

Medieval Guildhall

November sees the publication of an important new report on the area which has been the centre of City of London government for 900 years. David Bowsher and Nick Holder preview the findings.

One of London's largest ever archaeological excavations took place between 1985 and 1999 as the City of London was completing an ambitious programme of redevelopment at the Guildhall. As well as the spectacular discovery of London's Roman amphitheatre (the subject of a MoLAS book appearing in 2008), there was a wealth of archaeological evidence for the Guildhall and its precinct from the 12th to the 20th centuries. A major new 530 page monograph* aims to integrate the various strands of evidence – stratigraphic, documentary, finds, environmental and architectural – in order to tell the story of this unique



TOP LEFT 15th-century latrine pit attached to the medieval Guildhall library
RIGHT Medieval mount, perhaps showing a legendary May-king, probably from a German bowl (both photos: Andy Chopping)
ABOVE Reconstruction of 12th-century timber building used by both cattle and people (Faith Vardy after Damian Goodburn)

London neighbourhood.

Two themes are central to the book: the place and its people. The excavations and subsequent research have uncovered an enormous amount of evidence for the ever-changing buildings and streets. The story begins with a small 10th-century farmstead to the north of the Late Saxon town. The church of St Lawrence Jewry was founded here in the mid 11th century: the earliest graves in the churchyard are securely dated to the 1050s by tree-ring dating. Later that century as London expanded to the north, timber buildings were built along a narrow lane behind the church. The scale of the excavation and the organic preservation on the site have, unusually, allowed a wide range of evidence to survive including many elements of the houses and a variety of coffins and burial boards in the adjacent graveyard.

A major aspect of the book is an analysis of the evolution of the Guildhall and its precinct. The first Guildhall, built in the 1120s, was one of the largest halls in the land. Major changes to the hall and its precinct occurred in almost every century from the early 14th to the second half of the 20th. The status and wealth of the City government ensured that several famous architects were employed, including John Croxton in the 15th century, and Christopher Wren and Robert Hooke in the 17th century. New evidence for the appearance of the Guildhall itself, particularly its porch, has been found and other precinct buildings such as the medieval chapel are also detailed.

A surprising variety of other buildings were situated in the neighbourhood. For example, the 13th-

century baronial Blackwell Hall lay to the east of the Guildhall. Converted to a civic market for woollen cloth at the end of the 14th century, it created much of the City's wealth in the late middle ages; the buildings of the market survived until 1820. Significant new evidence has been found for the development of St Lawrence Jewry and St Michael Bassishaw, located either side of the Guildhall. A number of late medieval and early modern inns catered for visitors to Guildhall.

The book recounts the rediscovered stories of some of the neighbourhood's residents. For example, Aaron son of Vives and his family had to leave their house by the Guildhall in 1290 when Edward I expelled all the English Jews. A hoard of fine pottery jugs and tableware was buried at this time in the dismantled foundations of his old house: did Aaron hide them in 1290, hoping to return when the situation calmed down, or was this a darker episode, some kind of bigoted ritual act by the new gentile owners who wanted to 'cleanse' the property? Some four centuries later in the 1660s, the mayor's official swordbearer, William Man, seems to have placed a 'witch-bottle' in the cellar of his apartment by the Guildhall gate. The bottle – in fact a German *bartmann* jug – contained a tightly wrapped bundle of material that had been set on fire as it was placed in the bottle. If this was done as a protective charm to ward off the plague, it seems to have been effective: Mr Man remained the mayor's swordbearer for another 40 years, dying at the age of 76 and buried in the Guildhall chapel.

Bound in two volumes with reconstruction drawings, numerous colour illustrations and a CD-ROM, the book is a comprehensive study of the Guildhall and its neighbourhood.

* **The London Guildhall: an archaeological history of a neighbourhood from early medieval to modern times** by David Bowsher, Tony Dyson, Nick Holder and Isca Howell (MoLAS Monograph Series 36). Available November 2007 from MoLAS (tel 020 7410 2201 or email bookshop@molas.org.uk) or the Museum of London bookshop (tel 020 7600 3699 or email shop@museumoflondon.org.uk).

