

London's Waterfront 1100-1666: excavations in Thames Street, London, 1974-84

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Anybody interested in the rich archaeology of London will be familiar with high-standard and detailed publications by the Museum of London and other professional archaeological companies. *London's Waterfront*, published by Archaeopress, is no exception, but it stands out by adding new dimensions to what we know and what we do not yet know about the capital's history.

Excavations on the Thames waterfront, begun in 1972, have revealed timber structures and land-reclamation dumps rich in well-preserved artefacts [see pp.18-26]; the finds themselves would provide an astonishing source for any publication. Indeed, they already have, as they provided core material for the iconic series of medieval finds catalogues published between 1987 and 1998. Covering categories like dress accessories, leather shoes and textiles, household fittings and furnishings, and pilgrim souvenirs, these volumes have been vital for identifying and classifying medieval objects up and down the country. Here, for the first time, it is possible to assess finds on a broader

scale, as assemblages in their proper archaeological context.

Another significant aspect of this publication is that it represents a second stage of investigating London's archaeology, from the perspective of a larger continuous footprint of the city's past rather than a single site. Centred on four neighbouring sites, excavated between 1974 and 1984, *London's Waterfront* tells the story of 16 tenements situated on either side of the medieval London Bridge, including the site of St Botolph Billingsgate parish church. It draws together finds and features, documentary and – for the later period – pictorial sources, presenting the development of the waterfront, including its properties, buildings, lanes, and main industries of brewing and dyeing.

Readers come close to that rare opportunity of connecting objects to known individuals or families, with two sites providing groups of pre-Fire pottery and other objects that may have belonged to a 17th-century plasterer named William Widmore, residing on Hammond's quay, and Thomas Soane, a grocer, near

Billingsgate. A remarkable find is represented by a brick grave in the south aisle of St Botolph's Church, containing the possible remains of John Reynewell (d. 1445), mayor of London in 1426-1427.

A further 60 burials from the church date from the early 17th century, and provide informative demographic and pathological profiles from an early modern London cemetery.

Drawing this vast mass of material together must have been a mammoth task in itself, but a central tenet of the book is precisely to draw attention to the scope for further work and to encourage students and researchers to engage with the finds. (Hence, the publication is available as a free download on both the Archaeopress and the City of London Archaeological Trust websites.) Further examples of new research on the finds discussed here include the full academic analysis of the medieval Billingsgate trumpet, the only known example of a straight trumpet in Europe, and an up-to-date reassessment of some of the hundreds of kilos of pottery recovered. Initial studies have shown that some pottery, in particular the unparalleled Billingsgate assemblages of Sandy Shelly Ware from the 12th and 13th centuries, may be directly related to activities on the waterfront.



This is significant, as the vast majority of medieval finds were excavated from the reclamation dumps and probably originate from unknown locations in the City, raising fruitful questions for further research.

If this all sounds good and hopeful, it is sadly also an indictment of the failed mission of the flagship institution widely known as LAARC, the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre. Whether intentionally or not, a viable structure for developing the research potential of the archive has never materialised; it is now simply referred to as the Museum of London's Archaeological Archive. With all focus now on the move of the museum to its new site at Smithfield Market, there is real concern about the future of this fantastic resource for London's past.