
EXHIBITION REVIEW

Review of "Portals to the Past" presented by Crossrail

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If you missed Crossrail's *'Bison to Bedlam'* exhibition in July 2012, now is your chance to see the next showing of artefacts found since 2009 from the various Crossrail worksites scattered throughout London. The PIA published a forum discussing the benefits and challenges of urban archaeology, led by Crossrail's archaeologist, J. J. Carver in our publication last year (Carver, 2013), so we wanted to catch up with the team to see how they're doing with their new four week *'Portal of the Past'* exhibition found huddled in a little space just around the corner from New Oxford Street's Centre Point (a two minute walk from Tottenham Court Road tube station).¹

Crossrail's work started in May 2009, and is one of Europe's largest construction projects costing around £14.8bn that promises to transform London's travel infrastructure with its impressive route running over 100 kilometres, stopping at 38 stations to join London from west to east. It will undoubtedly change the fabric of the city, weaving through key nodes of leisure and tourism, employment, business, and commerce, and will also connect people throughout the capital and the greater region.

Crossrail has been burrowing under our city streets, tunnelling 42km of new tunnels with tunnelling machines weighing as much as 1,000 tonne and stretching 150 metres long! These eight machinery beasts can

tunnel about 100 metres per week, so it's no surprise that approximately 4.5 million tonne of soil has so far been gathered, with plans for this soil to be shipped off to Essex to be part of a new, large RSPB nature reserve.

The exhibition is a rather small gathering of artefacts, ranging from 7,000 BC flints of the Mesolithic period, through to the Roman era, and into the early 20th century of the Victorian era with a Shipyard chain from the famous Thames Ironworks yard (**Figure 2**). The public can finally get an opportunity to see a few of the 39 fascinating skulls (**Figure 1**) found in late 2013 along the vanished Roman Walbrook river (Kennedy, 2013; Mower, 2012). With 55 million years of unexplored London clay dug up over 40 worksites, the 50 or so artefacts are quite literally just the tip of the iceberg of the history that remains beneath our feet, showing a diverse timescale of many of London's most important periods. They also represent a beautiful collection that show a personal touch from the past, with leather shoes, a child's bracelet, Sarah Long's limestone grave slab, ladies hairpins, and a copper-alloy spoon. There are also some spectacular pieces of tile and pottery from the medieval and Tudor eras. A large portion of the artefacts are from the Roman era, but after all, Britain was part of the Roman Empire for almost 400 years, so this is not surprising.

A pleasing aspect of this exhibition is that it is being held in central London, so it is easy to reach and quick to see if one is in or

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Fig. 1: Human Cranium from the Roman Period (AD 43-410).



Fig. 2: Thames Ironworks uncovered at Instone Wharf.

visiting central London. It is a great and rare opportunity for archaeologists to be able to display artefacts found from projects so quickly. While it is only a small display in the limited space of the Crossrail Visitor Centre, the large glass window panes of the centre

invite all those passing by to look and see what lies within.

The exhibition is accompanied by a series of Wednesday lectures in the evening at six o'clock, which are free to attend, but extremely limited in space. The schedule is:

DATE	TITLE	PRESENTER/AFFILIATION
19/02/14	<i>The Urban Realm – Buildings archaeology</i>	Julian Munby, Oxford Archaeology
26/02/14	<i>Crisis and The Black Death</i>	Sam Pfizenmaier, MOLA
05/03/14	<i>Beyond the City Walls, Recent finds from Liverpool Street Station</i>	Alison Telfer, MOLA
12/03/14	<i>London's Last Great Shipbuilder – The Thames Ironworks and Shipbuilding Company</i>	Danny Harrison, MOLA

It will be another four more years before we see Crossrail services in central London. In the meantime we hope to see more exhibitions and stories about what secrets have lain hidden under our London landscape.

If you happen to miss this short opportunity, Crossrail plans on setting up an interactive gallery exhibition, with their displays and panels, lectures and discussions to go online permanently for all to see.

Notes

- ¹ Crossrail Visitor Information Centre, 16-18 St Giles High Street WC2H 8LN. Exhibition open to the public for free from 15 February to 15 March 2014 from Tuesday to Thursday; Saturday (opening times vary). See website: <http://www.crossrail.co.uk/sustainability/archaeology/archaeology-exhibition-portals-to-the-past-february-2014>

References

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