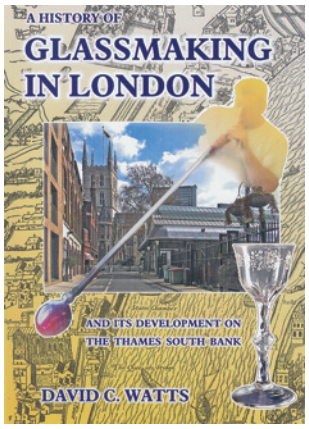
A History of Glassmaking in London



DC Watts

2009
Watts Publishing

167 pages
numerous figures, bibliography and index

£25

Reviewed by Thilo Rehren, UCL Institute of Archaeology

Glass is the youngest of the artificial materials in archaeology, and probably the most fascinating one for scholars and the general public alike. Its creation from humble sand and ashes, its lucid appearance and sheer limitless ability to take exotic forms, colours and decorations set it apart from the more rough and earthen ceramics and heavy metals. It is therefore not surprising that glass studios and workshops regularly attract visitors, more so than foundries and potteries, today even doubling up as tourist attractions, often with a Roman connotation. This, however, must not distract from the fact that for the last two millennia, glass working has been a serious industry; that glass workers were exposed to real hardship in their job; and that competition for raw materials, skilled workers, and customers was fierce.

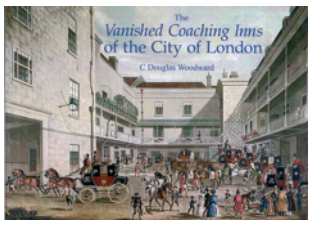
A History of Glassmaking in London is written and published by David Watts, a retired academic of UCL and Guy's Hospital and long-standing editor of the newsletter of The Glass Circle in London. The author introduces us to the history and historical archaeology of glassmaking, particularly on the South Bank, the centre of glassworking in and around London.

The first third of the volume provides an introduction first to Southwark and its history through the later Middle Ages. The central role of window glass, and the substantial demand the church had for it, is highlighted along with the increasing interest of wealthier people for storage and drinking vessels. In the late 14th century, the glaziers formed their own guild, even though imported glass continued to dominate much of the English market well into the early modern period. Over eight well-focused chapters, Watts set the story of glass use in the context of political and religious developments, often through the actions and historical documents of individuals. One of the larger chapters, The Glassmaking Process, provides an easily accessible overview of the technical foundations of the process, highlighting also the crucial roles of fuel and specialist ceramics in glassmaking.

The 13 chapters of the second part is the 'meat' of the book, giving a detailed account of the major glassmaking sites and their owners, blending historical records, contemporary maps and illustrations, and surviving architectural remains with examples of the products made. Its catalogue-like presentation and substantial index make it easily accessible for anyone interested in a particular part of London or just intrigued by a place name such as Saltpetre Bank or Glass Fields.

Overall, the book is written in a very personable style, bringing to life the history of glassmaking in London and beyond through the eyes and actions of numerous individuals. The wide range of illustrations, many in colour, adds considerably to the appeal of the book, and offers often surprising insights and detail; at times there is so much of it that the layout is a little crowded, with the text encroaching too close to the figures, and illustrations overlapping unnecessarily. While clearly addressed to the general public, albeit one with a special interest in glass and glassmaking, the book has the depth and detail of a scholarly and well-researched publication, with references and notes provided for each chapter. My only criticism is that this book should really be called 'Glassmaking in London, Part II' – it now calls for a prequel, focusing on the equally fascinating, but less well documented and developed centuries of glass use and working in and around Roman London.

The Vanished Coaching Inns of the City of London



C Douglas Woodward

2009
Historical Publications

80 pages
36 colour / black and white figures, short sources list and index

£12.00

Reviewed by Becky Wallower

According to the author of this slim volume, 25 coaching inns once existed in the City of London. Of these only vestiges remain – in the names of courts and alleys behind City thoroughfares, and in the signs or symbols long since transferred elsewhere.

After brief accounts of the history and architecture of coaching inns, 22 of the 25 inns are described in passages that range from a single sentence to several pages. Most are illustrated by nicely produced maps, prints, paintings and/or photographs. Completing the book are a couple of short chapters on notable inn keepers and their livery company, and on the views of Dr Johnson and Charles Dickens.

It is a reasonable introduction, but a bit more primary research – delving amongst livery records, non-City archives and even archaeological accounts – could have added a fresher perspective. Public outcry at the demolition of the Oxford Arms would have been worth noting, for instance, especially since this led to the foundation of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, the first salvo in the conservation movement.