London’s Waterfront 1666 to 1750: assessment

Outline of project

John Schofield and colleagues

20 August 2019

The questions we want to answer

1. By 1700 London was the hub of a rapidly expanding British Empire. What effects did this have on the buildings and people along the waterfront?

2. What was life like in the port of London in the century after the Great Fire of 1666? Who lived on the waterfront, and what comprised their world?

3. Did the quality of life change for Londoners in this area of the City in the century after 1666? What happened after the Great Fire?
There is a body of work on post-Fire London, from social and architectural historians (Peter Earle, Vanessa Harding, Elizabeth McKellar) but so far little from the archaeologists. There are published reports on sites or whole areas in the City’s suburbs at Aldgate and Spitalfields (Thompson et al 1984; Harward et al 2015), but nothing yet on the waterfront. We need to have archaeological studies of areas nearer the commercial centres of post-Fire London, which would be more than usually open to cultural influences from outside. In this way we can examine a commonly-made but uncritical belief that London became one of the earliest modern European cities after the Fire.

The project and its funding is arranged in three stages: (i) assessment, (ii) research and writing the publication text, and (iii) the expenses of publication, which will be in both conventional form and online.

This application is for funds to carry out (or in certain areas, to complete) the post-excavation assessment of four archaeological excavations of 1974–84 in Thames Street, London. This assessment is expected to provide the material to contest some of the currently held views about the development of the City of London in the century after the Great Fire.

**The sites to be analysed, and their relation to the waterfront of the period**

In 2018, John Schofield and others published their archaeological and historical report on four excavations of 1974–84 in Thames Street, City of London, around the north end of the medieval London Bridge (*London’s waterfront 1100–1666*: Schofield et al 2018; summarised in Schofield 2019). That volume reported on the sites in the period 1100 to 1666, the Great Fire of London. It also left for future analysis the remains of the period 1666 to about 1750 on three of the four sites, which are the subject of this project.

The four sites were given letters A to D: Swan Lane (A), Seal House (B), New Fresh Wharf (C) and Billingsgate (D). For ease of comparison, these letters are kept, but there is no detailed reporting here on New Fresh Wharf as the post-Fire remains were very small. This project is therefore largely about the strata and finds on three sites, A, B and D. In discussion excavated sites elsewhere on the north bank from Blackfriars to the Tower and others on the south bank of the Thames opposite the sites are summarised.

The study will consider the history of the scheme for a single wide quay along all the City’s Thames waterfront after the Great Fire, as originally proposed in Wren’s scheme for rebuilding. Only an outline history can be given, as the post-Fire waterfront wall has not been excavated on any site yet; but it will be placed in the context of works at contemporary European ports (eg Rotterdam). Then more setting for the study is supplied by information on the general raising and widening of Thames Street along all its one-mile length (from the survey of lanes published by Strype in 1720); and brief description of the public structures and buildings along the City bank of the Thames in the period 1666–1750, especially Billingsgate dock itself. The detailed study is of houses, warehouses and other buildings behind the post-Fire wharf; as in the preceding *London’s Waterfront 1100–1666*, this is an archaeological history of the sites between the major institutional buildings on the waterfront.
More detailed questions

The three overall questions listed above are composed of detailed questions. These can all be answered by a combination of the archaeological evidence with study of the rich documents available for the sites. These are listed here, then further expanded in sections dealing with the assessment of individual types of material.

People and buildings

1. What is the history of these buildings, and why did they change over time? Here we are studying the replacement of smallscale buildings including a large proportion of houses with much larger warehouse buildings as commercial pressures on the port changed. This radical change in urban topography may have been sooner below London Bridge than in the area above the Bridge.

2. To what extent do these waterfront buildings follow the usual notions of rebuilding after the Great Fire? How do they compare with 17th-century buildings on other London sites?

3. How can archaeological study differentiate between buildings used for domestic and trade purposes? What were the buildings used for?

People’s lives and their outlook on life

4. What can the artefactual evidence (both pottery and non-ceramic artefacts) can tell us about consumers in post-Fire London; what they owned and treasured, what they accumulated, and why things were thrown away? Here a significant start has already been made with a study of rich material of the years just before the Fire on the Billingsgate site (Schofield and Pearce 2009), which demonstrates some of the method of analysis and possibilities.

5. From the large amount of discarded animal bone in these layers, what can be deduced about trends and specialities in eating habits, nutrition, the marketing of livestock, pets and pests, and all the other things which animal bones can tell us?

6. How can the artefactual material from these sites, when compared with the documentary evidence for property ownership and occupation, elucidate the question of London’s position in the development of a consumer culture at this period? In work of the 1980s a consumer revolution in Britain was ascribed to the late 18th century, but this has been much qualified since, with evidence of widening consumer demands in earlier decades and even centuries (Glennie 1995). One historian’s view is that the average English standard of life in 1700 was on a different plane from that 100 years or even 60 years previously (Holmes 1993, 66). This needs archaeological examination.

7. Historians have made much of the thought that the Great Fire created a ‘modern’ city. A section of this study will examine several archaeological sites within the City, including Billingsgate, to see what happened to streets and houses after the Fire. The degree of change was probably far less than historians have supposed. This throws doubt on the modernisation theory.
8. How does this study elucidate the 17th-century port and its national and international connections? The archaeological findings on these sites, backed up by their rich documentary evidence, demonstrate how this area with the port of London was an important part of the expanding British Empire because it was the main gateway to that empire. Comparable archaeological sites have now been excavated on the east side of the United States, and there may be connections with London’s part in the slave trade (the finding of enigmatic cowrie shells in the Billingsgate deposits, and what they might mean).

9. One aspect to pursue is that in London, as in other growing Atlantic ports, a ‘complexly organised and highly integrated form of social life devoted to supplying the burgeoning demand for civilised comforts and consumption needs on both sides of the ocean’ was being born and developed at this time (Sacks and Lynch 2000, 409). Thus the findings of this project will be of interest to those working on historic places of colonial America and the Caribbean.

We can ask ‘what is this a case of?’ London in 1666–1750 is an example of a port city which began to rule an empire. Work by economic historians has shown that in the century after the Restoration, ‘there was a major redirection of England’s overseas trade to areas beyond Europe; an expansion in the shipping and ship-building industries; a dynamic growth in new import and re-export trades.. and the development of expertise in a range of commercial services’ (Zahedieh 2010, 3–4). There will be an archaeological dimension to this. Detailed comparison will be made with the port of Liverpool, which rose to rival London, with a better dock system, from the 1730s (starting in 1715). The archaeology of the port of London in 1666–1750 will be compared with that of other European and New World port cities, to see if or how they were different in their development, appearance and commercial character. Examples of such cities are Amsterdam, Barcelona, Philadelphia and Boston.

A brief description of the archaeological material to be assessed

The sites, features and buildings of Thames Street, and its history after 1750

At Swan Lane (site A), only the contents of a stone-lined cesspit, amounting to 648 sherds from up to 120 vessels, has been be analysed; this was probably a house clearance in the immediately post-Fire period. The house was next door to one of Samuel Pepys’s favourite taverns. At Seal House (site B), excavation uncovered a row of six small brick houses on the east side of Black Raven Alley. They were built in 1671 by William Darvoll, plasterer, and they are shown on a survey of the site by William Leybourn in 1686 as they belonged to the Fishmongers’ Company (Figure 1). A well which may have been in the cellar of one of the houses contained pottery, including complete vessels, of the early to mid-18th century in its fill (Figure 6 below). The houses were demolished around 1750 as large warehouses began to dominate the area.
In Lower Thames Street at Billingsgate [Lorry Park] (site D), extensive remains of post-Fire buildings to about 1750 were excavated in an area about 19.5m east–west by 24m north–south. These lay on Botolph Wharf, on both sides of a lane which bisected the wharf and led to the Thames. In the period 1666 to about 1750, brick buildings were erected on both sides of the lane, and went through several phases of alteration on their ground floors (the first phase as an example, Figure 2). At the north end of the west half the pre-Fire church of St Botolph Billingsgate was not rebuilt but its site became secular buildings associated with the capitalist entrepreneur Sir Josiah Child (1631–99), who was prominent in the East India Company. Child became rich and bought the large estate at Wanstead in Essex, which he landscaped and extended; his elaborate tomb is in Wanstead church (Figure 3).
Figure 2 Billingsgate (BIG82) period 17.1; one of the four main phase plans for the Billingsgate site in the period 1666–1750 (MOLA). Lower Thames Street lay about 4m to the north of the excavation trench.

Figure 3 Effigy of Sir Josiah Child in St Mary’s church, Wanstead (he died in 1699, but the monument may be of 1704); the London capitalist in Roman costume, with a full wig.
The discussion summarises the archaeology of the port of London in the period 1666 to 1750, largely of sites on the north bank of the river but including some observations of sites on the south bank and a brief look at the expanding docklands facilities east of the City in the century after 1666. It suggests that Thames Street was an important post-Fire street in the London; so much so that the idea of Thames Street was exported to the American and Caribbean colonies. The waterfront of the City was an important element in the development of London as an imperial centre. The forms of houses along Thames Street can be reconstructed from archaeological and graphic evidence such as engravings and drawings of the buildings round Billingsgate dock itself (Figure 4), the chief point of interest in the area which lay about 50m east of the Billingsgate excavation site.

![Figure 4](attachment:image.png)

*Figure 4 View of Billingsgate, 1736 (BM): valuable for showing many aspects of post-Fire London buildings. The corner buildings are higher than most of contemporary Thames Street. The building on the left is the house of ‘Major’ Beckford, probably part of the very rich landowning family in Jamaica*

Here it seems the post-Fire building regulations were interpreted in such a way as to emphasise the corner buildings on Thames Street to give prominence to the dock and its public functions. The central function of Thames Street and its buildings can now be demonstrated, and the lives of people who occupied those properties can be explored.

A brief epilogue section will sketch the history of this part of the Thames waterfront in the 100 years after 1750, especially the development of Billingsgate as a market, transport hub and major point of entry into the city for goods and people (Figure 5). Before 1700 the space north of the dock functioned as the capital’s coal market, and from the late 18th century a succession of buildings called the Coal Exchange functioned on the other side of the street. This was to be rebuilt as a well-known building in the 1840s, demolished only in 1969. Thames Street contained several public buildings of architectural note, underlining its purpose as the main street of the City’s waterfront.
Figure 5  Anonymous view of Billingsgate in 1810 (BM, 1880,1113.1607). This shows (in the middle, at the rear) the main post-Fire arcaded building on the west side of the dock, and left of it a large open-sided fish market building of about 1800. Such covered, open market halls survive in modern coastal towns still concerned with fishing, for instance in the Mediterranean

The nature of the artefacts and ecofacts

To illustrate the significance and variety of the archaeological material for all these questions, here is one sample table listing artefacts, bones and shells from one of the 27 phases within period 17, the post-Fire period at Billingsgate. This indicates how the many kinds of pottery, pipes, non-ceramic artefacts and animal products will be studied together to illuminate life on the site during this century.

Registered finds from 17.23

<table>
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<th>Description</th>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
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<td>CERA PIPE [504]</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;1019&gt;</td>
<td>CERA VESS [441]</td>
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<td>&lt;762&gt;</td>
<td>CERA WALT [441]</td>
<td>441</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;960&gt;</td>
<td>CERA WALT [496]</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>AO18 2 BOWL</td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt;1012&gt;</td>
<td>CERA WALT [496]</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>AO19? 1 BOWL</td>
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<td>&lt;1305&gt;</td>
<td>CERA WALT [496]</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>AO15 1 BOWL</td>
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<td>442</td>
<td>AO22 1 BOWL</td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt;964&gt;</td>
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<td>&lt;577&gt;</td>
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<td>496</td>
<td>AO15 1 BOWL</td>
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<td>&lt;590&gt;</td>
<td>GLAS BEAD [492]</td>
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<td>AO18 2 BOWL</td>
</tr>
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<td>&lt;720&gt;</td>
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Pipes from 17.23

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<td>&lt;768&gt;</td>
<td>SAMP - [441]</td>
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</table>
Table 1  Finds from Billingsgate
period 17.23 (18th century, to be further specified)

Detailed nature of assessments and particular questions

Pottery and non-ceramic artefacts

This phase of assessment comprises basic recording and the proposal of what further research to undertake, and covers pottery, glass, ceramic building materials, metalwork, wooden objects, leather and clay tobacco pipes. In terms of resources required, it is largely about site D. Some work has been undertaken on the pottery from site B, Seal House (Figure 6); but the glass and non-ceramic artefacts remain to be assessed.
The finds recovered from post-Fire contexts at Billingsgate (BIG82) present an important opportunity to examine in fine detail developments taking place along this stretch of the waterfront in the decades following the Great Fire, and building on earlier research. The wide and diverse range of ceramic fabrics and forms will be studied alongside other contemporaneous finds, including clay tobacco pipes, glass and registered finds in various materials. The principal objective will be to adopt a holistic, ‘biographical’ approach to the material, using all finds together, as considered by functional type, to enhance our understanding of the site’s development and use after 1666. This approach has been successfully followed in several recent MOLA publications (for example, for the Spitalfields area, Harward et al 2015), and our aim is to extend it to the Billingsgate site, and thereby to present a nuanced biography of this stretch of the London waterfront, based on interdisciplinary research.

Of the questions which can be addressed by these relatively new methods; two concern the wide variety of pottery, especially from abroad. First, the material can demonstrate the range of London’s commercial and cultural contacts at this time, to compare with the good documentary evidence for the range of imports from many countries as found in port and shipping records. A simple table of the sources of imports into all of England, in terms of tonnage in ships, for the years 1699–1701 and 1752–4 is given in Table 2. This shows that by 1700 much of the known world sent goods; and during the first half of the 18th century, the percentage of goods from the West Indies, West Africa and North America increased. We are equipped to study the range of imports on these sites; nearly 50 different pottery wares were recorded on the sites in the period up to 1666, so the analytical structure exists to take this study into the post-Fire period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1699–1701 average (000 tons)</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>1752–4 average (000 tons)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Figure 6 Pottery of the late 17th and 18th century from the well on site B; this remarkable group of pots may need to be individually drawn for publication (L Blackmore)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>1699–1701 (000)</th>
<th>1752–4 (000)</th>
<th>Average (000)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northern Europe</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nearby Europe</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Europe and Turkey</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Indies and West Africa</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East India</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>369</strong></td>
<td><strong>562</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2** Sources of imports into England, in tons (000) for 1699–1701 and 1752–4 (averages), from Davis 1972, 184

Second, two previous studies by two of the project authors (Schofield and Pearce 2009; 2014) have demonstrated that specific groups of pottery and artefacts can be associated with named people on the sites immediately before the Great Fire (Figure 7); this unusual ability is to be pursued in the post-Fire groups. Thus people’s tastes for foreign novelties can be explored.

![Figure 7](image.png)

**Figure 7** Pottery of 1610–30 from a drain on the New Fresh Wharf site, excavated in 1974–8; various native and foreign wares, including items from Spain (Schofield and Pearce 2014)

Assessment will also be made of ceramic building material (roof tiles, wall- and floor tiles, bricks), leather, and coins.

**Animal bones**

A separate application for assessment of the animal bones from 117 contexts [layers] at Billingsgate in the post-Fire period is also being prepared. The main question here, already
alluded to above, is to probe in detail for the first time a major collection of accurately-
stratified animal bones representing domestic consumption over a century in this waterfront
zone. The bones will tell much about diet, status (better cuts and rarer animals) and dietary
preferences. The presence of wild animals will also show what species were hunted, captured
or poached for consumption. The assessment will allow us to say whether detailed analysis
will reconstruct mortality profiles for the major domesticates.

Other matters which might come up include evidence of industries which used animal bones
or skins, such as tanning, horn working or bone working; what the faunal remains will tell us
about animal husbandry, ie contemporary farming practices; and even any evidence for trade
in exotic animals, including pets.

Cowrie shells

One particular item in the assessment is a number of cowrie shells, spread through several
layers on the Billingsgate site in the late 17th- and 18th-century buildings. Cowrie shells,
from around the Maldives Islands near Sri Lanka, had long been used as a currency in west
Africa before the Europeans arrived. They had added virtues of being useful as ballast in
empty ships and they did not rot during long voyages. Merchants from several European
countries bought and sold cowries, and by 1700 Amsterdam and London had become sources
of supply for nations wanting cowries for the African markets. The East India Company
imported many tons of the shells and held auctions in its London warehouses; there were also
‘interlopers’, private dealers outside the official system (Hogdendorn and Johnson 1986, 88–
91). We wish to find out what the shells were doing here, to confirm the species present and
investigate their possible sources.

The documentary evidence, study of which has begun, indicates that Robert Pallady, who was
living in one of the houses at Botolph Wharf and quite probably in one of the buildings
excavated, made a will proved in 1691; and in it he refers to being about to go on a voyage to
Guinea. This may indicate involvement in the slave trade, and provide some of the context
therefore for the cowrie shells.

Writing the publication text

This second phase, following the phase of assessment, comprises analysis and writing on
several aspects and illustration (photography of selected artefacts, maps and artefact
drawings; production of 3D drawings of buildings and phase plans). This phase will be costed
as part of the assessment, as a product of it.

Publication

The third proposed stage comprises the expenses of publication, that is printing of a
conventional paper text and the simultaneous provision of a free pdf download of all the text,
from one or more websites. The City of London Archaeological Trust (CoLAT) is already
doing this with the previous London’s Waterfront 1100–1666, the free download being a
product of a previous grant from the Marc Fitch Fund (www.colat.org.uk/london-waterfront/).

The draft text, which does not include the research for which funds are now required, comprises about 47,000 words, 75 figures and 27 tables. When all the parts are completed, it may be about 50% larger.

As with the previous and related publication *London’s Waterfront 1100–1666* (Schofield et al 2018), one objective is to place in the public domain a body of catalogued artefactual material (pottery, pipes, objects in metal, wood and bone, leather, tiles, and in this case animal bones) which can attract students for further research, building on this gateway publication.

**Personnel on the project**

The main author John Schofield and the documentary historian Stephen Freeth are working on this project at no cost. The documentary research includes unpublished previous work by Tony Dyson. Other contributors to this monograph are all based at Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA), and several have contributed to the previous monograph dealing with the same sites in the preceding period of 1100 to 1666 (Schofield et al 2018): Ian Betts, Lyn Blackmore, Julian Bowsher, Alan Pipe and Jacqui Pearce.

**Further information**

For further information about this project, including the required funding costs, please contact the main author, John Schofield, at john@jschd.demon.co.uk.

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