a few months after and she then married Charles Brandon, who had already been married twice before. King Henry accepted the marriage, after initially being furious and they clearly remained on good terms. After Mary died Charles married for a fourth time and was buried in St Georges chapel Windsor when he died in 1545.

The Tooting Anglo-Boer War Memorial by Neil Robson

This memorial in Tooting Parish Church contains 13 names and was unveiled in August 1903 by a Major General Oliphant. Neil discussed the background to the war and how this memorial came to be erected. He considered two of the names on the memorial in more detail. Private Dawson, a public school educated man who joined a City of London volunteer regiment and died of wounds in May 1900. Corporal Aldous was by contrast a career soldier who died of typhoid in February 1902.

The Tooting Common Project by the project leader Susanna Kryuchenkova

She presented a brief history of the common and a summary of the aims of the project.

Four interesting objects by Keith Whitehouse

Keith showed some items he has acquired recently. First a trinket box from around 1880 with a picture of the old Putney Bridge and Tollhouse. The second was a pre-paid envelope dating from 1841 with a Wandsworth postmark. These envelopes designed by William Monreddy were sold as an alternative at around the same time as the introduction of the Penny Black postage stamp.

The third was a chalice presented as a prize on the 11th September 1804 to a member of the Royal Roehampton, Putney and Mortlake Volunteers, one of the volunteer regiments raised to defend the country against a possible French invasion.

The final item was a small yearbook of parades, drills and camps from 1900-1901 for the West London Rifles.

Colin Jenkins