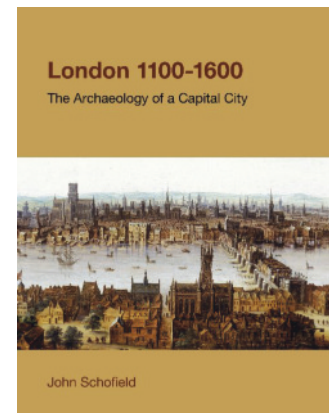


# And the award goes to...

*What makes for a prize-winning publication? And what does that have to do with the reports, articles and assessments that are the everyday product of archaeology?*

*Becky Wallower spoke to John Schofield, author of **London 1100–1600**, winner of the 2012 London Archaeological Prize, to find out.*



When we relaunched *London Archaeologist* in 2007, one of our objectives for the expanded format was to actively promote high standards of writing about archaeology.

When we later took over managing the London Archaeological Prize, formerly administered by SCOLA, we did so partly in fulfilment of that objective: the publication prize, as it's commonly called, provides the perfect showcase for good writing. As the judging panel completed deliberations for the latest round of prizes in 2012, we realised that the winning publication could also offer an exemplar that might yield useful methods, ideas, styles and tips for other writers.

We've therefore created this new feature series – *Author, author...* – so that we can delve into how prize winning authors work and what makes their writing so successful.

## Author

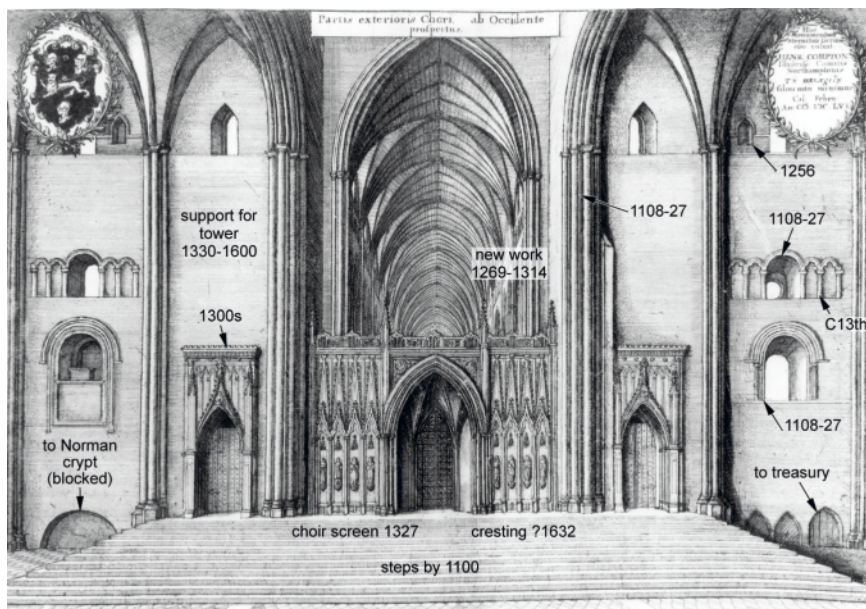
The first author to be quizzed about his writing is pretty much the ideal subject. John Schofield is not only a prolific writer – he may have written more than anyone else about the archaeology of London – but is also recognised for the readability of his work, something mentioned by each of the publication prize judges in their evaluations. His award of the Prize for 2012 is, in fact, his second: he also won in 2006 for the report he wrote with Richard Lea on Holy Trinity Priory Aldgate.

A large proportion of John's writing concentrates on the medieval period, virtually all of it is based on archaeological discoveries and research, most of it deals with London and much of it provides a synthesis, a survey, an overview of a topic or period. He may have focused largely on medieval London, but his view is in the round, looking through a wide angle as

well as a macro lens.

This ability to see the detail through the bigger picture and vice versa comes from a long career in archaeology. Having joined the Museum of London in 1974 as a supervisor, he moved through its archaeological incarnations (the DUA and MoLAS) before transferring to a curatorial position under Simon Thurley, and finally taking early retirement in 2008 after 34 years as an urban archaeologist.

His affinity for writing stems from a first degree in Classics and English, for which he read the entire works of Shakespeare, amongst others, and critically analysed a range of factual and fictional writing styles. He then qualified as an English teacher, and teaching at a secondary school for a short time provided a valuable lesson for his own development in the importance of two crucial factors for communication: simplicity and clarity.



ABOVE John investigated the archaeology of the choir entrance (or New Work) of St Paul's Cathedral, demolished 350 years ago, by analysing and annotating this Hollar drawing of 1656.

## Conception and motivation

Once retired, John had the opportunity to concentrate on a project that had been simmering for years – producing the book *London 1100–1600*. It is part of a series on medieval Europe that was conceived in the 1990s when he and Alan Vince wrote the first volume, *Medieval Towns: the archaeology of British towns in their European setting*. First published under Leicester University Press, and now with Equinox in its third edition, this set out the ethos of the series: to bring together new archaeological studies that could not only describe life in medieval Europe in an accessible way, but explain it.

John has also been the series editor. His wish list for future volumes starts, interestingly, with the authors rather than the topics. Key to selection is the

ability to write well, to understand a topic inside out and to have the vision to synthesise large amounts of complex, diverse archaeological research. The authors need to be able to address a readership John describes variously as ‘interested secondary school students’ or ‘my colleagues – the professional and voluntary archaeologists who want to know more, the *London Archaeologist* readership, if you like.’

**Putting it all together**

The prize-winning book is a paradigm for such an approach. Having decided to write the volume in 2008, his first task was, as he says, ‘to read everything’. This is no exaggeration; his bibliography runs to 26 pages, covering every archaeological excavation and study relevant to medieval London.

Eight topical chapter headings range from *Public buildings and concerns* through *Selling and making to London’s region*. Easy to read as independent articles, the sections stimulate curiosity about related topics, encouraging a voyage of discovery - something John says he experienced himself in writing the book. The framework for the book was a natural product of the approach of a view in the round. A chronological slog through the period would have been both repetitive and disjointed, but a subject-oriented outline enabled a picture to be painted of various aspects of life and how they developed.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of John’s approach to writing this book,

**BELOW** The connection between building dates for early medieval bridges, such as Bow Bridge here, and the expansion of urban trade, is investigated in the book. (Guildhall Library)



in fact, was to choose the majority of images first. The pictures and drawings provide not just interesting eye fodder, but a skeleton on which to drape the flesh of the story. He had all the plans redrawn to give them consistency and coherence. Many of the images have not been widely published, some are annotated and others are examined archaeologically, to make particular points about what the evidence of the pictures adds to the excavated and built record. Every one is not only relevant, but integral to the story.

John has described his aims and approach for each chapter in the introductions – a key element of his quest for clarity. This is a technique sometimes taken to rather tedious extremes by public speakers who’ve been trained to say what you’re going to say, say it, then say what you just said, but here it works, helping to light a pathway through the material, rather than going over the same ground repeatedly.

**Writing**

A considerable degree of discipline is unavoidable in putting together something like this survey. It needs preparation and perseverance – and time. Having done the reading and research, John planned the chapters, and more or less stuck to a schedule for producing them. He worked through each section at a time, which could be a bit of an effort, but was important for consistency. He’s kept it lean, resisting temptations to add more material that could fog the clarity of purpose.

Writing a survey like *London 1100–1600* differs from writing a monograph, or indeed an archaeological assessment. John has sympathy for archaeologists who are now limited, he feels, in what they can and must produce for development-based reports. ‘They have to do their job,’ he says, ‘which is to get the information in the record, and move on.’ Although the information so produced is useful, it won’t often spark new thoughts, or lead to overarching conclusions. John would like far more archaeologists to be bold, to look beyond their

**Prize-winning techniques**

- metaphor:** make the readers identify with your analysis. In his introduction, John asks the reader to imagine stepping out of a train station into medieval London – the shock would be akin to a traveller emerging from the terminus at Venice and seeing water where roads should be.
- clarity:** find the right words and phrases. A supposedly scientific emphasis on technical terms usually masks meaning and undermines understanding. Keep it simple.
- explanation:** explain why your subject is interesting, don’t just describe it.
- pace:** use long and short sentences to create momentum. Starting sentences with ‘but’ or ‘and’ makes the text more conversational – if that’s what you aim to do.
- personal pronouns:** John often uses an approach like ‘this looks interesting: let’s probe a bit further’ or inserts his own opinion about conclusions others have drawn. This engages the reader in his thought processes.

own work, to form theories and reach those conclusions. It’s an approach that makes the archaeology more meaningful to general reader and archaeologist alike, by providing an explanation, rather than just a description.

John feels that the final basic component of successful writing is rewriting. Through innumerable drafts, and thinking it through again and again, he honed, tweaked and improved his text. He also acknowledges the helpful input of his healthily critical readers, Tony Dyson and Dave Evans. The care he’s taken is evident.

**Afterthoughts**

So what’s next? More books, of course. A volume on the archaeology of medieval Spain is being edited. He’s working on a short book on a site near Tower Bridge for a developer. Two larger, long-term projects are a second volume on St Paul’s, where he is Cathedral Archaeologist, about the archaeology of the Wren building; and the report on waterfront excavations described in the last *London Archaeologist*.

**London 1100–1600: the archaeology of a capital city**  
Published in 2011 by Equinox, John Schofield’s book is widely available online and in bookshops for £25.