

**Project outline:
London Waterfront Tenements, 1200–1666**

John Schofield

This project arises out of archaeological excavation of four sites on the north bank of the Thames in the City of London; Swan Lane (1981), Seal House (1974), New Fresh Wharf (1974–8) and Billingsgate Lorry Park (1982–3); the first two a little way upstream of the medieval London Bridge (removed 1832), the other two an equal distance below it. These sites were excavated by the Museum of London and its predecessor the Guildhall Museum in 1974–83.

During the 1970s and 1980s there was a revolution in the study of European urban history from its material remains. This was the unprecedented and hardly dreamed of richness of archaeological material from waterfront sites in British and European cities on rivers or coastlines. And in its complexity of material, the range of activities and trade contacts demonstrated, and sheer volume of material, the City of London was the most important European example of this new type of evidence.

Archaeologists of the Museum of London had to learn how to deal with tons of artefacts, many of which needed conservation. Site records were also voluminous, and there were many sites available for excavation as the present north bank of the Thames around London Bridge changed its function and was redeveloped piecemeal. There have been a number of publications exploring the topographical history of the waterfront zone in Roman, Saxon and medieval times, and an impressive series of catalogues of artefacts. Kept airtight and wet by the adjacent river over centuries, the layers have produced many thousands of such artefacts in excellent condition. These form a collection of European significance; and the context of their discovery is one of the themes of this study. Now the structural histories of the houses, shops and warehouses on four important sites (two on either side of the Bridge, east and west) excavated in 1974–83 can be reported. The development of computers since 1980s has enabled our analytical wishes to catch up with the immensity of the dataset. This study will be able to illuminate many themes in the history of the capital in the centuries 1200 to 1666, not least because of the correlation of long stratigraphic sequences, the best dating framework in medieval archaeology in Britain (derived from dendrochronology), and detailed documentary evidence (wills and deeds concerning the many individual properties; maps and plans).

The project will explore how a conjunction of detailed documentary history and exceptional preservation of archaeological artefacts and buildings for the period 1200 to 1666 can illuminate several themes of universal significance for historians and archaeologists: the behaviours and world-views of medieval and early modern Londoners, and the physical context of the emergence of a capitalist urban bourgeoisie in the 16th and 17th centuries. In turn, by studying the buildings and artefacts of the 17th-century port of London, we can understand the machine which was instrumental in creating the British Empire.

These are however the ultimate objectives of a package of studies which begin more prosaically with a local community on the London waterfront; skeletons of parishioners in the church of St Botolph Billingsgate form one chapter, together with

a study of the development of the excavated church site against the backdrop of the Reformation in the 16th century. We intended to present a study of changing patterns of consumption, standards of living, family and craft organisation, site formation and waste disposal over six and a half centuries, from 1200 to about 1666. This long period was interrupted by several cataclysmic events: the Black Death in 1348–9, and the twin disasters of the Great Plague and the Great Fire of London in 1665–6. The Great Fire, in particular, is well attested in the archaeology, with several pit groups of material caught in a cultural snapshot, being the demolished remains of buildings from September 1666. Such ‘time capsule’ sites are valuable for archaeologists and historians round the world.

Documentary evidence is plentiful for all these sites from about 1300. Owners of properties here included a medieval alderman, merchants, fishmongers, and the 17th-century economist Sir Josiah Child (1630–99) (who has an entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*). Part of the day-to-day account book of Gilbert Maghfeld, an ironmonger and trader who lived on the New Fresh Wharf site in the late 14th century, has survived and its contents may now be placed in context. The study will also place in context the 16,000 individual non-ceramic artefacts of the period 1200 to 1666 which were recovered (a good number of which have been or are being published elsewhere). It will attempt to extract significance from the closest correlation between the sources of archaeological excavation, documentary history and artefact study yet possible from a medieval and post-medieval European city. This combination of sources should provide a detailed picture of economic, social and cultural development of this part of London and its people over a long period. The intention is also understand and describe the concrete experience and meaning of urban life.

The proposal is to publish the stratigraphic sequence, documentary evidence, and discussion of the topographical and historical development in the long period 1200 to 1666 (the Great Fire of London) in a first volume (probably a Museum of London Archaeology monograph), which will also contain detailed tables to enable interrogation of the archive itself. A large amount of archaeological data will be placed on appropriate websites, to be worked on by specialists and university students, as part of their degree courses.

This very large project has been worked on in stages since the sites were excavated in 1974–82. The work to be done for completion is still large and complex. It is best assessed and costed in stages. The work on the first volume outlined here, with the supporting website, will probably cost in the region of £100,000 (\$61,000).

For further information contact John Schofield, john@jschd.demon.co.uk.

9 June 2011