

Peter Collins

29 December 1942 to 5 August 2024

Peter passed away at the age of 81. He joined the London Geodiversity Partnership in 2009 not long after it had been formed.

I joined the gathering of family and friends on 23 August for his burial at Oakfield Wood, Wrabness. We gathered at Tony and Janet's barn close to Oakfield Wood. At the burial a heartfelt farewell to Peter was given by Billy, long-term friend.

After the burial we gathered at Tony and Janet's where many tributes were shared, which captured all facets of his life and what he meant to everybody.

The sun shone all day for Peter.

Below is a photographic tribute of Peter's achievements with LGP and comments from some of his friends. I took this for Gill and family, where it was displayed with other photographs at the gathering. This is followed with a personal recollection by Diana Clements and the tribute given at the gathering by Michael Hacker.

Laurie Baker
Chairman, London Geodiversity Partnership

Peter Collins, active member of London Geodiversity Partnership, died August 2024
Peter was very instrumental in identifying and auditing some of the London sites



Peter's brainchild: Claygate Beds in Highgate Woods resulting in a display in 2014



Barnet Physic Well with members of LGP, 2015



In search of Stamford Brook, 2009



Rainham Marshes with Bill George, 2011



Stanmore Common with Mike Hacker July 2013



Harrow Weald Common, observing the Stanmore Gravel ridge within the SSSI with Bryan Cozens, c.2015



Hollow Ponds, 2013



Wanstead Flats, 2015



Monken Hadley, 2015



*Rockingham Anomaly, auger, Southwark.
Measuring the depth of peat. November 2017*



LGP visit to Hackney Museum exhibit 2023. Peter is in dark shorts

Tributes to Peter from members of London Geodiversity Partnership & other colleagues

I am so sorry to hear of Peter's passing; he was such a pleasant person. I was lucky to also know him when he worked for London Transport when I worked at GLC and Camden. He contributed an enormous amount to LPG and I had also wondered when he did not reply to the last meeting.

Laurie Baker, Chairman LGP

Terribly sad news. He was a lovely man.

Dr Ruth Siddall , LGP

This is very sad news, particularly for those who have known him for many years. It was very good to see him that day at the Hackney Museum. It was always a pleasure to see him.

Theresa Ball, Treasurer LGP

Sad news indeed, he provided valuable input to LGP and was always a pleasant companion

Dave Brooke, Ex Chairman LGP

I got to know Peter in the 1990s when he attended my geology classes in NHM. He was a great thinker and often questioned my statements. When those classes came to an end he joined my WEA classes as a very active and enthusiastic member of the group.

Peter joined the London Geodiversity Partnership at much the same time as I did in 2009. We went out on many trips together to the sites designated in the 2009 *London's Foundations*. Peter knew some better sites in the Essex border region and suggested some new sites and some replacement ones.

Peter was officially the representative of the Essex Rock & Mineral Society (ERMS).

It was the Highgate Wood project that was his big initiative and triumph of execution, resulting in our geological display in the hut there. His friend, and co-archaeologist, Mike Hacker, was very much part of the team and they were in the middle of a paper about the Claygate Member of the London Clay that Peter had proposed lay under Highgate Wood because of the Roman Kiln discovered at the high point.

The Kiln will be reinstated in the Visitor Hut at the beginning of September.

Thee last time we saw Peter in the flesh was when we visited the Hackney Museum exhibit last year. otherwise, in recent years he has continued to involve himself with LGP via Zoom.

Diana Clements, LGP

I'm shocked and saddened to hear this news. I first met him on a visit to the Sipson Quarries in 2012 and if I'm correct he was involved in archaeological investigations there.

Allan Wheeler, LGP

This is really sad to hear! He was such an important character in LGP and contributed so much thorough observation and research. His presence will be so missed.

Gail Dickerson, artist, LGP

Oh this is very sad. Thank you for letting us know Di. And that's a lovely picture of the trip to the Hackney exhibition. I've passed your message onto Jane as well

Sylvia Warman, LGP (Historic England)

So sorry to hear the sad news about Peter. What a lovely man.

Cally Oldershaw LGP

Thank you for letting us know about Peter Collins. So sad - he had been suffering for a long time. I particularly remember his keen interest in mammoths. Please send our condolences where appropriate. I'll let folks in GeoEssex know.

Ros Mercer, Essex Rock & Mineral Society

That is sad, I know you worked well with him, as you quite right he wasn't a GA Member.

Sarah Stafford, Geologists' Association

A personal recollection by Diana Clements

Peter Collins took early retirement in 1998 when he was Head of Planning in London Transport, the precursor of TfL, because of heart problems. In his early retirement years he was very active within the archaeological community and with an interest in geology as well, he attempted to marry the two, sometimes giving talks to archaeologists about the geology under investigation.

I got to know him in the 1990s when he attended my geology classes in NHM. His geological knowledge was already quite advanced and he was a great thinker, often questioning my statements. When those classes came to an end he joined my WEA geology classes in Palmers Green as a very active and enthusiastic member of the group.

In 2009, I joined the London Geodiversity Partnership (LGP) and Peter joined in the same year. We went out on many trips together, which were always enjoyable occasions as well as productive ones. Peter was officially the representative of the Essex Rock & Mineral Society (ERMS). We visited a large number of the listed 'Potential Sites' throughout North London – some were deemed not useful, others a sensible addition and some were more interesting geologically than the designated sites and so we suggested they be replaced. Peter would pick me up from home and the first objective was to find somewhere to stop for coffee. Usually we visited sites in the morning and then found a suitable pub for lunch. Peter had an excellent map of London which aided our investigations. It showed the topography with a 3-D effect and all the rivers accentuated.

We actively pinned down quarries that were still operating and some we visited with Peter's friend, Bill George (also a member of ERMS). In 2012 we went to Mark's Warren in Barking, just off the A12, and it transpired that it was their last day of operation. We had spotted a large boulder of dolerite and spoke to the quarry manager about it. It had been found within the Black Park Gravel and they had placed it in a prominent position to guide the route for the lorries to take through the quarry. We asked what would happen to it when the quarry closed and they said they would just leave it there. At that point we had the idea that we could perhaps take it to the Essex Wildlife Trust Visitor Centre in Bedfords Park, not far away, up the hill. Brett Lafarge was extremely helpful and transported the boulder up there for us and a board was placed beside it provided jointly by GeoEssex and ERMS explaining that the boulder must have been transported by ice, probably from the Whin Sill in Northumberland and then became incorporated into the Black Park Gravel. We also had an interesting outing with Bill to visit the submerged Forest at Rainham on the north bank of the Thames.

Another quarry we visited was in West London. A number of quarries in this area were indicated on lists from the British Geological Survey (BGS). Eventually we managed to establish that one of them, in Sipsons Lane near Heathrow was still operating. The quarry owner did not want to know but we decided to go anyway, along with members of the Harrow & Hillingdon Geological Society (HHGS) and were loitering near the entrance to the works when a Land Rover drove down to us. It was the Manager of the quarry and he was extremely helpful. He invited us to hop in and drove us to the active site. It was near the beginning of its operation and Peter was delighted to find an archaeologist friend examining the surface material as the digger began its work. Archaeologists have this right; geologists don't, but probably the owner was worried we may interrupt the workings which was not our intention. A couple of years later the archaeological interest had moved onto another part of the site and we visited them specifically. To my surprise I found a friend this time – someone I knew from music connections. We learn more recently that the

quarry has finished operation and is almost completely backfilled. Unfortunately, despite giving it status as a Regionally Important Geological Site (RIGS) no face has been left for geologists to examine. We named it *The Sipson Lane Complex* to encompass all the other sites that had been worked in the area and are hopeful that another pit may be opened in the future.

In 2013 Peter suggested to me that the Romano-British Pottery in Highgate Wood was much more likely to have been using the sandy Claygate Member at the top of the London Clay for their pots, rather than the London Clay shown on the BGS Map. He had been working with his archaeologist friend, Mike Hacker, when they had an experimental firing in 2010. The three of us went to examine the site which was at the highest point in the Wood, over 100m OD, and, comparing it with a dig I was involved with on the Parkland Walk, we agreed that in all probability it was the Claygate Member. Our thoughts were backed up when we bumped into Cindy Blaney, the Wood Keeper, who told us that they were currently conducting a survey around the Wood to try to establish why the oak trees were dying and the auguring had proved Claygate Beds throughout. With the agreement of the BGS this led to mounting a small display in the hut, explaining our reasoning for redrawing the geological map and providing specimens to go with it. In 2018 Peter and Mike published a report on the LGP website: *Highgate Wood Roman Pottery Kilns: Geological and Topographical factors influencing the location*.

Another area we investigated together was Harrow Weald Common. We had visited with the WEA class but failed to find a good exposure of the Stanmore Gravel on that occasion so in 2013 we invited Bryan Cozens and Dave Brooks (both HHGS members) to come with us so that Bryan could show us where to look. It was very obvious in the perimeter bank and I don't know how we missed it before. Later, in 2015 Dave (who was LGP Chairman) advised us that work was being undertaken on Stanmore Common and there were good exposures of the Stanmore Gravel so Peter and I made another expedition, this time with Mike Hacker who subsequently analysed a sample of the gravel. When Peter moved house some years later he gave me all his gravel samples which LGP have used on several occasions to demonstrate the Quaternary within the GLA. Peter had also spent considerable time studying the ages of the various gravels from the literature and we spent a happy afternoon at my kitchen table going through each one in turn while I annotated my BGS Regional Guide. This remains my 'bible'. He also gave me copies of the references he had used.

In 2012 the Mayor of London published the second edition of *London's Foundations* as Supplementary Planning Guidance to the London Plan. Southwark responded that they were sad that we did not have any sites within their borough and what about the Rockingham Anomaly? Peter came round to my house and we spread out the geological maps on the table and spotted a patch of brown that we had not noticed before. This turned out to be peat which is very unusual in an inland site within the GLA and was indeed the Rockingham Anomaly. We were jolted into action when artist, Gail Dickerson joined the Geologists' Association (GA) wanting to gather peat from this area for her artworks. We jumped at the opportunity and Gail succeeded in acquiring permissions from the local authority who managed the housing estate that had been built on the Anomaly, and in 2017 Peter lent us his auger and we drove down to Southwark with Mike and met Gail with a few of her 'strong men' friends and began to auger. Alarming, all that seemed to be coming up was brick and we realised that the estate had been built over a former area of housing but we persevered and at about a depth of two metres we reached the peat. Gail was able to use it in her artwork and arranged a display in the local disused library and invited LGP to add a small exhibit on the geology. Meanwhile Mike and Peter arranged for the pollen content of the peat to be analysed by Prof. Rob Scaife of Southampton University. This indicated that it accumulated

between 5,500 and 3,500 BP. Paul Rainey, LGP expert in such things, drew a cross section and it seemed that the peat in this area was as a result of faulting which allowed water to reach the surface. The combination of these two bits of research allowed Mike and Peter to combine with Rod Scaife to add another report to the LGP website: *The Rockingham Street Anomaly – Southwark, a Geoarchaeological Evaluation* (April 2019) at <https://tinyurl.com/2s7tjb85>

Over the last few years Peter has been less able to take a physical part in the activities of LGP but that has not stopped him from contributing in many ways, in particular to discussions on the Quaternary.

June 2023 was the last time we all saw Peter except on Zoom. This was at the Hackney Museum when LGP had a group visit to their temporary exhibit: *Hackney 300,000 BC*. Before the event, Peter characteristically wrote to us:

300,000 years ago we were transitioning from the warm “Purfleet” Interglacial (MIS 9) into the colder MIS 10 peaking around 250kya. And it’s the Lower-Middle Palaeolithic Transition with a variety of flint artefacts. Hackney looks a great habitat!

Peter, we will miss you greatly.

A tribute by Michael Hacker on the occasion of Peter’s funeral 23 August 2024.

Peter and I shared two significant things in common. Firstly we both experienced life-threatening medical events in our mid-50s. Very different events, but serious enough for both of us to opt for early retirement from demanding professional careers.

The second thing we shared was that we both chose to take demanding academic courses at Birkbeck College in entirely new fields. He chose to study geology and I chose to study archaeology.

Having studied geology for some years Peter decided to widen his field of study and follow up his interest in archaeology. We first met when we both joined an archaeological training excavation in south London way back in 2003.

All archaeological excavations are something of a gamble. Sometimes you discover exciting things like mosaic floors or burials. But sometimes nothing of any archaeological significance is discovered. This dig was one of those digs. But Peter, with his knowledge of geology discovered something of geological significance. He spotted some unusual patterns in the gravel that formed the sides of the trench. He contacted someone he knew in the British Geological Survey and they were able to confirm that this was evidence that this quiet part of south London had been frozen arctic tundra for tens of thousands of years during the last ice age. I mention this because we were students. We were there to learn. But Peter was always keen to share his knowledge with others. He was able to enlighten us all, and show both students and tutors a world we had never imagined could have existed in south London.

The Birkbeck training excavations became a regular feature of our summers over many years and eventually Peter was invited to contribute to the training excavations by providing open-air seminars for the students. He was able to teach them something of the rudiments of geology and how they could read the geological local evidence.

We both became members of an ad-hoc group of fellow Birkbeck mature students. We met regularly in the winter months to sort through what had been found in the training digs; bits of broken pottery, animal bones, fish bones and shells and of course bits of stone, which Peter with his encyclopaedic knowledge was able to identify and often pin point to a particular area of the country. He was the only person I knew who carried a bottle of Hydrochloric acid in his pocket in case he needed to check if a fragment of stone was limestone.

We ended up working on a wide range of archaeological projects over the years. These included: Roman ritual shafts in the north Down chalks in Ewell, a medieval convent in Brentford, complete with the skeletal remains of buried nuns and monks, prospecting for the moat of an Elizabethan manor house in Epping forest, evaluating the sub soil for a nature pond on Hampstead Heath, sampling a bog in the ancient woodland of Queen's Wood in Muswell Hill and evaluating the clay used by Roman potters in Highgate Wood.

I would like to tell you about one geo-archaeological project in particular.

Through his involvement with the London Geodiversity Partnership we became involved in an unusual project near the Elephant and Castle in Southwark. Gail Dickerson a local artist with an interest in geology uses local soils in her paintings. She had heard that peat had been encountered when a sewer had been constructed and had asked the London Geodiversity Partnership if they could help her find some of it. So on a grey November day we found ourselves in the gardens of a 1930s housing estate. Peter had with him his geologist's soil auger. A sort of oversized apple corer with an extendable handle. The plan was to use this to drill into the turf and extract a sample of peat. However, when we started we did not at first encounter the expected peat, but lumps of brick, concrete and broken glass. Undeterred we dug through this and to our relief and the delight of Gail, eventually struck the peat she wanted. But Peter continued drilling and drilling to the full length of his auger's handle. He established that there was an accumulation of over 3 metres of peat below the ground level. Elephant and Castle is not located on an Irish bog or a Yorkshire moorland but central London. How and when had the peat got there?

Using the evidence he had gathered with the help of his geologist friends and contacts, he was able to show that at the end of the last ice age the area had been occupied by a large fresh water lake, some 300m wide and nearly 20m deep.

Most recently we had been involved with a project to recreate a Roman pottery kiln in Highgate Wood in North London (Friends of Highgate Roman Kiln). The wood is the site of a Roman pottery and it had been assumed that the Roman potters had used local clay. The problem was that most of the clay in the area is not suitable for making pots and the source of the potter's clay had not been found. Using Peter's geological knowledge we have been able to localise a narrow seam of suitable clay, which was probably, the one used by the Roman potters. Currently this clay is being used to make replica Roman pots and to make a kiln to fire them in. Sadly Peter was not able to see the finished pots made from the clay he helped to locate.

I knew, studied and worked with Peter for over 20 years. We spent many happy hours together, pouring over maps and books, unearthing and discussing evidence, trying to better understand London's past. He was always keen to share his knowledge and experience and made a real and significant contribution to both the geology and archaeology of London.

Like all of us here today I will miss him greatly. I will miss his knowledge, his wisdom and intelligence. But most of all I will miss his friendship, companionship, and his many acts of kindness and support.

Peter was a Londoner. He spent most of his life in North London. He was fascinated by London's geology, geography and history. He passionately wanted to know how the rocks, the stones, the sands, the clays, the rivers, the streams and the springs of London's have shaped the land and influenced the lives of Londoners in the past and today.

I would like to read a description of North London in the 12th century written by a proud Londoner, William Fitzstephen. A passage Peter was familiar with and one that we had often discussed.

Though it was written over 800 years ago I feel it embodies much of what Peter valued and reflects something of his love of North London, the houses he lived in, the gardens and allotment he tended and his interest in the hidden history that lay beneath his feet.

"Adjoining to the houses on all sides lie the gardens of those citizens that dwell in the suburbs, which are well furnished with trees, spacious and beautiful.

On the north side too are fields for pasture, and a delightful plain of meadow land, interspersed with flowing streams, on which stand mills, whose clack is very pleasing to the ear. Close by lies an immense forest, in which are densely wooded thickets, the coverts of game, stags, fallow-deer, boars, and wild bulls. The tillage lands of the city are not barren gravelly soils, but like the fertile plains of Asia, which produce abundant crops, and fill the barns of their cultivators with "Ceres' plenteous sheaf."

Michael Hacker
August 2024

Note: The passage is by William Fitzstephen. He died about the year 1190. He was a trusted clerk in the service of Thomas à Becket, and was present at his murder. He wrote a biography of Thomas à Becket(*Vita Sancti Thomae*) and prefaced it with this description of London (c.1170). The original was written in Latin. This translation is from the 1912 edition of John Stow, *A Survey of London* (1598-1603).

https://www.gutenberg.org/files/42959/42959-h/42959-h.htm#Page_501 [accessed August 2024]
