

Throwback Thursday: Dig This!

Thursday 9 April 2020

Welcome to Throwback Thursday: Dig This! – sharing our heritage from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

Calling all those budding armchair archaeologists out there – tonight is a good time to tune in to (or catch up on) More 4 for a new archaeological series on Thursdays at 9pm and hear about the [Great British Dig in Your Back Garden](#).

Although the programme isn't about Haringey, do not be disappointed. In our post today we are investigating some of our own archaeological stories and surprising discoveries, some found by chance in back gardens – but all from around our borough.

We will start with one of the most impressive finds - a story from 1928 of how a young boy was digging in his back garden one evening in Muswell Hill. He had dug a really deep hole, reaching a depth of about 4 feet, when he struck what was thought to be two pottery bowls embedded in the clay. Within the bowls were 654 silver coins, a silver spoon and a bronze ring. It was a Roman hoard.

At the [British Museum](#), where the hoard is part of the collections, experts reconstructed the broken clay fragments. They found that the pieces turned out to be a unique, purpose-built money box, complete with a slit for coins. It was possibly made by the owner of the hoard.



The Muswell Hill hoard © and courtesy The British Museum

Looking at the Roman coin types (41 of which now remain in the Museum), these suggest that the hoard was buried in or shortly after AD 209. But why were these coins buried (changing fortunes? economic upheaval? gifts to the gods?). And why did they not come back for it? Sadly, that's a mystery that will not be solved.

From our own collections at Bruce Castle, over the past century, other chance spot finds have been unearthed. A couple of Roman coins lost by their Roman owners, resurfaced before the Second World War by allotment holders digging at Broadwater Farm and one near White Hart Lane in Tottenham.



A Roman coin called a 'sestertius' showing the head of Severus Alexander, who was emperor AD 222-235

© Henry Jacobs. From the collections at Bruce Castle Museum & Archive

Other chance finds discovered on Tottenham Marshes include a hammer (with the hole, in the photograph below) and flint flakes for cutting. In 1942 in a back garden in Windermere Road, Muswell Hill, an axe was found – all of these finds date from the Neolithic period (around 10,000 BC), and are now part of our collections.



© Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

A plain and functional medieval jug (below) was found at Scotland Green in Tottenham too.



© Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

We will be returning in future posts to other significant finds and archaeological excavations in Haringey, as there are so many important sites to cover in more detail. So do look out for those ...

In 2005, there was a community drive for The Big Dig, where organised groups liaised with archaeological authorities in London to take part in (exactly what it describes) a co-ordinated big dig happening all at the same time, whether it was in back gardens, community spaces or even schools. It was very popular and was a huge organisation of community archaeology en masse. One memorable 'big dig' involved Rhodes Avenue Primary School in Muswell Hill, as the school sits within the grounds of the historical [Tottenham Wood Farmhouse](#). The rather grand portico from the farmhouse survives at the school, as a lasting reminder of the old farm (below).



© Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

There is one very large 'front and back garden' that has revealed a bountiful supply of finds – the immediate grounds of Bruce Castle, the former 16th century manorhouse for Tottenham – now Bruce Castle Museum and Bruce Castle Park.

Many of you will remember back in July 2006 Bruce Castle joined forces with the Museum of London and the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS, now known as MoLA) to undertake an organised three-week community dig. Over 1,500 schoolchildren took part, as well local residents and community groups. What fun that was!



Two scenes of archaeology at Bruce Castle showing trenches by the Tudor Round Tower and a trial trench for looking for the medieval manorhouse.

© Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

The aim was to find the medieval manorhouse for Tottenham (which we did find partly – we concluded that it is likely the main medieval house lies beneath today's Tudor Bruce Castle and its later built additions). Of course the wonderful

photographer Henry Jacobs was there to record events and he has kindly shared a selection of his photographs on his website [here](#).

Amongst the views taken by Henry are camera shots of our two great volunteers – Bill Rust and the late Ray Swain – who, amongst other things, headed the non-digging investigation, with Ian Blair (Senior archaeologist with MoLAS), of the deep void beneath the Tudor Round Tower using a tiny camera. Great work. You can see more of this official and professionally-organised community dig in a write-up [here](#). And with more photographs provide by the Museum of London's London Archaeological Archive Centre (LAARC) [here](#). It is also listed on the [Layers of London website](#) where you can see some images of finds and features, including this extraordinary little Victorian toothbrush (below) with the name of its owner written on it.



The name distinctively says 'Babbage'. It belonged to one of the sons of [Charles Babbage](#), (the mathematician, polymath and originator of the modern-day computer), who sent both his sons to Bruce Castle School, run by the Hill family. The toothbrush is on display at Bruce Castle Museum and, along with some of the Bruce Castle School tokens that were found by the young archaeologists in 2006, it is one of the favourite objects on display; it is always pointed out on our tours of the building with groups, or spotted by children on school trips.

One of our former Bruce Castle colleagues Gigi used to live in the Caretaker's House at Tottenham Hale. She is a keen gardener, and I asked her a few weeks ago if she had ever found anything unusual in her garden. She was curious why I was asking but said she only used raised beds in that garden, so had never dug deep down into the ground. If she had, who knows what she would have found. In February 2020, on the [land of the former Welbourne Community Centre](#) opposite her old house (by Stainby Road and Monument Way), the community was invited to an Archaeological Open Day by Historic England and Pre-Construct Archaeology.

Here is a write-up of that day and what was discovered, kindly shared by Joseph Nicholas of the [Friends of Bruce Castle](#):

"This afternoon 5 February, some of the Friends of Bruce Castle went to the Archaeological Open Day at the site of the former Welbourne Centre, near Tottenham Hale, where in advance of its redevelopment, a team from Pre-Construct Archaeology has been excavating for the past couple of weeks.



Archaeologists working on the former site of the Welbourne Centre at Tottenham
© Joseph Nicholas

They have turned up some exciting finds: over 600 Mesolithic flints, and evidence of a Saxo-Norman farm dating from 1050-1150 AD. (The Mesolithic period (c. 9,000 to 4,300 BC) is marked by the appearance of small-bladed, often hafted stone tools and weapons and by the beginnings of settled communities.)

The quantity of early-Mesolithic finds recovered so far (to date, only half the site has been excavated) suggests that we're looking at a major campsite: not a place where a hunting band may have stopped for a couple of nights, but a location visited and occupied by large groups of people ... for substantial periods of time. The site could have been in use for many hundreds or thousands of years: flint does not occur here naturally, and must therefore have been brought in from somewhere else - and that wouldn't have happened were the site not considered an important one by its Mesolithic inhabitants.



First photograph: Mesolithic axe, with the photographer's hand for scale (the axe would have been hafted rather than held in the hand); Second photograph: four Mesolithic flints on an image of a Mesolithic flint-knapper (anti-clockwise, these are a hammer stone, two flint knives, and the core of a nodule from which blades were struck). © Joseph Nicholas

Until the 19th century, the site stood alongside a small stream that formed part of the braided Lea Valley system, on higher and drier ground above the wetlands: an attractive place for settlement, then and in the Saxo-Norman period.

Evidence for the Saxo-Norman farm is quite scanty compared to the Mesolithic material found - a possible enclosure ditch, some sheep bones and coarse pottery fragments - but it's the first time remains from this period have been found here. Tottenham's Saxon roots have been inferred from its Old English name, but this is the first archaeological evidence for its occupation a millennium ago. “



Butchered sheep bones (left) and the fragments of Saxo-Norman pottery (right). © Joseph Nicholas

About the origin of the name 'Tottenham, local historian - and Vice-Chair of [Friends of Bruce Castle](#) - Christine Protz writes in her book '*Tottenham: A History*': “The more commonly agreed origin of the name is that it is Saxon. The simplest version is that it comes from a man's name 'Tota', and 'Ham' refers to a settlement or home.’

As Adam Single, Historic England's Archaeology Adviser at the [Greater London Archaeology Advisory Service \(GLAAS\)](#), summarised:

“Evidence of intensive activity from that distant prehistoric period is very rare and I expect we will learn a great deal about that time during this work. The discovery is certainly an important one for London, and for the Lea Valley especially.”

This extraordinary discovery certainly sent waves of interest across London with many coming to Tottenham to see it for themselves.

Closer to home, if looking in our own back gardens, we might not find anything quite like any of this of course. Land has been disturbed with increased urbanisation and use. Maybe we won't find a Roman hoard or a Mesolithic hand-axe, but to all those who during this period of isolation and who are lucky to have a garden, do take care when digging - you never know what you might unearth.

One of our readers very kindly shared with us this week a photograph of an air raid shelter that she had discovered in her back garden (thank you for sharing your photograph Sarah!).

But if you do find something unusual, please do take a photograph like Sarah and let us know at Bruce Castle. We are happy to see your photos and also can advise on what to do next should it be something of greater significance. Here's some advice too from the [Portable Antiquities Scheme](#). And for further interest in

archaeology in London, check out the [London Archaeologist](#) and the [Archaeology Data Service](#) or for young people look at the [Young Archaeologists' Club](#).

So, another good reason to stay at home – become an armchair archaeologist!
And remember the television series this evening.

Most importantly, let us all show our support and appreciation and Clap for Carers at 8pm.

Take care, stay safe, keep well.

Best wishes

From all at Bruce Castle

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