

News

Obituary: Graeme McArthur, 1982–2024

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Graeme MacArthur joined the UCL Institute of Archaeology as a postgraduate student completing the MA Principles in Conservation (2008) and MSc Conservation for Archaeology and Museums (2011) degrees (see Figure 1). As a student Graeme was modest and easy going, but he promptly made an impact due to his impressive academic critical-thinking ability and accompanying astute sense of humour. He was immensely well liked by his student cohort, while his strong skills in analysing, embracing feedback and consistently enhancing his work made him a delight for staff to supervise.

In his early career Graeme held multiple positions as a conservation practitioner, including at the British Museum (2012–13 and 2014–15), Suffolk Conservation Services (2013) and the Wallace Collection (2011–12 and 2015–18). He contributed to technical research at both the British Museum (McArthur et al. 2015) and the Wallace Collection in the field of metals in which he came to specialise. This included supporting his Arms-and-Armour colleagues investigating the composition and construction of historic armour and blades (Edge et al. 2014) and the Black Prince effigy in Canterbury Cathedral (Barker et al. 2021). In addition to his professional achievements, Graeme is fondly remembered by his



Figure 1 Graeme assessing objects at the UCL Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology (Source: Catriona Wilson)

Wallace Collection colleagues for extra-curricular adventures, especially the joint efforts of helping him navigate the canal network to bring his new houseboat from Hertfordshire to its mooring in London. The assistance and connivance of his colleagues was always repaid with cold beer and warm company.

In 2014 Graeme worked at UCL Qatar as a researcher where he made a significant contribution to the Coming Clean project, co-authoring papers to disseminate research findings (Dillon et al. 2018; Golfomitsou et al. 2018). In 2018 Graeme returned to UCL joining the collections management team as a conservator specialising in inorganics. He took the memorable and challenging first-week assignment of the UCL pathology collections' disposal programme in his stride, quickly establishing himself as a well-liked and respected colleague. He co-authored collections care policies and procedures and notably the department's first collections care and conservation strategic plan in 2019. In 2020 he helped oversee the successful move of the Jeremy Bentham Auto-Icon from the south cloisters to the student centre. In response to the Covid-19 crisis, Graeme established a lockdown risk register in March 2020, implementing regular on-campus checks of museum collections and stores, a model that was shared across UCL collections-holding departments. In 2022 he planned and managed the cleaning of the Flaxman Gallery sculptures, leading a team working at height-in-record July temperatures reaching 40°C. He furthered his research into the analysis of corrosion products on metals, surveying more than 7,000 Petrie Museum objects, and presented his findings at the Interim Meeting of the ICOM-CC Metals Working Group in Helsinki (McArthur and Chow 2022). He had recently started working on a related project with colleagues in mechanical engineering incorporating time-lapse photography of metallic objects in the Petrie Museum.

Working with colleagues in museums across the Bloomsbury campus, Graeme made significant contributions to a series of high-profile capital projects, including Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded improvements to collections storage in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, awarded Best Museum Collections-based Project 2023 by the Society of Museum Archaeology. He was a major contributor to revitalised displays in the Grant Museum of Zoology (see Figure 2), which reopened to the public in February 2024 following a 10-month closure to enable works funded by the Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport Wolfson Museums and Galleries Improvement Fund. Graeme regularly assessed objects for suitability for national and international loans and exhibitions and advised on potential acquisitions such as the recent UCL Art Museum acquisition of 96 bronze portrait medals from the 1880s by prize-winning students of the UCL Slade School of Art. He was instrumental in forging links with the UCL Institute for Sustainable Heritage.

Graeme made a significant contribution to teaching across the IoA MA and MSc conservation programmes as well as the MA in museum studies. Soon after joining UCL, he conducted his first session on manufacturing technologies and conservation of metal artefacts for the MA conservation programme. This established his approach for subsequent teaching, focusing on both theory and practice, and encouraging students to further explore the conservation of metallic objects, including sessions on precious metals, which he particularly enjoyed. He also provided annual lectures and practical sessions on integrated pest management and handling, packaging and transportation. Graeme also hosted and supervised students on work placements who greatly appreciated his guidance. He received exceptional student feedback and made a real difference to the experiences of students and colleagues in both teaching and research, fostering mutual respect and collaboration.



Figure 2 Graeme and colleagues with a UCL Grant Museum specimen. From left: Ignacio Echeverria Faccin, Sarah Dwyer, Graeme McArthur, Emilia Kingham and Joseph Richards (Source: Alan Williams)

Graeme was hugely valued by his team and wider colleagues for his calm and practical approach to projects. His dry sense of humour regularly supported the smooth navigation of the inherent complexities of collections care in a university setting. Working on an almost abandoned campus during the pandemic strengthened ties among those needed on site, cementing already close friendships. Colleagues were regularly entertained with stories of gardening experiments and walking holidays in his beloved Lake District, never without a flask of tea to hand. He was always ready to comment on the latest cricket scores or to patiently explain seemingly impenetrably complex rules of a test match to international colleagues.

Graeme has been variously described as enthusiastic, dedicated, an extremely lovely bloke, a most wonderful colleague, a very special person and a joy to work with. He is sorely missed by all who knew and worked with him who treasure his memory as both colleague and friend.

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