

SGI 5 Gordon Square Sarsen

London Borough of Camden
Gordon Square sarsen, WC1H 0PQ
Grid reference: TQ 2972 8228

(See also SGI 9, the Hanwell Sarsen)

An unworked, saccharoid sarsen stone, derived from the boulder fields of Wiltshire was erected in Gordon Square Gardens in June 2013, to commemorate 75 years since the founding of the Institute of Archaeology (IoA), now part of University College London (UCL).

Sarsens are the remnants of silica-cemented quartz-rich sandstones, so called silcretes or duricrusts, belonging to Palaeogene and Neogene strata. Characteristically, these units have weathered down to form isolated boulders which are now found overlying Cretaceous and Palaeogene bedrock subsequently unaffected by later glaciations. In the UK, the sandy, 'saccharoid sarsens' are best known from the Marlborough Downs of Wiltshire, though similar and related lithologies (puddingstones and 'hard'-sarsens) are also found throughout south-eastern England, overlying the Chalk and the Thanet Sands, and in some cases, younger strata.

Holes and tube-like structures are typical of this variety of sandstone, their precise origin is unknown but they have traditionally been interpreted as plant root casts. Several of these can be seen on the back of this stone.

The sarsen here in Gordon Square Gardens was donated by a farmer, Gilian Swanton, who owns land near Avebury in Wiltshire. It was collected from the Marlborough Downs and installed by ME Construction. The solidity of sarsens, coupled with the relative ease of extraction made them the stone of choice for Neolithic 'architects' in Wiltshire; notable uses are at Avebury Circle and Stonehenge and sarsens are used as portals at the West Kennett and Wayland's Smithy passage graves. This legacy makes this sarsen a fitting memorial to the Institute of Archaeology.

Access

The gardens are located in Gordon Square WC1H 0PQ, and are owned by the University of London. The gardens are open daily from 8 am to 8 pm, closed on Christmas Day. Nearest Tube stations are Euston Square (Circle, Metropolitan, and Hammersmith & City) or Russell Square (Piccadilly). Buses 59, 68, 91, 168, 7, 10, 18, 24, 29, 30, 73, 134, 188, 390 all stop nearby.



Two sides of the Sarsen in Gordon Square 2016. Photos: Ruth Siddall

References

- Siddall, R., Kirk, W. & Robinson, E., 2014, The Urban Geology of UCL and the University of London; urban Geology in London No. 1, 20 pp., <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~ucfbrxs/Homepage/walks/UCL&UoL.pdf>
- Ulliot, J. S., Nash, D. J., Whiteman, C. A & Mortimer, R. N., 2004, Distribution, petrology and mode of development of silcretes (sarsens and puddingstones) on the eastern South Downs, UK., *Earth Surface Processes and Landforms.*, 29, 1509–1539.