

Making history

Hazel Forsyth was awarded the 2014 London Archaeological Prize for London's Lost Jewels, the story of the Cheapside Hoard that accompanied the Museum of London exhibition in 2013/2014.

Becky Wallower interviewed her to find out how she turned years of research into a book that has fascinated thousands.

London Archaeologist has been on a mission since its relaunch in 2007: we want to promote high standards of writing about archaeology, and encourage publications on the subject beyond the standard excavation reports.

A key factor in this quest is our administration since 2010, when it passed to us from SCOLA, of the biennial London Archaeological Prize – familiarly known as the publication prize. This series of ‘Author, author...’ articles enables us to quiz the prize winners on how they work and think, and showcase some of the methods, ideas and approaches that make their writing so successful.

Author

Perhaps the only surprising aspect of Hazel Forsyth winning the 2014 Archaeological Prize is that she’s not an archaeologist. She is an experienced researcher, historian and curator though, and has been on the staff of the Museum of London (MOL) for some 25 years. Having first tried the legal profession, she consciously changed direction to get back to the history she’d studied. After a spell as a temp secretary in the museum’s Tudor and Stuart department, she joined the curatorial staff, where she was involved with Peter Marsden’s riverside project.

Now Senior Curator, Medieval and Post Medieval, at MOL, her job has expanded beyond anything she might sensibly have envisaged in the 1980s, as the collections are vast and growing, and as she’s absorbed the medieval period since the reduction in curatorial staff a few years ago. Hazel’s passion from the beginning though has been the post-med period for the simple reason that a plethora of documentary evidence exists. ‘It’s so much easier to get close to the context of the objects

with so many original sources,’ she says. ‘I simply can’t understand why anyone would want to use second or third hand sources and risk compounding mistakes, or just promoting someone else’s conclusions.’

Behind the exhibition

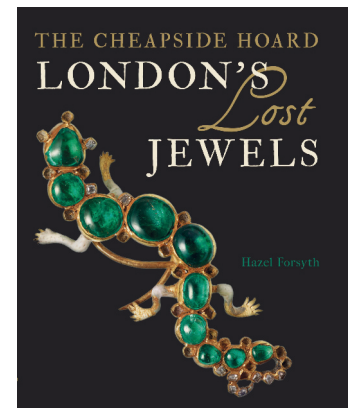
London's Lost Jewels was written to coincide with the hugely successful Cheapside Hoard exhibition, but it’s by no means a standard catalogue, and the story behind both book and exhibition is likewise anything but typical.

The Cheapside Hoard is undeniably spectacular – the largest and most significant trove of Elizabethan and early Stuart jewellery and gemstones ever found and an unmatched source of information about this important trade. Between its recovery from a demolition site in Cheapside in 1912 and its accession by MOL, however, lies a rather shady saga, involving dubious workmen, a go-between called Stony Jack and numerous competing interests. And despite the priceless pieces

retrieved in the cache, remarkably little had been learned in the intervening years about their origins, makers, depositors, owners or history.

A sprinkling of pieces had been on display for years at MOL in a single case. The British Museum and V&A likewise displayed a few pieces that they had acquired. Hazel had been promoting the idea of an exhibition to the MOL board for eight years, submitting and revising the case for it several times, and overcoming concerns about its appeal to visitors and sponsors, before they finally agreed.

In the meantime, she had decided that whatever happened, the people behind the story of the hoard – the jewellers, goldsmiths, merchants, traders and owners – would be worth researching. Her investigations yielded a network of over 9000 interconnected contemporary figures, all of whom are



ABOVE Agate cameo of Elizabeth I



CENTRE Unique emerald encased watch



RIGHT TOP Earring carved from seven amethysts



RIGHT BOTTOM Red squirrel pendant in cornelian

All photos © Museum of London

WRITING ON ARCHAEOLOGY

now detailed on her invaluable database.

Finally, in late summer 2012, the board agreed to the exhibition going ahead, and in December asked her to write a book. The time allowed to curate the exhibition – determine what to display and how, develop the design and new means of display, negotiate loans from other galleries, write all the panels and captions – and produce a book as well, was incredibly short.

The vision

Before she could begin the book, the deadline for the exhibition text had to be met. Reviews on matters of style (was the contemporary voice Hazel used appropriate?), and length (were 100 word captions too long?) were eventually resolved, allowing her to move on. Thanks to her earlier comprehensive research, Hazel finally wrote the entire book in little more than a month. Had she had more time, the form of the book might have been different, with chapters contributed by specialists in fields such as gemology and platemaking. However, she knew that she wanted something other than a standard catalogue or synthesis, and had a strong vision of what the book should be like.

Her overarching aim was to bring new insights into the gem and jewellery trade in the late 16th/early 17th centuries. Where past studies had concentrated on analysing the style of the jewels, Hazel was determined to

BELOW Just as a fresh approach was taken to the book, so the exhibition used new display techniques [as with chains here being installed by Jackie Keily] and provided magnifying glasses for visitors to create more dynamic, all-round viewing. Hazel's aspiration is eventually to create a permanent exhibition, with extensive contextual content, for the hoard.

look at the people and stories behind them. Her research, tracking down every possible primary source from court registers to House of Lords records, enabled her to find links and patterns not previously examined, and to reconsider the common view that styles in fashion were handed down from the court. Clearly a trusted expert in her field, Hazel wrote the text entirely herself, supported by valuable input from museum professionals in other fields and institutions.

Writing

When asked what sort of reader she had in mind, Hazel maintains she didn't think too hard about it. Her strong motivation to capture the flavour and complexity of the period led her to concentrate on 'creating as lucid a text as possible without diluting the scholarship'. It's the same approach she uses when writing anything. She aims for a certain cadence and flow. She is also clear that the book had to convey a sense of time, place and atmosphere rather than just recording a series of facts. 'Historical writing is so difficult,' she says. 'It's not only narrative, but analytical as well. There are no certainties, and you need to guard against over-interpretation of evidence.'

Hazel seems justly proud that not one unsupported conclusion is presented in the book – every detail is founded in documents. She is clear that 'there's no point in writing something dull or turgid' though and her 'lucid text' is not just coherent, but thoroughly engaging. The publication prize judges praised the readability, compelling narrative, and the integration of social history and context that so illumines the story of the hoard. Tellingly, she finds she rarely reads archaeological reports – 'it's so difficult for a non-archaeologist to work their way through the stratigraphy and lists,' she notes. 'I wish they'd draw me into their reports with notable conclusions at the beginning.'

The harder part of producing the book for her was getting the design and layout right. Various approaches were tried to indicate the scale of the pieces; the choice of what to illustrate and how was agonising; the final colour proofing stage was a major challenge. Her publishers didn't change a word of her text, but did ensure the copious notes were consistent and complete.

Linking up the evidence

A remarkable saga of murder and dirty dealing emerged from Hazel Forsyth's documentary research into the gem trade and Cheapside jewellers. The 17th-century jeweller Thomas Sympson was a notorious creator of counterfeit balas rubies, possibly those found in the hoard, and also one of the jewellers who leased space in the range of goldsmiths' shops in Cheapside where the buried hoard was discovered nearly 300 years later. Two of his equally dodgy relatives, it transpires, handled jewels stolen from one Gerrard Pullman. An adventurer merchant who had been travelling the world acquiring an astonishing collection of gems and jewels, Pullman was poisoned and thrown overboard on the return journey. Half of his trunk's contents had disappeared by the time the ship reached London, but some may well have found its way to the hoard. Telling the story of the crime through original accounts from the House of Lords investigation and other sources was perhaps a risky choice, but there can be no better way of showing how painstaking scholarship can be transformed into thrilling tales.

Afterthoughts

Any doubters who had questioned the appeal of the exhibition or the book were soon won over. High profile support came from the likes of Coutts, Gemfields, Faberge and Vogue. Press coverage and reviews were outstanding, a special programme aired on BBC Four, merchandise sold well and the public visited in their multitudes – perhaps 150,000 including the numerous special events, a higher attendance than for any previous MOL exhibition. And the book? More than 9000 have been bought in the MOL bookshop alone, and over 20,000 sold worldwide – exceptional figures.

The success of the entire project underlines the crucial importance of proper, in depth, original research in museums. Without such research, and Hazel's determination, the Cheapside Hoard might still be lingering in its single case in the museum, and many thousands of people would have missed the excitement of discovering colourful people, invaluable artefacts and a fascinating history. For my money, a real story well told can beat fictional characters hands down, every time.

London's Lost Jewels, published in 2013 by Philip Wilson Publishers, is widely available in bookshops and online for £19.95.

