

# Materiality and the urban: recent theses in archaeology and material culture and their importance for the study of urban history

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Half a century on from Ivor Noel Hume's reference to archaeology as the 'handmaiden to history', historical-period archaeology has come quite a way.<sup>1</sup> From disparate origins, in anthropological approaches to material and rescue archaeology in North America, and industrial and buildings archaeology in Britain and Europe, the sub-discipline has coalesced into a structured approach to the recent past. Hume's comment is often misinterpreted as a critique of archaeology's supposed inferiority to history, yet his comment actually refers to the potential for archaeological material to inform historical narratives, fill in gaps and populate the histories of non-literate peoples with a material culture. Unfortunately, overlap between the two disciplines is still in relatively short supply. In light of the recent material turn in the humanities, however, as well as an increased interest amongst historians and geographers in engaging with material culture, archaeological approaches to artifacts, sites and built heritage are in a strong position to inform methods for examining the historical material environment. Collaboration is now not only necessary, but timely, and this review of theses is an attempt to further that potential for co-operation amongst those who study the past. The doctoral theses reviewed here explore changes and developments in the modern city from a material perspective, evidencing both the breadth of approaches and the potential for research in the arts and archaeological sciences to stimulate new studies across different disciplines.

Cross-disciplinary scholarship between archaeologists, anthropologists and historians of material culture has frequently been inhibited by the disciplinary boundaries of academia, and in the case of doctoral research, assessment criteria for Ph.D. theses. Terminology surrounding

<sup>1</sup> I.N. Hume, 'Handmaiden to history', *North Carolina Historical Review*, 41 (1964), 215–25.

chronology and methods has also hindered multidisciplinary scholarship, despite significant archaeological scholarship dedicated to rationalizing temporal distinctions. Within the discipline, archaeologists have been concerned with process and change in material over time, with production techniques, building styles and material use dictating how individual cultures or time periods have been distinguished. In contrast, historians have tended to delineate periods through significant events, political developments and economic change, or through predominant modes of thought and representation. The theses reviewed here are all concerned with what is referred to in historiography as the modern period, ranging from the eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. In the archaeological terminology of the British Isles, this period is labelled as either the post-medieval or historical periods (c. 1550 – c. 1950), with the latter part sometimes split between the industrial period and the twentieth century. This review begins with an example of how material culture has been employed and used to good effect in modern history, followed by an overview of theses concerned with the built environment and the remains of welfare practice in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Approaches to urban landscapes and populations follow, and the review will conclude with a short discussion on the potential for future collaboration between urban historians and archaeologists. All of the theses reviewed here were sourced from the British Library EThOS repository.

A notable recent contribution to the field of material history is Nathan Booth's examination of leisure and masculinity in the urban north-west of England during the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Booth's thesis, completed for the University of Manchester in 2014, is a microhistory of Stalybridge that critically examines the urban development of industrial settlements more broadly, and identifies provision of leisure spaces and activities within the industrial streetscape. Booth's thesis is included here as an example of the effective use of material culture and the built environment by a historian, in this case to draw conclusions about how men expressed their identity and social lives in increasingly specialized spaces for leisure. Booth employs maps and plans to good effect, problematizing generalized histories of 'pub culture' which portrayed this tenet of Victorian working-class life as part of the wider problems of poverty and ill-health. The popular representation of the Victorian bar as a dedicated space for deprivation and drunkenness is challenged by its own material environment; auction lists, for example, demonstrate the standard of high-end furnishings that decorated many of these spaces. Booth shows that, rather than being dedicated spaces, many pubs, such as they were, developed from domestic dwellings and retained a distinctly domestic character on purpose, thus creating a space for homosocial activity within a comfortable and familiar environment for the men who drank there.

<sup>2</sup> N. Booth, 'Leisure and masculinity in "Dear Old Dirty Stalybridge", c. 1830–1875', University of Manchester Ph.D. thesis, 2014.

In common with diaries and personal accounts, the material and built environment of everyday places reflects the *de jour* activities and actions of people who can sometimes fall outside of broad narratives and mainstream histories. Historians already engage actively and effectively with space and place, and the focused study of individual buildings and spaces is a logical step. The way buildings are used, adapted, and modified to reflect cultural practices is currently of concern to archaeologists working on the built environment, and built heritage. Influenced by historians like Michel Foucault and architectural historians like Thomas Markus,<sup>3</sup> social and cultural historical approaches to large public institutions like workhouses and asylums have been a particular focus of study for doctoral research in urban history, as well as historical archaeology, in the last decade.<sup>4</sup> The large-scale closure and frequent destruction or redevelopment of the built heritage of what Foucault referred to as the 'Age of Confinement' has brought these buildings to the attention of planners and heritage professionals. Volumes on workhouses and prisons commissioned for the *Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England* and scholarship on the built environment of asylums and hospitals have provided useful architectural accounts of the built environment of institutions.<sup>5</sup> The wider social and urban context of these buildings has rarely been considered, however, with architectural histories focusing primarily on the buildings themselves, while social and cultural histories have largely considered their inmates and the social implications of their construction. Archaeologists, with a view to examining the built environment, architectural remains and geographical context in comparison, are thus in a strong position to inform both the wider position of institutions in the urban and rural landscape, and their position in the social space of the historical city.

Charlotte Newman's 2010 dissertation on the archaeology of workhouses in West Yorkshire offers an alternative view of workhouses of the New Poor Law as regionally specific.<sup>6</sup> Newman, a buildings archaeologist with a particular research interest in the post-medieval period, contributes to a wider scholarship of 'institutional' archaeologies, a growing sub-disciplinary focus of archaeology with roots in built heritage study, later historical archaeology in North America and Australia, and gender archaeology. Her thesis examines workhouses in rural as well as urban settings, and compares the differences between the two. She contextualizes the New Poor Law within a long history of charity and

<sup>3</sup> M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (London, 1977); T. Markus, *Buildings and Power* (London, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> See also the author's own thesis: K. Fennelly, 'The palace of a prince: the archaeology of lunatic asylum architecture, reform and management in England and Ireland, c. 1815–1855', University of Manchester Ph.D. thesis, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> K. Morrison, *The Workhouse: A Study of Poor-Law Buildings in England: Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England* (London, 1999); see also C. Stevenson, *Medicine and Magnificence: British Hospital and Asylum Architecture* (London, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> C. Newman, 'The place of the pauper: a historical archaeology of West Yorkshire workhouses 1834–1930', University of York Ph.D. thesis, 2010.

poverty management, tracing the beginnings of secular approaches to poverty in the city to the demise of charitable aid offered by monasteries after the Dissolution. She locates the first large-scale institutions for the management of the poor in hospitals in London, set up towards the end of the sixteenth century. With the implementation of the New Poor Law in the 1830s, Newman explores the material use of the workhouse building as a symbol of civic control, as well as a building to inspire confidence and pride in government in the nineteenth-century city.<sup>7</sup>

Newman highlights the differences, architectural and managerial, between urban and rural workhouses in West Yorkshire, identifying funding and direction by local industrialists, as well as the ever-changing demands of rapidly growing industrial cities as leading factors in regional variation between urban workhouse buildings. The accommodation of the able-bodied poor in particular was not possible in many cases, so that relief focused on the sick. These buildings, generally represented in maps and plans as monolithic and austere edifices, are instead revealed to have been busy and porous. Newman notes that the Bramley Workhouse, for example, had multiple entrances for different classes of inmate, indicating that the workhouse exterior and surrounding streets would have been busy spaces. Multiple sources are employed in this discussion of these historic buildings: archival materials and documentary evidence, Ordnance Survey maps to track physical changes in the buildings and streetscapes over time, and National Monuments Records – part of what archaeologists refer to as ‘grey literature’. Since 1990, all sites of commercial development are required to undertake an archaeological evaluation, which has generated a significant amount of paperwork, utilized increasingly by archaeologists in the academy.<sup>8</sup> Grey literature, or unpublished fieldwork reports and commercial heritage assessments, as well as government scheduling and listing reports, remain a useful but underused resource outside of archaeology and heritage studies.

Emma Dwyer’s thesis, submitted to the University of Leicester in 2014, also draws attention to commercial building surveys undertaken by archaeologists as part of planning procedure. Museum of London Archaeological Services in particular have been responsible for several surveys of social housing complexes facing destruction. Her thesis examines social welfare housing, the application of ideas of modernity in social housing from 1870 to 1930 and the legacy of early twentieth-century social housing today. She takes account of council-led housing construction,

<sup>7</sup> Some of the research from Newman’s thesis has been published subsequently. See, for example: C. Newman, ‘To punish or protect: the new poor law and the English workhouse’, *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 18 (2014), 122–45.

<sup>8</sup> This was legislated for by Planning Policy Guidance 16, which called for *in situ* preservation of archaeological remains where possible, and *by record* preservation (excavation, survey) where not. This was superseded by Planning Policy Statement 5: Planning and the Historic Environment, and has since been replaced by the National Planning Policy Framework, and the Historic Environment Good Practice Advice.

co-operative societies, and philanthropic housing, in London, Birmingham and Liverpool. Dwyer's thesis offers a comprehensive review of how archaeologists have examined modern social housing in the past, from a study of modern council-house abandonment as a lens through which archaeologists can critique their own approaches,<sup>9</sup> to studies of alienation and marginalization in the face of development in modern London.<sup>10</sup> Dwyer's is one of a few studies that have recently emerged to advocate a materially focused view of the contemporary landscapes of social welfare as a way to consider both welfare and housing as an ongoing process of constant change within communities and from outside.<sup>11</sup>

Dwyer presents social housing in the Victorian, Edwardian and inter-war periods as an evolving process; a distinctively archaeological approach to the material environment. She states that archaeology 'does not see landscapes and buildings as containers for events and actions, but rather as a means of combining human and material engagements'.<sup>12</sup> This succinct summary of an archaeological approach clearly articulates how archaeology differs from but can contribute to a reading of the contemporary past. She follows this with a concise but comprehensive overview of contemporary archaeology, which serves as a potentially valuable tool in teaching this sub-discipline, and as a means of communicating contemporary archaeology to those outside of the discipline. In her approach to the case-studies, in Birmingham, Liverpool and London, Dwyer employs several different methods. Dwyer makes a photographic record of the estate buildings, employs plans sourced from local archives, maps and map progressions and combines these with oral testimony collected from long-term residents. Her informants were all residents of the estates, and included a mix of people born locally and immigrants to the area. The local residents were able to comment on how the houses were adopted, and spaces used over time, and how local residents subverted or adapted the designs of architects and planners, and acted with or reacted to the regulation of spaces or zoning of specific areas. Dwyer records how these areas of social or philanthropic housing underwent change as a result of the Right-to-Buy scheme, but does so from a distinctly material perspective. This approach to areas of social housing

<sup>9</sup> V. Buchli and G. Lucas, *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past* (London, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> R. Harrison, 'Towards an archaeology of the welfare state in Britain, 1945–2009', *Archaeologies*, 5 (2009), 238–62.

<sup>11</sup> See also S. Penrose, 'Archaeologies of deindustrialisation', University of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 2015. Penrose's thesis was not available for study from ETHOS for the purpose of this review. The thesis examines the deindustrialization of East Oxford, and addresses changes in housing and demographics in the area since the closure of Morris Motor Works. See also S. Penrose, 'Recording transition in post-industrial England: a future perfect view of Oxford's motopolis', *Archaeologies*, 6 (2010), 167–80.

<sup>12</sup> E. Dwyer, 'Historical and contemporary archaeologies of social housing: changing experiences of the modern and new, 1870 to present', University of Leicester Ph.D. thesis, 2014, 60.

thus uncovers the concerns and actions of small communities within or against the frameworks imposed upon them by new housing styles.

Both Dwyer and Newman make effective use of standing building survey – whether architectural or photographic – to account for material change and adaptation in building types for which much has been written in general terms. Identifying adaptation and points of departure from original plans and expected composition allow the archaeologists to highlight points of agency and conflict, of resistance or adaptation, over time. Both theses also highlight the potential for further academic engagement with commercial reports.<sup>13</sup> This is a facet of research that is more common to archaeologists than other arts subjects in the humanities, likely due to the vocational aspect of the discipline. This kind of engagement with commercial projects is beneficial for both the academy and the commercial sector, and could in itself inform studies on urban development in the last 30 years.

Looking forward to urban development and planning in the future, urban historians might also increasingly wish to engage with historic ‘landscapes’. Ruth Colton’s 2016 thesis for the University of Manchester is an interdisciplinary exploration of childhood and the urban park that highlights the potential of this approach.<sup>14</sup> Colton compares popular ideas about childhood and the natural landscape with narratives surrounding the construction of urban parks in north-east England, London and Manchester. She examines the design and architectural features of parks, highlighting features such as wilderness areas, gate posts and tree plantations as deliberately placed elements in parkscapes, intended for engagement. Colton’s focus is on provision for children and play in urban parks, and she draws connections between increasing concern for children’s moral and physical health and the growth of the parks movement in British industrial cities. Employing children’s literature from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the thesis illustrates the Victorian and Edwardian ideals of childhood and children with reference to internal grammar as played out in popular fictional accounts. Colton makes good use of material and landscape engagement in fiction, particularly with regard to her discussion of the ‘natural’ child. Archaeological excavations in Manchester inform her research on children’s play, as do park landscape features such as constructed mounds, plantations and lakes. This multifaceted approach demonstrates the huge potential for interdisciplinary research on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and showcases the use of archaeological approaches to landscape and material culture in problematizing familiar urban landscape features.

<sup>13</sup> Where licensing allows, commercial archaeological reports are (increasingly) being uploaded to the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) or London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC) websites, which are free to access.

<sup>14</sup> R. Colton, ‘From gutters to greensward: constructing healthy childhood in the late-Victorian and Edwardian public park’, University of Manchester Ph.D. thesis, 2016.

Colton's thesis further contributes to the history of urban childhood through a discussion of play and toys, drawing directly on materials excavated during the Whitworth Park Community Archaeology and History Project. Notably, she interprets the presence of parts of a child's tea-set in the park – stationary or home-based objects – as an example of children expressing their identity through the communication of status and ownership. Drawing attention to the discovery of a large number of play-related objects on the shore of the boating lake (now filled in), and drawing on maps and postcards depicting this feature in use, Colton argues that children transgressed carefully marked boundaries like railings, and made use of the landscape feature in their play. This thesis shows how artifactual evidence and spatial analysis can inform how people used objects and moved through space, sometimes in unexpected or transgressive ways, information rarely available to us in historical records.

As Colton explores, the ways in which people used public spaces and the evidence of the material culture are not always expected, and the urban environment in the past was neither static nor prescriptive. In the same way that general assumptions about how people used spaces and things can be problematized by the evidence of human actions, broad themes such as migration can also be nuanced with evidence of idiosyncratic behaviours. Studies of migration and displacement have been popular in doctoral research in social history in the last few years and mass migration between England and Ireland has attracted much attention from Irish studies, literature and urban history. Indeed, the experience of Irish migrants in industrial and twentieth-century Britain has been of some concern in light of a renewed increase in migration between the islands since the 2008 financial crash. From an archaeological perspective, identifying migration and change through material culture in urban contexts can sometimes be difficult, due to the prevalence and cultural iniquitousness of cheap earthenware and mass-produced glass bottles in domestic 'assemblages' (collections of related material found in common contexts, relating to single deposition events).

In light of these difficulties, Julia Beaumont's approach to Irish migration to London during the Irish famine stands out as a particularly important contribution to modern British history, and urban studies.<sup>15</sup> Beaumont employs high-resolution carbon and nitrogen isotope profiling of teeth to identify Irish migrants in London, comparing British results with those from excavations in Ireland during the same period. Her datasets include English people in London, Birmingham, Coventry, first generation migrants and Irish paupers from the Kilkenny Union Workhouse. Focusing on dental analysis, the study is informative of the nature of Londoners, Irish and the diets of the urban poor.

<sup>15</sup> J. Beaumont, 'An isotopic and historical study of diet and migration during the Great Irish Potato Famine (1845–1852)', University of Bradford Ph.D. thesis, 2013.



Interestingly, Beaumont discovers that Londoners may have had a significantly different diet from other cities in England. In this way, she was able to identify migration to London from other cities in England, as well as from Ireland. Though necessarily technical in parts due to the specialized nature of analysis, the thesis is a clearly argued case for the analysis of human remains in reconstructing past lives in industrial cities amongst migrant populations during the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Beaumont's thesis complements another doctoral research project, which made use of the Kilkenny Workhouse assemblage (Ireland), but which was unfortunately not openly available for review here, but some of the research for which has happily been published in a monograph.<sup>17</sup> The burials from the Kilkenny Union Workhouse are the only collection of burials from a pauper institution to have been analysed thus, in comparison with wider populations. The potential of such bioarchaeological studies to inform on the daily lives of the urban poor – on their diet, lifestyle and healthcare – have been further demonstrated in recent publications on the subject.<sup>18</sup> These themes can be further explored through bioarchaeology and zooarchaeology, specialized fields which, while requiring dedicated knowledge and training to undertake, are accessible in their communication.

The final thesis considered in this review is Rebecca Louise Gordon's extensive exploration of zooarchaeological remains on post-medieval sites in England.<sup>19</sup> While Beaumont focused on human remains, Gordon's thesis evidences the role that animal remains can play in informing understandings of economic and social life in the English city during a long period of significant urban change. Focusing on Chester and drawing on evidence from across the country, Gordon's thesis is a timely and thought-provoking piece of work, which makes a significant contribution not only to the sub-discipline of post-medieval archaeology for which zooarchaeological remains are a surprisingly underused resource, but urban history of the modern period. Like Dwyer and Newman, Gordon makes good use of grey literature reports for datasets.

Chester forms the core geographic focus of the thesis, and Gordon makes comparative use of faunal remains from several different sites and site types, including feasting pits, industrial sites and domestic sites. Gordon

<sup>16</sup> Beaumont published some of the results of this study in 2013: J. Beaumont, J. Geber, N. Powers, J. Lee-Thorp and J. Montgomery, 'Victims and survivors: identifying survivors of the Great Famine in nineteenth-century London using carbon and nitrogen isotope ratios', *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 150 (2013), 87–98.

<sup>17</sup> J. Geber, 'They died in the Great Irish Famine', Queen's University Belfast Ph.D. thesis, 2012; J. Geber, *Victims of Ireland's Great Irish Famine: The Bioarchaeology of Mass Burials at Kilkenny Union Workhouse* (Florida, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> See for example D. Walker, 'Resurrection: who is it good for? The price of achievement at the London Hospital', *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 48 (2014), 388–97.

<sup>19</sup> R. Gordon, 'Feeding the city: zooarchaeological perspectives on urban provisioning and consumption behaviours in post-medieval England (AD1500–AD1900)', University of Leicester Ph.D. thesis, 2015.



posits that archaeological and zooarchaeological remains indicate that the population of post-medieval England had a relatively varied diet. She identifies the meat trade as a significant factor in the expansion of urban populations in industrializing cities, highlighting the agricultural and commercial impact of increased urban populations. Demand on the meat industry led to the prioritizing of certain breeds, and the 'improvement' or streamlining of pastures and farming practices. Interestingly, Gordon suggests that unusual morphological variability in cattle bones during the seventeenth century reflects exceptional pressure on the dairy and meat industries during and after the Civil War. Increasing populations and capital, Gordon argues, led to a diversification in jobs in the meat industry in urban contexts. In turn, the expansion of the meat industry in response to demand led eventually to concern over sanitation and public health, and the eventual removal of meat processing from urban centres. Offering a long-durée approach – some 400 years between 1500 and 1900 – Gordon clearly demonstrates how archaeologists, by focusing on processes of change and continuity from a material perspective, can offer an insight into practices like consumption, urban population expansion and ecological change brought about by industrialization. It is these kinds of broad perspectives on change that more chronologically focused studies may fail to capture.

For the non-archaeologist, engagement with the discipline may seem daunting. The way in which popular media both reports on archaeology and employs the jargon of field archaeology often lend the discipline a degree of inaccessibility which is not reflected in academic and scholarly outputs. Indeed, archaeologists are increasingly concerned with communicating research further afield (no pun intended), and the rise of community and public archaeology reflects this. Indeed, the theses introduced in this review are each, in themselves, accessible entry-points into archaeology, and this is no mean feat given the specialized nature of the methods which have been made use of. For a small discipline like archaeology, cross-disciplinary engagement is a necessity. The recent 50th anniversary edition of *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, the journal for the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology, published detailed thematic reviews of the journal's coverage, including articles on cities in the modern world,<sup>20</sup> and the built environment.<sup>21</sup> These kinds of reviews are useful in introducing scholarly output and disciplinary context to the non-specialist.

There is a clear interest among modern historians in engaging with the material and built environment as a source for studying the past. Positive reception to and subsequent discussion of object biographies following a 2016 blog post on the subject by Birmingham's Modern British Studies

<sup>20</sup> P. Davies and G. Parker, 'Cities and the modern world', *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 50 (2016), 53–72.

<sup>21</sup> A. Green and J. Dixon, 'Standing buildings and built heritage', *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 50 (2016), 121–33.

centre evidences an appetite for exploring the development of a historian-specific method for object study.<sup>22</sup> Urban history is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, reflected in both the pages of this journal, and successive programmes for the annual Urban History Group conference. This interest correlates with the increasing popularity of archaeological approaches to the historical (modern) and contemporary periods, and innovations in methods and approach undertaken by archaeologists studying these periods. A reassuring development in post-medieval archaeology in the last 20 years has been a marked decrease in the number of publications which justify how 'archaeological' their studies really are, in light of what has been more traditionally seen as archaeology. This self-assurance in the sub-discipline has led to more relaxed and active collaboration with archival sources and what may be more traditionally seen as the tools of a historian's craft. As such, collaboration between the two disciplines is necessary if scholars wish to avoid reinventing wheels. Though this thesis review has presented just a few of the recent scholarly approaches to the subject, it is a snapshot of the great variety in methods and sources which could be of benefit for increasingly holistic approaches to the historic urban environment.

<sup>22</sup> See text and comments on Matthew Houlbrook's post on objects, which appeared on the *Modern British Studies* blog in 2016. M. Houlbrook, 'Hidden objects and untold stories' (online source): <https://mbsbham.wordpress.com/2016/05/12/hidden-objects/> accessed 10 Feb. 2017.