

From the Museum

by *Martin Howe*

Archaeology is a difficult discipline to explain to the passer-by. The technical terms and methods so familiar to the archaeologist are not generally understood by the layman. Excavation remains a mysterious process, mostly because excavators cannot spare the time to explain in detail what they are doing while they are digging. The public image of archaeology in this country is shaped by object-orientated museum displays created by archaeologists who, on occasion, are blinkered by their own knowledge. Their displays may be good illustrations of such topics as typology, but boring to the visitor.

When work began on the Museum's new Archaeology Gallery the present writer was keenly aware of such pitfalls and both the gallery and the case-displays were designed to enable the visitor to relate the objects on display to the way of life of the people who made them and used them.

The first problem was how to convert a high Victorian room, which housed an ageing collection of stuffed birds, into a gallery whose varied shape and content would attract the visitor. After consultations between the present writer and Mr L. Threadgold of the City Architect's Department, it was decided that a walk-round gallery of varying shape was the most appropriate. The visitor enters the gallery through a vestibule containing cases explaining the natural and scientific processes of archaeology and he can then follow the chronological development of human activity in the Nene Valley from the Neolithic to the Victorian Age (see fig. 21).

A ground-plan and working drawings were produced and the construction work commenced in October 1977. Originally, it had been proposed that a false ceiling should be inserted lowering the height of the room which tended to overawe visitors and distract their attention from the displays. However this proposal was abandoned due to the cost and it was demonstrated that the same effect could be obtained by painting the upper part of the room dark brown. Track-lighting was hung from the existing light fittings and the long neon tubes which formerly lit the room were transferred into the tops of the existing bronze-bound wall cases to provide case lighting. Thus it was possible to free money to fit out the interiors of the cases and provide features which would otherwise have been beyond our budget.

The project was jointly financed by the Peterborough City Council and the Peterborough Development Corporation with grant aid for such items as new cases from the Area Museum Service for South Eastern England.

Total expenditure was £8442 and the gallery was opened by the Mayor, Councillor Ben Franklin, on May 18th, 1978.

It was an easy task to turn the illustrative material into a gallery-guide designed as an aid to classroom teaching, which helps school children to get as much benefit as possible from an organised study trip to the gallery. Many Peterborough schools have taken advantage of this and their comments and reactions to the gallery have been most helpful in shaping the future development of the displays.

The introductory vestibule contains three cases explaining the processes which lead to the formation of archaeological sites, their detection and excavation and a flow diagram showing how information gained by excavation is turned into a finished report. A wall-mounted relief map showing the extent of archaeological sites in the area completes the basic information which the visitor needs in order to understand the reasons why people in antiquity settled where they did and to appreciate the significance of the displays dealing with specific sites.



Fig 21 The new archaeology gallery of Peterborough Museum

Prehistory is represented by material recovered from the important Fen-Edge settlement at Fengate backed up by finds from other important sites such as those at Stanground and Fletton. By including material from other sites it is hoped that the visitor will appreciate that the Nene Valley was extensively exploited by human beings from the earliest times.

The intention of giving an overall view has been applied to each of the other chronological sections. Reconstruction models have been widely used throughout the displays. The post-holes and ditches excavated at Fengate can be readily explained by recreating the settlement of which they are the last remains. The north gateway of the Roman fortress excavated at Longthorpe can similarly be recreated in order to make the past live, especially to children, with whom the models are great favourites.

The Longthorpe case, with its display of military equipment and pottery from the site, is an introduction to the Roman section of the gallery which contains cases devoted to the local Roman industries of salt extraction, iron and stone working and above all, the large scale manufacture of pottery. A case dealing with objects of religious significance forms part of the everyday life display and to this will shortly be added a case on Roman costume.

Grave goods from the Pagan Anglo-Saxon cemeteries at Nassington and Woodston bring the visitor into the Anglo-Saxon and mediaeval section of the gallery. The use of wall-mounted explanatory material has proved most useful as, to date, Mediaeval Peterborough, although known from historical sources to have been a rich and prosperous town, has left relatively little compared with earlier periods. Finally, two cases containing post-mediaeval objects such as German stoneware bottles and Victorian lemonade bottles bring the story up to the turn of this century.

The new gallery was designed to be completely flexible, not only in display areas, but also in its layout. It will be possible not only to change the objects on display, but also physically to change the shape of the gallery itself. Eventually an audio-visual unit, with taped commentary, intended to take the visitor on site, will be located behind the Roman industry cases. Replicas of the Waternewton early Christian silver, made by the British Museum, will be displayed in close proximity.

The intention behind the design of this new gallery is to make the people of Peterborough aware of their rich archaeological heritage. The present writer hopes that a visit to the new gallery will not only be informative, but will also be fun.

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Fig 22 The medieval and post-medieval section of the new archaeological gallery.