



Fig. 1: Staple Inn, High Holborn (photo: Kim Biddulph)

History v. Archaeology: the City of London on the eve of the Great Fire of 1666, a case study

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The study of history and that of archaeology are usually conducted by different sets of people with specialist skills who produce separate publications that contradict each other as often as not. But what are the benefits of studying history and archaeology together?

The Great Fire of London, which began on Sunday 2nd September 1666 and lasted for four days, was a turning point in London's history. Most of the medieval town was destroyed. Painstaking study of the evidence – archaeological and historical – can help us to build up a picture of London before the disaster.

Introduction

Using contemporary documents, the study of history appears to get much closer to past peoples and events than is achieved through archaeology, whose 'stones and potsherds... seem mute by comparison'.¹ Archaeology involves greater interpretation to bring these artefacts to life. Even the most basic of archaeological activities involves interpretation, such as the codifying of a soil type into sandy silt or silty sand.² When it comes to assigning a meaning or use to an artefact or structure, archaeologists are on increasingly shaky ground.

However, written and pictorial sources should never be trusted without reservations, for mistakes could be made. We cannot be sure whether the surveyor, drawer, writer or commissioner of a source had any reason to mislead or introduce inaccuracies. Every piece of evidence should therefore be treated with caution and checked before use. It is also sometimes difficult to assess whether a word means the same for us as it did for the writer. For instance, during his surveys, Ralph Treswell includes toilets on his plans. He calls them by one of two names, either 'privy' or 'house of office'. It is unclear whether these are two different types or whether the names are interchangeable.³

Archaeological evidence

The Great Fire has left a layer of fire destruction over part of London that enables archaeologists to closely date the material immediately above and below. Pre-Fire remains are concentrated close to the river, Pudding Lane for instance. Here the deposits are deepest and so later building has not truncated evidence as it has further inland.⁴

Investigations at the Peninsular House site on Pudding Lane in the City of London uncovered the remains of the cellar of a house destroyed in the Great Fire, constructed in the early 16th century and re-floored in the early 17th. Carbonised remains of barrels of pitch were discovered lying on this second floor, suggesting that they had caught fire during the blaze (Fig. 2). Roof tiles, nails and fragments of window glass found above the barrels give some idea of the appearance of the superstructure. However, the excavation did not extend far enough to allow the archaeologists to uncover the entire floor. Information gleaned from keyhole excavations is difficult to fit together into a wider picture. Another problem is that material remains are hardly ever complete in themselves. At this site a cellar floor and a 4.6m length of the cellar wall survived to a few courses. What was not clear was the form of the superstructure above. It was conjectured that the house above would have been made of wood, but this was based on what is known about pre-Fire London from other sources.⁵

The cellar excavation suggested that some buildings were relatively new at the time of their

destruction. In contrast, other archaeological investigation suggests that much of London was crowded with medieval buildings. Inside the city walls stood a number of medieval churches, such as St Lawrence Jewry, whose crypt was stylistically dated to the 14th century. The church was largely rebuilt after the Great Fire, having been extensively damaged.⁶

The buildings that escaped the Great Fire also provide information on the appearance of London on its eve. These largely comprise churches, but there are also 17 fragments of secular buildings (excepting the Tower of London) in the City. However, most survivals have not escaped alteration. Staple Inn in Holborn was heavily restored in 1894 with a larger number of vertical studs than was strictly necessary (Fig. 1).⁷ Also, it is likely that the ones to survive and be preserved are the outstanding examples of London's medieval architecture.



Fig. 2: carbonised barrel staves from a cellar in the Peninsular House excavations, 1979. (Reproduced with kind permission of the Museum of London Archaeology Service)

When roof repairs were undertaken at St Mary-at-Hill, it was found that Wren had incorporated the medieval tower in his design after the Fire, and although it was all rebuilt later, some of the medieval fabric survived. It had been thought that nothing remained of the earlier building. The architect had actually set his circular window in the centre of a late-15th- or early-16th-century arch (Fig. 3).⁸

Searching for these smaller, more representative buildings of Restoration London is possible through archaeology, as is clear from the excavations in Pudding Lane. In other cases archaeology cannot shed much light on the appearance of parts of London, such as the Bridge. A publication detailing two thousand years of this river crossing relied heavily on documentary and pictorial evidence for the reconstruction of London Bridge in the early 17th century. Indeed, the archaeological evidence was interpreted by means of documentary history. For instance, the recovery of part of a cellar from a building on the west side of the foot of the bridge was interpreted as property belonging to the church of St Bartholomew's by the Exchange, mentioned in a will of 1557. In Churchwardens' accounts of 1603 it was noted that there were two houses on the site and there was a proposal to rebuild to three and a half storeys. It was concluded that the excavation had uncovered the eastern property of the two.⁹

Documentary texts and literary sources

Legal and administrative documents provide a huge amount of evidence. By 1666, six out of eight houses on Ironmonger Lane were three storeys high with a garret room above; one house was one storey shorter and another one storey taller than the rest. Tenants included a bricklayer, an engraver, a coat-seller, a victualler and an attorney. Three large houses, which lay behind the main row of buildings, belonged to a parish priest, a silkman and a lawyer.¹⁰ However, it was impossible to know from these records the disposition of the rooms inside or even whether the houses were built of wood or brick.

Something of the social topography could also be reconstructed through detailed analysis of hearth tax assessments, a Restoration tax first imposed in 1662 based on the number of hearths in one's



Fig. 3: Wren's window in late medieval arch at St Mary-at-Hill (photo: Kim Biddulph)

dwelling. Hearth tax returns do not survive for each parish, so any hypotheses about the appearance of London are incomplete. In the parish of St Lawrence Jewry the average number of hearths per household was 6.17 while in St Botolph Aldgate, to the east, there was an average of 2.48. However, the hearth tax exempted the householder 'who by reason of his poverty... is exempted from the usual taxes and payments towards the church and poor'. In some parishes those who were exempted were recorded, but in others they were missed out completely. It may be that any assessment of the tax returns would be an optimistic view of the social make-up of London.¹¹ The same writer analysed the surveys of confiscated church and royal property instigated by Parliament in 1650–51. This included land to the east and west of the city. In Westminster rent per room was high at £3.70 per annum, but there were a large number of 'shed' or lean-to style houses (38.9% of all houses),



Fig. 4: London from Southwark c. 1630. (Reproduced with kind permission of the Museum of London)

indicating the very poor lived among the very rich. 12.9% of houses in the Tower Liberty had gardens, whereas in Piccadilly 97.8% did.¹²

Some literary sources also provide us both with information about the physical appearance and the social layout of London. John Stow's *Survey of London* was first published in 1598, with a second edition 1603.¹³ He describes High Holborn with 'many fair houses built and lodgings for gentlemen, inns for travellers and such like'. Tower Liberty, however, is 'greatly straitened by encroachments (unlawfully made and suffered) for gardens and houses... whereby the Tower ditch is marred'.¹⁴ Although Stow walked around every part of the city and looked into every church, he would not mention many new monuments 'because those men have been the defacers of monuments of others'.¹⁵ His book, therefore, may not be even an accurate record of London in 1603, let alone an accurate record of London on the eve of the Great Fire in 1666.¹⁶ Nor does he mention with any regularity the commonplace aspects of his own contemporary

London and its inhabitants like their privies, wells, gutters, boundaries and so on. Stow cannot, therefore, be fully relied upon.

Pictorial evidence

Pictorial representations take several different forms. One oblique bird's-eye view was the representation of the relatively new Covent Garden area by Wenceslas Hollar in 1656. This shows an impressive group of residences on and north of the Strand. A great amount of detail is shown, including individual houses. However, features such as privies and wells seem to be omitted.

The conventional map, such as one made by Cornelis Dankerts in 1645, is a much more stylised view of London. The streets seem to be very wide, and the housing quite sparse. Although some of the suburbs are represented, one can see that they extend beyond the edge of the map. The map provides a general, but perhaps not very accurate, view of the shape of London.

Panoramas recorded much detail, such as that by Hollar, composed in 1647. This shows Southwark, with the Bishop of Winchester's Inn covering the foreground. The hall, whose rose window can now be seen, is on the waterfront. In the background two theatres can also be made out. One may be the Hope theatre, which continued in use until 1655¹⁷ (see an earlier 1630s panorama in Fig. 4). Even these panoramas, though closer in date to 1666 than Wyngaerde's, may include buildings that would not have been standing by the eve of the Great Fire.

Christ's Hospital and the Clothworkers Company, both of whom owned property in London, commissioned the plans of Ralph Treswell, executed mainly between 1610 and 1612. They record the dimensions of each property and the layout of the ground floor, but upper storeys were not planned, although their dimensions and uses were recorded separately in writing. The tenants' names were also recorded, as were small features like fireplaces, privies and stairs. Treswell records that one cesspit could service several privies, sometimes from separate households, something for archaeologists to consider during excavation of such features.¹⁸

Elevations are also useful, such as that of the east side of London Bridge by John Norden c. 1600. Changes made since the Wyngaerde panorama of

c. 1540 are evident, such as the replacement of the chapel of St Thomas Apostle with a timber-framed building. Between c. 1600 and 1666, as much may have changed. Indeed, on 11 Feb 1633 fire broke out and burned 122 houses in total on the bridge and the immediate area to the north. Pepys noted that there were still vacant plots on the sites of these houses in January 1666.¹⁹

Conclusion

Documents and pictorial representations reveal aspects of the city that archaeology rarely uncovers. This includes the configuration and building techniques of upper storeys, names and occupations of tenants, uses of rooms and buildings, level of rent and so on. However, much of this pictorial and documentary evidence dates from an earlier period, and much may have changed before the Great Fire. Archaeological investigation often uncovers features that are unlikely to have been written about or can be used to check the documentary and pictorial evidence for accuracy. On the other hand, the documents and pictures can place excavated remains in context.

Can archaeology be termed the handmaiden of history? Well, if archaeology is the study of the material remains of the past then what are written and pictorial sources if not material remains?

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