Theatres of resistance:

Buried stories and Black radicalism at London's earliest playhouse and taverns

ASE

Since 2015, Archaeology South-East, part of the UCL Institute of Archaeology, has been working on a site at Stepney Way in Whitechapel, East London, funded through the developer Mount Anvil, in partnership with L&Q Housing. Sarah Wolferstan, Mercedes Baptiste Halliday, and a team of community researchers have been charting the evolution of these spaces from places of entertainment to their later emergence as centres of Black radicalism in London's East End.

Everyone thought that modern structures on site had destroyed the archaeological layers, but instead the site went from the evaluation phase to full mitigation and finally excavation.

Over several years, seventy plus archaeologists excavated over 7,000m² of soil, putting in more than 80,000 person hours on site.

During the post-excavation phase, over 40 different specialists have been involved and 1.76 tonnes of finds investigated: 685kg of pottery, 389kg of ceramic building material, 271kg of animal bone, 125kg of glass, and 62kg of clay tobacco pipe. The links to London's history were even more impressive than these numbers.

Whitechapel through the ages

Just outside the City of London and alongside the Great Essex Road is the main route east into London, enticing visitors and inhabitants this area has been 'global' since records began, and people have lived in this valley for several thousand years.

Prehistoric to medieval

Despite the fact that no prehistoric finds had been previously identified in the vicinity and the closest known prehistoric settlement was located some 3km to the northeast at the Olympic Park in the Lower Lea Valley, there were some very early discoveries on site, including worked flint dating from the Mesolithic to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age.

We excavated roughly one quarter of an oval enclosed settlement, the first securely dated occupation layers suggesting that people lived here during the Middle Iron Age (c. 400–200 BC).

Nearby, we found a linear ditch with an ankle-breaker style slot at the base, a typical Roman technique designed to entrap and trip any invaders. It was located about 140m south of the projected line of the London to Colchester Roman road, and served as the main route into London from the east.

In the medieval period the site lay in the ancient manor of Stepney, whose lord had been the bishop of London since Saxon times. Over the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, parts of this large manor developed into separate estates. Within a robber cut, we found the remains of a large stone constructed building, possibly the remnants of a large manor house with pathways to the north, a yard, and farmland across the southern two-thirds of site.

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Above: Archaeologists on site excavating the stage of the Red Lion Playhouse

Opposite page: Lead archaeologist Stephen White introducing the site: he is standing within a recreation of the playhouse's layout outlined in differential paving, and is leaning against a monolith marking the height of the stage, some of the various features incorporated into the landscaping of the development

Post-medieval: A lost playhouse

It was during the early post-medieval period that things got more complex, with buildings, levelling deposits, postholes, ditches, beam slots, quarry pits, and a large timber structure found on site. The busiest areas were to the northeast and to the northwest and included various buildings with yards on the northern edge with fields to the south.

Historic evidence indicates that the building to the northeast was the farm or house known as the 'Red Lion'. The building went through as many as four phases of rebuilding during the 150-year span (1550-1700), staying active from the mid-1500s through to the mid-1800s.

The group of buildings in the northwest may be the early iterations of a building referred to in later documents as the 'Gardener's house' and associated yards.

Theatre historians first shed light on the existence of a lost sixteenth-century playhouse, probably London's first purpose-built theatre, in 1923, when Edmund Chambers demonstrated that the Red Lion playhouse was referred to in a dispute of 1567 between a client, John Brayne, and a carpenter, William Sylvester, a dispute which was adjudicated by the internal court of the Carpenters' Company.

In 1981, Janet Loengard discovered a second and fuller documentary source in a legal case in the Court of the King's Bench in 1569 involving the same client, John Brayne, and a second carpenter working at the site, John Raynolds.

This second document showed that William Sylvester was working on the scaffold for the spectators while Raynolds built the stage and a tower.

The documents refer to the 'playhouse at the sign of the Red Lion', describe the layout of the structure and its dimensions (30 by 40 feet), and even talk about a play that was performed there; 'the storye of Sampson', a biblical tragedy which was performed there in mid-July 1567.

The fact that the first law dispute was in 1567 and describes that the playhouse had been commissioned that year proves that the structure went up very quickly. Brayne, originally a grocer, and his wife Margaret, had decided to invest in the burgeoning world of sixteenth century entertainment. In partnership with others, including Burbage, they then went on to build 'The Theatre' and 'The Curtain' in Shoreditch.

Imagine the thrill when the ASE team found a large post-built superstructure with 144 surviving timbers sat within a construction cut measuring 12.27m north-to -south by 9.27m east-to-west; its dimensions matched those in the 1569 lawsuit remarkably well.

A reconstruction (see page 21) based on the plans of the site show that the stage sat at the eastern end of the buildings and at the western end sat the galleries or "skaffolds" as they were referred to in the legal documents.

Right: Middle Iron Age enclosure photographed from above

Below: Middle Iron Age enclosure in plan

Bottom: The medieval wall of Stepney Manor in situ

ASE [3]

The playhouse was entered from the west, underneath the galleries. There were walls to the north and south, forming a rectangular enclosed space.

Dating evidence from the western galleries of the superstructure indicates that they were standing until at least 1580. Large quantities of pine used in this early part of the structure were imported rather than local and the limited evidence for woodworking technology, use of simple joints, and the seemingly haphazard use and placement of many upright posts of varying sizes all suggest the structure was built rapidly and somewhat expediently.

Playhouses and theatres began to spring up in western Europe in the sixteenth century. Some reused existing spaces, others were constructed anew and free standing; the Red Lion is the first of these in England. There are similar examples in France and Spain built during the latter 1500s, most (if not all) of

which were rectangular in footprint. They were generally located in transitional spaces, along routes or thoroughfares that were frequently travelled, and were economically viable enterprises.

Callan Davies argues in his recent book that they were a venue for 'playing': sports, music, drinking, animal sports, and performances; combat displays such as fencing or wrestling; or an early version of stand-up or 'improv', known as 'extemporising'.

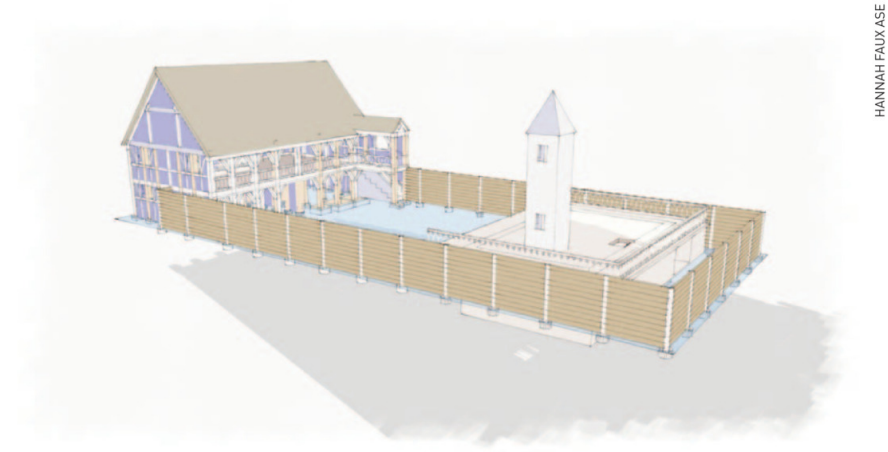
These are important places, no less important than the alehouses, taverns, and inns, and what defined them was unlikely to have been set in stone. Farmers would brew their own beer for their workers, and it is not hard to see how this might become a commercial activity. The playhouse is not referred to as being by an "inn" until the 1600s.

Given the number of glasses and ceramic cups found, it seems likely that the farmhouse was an inn by the time of the playhouse's construction. The large number of wine drinking vessels recovered during the excavation dating to the 1600-1700s is also interesting, suggesting further distinctions of clientele.

Some 20 years later, the galleries had already been demolished, based on pottery found within the fills of the postholes that made up the gallery area. The playhouse structure was still in use some hundred years later, when, during the 1670s, the building was repaired and the stage modified into a type of pit, surrounded by postholes indicating that a fence surrounded it.

A high number of partial dog skeletons were recovered from that area; further analysis showed that the assemblage consisted of a variety of different breeds, some with healed trauma and pathology, including abnormal tooth wear on many teeth, which has led archaeologists to hypothesise that this may have been a place for animal baiting, or ad-hoc dog fighting with dogs chewing on cages or chains.

The end of activities within the old stage appears to have been in the late 1690s or early 1700s, when it was completely backfilled and levelled up to ground level, although leisure and play were still associated with the back of this drinking establishment: the 1703 map by Gascoyne illustrates buildings in the northeast and northwest corner, with the addition of bowling greens and ponds to the south.



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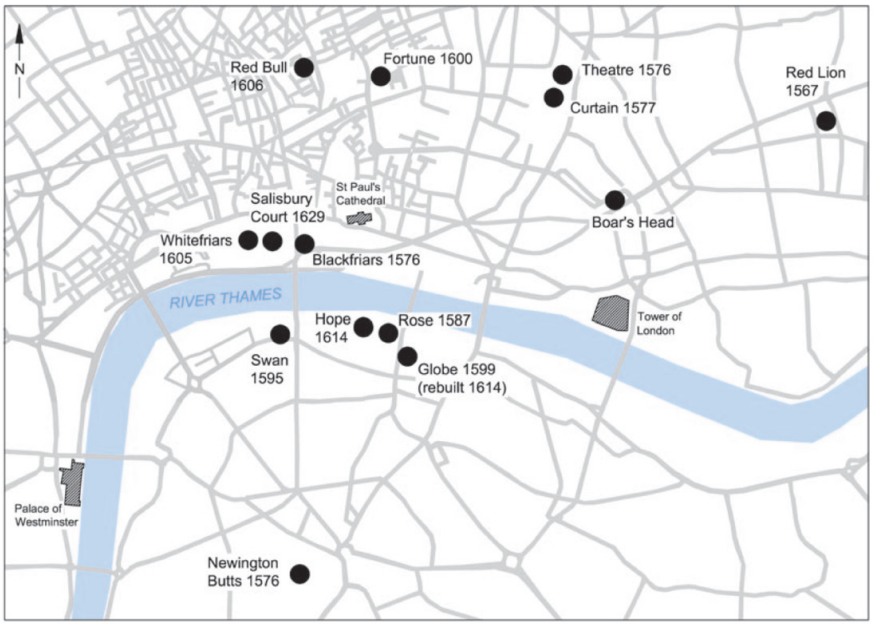

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Top: Reconstruction of the playhouse

Above: Map of London's Tudor playhouses

Post-medieval period and Whitechapel's links to the trade in enslaved people

With the rise of the British Empire during the eighteenth century, London went through a period of rapid growth. Slavery and racial capitalism provided the raw materials for industrialisation.

The Atlantic economy has been identified as the biggest change in modern economic history. Between 1699 and 1807, British and British colonial ports mounted 12,103 slaving voyages – with 3,351 setting out from London. Until the 1730s, London dominated the British trade in enslaved people, continuing to send ships to West Africa until 1803. During the eighteenth century the suburb of Mile End was growing, with merchant houses, breweries, distilleries, and factories processing sugar from slave plantations.

By the end of the century, the mercantile population gradually moved out, and was replaced by new groups, such as Jewish migrants from Europe and Loyalist Black soldiers from the colonies.

On our site, archive work by historians tells us that the 'Red Lion' estate was being split and redeveloped, and there is an exponential increase in the activity and complexity in the archaeology uncovered.

In 1709, Thomas Hayes advertised a house and 40 acres of land at the Red Lion Farm for sale or let. In 1713, the Red Lion estate was described as the "messuage or tenement called... by the name of the Red Lyon with the

[LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVE/LONDON TOPOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY]

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Gardiners House and... all the Outhouses Edifices Buildings Barns Stables Yards Gardens and Orchards."

The western half of the estate, still largely open fields, was bought by the London Hospital, the first charitable infirmary on the east side of London, set up to provide relief to merchant sailors and labourers. With hospital construction under way (1752-78) the rest of the Red Lion estate was further subdivided.

By 1772, a lease of sale to the London Hospital developers describes the property as including a house called "the White Raven and formerly called the Gardener' House and of and in the pleasure and other Garden thereunto belonging and adjoining to the said Red Lyon Farm'."

Top: Detail of Gascoyne's map of Stepney of 1703 with the ASE excavation area outlined in red

Above: John Rocque 1746 map of Stepney showing the three main building groups in blue

Maps show this, and the yards associated with buildings, and pleasure gardens to the south. The reason for our focus on these buildings and the drinking vessels, pipes, and other objects found in this area is that the White Raven became one of the two locations where the 'London Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor' held its meetings throughout 1786-7, the other being the Yorkshire Stingo in Marylebone.

This committee was closely tied to prominent abolitionists, both White and Black, which played a crucial role in distributing relief and forming a new colony in Sierra Leone. These relief centres were kept open for several hours each day and administered by fellow Black Londoners who dispensed loaves of bread, meals of broth, blankets and bedding, shoes and stockings.

One possibility is that the White Raven was part of a complex of buildings and yard on the western margins of our excavated area; indeed the eighteenth-century brickwork and ample tavern assemblages that were now more prevalent on this side of the site may support the idea.

Could a public engagement project help us find out more?

Buried Stories: the resistance of Black Londoners

ASE and Mercedes Baptiste Halliday from BlackArchaeo set out to provide some historic background to the story and uncover the lives of the people who would have lived in Whitechapel at the time of the White Raven.

Historians and archaeologists alike have noted the longue durée presence in Britain of people who today would be racialised as Black. They highlight that such pasts should not be marginalised, instead understood as an important component of Britain's diverse heritage). In many popular historical narratives of Whitechapel, Huguenot, Jewish, and Bangladeshi histories are quite rightly celebrated, yet the histories of the Borough's Black populations are rarely referenced.

Efforts have been made to rectify this over the years, for example, by the Tower Hamlets African and Caribbean Mental Health Organisation (THACMHO), and more recently through the London Borough of Tower Hamlet's Library and Archives services initiative called 'Communities of Liberation'.

The historical record reveals that there was a spike in London's Black population following the defeat of the British Army in the Americas, when formerly enslaved Africans were offered their freedom in 1775 if they fought for the British against American patriots.

These men became known as the Black Loyalists, and many sought refuge in both Britain and Nova Scotia. Their history is rarely told in relation to Whitechapel. Estimations of London's late eighteenth-century Black population range from 10- to 20,000 people, meaning between one and three people in every hundred were Black.

Alexander Byrd writes that: "Blacks – Asian, African, and American – were no strangers to the alleys and street corners of eighteenth-century London; nor were they uncommon in the city's mansions or around its fashionable meeting places. Britons' long participation in the Atlantic slave trade, their extensive planting interests in the Americas, and the island nation's wide-ranging imperial concerns ensured that the capital captured a noticeable population of black servants, slaves, sailors, paupers, and performers."

Many of them would have sought solidarity from others in the pubs and taverns along Mile End Green, now Raven Row. The hamlet was growing, with both fine houses, pubs, and overcrowded areas full of slum housing.

One instance of community support, which took place in September 1786, is particularly striking. Using their military expertise, a group of Black Loyalists banded together to resist the arrest of Jack Pegg, a Black Corporal, whose role was to administer the relief.

"After he was arrested, the black men, to the number of about one hundred, insisted, that the Officer should not take him away; and hallooed out to their comrades, 'shut the gates!' . . . But Mr. Drawwater, and his men, being resolute, they got the prisoner, with difficulty, on the outside of the gates . . .

"Several of [the black men] instantly armed themselves with sticks &c. and came on a second time; and after a desperate onset, in Mile-End road, in which Mr. Drawwater's cloaths were torn off, and he was terribly bruised on the head, and almost every part of his body, they rescued the prisoner, and carried him off in triumph."

Historians like Braidwood and Hanley

write that Mile End was a centre for London's Black population, who looked to prominent leaders like Ottobah Cugoano (1757-1791) and Olaudah Equiano that had formed the first all-Black political organisation of its kind in Britain, called 'The Sons of Africa', by December 1787.

This corresponding society wrote public and private letters to prominent figures, including the Prince of Wales, in support of their efforts toward abolition. Both Equiano and Cugoano published works calling for an end to slavery and the emancipation of all enslaved people.

The area would have been familiar to at least one of the committee members who was also a board member of the London Hospital, Jonas Hanway, and the fact that as mentioned above, East London had been a long-standing home to London Black population and recent arrivals, it would make sense to choose this area as a place for their committee meetings. The meetings were held in conjunction with prominent spokespeople for potential settlers wanting to establish a new settler colony, 'Land of Freedom', today known as Sierra Leone.

WELLCOME LIBRARY, LONDON

ASE [2]

Right: Some of the 62kg of clay pipes dating from the sixteenth to nineteenth century found at the site. Tobacco was a major part of the Atlantic trade and was grown in plantations in the American colonies by enslaved workers. It was largely associated with Ale house culture

Middle: The London Hospital: viewed from the north, 1753, engraving by Jean Baptiste Claude Chatelain. Buildings near the Red Lion can be seen to the left. Remains of the civil war fortifications can be seen to the right

Above: Selection of drinking vessels include wine glasses and a Frechen Stoneware Bartmann jug

Community outreach and engagement by Sarah Wolferstan

Having found the Red Lion, our attention turned to finding the White Raven and telling this lost story in partnership with the local community. Given the significant connection to Black history and archaeology, it became apparent that community-based outreach was important.

Archaeology South East's (ASE) initial outreach strategy for this project comprised of regular blogposts and a press release on the discovery of the Red Lion playhouse, which gained a lot of traction and led to our involvement in a new research partnership, the Archaeotheatre collective, co-creating playhouse research and engagement through digital world building. It was only as all the research was being analysed that we realised we had a link to the White Raven.

ASE's engagement team started our work with two professionals with a background in archaeology and youth engagement: Mercedes Baptiste Halliday, UCL Alumni and founder of BlackArchaeo, and Professional Storyteller and musician; and Alim Kamara, founder of StorieStorie.

Archaeologists, planning consultants, and UCL curators, professors, and students came together to brainstorm on project approaches, and think about storytelling as a method for engagement. Alim's involvement was particularly emotive, as he has roots in Sierra Leone. The story inspired his creativity, resulting in a moving poem.

BlackArchaeo at UCL East by Mercedes Baptiste Halliday

BlackArchaeo was founded in 2022 and seeks to promote the wellbeing of Black and Brown people through archaeology, heritage, art, and ecology.

ASE [2]

BLACKARCHAEO

Top Looking at objects from the Site with Alim, Mercedes and staff from UCL Culture Lab

Above left: Young people during the BlackArchaeo Urban Ecologies summer school

Above right: An earthenware jug excavated from the site

It has a transformative social justice approach, recognising the affordances of creatively engaging with the past and the natural world to promote connectivity and healing.

Particularly given the colonial roots of disciplines like archaeology, the lack of participation of Black and Brown people in the profession (the last 'Profiling the Profession' report in 2021 revealed that 97% of archaeologists in the UK are white), could be understood as an enduring, ever-present colonial legacy.

The promotion of community engagement, and the decentralisation of knowledge, is an essential part of decolonialising archaeology.

Having partnered with a range of arts, cultural, and heritage organisations, including the London Museum, UCL's Institute of Archaeology, Maslaha, Studio Voltaire, Wild in the City, Royal Museums Greenwich, and the London Wildlife Trust – from mudlarking to landscape walks, to photography workshops and wildlife conservation – BlackArchaeo recognises people's entanglements with the more-than-human world, and the reciprocal nature of care.

In 2023, with support from Impact on Urban Health, I ran a week-long summer school for 16 to 19-year-olds in London entitled Urban Ecologies, to address climate injustices, and how they disproportionately affect Black and Brown urban communities.

With a particular focus on climate anxiety that many young people experience, the week involved museum and gallery visits, hikes, art workshops, and lectures, to help young people explore the potentials of these spaces and creative activations to support their wellbeing.

I felt well placed to support ASE build partnerships, starting with community historians from the Whitechapel area. THACMHO's Engagement with the History of the White Raven Tavern by Harry Cumberbatch, Fabian Tompsett, Dorothy Du Boulay.

Nearly 25 years have passed since THACMHO started to develop its Health Through History Initiative. We hope this project can bring its learning to a new generation of Londoners.

We met staff from ASE and Mercedes at a second storytelling and archaeology workshop at Tower Hamlet's Town Hall, visiting the Whitechapel Central site, and learning about its archaeology as well as young UCL students' perspectives.

As steering group members of a local history project called 'Communities of Liberation', we have been supporting local researchers who were delving into the archive to uncover the names and stories of individuals of African descent who lived, worked, and played in the borough in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

The location of the White Raven, and the lives of the many Black Londoners who lived in Whitechapel and beyond, had been a topic of interest to us as locals and historians for a considerable period, particularly through the work of the THACMHO.

We introduced ASE to our work, and the research of another member of the group, Fabian Thompsett, and the three of us visited the UCL Culture Lab, looked at the artefacts from Whitechapel Central and together agreed to co-organise an exhibition in the space.

THACMHO was founded in 1996 as a mental health service users group for the African and Caribbean communities. The Health Through History Committee was an additional project to THACMHO's other activities. Our committee had discovered that five of the writers mentioned in Vincent Carretta's *Unchained Voices: An Anthology* (1996) had all interacted with London's East End in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

These were Phillis Wheatley, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, John Marrant, Olaudah Equiano, and Ottobah Cugoano. As part of Black History Month, 2001, we organised its first Power Writers walks, having identified five African Writers who came to London's East End and found that we could make a short walk visiting

locations connected with each individual. Our members would read out short pieces by each of the Power Writers, followed by a brief discussion of the writer's contribution. The walk would end at the Whitechapel Mission, who kindly hosted the group, with the support of Tony Miller.

The presence of the eighteenth-century brick work in the cellar of the mission, at the time, led us to believe that it as the most likely site of the White Raven Tavern and a site of importance for London's African population in the 1780s, and we called out for further research to be carried out.

The development of the walk was designed to be inclusive, and to provide an embodied, experiential sense of place. As we went from location-to-location, participants would sometimes meet old friends and sometimes make new friends, breaking off into splinter groups as they negotiated through the bustling streets. The walks facilitated a life-affirming psycho-geographic connection between the local participants of African descent and the city they came to live in.

The five writers were not isolated individuals, but rather a selection of the Black community in London's East End, whose presence endured in the historical record thanks to the publication of their books.

Stephen Braidwood's book *Black Poor and White Philanthropists* (1994) provided a book-length account of the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor, highlighting the role of the White Raven as a meeting place particularly for Black Loyalists who had fought for the British Army in the American War of Independence. Promised their freedom by the British, they were evacuated from the newly independent colonies following their defeat.

THACMHO

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Above: Photography of a 'Power Writers' guided walk, outside St Botolph's church

Right: Excavations taking place on the site of the White Raven

Below: Left to right: Philip Morgan, Fabián Tompsett, Beverley Clarke, Harry Cumberbatch, Sadie Parkes, Barrington Johnson, Jennifer Jones, and Sidney Millin at the launch of the revised edition of Power Writers during BHM 2005

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

At this time English law required the local parish to keep a record of baptism, and those that found themselves subsequently destitute were expected to return to their original parish, where they would be provided for by that community. This meant that these army veterans were often reduced to begging on the streets of London.

The site then became a principal recruiting place for the resettlement of these veterans and others who wanted to go with them, to create an English colony in Sierra Leone.

At the time of THACMHOs inception, not much academic attention was given to Black presence in British historical narratives. We found our interpretations of the past largely dismissed, with some members even being misdiagnosed by psychiatric professionals as delusional. The denial, erasure, and pathologisation of Black people's interactions with the past have real, material effects on their wellbeing in the present. This is particularly disheartening given the values of THACMHO, and our agenda to promote healing and connectivity.

This erasure can further be identified in the booklet *The Hamlets and the Tower: 1000 Years of Tower Hamlets' History* published by Tower Hamlets Council (2000). The first time Africans are mentioned are Somalian sailors who settled in Tower Hamlets during the 1950s. Fortunately,

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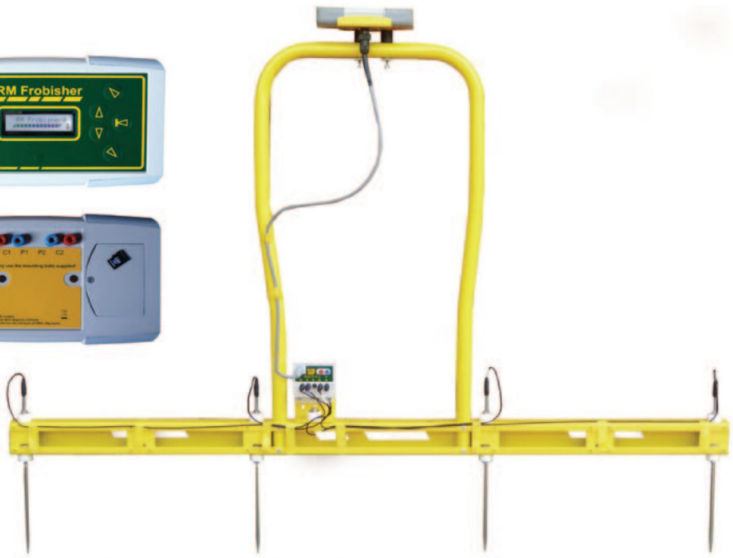

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when this matter was raised, the Council agreed with the concerns and provided some funding to support THACMHO in our publication of a booklet version of the guided walk, entitled *Power Writers and the Struggle Against Slavery* (2025).

Today, the historic Black presence in the borough of Tower Hamlets, and in Britain more broadly, is more widely recognised and celebrated, although there is more work to be done, particularly in archaeology.

We recognise the incredible legacy of THACMHO, and the enduring effect of its members' role in advocating for the wellbeing of Black communities and its ongoing contribution to presencing Black people in British history.

Archive workshop

With the support of UCL and Tower Hamlets archive, ASE and BlackArchaeo held a joint workshop, with researchers from Northeastern University, UCL students, community researchers, and representatives from THACMHO and the Communities of Liberation project.

During the workshop, the local borough archivist had unearthed an image of a 'White Raven' pub next to the Salvation Army bowling alley on Raven Row. Fabian contacted the Salvation Army historian, who confirmed that their archive included documents which refer to meetings being held in the mid-nineteenth century in Alexander Hall, a covered Skittle Alley attached to the White Raven public house on Raven Street.

This seems to be confirmed by two separate pub history projects (pubology, and pubwiki) which list a 'White Raven Tavern' on Cavell St. This also identifies the landlords who lived at the pub over the years. A gap in landlords between 1797 and 1831 may indicate a period of closure, when the pub may have moved to the location referred to in the 1860s history of the Salvation Army.

Our exhibition and future work – next steps

Out of this collaboration came the opportunity to curate an exhibition at UCL East's Culture Lab, a teaching and sharing space for students, artists, and community groups. Its main aim is to help communities make their own exhibitions. Combining archaeological, archival, and contemporary material, the group worked together to co-curate an exhibition for the Culture Lab's upcoming exhibition, titled Patterns.

The exhibition tells the story of the Whitechapel excavation; the people, the buildings, the objects, the things from the past, present, and future, that are drawn into its orbit.

This collaborative approach to curation means that the local Black community's long-term interest and situated knowledge of the site was properly represented, alongside archaeological findings and conclusions.

We hope that the exhibition will act as a springboard, to inspire further conversations and collaborations in relation to the White Raven Tavern and Whitechapel's underappreciated Black histories and archaeologies. It speaks to the potential of archaeology to increase connectivity, between people, landscapes, and temporalities.

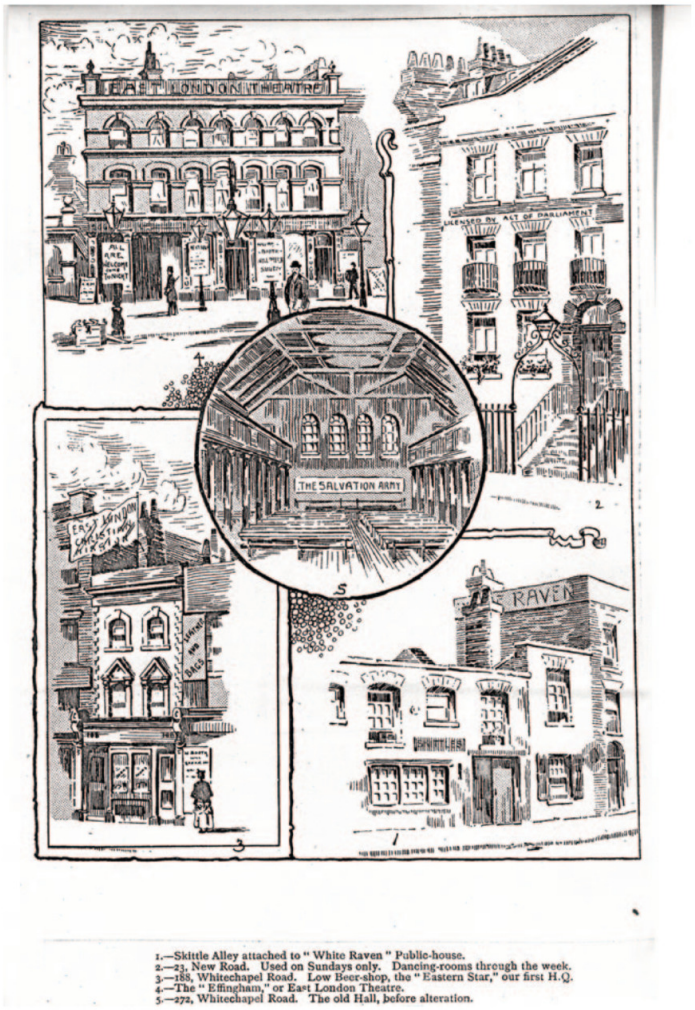
Patterns: how to visit

Starting from June 2025 and for the following 12 months, the exhibition will be held at: UCL's Culture Lab, UCL East Marshgate Building, 7 Sidings Street, Stratford, London, E20 2AE.

We will be holding workshops and events in partnership with local organisations throughout the year, and as part of Festival of Archaeology on 21 July. For more information and how to get involved:

- www.ucl.ac.uk/creative-cultural-industries/culture-lab
- www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology-south-east
- www.storiestorie.com
- www.linkedin.com/company/black-archaeo/
- www.ideastore.co.uk/local-history/communities-of-liberation-project ■

Right: Illustration showing the White Raven next to a skittle alley used by the Salvation Army during the 19th century showing the last location of the tavern, adjacent to ASE's excavation site



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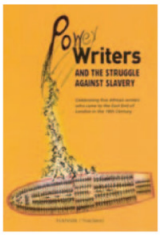

Above: Front cover of the book published by HANSIB / THACMHO 'Power Writers and the struggle against slavery.' Artwork by Ruth Reviere