

Fig. 1: locations of the four main sites in the *London Waterfront Tenements* project, two on either side of both the present and medieval London Bridges (Carlos Lemos, MOLA). The sites are Swan Lane (SWA81), Seal House (SH74), New Fresh Wharf (NFW74) and Billingsgate Lorry Park (BIG82)

# The medieval port of London: publication and research access

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This article attempts two things. First, it suggests that we now have enough archaeological information from recent excavations to reconstruct, at least in outline, the 12th-century port of London and discuss its wider importance within Britain and Europe. Second, it announces a novel experiment in the interim publication and provision of access to detailed information about London's medieval and post-medieval waterfront.

There have been a number of excavations exploring the archaeological and topographical history of the waterfront zone of the City of London in Roman, Saxon and medieval times. One product has been an impressive series of catalogues of medieval artefacts, the *Medieval finds from excavations in London* of 1987–98. Kept airtight and wet by the adjacent river over centuries, the layers

forming landfill units have produced many thousands of artefacts in excellent condition. These medieval artefacts form a collection of European significance; but the context of their discovery is not yet fully presented to the academic and general public.

Now the structural histories of the houses, shops and warehouses on four waterfront sites excavated in 1974–83 (Fig. 1) is being prepared. The publication is divided into two reports or volumes. The first volume, *London Waterfront Tenements 1100–1666*, will cover the period 1100 to 1666. The Great Fire, in particular, is well attested in the archaeology, with several large groups of material caught in a cultural snapshot, being the remains of buildings demolished by fire in September 1666. The second shorter report will be titled *London Waterfront Tenements 1666–1900*.

All four excavation sites lay south of Thames Street, with river frontages. The Swan Lane site and Seal House (now the Fishmongers' Hall extension) sites were on the western, upstream side of the present London Bridge; the New Fresh Wharf and Billingsgate Lorry Park (also called here Billingsgate for short) sites on the eastern, downstream side of the present bridge. The two pairs of sites were similarly upstream and downstream of the medieval bridge, which lay at the foot of Fish Street Hill slightly downstream of the present London Bridge. The Great Fire may have intervened, but remains of the northern part of the 12th-century bridge were still visible in the early 19th century (Fig. 2). The City of London today does not look medieval; but it has the capacity to tell us much about life in medieval cities from the large, though now severely eroded, reservoir

of historic deposits along the waterfront which were contemporary with the Bridge.

The documentary history of these tenements is among the richest that can be provided for any secular properties in the City; but it starts in quantity around 1270. This article reports on the first part of the project, to reconstruct the port of London from 1100 to about 1220, a time when there are virtually no relevant documents. It then describes intentions to make the information from the whole project available to the archaeological and wider public.

In the 12th century, London was an important port with British and continental connections, but information on its trade is sparse. Religious institutions and other rich clients participated in a trade in luxuries. Port regulations of about 1130 speak of precious stones or cloth of Constantinople or of Regensburg, and fine linen stuff or coats of mail from Mainz (Mayence). Wine came from France, especially Poitou (the region of Poitiers, north of Bordeaux). In 1975 documentary historians could state that 'if we walked along the wharves from Billingsgate to Paul's Wharf, we should meet [besides Vikings and Jews] also the Flemish, Norman and German elements in London's trading

population'.<sup>1</sup> Cultural contacts were even wider: educated Londoners knew of and may have visited Italy, and in 1185 Heraclius Patriarch of Jerusalem came to consecrate the churches of both the Temple and the Hospitallers in London. Archaeological work has produced evidence of imports of pottery in the 12th century from Germany, France and the Low Countries. Contact between London and Spain is documented, but there are as yet no finds to illustrate this for this period (as opposed to later). There was also an increase in internal English trade, as London took over from Winchester as capital of the kingdom. During the forty years after 1180, the currency in circulation in England increased many times over, whereas the population doubled.

In 1100, the port of London lay only on the north, City bank of the Thames (Fig. 3). From the 10th century it had developed from Queenhithe (*Aetheredes hyd*) in the west to Billingsgate in the east, though little is yet known about the early form of either of these landing places.<sup>2</sup> The grid of medieval streets east and south of St Paul's may have been laid out in the late 9th century, and although there are other theories, this project holds that the similar grid east of the Walbrook on both sides of Eastcheap dates from later,

the late 10th century. By the time of Edward the Confessor, foreign merchants were gaining a foothold in the centre at Dowgate, where the Walbrook met the Thames; their wharf was on the downstream side, reflecting the shifting of the mercantile centre of gravity eastwards.

The merchants of Rouen and after about 1170 those of Cologne had their own separate establishments at Dowgate; the depot of Cologne later became the Steelyard, for merchants from all German cities. It was an important outpost in the maritime empire of the Hanse League, an association of north German towns and cities. The site of the Steelyard, now beneath the raised vaults of the 19th-century Cannon Street railway station, was investigated in 1987–8. On Saxon embankments were the fragmentary remains of a masonry building 10.3m wide east–west and at least 17m long north–south, probably of late 12th century date, which would seem to be the Guildhall of the merchants of Cologne.<sup>3</sup> Since the mouth of the Walbrook was then wider than later in the medieval period, the stone building may have bordered the stream to its west, adapting the Roman riverside wall at its north end.

For all its significance, the Steelyard lay above the bridge. By the middle of the 12th century the bridge, in whatever form it then took, formed the upstream end of the city's main port area on the north bank. In 1160 a French poet spoke of his hero visiting the port; he 'goes straight up to London beneath the bridge, and there displays his wares'.<sup>4</sup> Details of the 11th- and 12th-century bridges have come from excavations at the south end.<sup>5</sup> The rebuilding of the bridge in stone in 1176–1209 (Fig. 2) had a gradual and long-term effect on the development of the north bank, since differences in the character of the upstream and downstream sections of the waterfront began to appear. But the differences only became clear in the 16th century.

Between these larger structures and complexes, the north bank began to fill out with reclamation and buildings, including parish churches. In 1244 the City stated that it was common to extend wharves towards the current of water 'and this was permissible by all



**Fig. 2:** view eastwards through one of the northern arches of London Bridge just before demolition in the 1830s (E Cooke; LMA). This shows three arches of the original bridge of 1176–1209, with roll mouldings, still visible; in the background, the New Fresh Wharf site. Now archaeological work can illuminate the medieval view to either side of the Bridge for a considerable distance

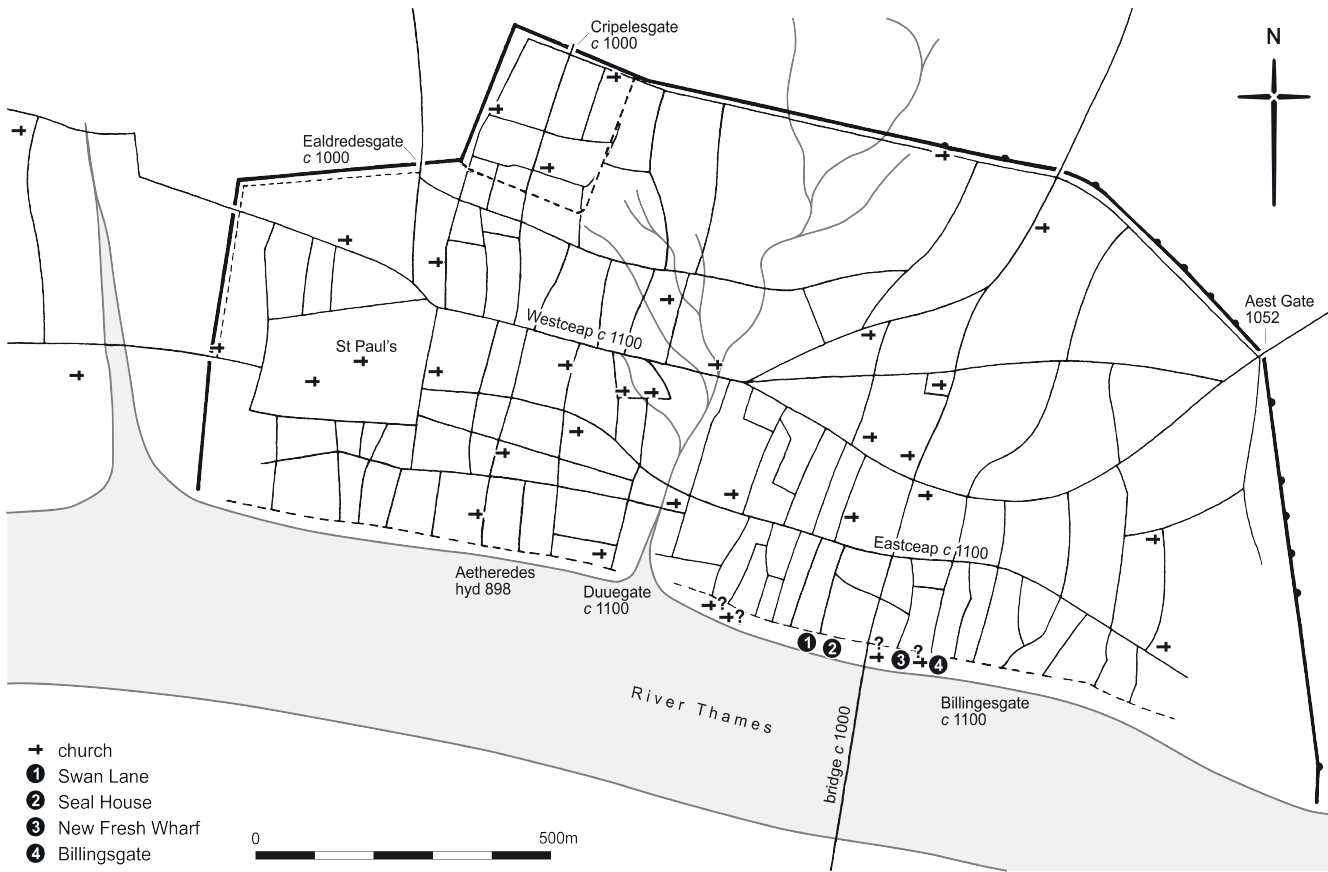


Fig. 3: early 12th-century London and its riverfront: sites mentioned in the text (Carlos Lemos, MOLA)

custom because thus their lands and tenements could be protected against the sea ebbing and flowing night and day'.<sup>6</sup> Excavation has now revealed the history and prehistory of this 'custom'; individual properties were clearly established south of Thames Street, and reclamation pushed out into the river for the next three and a half centuries. The largest amount of reclamation, in cubic metres, seems to have been in the 12th century. A property near Billingsgate dock was 103ft (31.4m) long from Thames Street to the river in 1147–67.

This period sees the appearance of waterfront revetments in a new style, based on a wall of stout vertical planks slotted into a large timber baseplate, with both internal and external braces. This type of waterfront probably

presented a vertical face to the river about 2m high, and possibly more (perhaps 3m at Seal House).

The development of the four sites in the 12th century is shown in Table 1.

Buildings on the reclaimed land west of the bridge seem to have been at least partly industrial in character. At Swan Lane were large buildings containing hearths, possibly large dyehouses. We should think of these tenements as a concentration of cloth-finishing establishments on the riverfront south of Cannon Street, where cloth was made. Possibly the waterfront was the industrial, dirty end of this locality of trades and processes.

East of the bridge were the tenements excavated at the contiguous New Fresh Wharf (1974–8) and Billingsgate (1982–3) sites. A few yards

east of St Magnus' church, Rothersgate, presumed to be an opening in the decayed Roman riverside wall which bordered the site on the north, led to a jetty of some kind in the late 10th century. On its east side was a rubble bank and hard standing on which small boats could be drawn up. By the middle of the 11th century this arrangement, and probably the jetty, had been superseded by reclamation which heightened the embankment, pushed southwards to an unknown line, and which was divided by fences into the tenements or properties which lasted until the 19th century.

The only documentary evidence for this site before 1200 concerns a double wharf owned by Holy Trinity Priory in 1108; it had been there some time. This lay on the east side of Rothersgate, and

Swan Lane	Seal House	New Fresh Wharf	Billingsgate (Fig. 4)
Slight buildings in the 12th c on the 11th c riverside embankment; extensive stone buildings including a dyehouse complex by about 1200.	Stone building and several waterfronts expanding the property, 1160–1215; reclamation probably influenced by building of nearby London Bridge 1176–1209.	Embankments in the 11th c, a small timber building in the embankment c. 1100, stone buildings on all the excavated properties by 1200; wharves at Rothersgate an important asset in 1108–47.	Eleven stages of waterfront expansion in the 11th and 12th c; St Botolph's church and Botolph Wharf mentioned 1140 but possibly older; royal customs taken at the Wharf 1201.

Table 1: overall development of the four study sites in the 12th century





**Fig. 4: Billingsgate 1982: initial recording of the timbers from medieval waterfronts in progress; in the left background, London Bridge (© Sharon Pallent)**

excavation here in 1975–8 found two buildings (A and B on Fig. 5). By about 1200, the street east of Rothersgate to the church of St Botolph Billingsgate was lined with stone buildings and their yards, the buildings mainly arranged north-south on the narrow plots, and three of them with cellars, two probably vaulted.

The 12th-century period at the Billingsgate excavation was published in 1992, and it is currently being scrutinised again to take account of refinements in dating of the pottery (for instance, the work of Lyn Blackmore and Jacqueline Pearce on shelly-sandy wares and the greyware industries of Hertfordshire of the 11th and 12th centuries.<sup>7</sup>

Description of the waterfront sites leads to their interpretation as parts of the 12th-century port. Along with its landward suburbs, the waterfront was literally an expansion zone for the City of London from the 11th century to the 16th. It has so far been largely studied in the central stretch between Queenhithe and Billingsgate; but this comprised more than half of the waterfront and was clearly the most important and developed part. Next to

Botolph Wharf, which had embankments of timber, the 12th-century Building C on New Fresh Wharf (Fig. 5) had a wharf of stone, but this was exceptional among ordinary properties. This variety of construction (timber or stone river walls) is paralleled in other contemporary ports. Eleventh- and 12th-century embankments, perhaps for commercial purposes, have been excavated in a number of sea and river ports in Britain, Ireland and on the Continent, for instance at Bristol, Norwich, Dublin, Bergen, Utrecht, Lübeck and Gdansk. These structures are mostly simple fences, sometimes supported by dumps of stone rubble and earth, and stone walls were perhaps rare: that of shortly before 1120 in Dublin was marvelled at. Hartlepool has produced 12th-century walls both along the shore and apparently jutting out into the water as jetties.<sup>8</sup> But to date London stands out for the extent to which its 12th-century waterfront has been investigated.

The major towns of Europe with which London communicated and traded around 1200 are shown in Fig. 6. Some idea of the vitality and development of port areas in European

towns is given by recent work in them, and further parallels can be sought. Ports around the North Sea may have shared similar fortunes. In the early 12th century, it seems, the level of the sea rose and opened the Zwin, the river of Bruges, but only so that sea-going vessels could reach Damme, about 5km from Bruges, which became its medieval port. It is possible that a rise in sea level influenced or required the development of a more crystallised waterfront in London, with stone-walled indentations in the riverbank and associated stone buildings.

So far we have described an intended publication, and how the first part of that, on the 12th century, is shaping up. An experiment which may or may not be useful is also being contemplated.

The large two-part publication (dealing with the periods 1100–1666 and 1666–1900) will take several years to complete and get printed, even from its present state. The data from these waterfront excavations are so large and detailed that the publication will only have addressed the basic matters of development, chronology, and character of the sites at various periods.



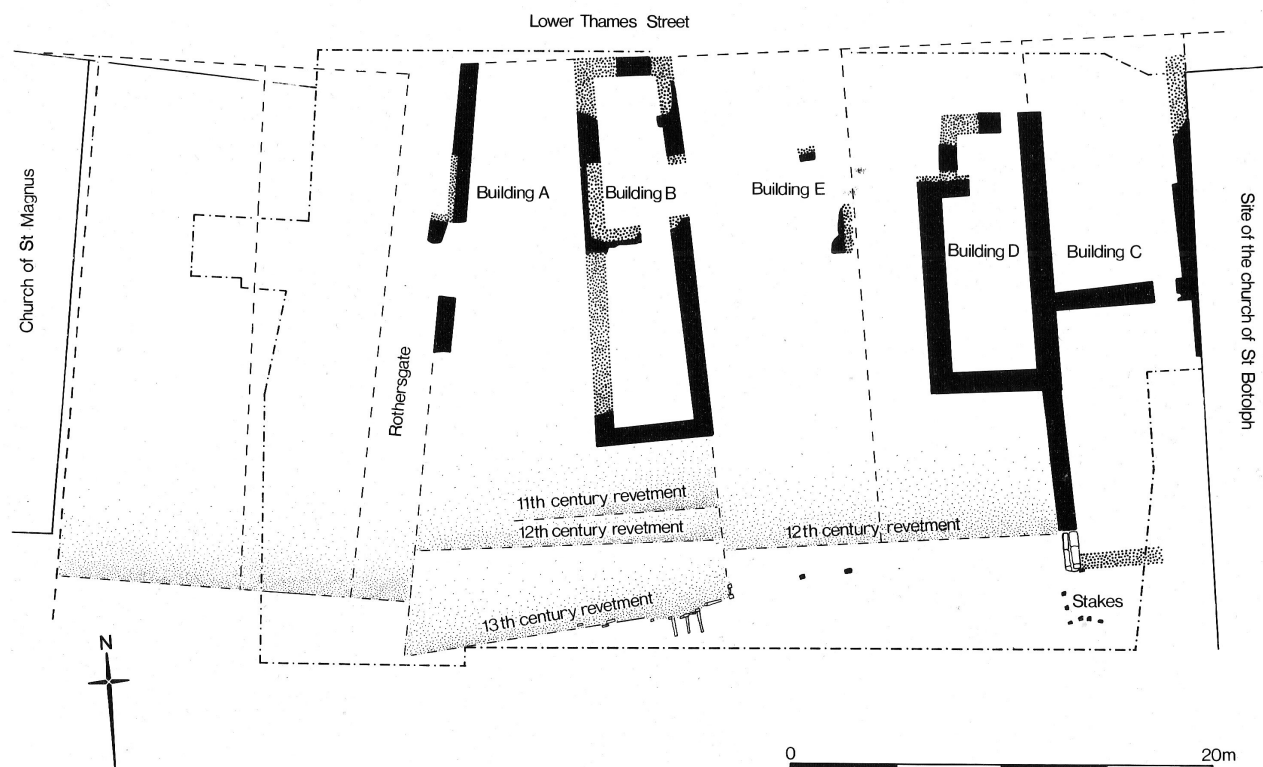


Fig. 5: twelfth- and early 13th-century buildings and revetments on the New Fresh Wharf site, between the two waterfront churches of St Magnus and St Botolph Billingsgate (both probably built on land reclamation of the 11th century) (Louise Miller and Richard Lea). This is one of the largest intact areas of 12th-century secular buildings to be excavated in London.

Over the past few years, the project has gratefully received grants for aspects of the evolving work from the City of London Archaeological Trust (CoLAT). One condition of the most recent grant, for work on the pottery from New Fresh Wharf, was that making access to the findings and the underlying datasets should be investigated. So from September 2012, interim parts of the publication text and blocks of archive information have been placed on the CoLAT website, [www.colat.org.uk/LondonWaterfront.htm](http://www.colat.org.uk/LondonWaterfront.htm). Students of all kinds are invited to inspect and

download what they wish. In particular, we wish to open up the large dataset concerning the artefacts, which date from 1100 to 1750, so that new research can be undertaken. If a specific research project, for instance by an undergraduate student, is done in time, we may wish to add it to the final publication. But we also encourage students to investigate the archive and produce their own research.

What needs thinking about? Here are two examples from one of the waterfront excavations, Seal House (Table 2). The upper half of the table

summarises pottery types and non-ceramic artefacts from a group of layers forming a reclamation unit of about 1210. The bottom half of the table similarly summarises finds from one reclamation layer of the middle of the 14th century, probably the next unit of landfill. Are these rich deposits just redeposited rubbish, so jumbled that they have no significance? Or are there links between them which we are missing?

A further part of the project which may help concerns its benefit to LAARC (the London Archaeological Archive

Reclamation deposits [394], [467], [484] together	
Pottery types	Shelly-sandy; London-type; red-painted; blue-grey; North French; South Herts; Andenne
Artefacts	Wooden and bone pins; cord; hones; copper and iron implements; leather pieces and shoes; hair; horse shoes; knives; wooden bowl; padlock and fastenings; nails; coins
Date	about 1210 from dendrochronology
One reclamation layer [386] in front of the former group	
Pottery types	London-type; South Herts; Kingston; North French; Coarse Border; Rouen; Spanish
Artefacts	leather pieces and shoes; wooden box and bowl; horse shoes; iron candle and other pieces; scabbards; pieces of querns; nails; slag; knives; bronze mounts
Date	mid-14th century from stratigraphic position and pottery

Table 2: summaries of pottery and artefacts from two deposits Seal House (1974): a group of three layers from a reclamation unit of about 1210 (above); and a single layer from the middle of the 14th century (below).



**Fig. 6: the European trading network of London in the 12th century** (from Blackmore and Pearce 2010 fig 3, with permission). This map shows findspots of three types of 12th- and 13th-century pottery made in the London area and marketed through London. It is also a map of London's general trading contacts and partners.

and Research Centre, of the Museum of London). The records, photographs, reports and all the finds from these sites, as for all other sites in the London area, are housed at LAARC. It is broadly intended that the detailed research already done and to be done should result in an additional project to make a large proportion of the archaeological

material from these sites available for public education and further detailed research; for instance on artefacts or the large amount of pottery of the medieval and post-medieval (to 1666) period which will have been analysed and partly illustrated. At the end of the present project, it would be possible for any researcher to come to LAARC and

ask to see a specific group of pottery described in the publication. The documents compiled on the CoLAT website will be shared with LAARC. *John Schofield is now writing up the waterfront excavations which he organised for the DUA in the 1970s and 1980s, at a formative time for the development of London's archaeology.*

1. C. Brooke and G. Keir *London 800–1216: the shaping of a city* (1975) 178, 265–76.

2. For Queenhithe, see R. Wroe-Brown 'The Saxon origins of Queenhithe' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 50 (1999) 12–16.

3. L. Blackmore, 'The Steelyard in the age of steam: the collection of John Walker Bailey (1809–73) and the site of the Hanseatic kontor in London', in prep.

4. *Op cit* fn 1, 158–9.

5. B. Watson, T. Brigham and T. Dyson *London bridge: 2000 years of a river crossing* MoLAS Monogr 8 (2001) 76–8.

6. H.M. Chew and M. Weinbaum (eds) *The London Eyre of 1244*, *London Record Soc* 6 (1970) no. 343.

7. K. Steedman, T. Dyson and J. Schofield *Aspects of*

*Saxo-Norman London III: the bridgehead and Billingsgate*, *London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Special Paper* 14 (1992) 59–71; L. Blackmore and J. Pearce *A dated type-series of London medieval pottery Part 5: Shelly-sandy ware and the greyware industries*, *MOLA Monogr* 49 (2010) 59–71.

8. R. Daniels 2010 *Hartlepool: an archaeology of the medieval town*, *Tees Archaeol Monogr Ser* 4 (2010).