

Fig. 1: site location

Material evidence from the Great Fire: burnt artefacts discarded in a well in Philpot Lane, City of London

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Introduction

Extensive archaeological excavations were undertaken by MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) during 2008–9 at 20 Fenchurch Street, City of London, EC3. The centre of the site was located at National Grid Reference 533085 180880 (Fig. 1). The majority of the excavated material was Roman in date, including virtually all of the horizontal stratigraphy and, together with the few deeper cut features of medieval and later date, will be published separately.¹ A 16th- to 17th-century brick-lined cellar which contained an assemblage of early to mid-17th-century ceramics, glass and pipes associated with an ale-house also merits a separate article.²

However, located towards the west side of the site was a chalk-lined well (Fig. 2) that originally served a property fronting Philpot Lane and in the parish of either St Andrew Hubbard or St Dionis Backchurch (it is within a metre or two of the parish boundary, meaning it could not be precisely pinpointed on historic maps). The well was filled largely with ceramics, glass and structural fittings consistently dated to the mid-17th century and, as an assemblage, is further characterised by the high percentage of objects distorted through being exposed to fire and high temperatures. Interpreted as a result of the Great Fire of London which swept through here in September 1666, this

article therefore articulates the stratigraphic and artefactual evidence within the context of this conflagration.

The well

The well's placement close to two parish boundaries is of relevance as it conforms to Ralph Treswell's 1585 *The London Survey* where such structures are often found astride two or more properties' boundaries, and almost always in a shared yard or alley.³ The well was constructed in a circular cut, context [831],⁴ 2.24m in diameter, the top of which had been removed by a modern basement. Its full depth is not known as the base of the cut was not reached, both for safety reasons and

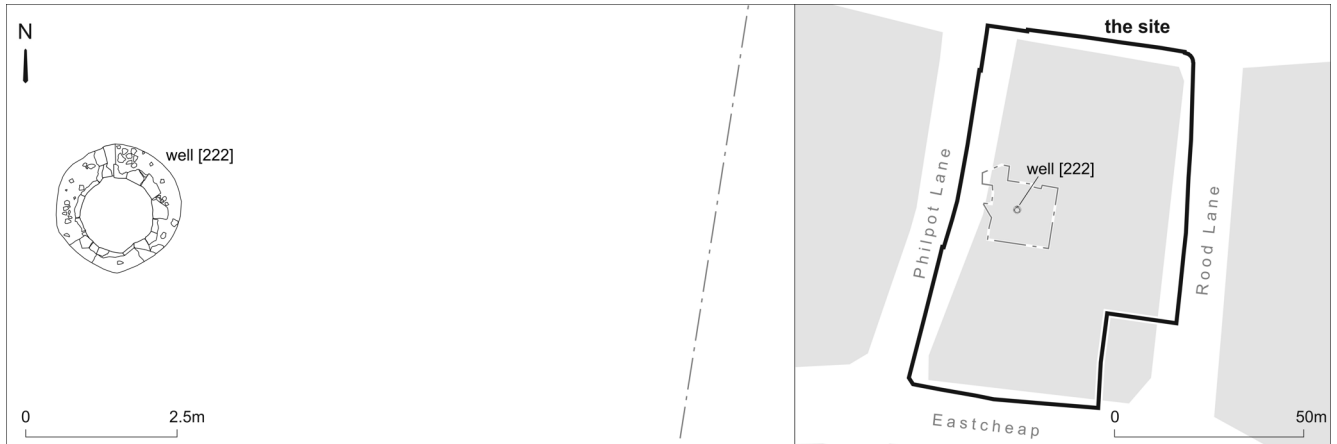


Fig. 2: plan of the chalk-lined well

because it was below the depth required of the excavation.⁵ The masonry itself [222] comprised chalk blocks made to a range of different sizes and smoothed with considerable care on the inside face (Fig. 3). The

remainder of each block was rough-hewn and only partially shaped in order to fit with the courses, and bonded with a friable sandy mortar mixed with crushed chalk. Each course was consistent in its own height but varied

widely in comparative size. The top five courses (as found) alternated with wide and narrow blocks but beneath this the courses were all narrow. The masonry facing was remarkably close-fitting. It is not clear why the courses varied in height, but it may simply have been for aesthetic reasons, as the variation was only evident near the top of the well where it could be seen from above. Many of the chalk blocks were marked with a tally system, showing that they were prefabricated prior to their transport to site. The top five courses were simply numbered upwards 1 to 5 with the requisite number of vertical scores. A more complex system appeared to be in place below this but the marks were more worn and harder to decipher. Two of the courses possessed gaps between some of the blocks; these were deliberately created putlog holes beneath longer blocks in the courses above.

It can be surmised that the well was built up from the bottom of the cut. The presence of the putlog holes, designed to receive the ends of scaffold timbers, indicates that static shoring was employed during its construction. The sequence of events for construction is therefore as follows: the cut was hand-dug to full depth; the first masonry courses were built and backfill was inserted behind; this continued upwards until the first part of the scaffolding could be put in place; the well was completed in stages; the scaffold was removed at the end of the process leaving the putlog holes where the timbers were positioned.

Providing a *terminus post-quem* of 1475 for the well's use, a well-preserved and perfectly legible Nuremburg Wurzburg jetton <15>,



Fig. 3: archaeologists recording the chalk-lined well

dated 1452–75 (Fig. 4) was recovered in one of the putlog holes.⁶ It seems unlikely this jetton had fallen into this position and one of the many scenarios behind its deposition might be that it was deliberately placed by a builder during the construction of the well's chalk lining. This structure was backfilled with [221] a loose grey to light brown sandy silt with a high proportion of ash mixed with burnt brick, tile and chalk fragments and crushed white mortar, an episode which marked the disuse of the feature.⁷

Finds assemblage

The artefactual assemblage found in backfill [211] contains pottery, glass and pipes that when combined are



Fig. 4: 15th-century Nuremburg Wurzburg jetton (front and back) found in a putlog hole in the

dated c. 1640–60. There is an emphasis on pharmaceutical wares in the glass case bottles and ceramic drug jars retrieved, with ceramic ointment and chamber pots functioning as health and

hygiene wares also common. As noted, the pottery and glass has been significantly altered through exposure to a fire and associated high temperatures (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). With the glass and



Fig. 5: burnt Surrey-Hampshire border wares vessels (top left) with London-made delftware charger (top right) and chamber pot (bottom) fragments

GREAT FIRE ARTEFACTS

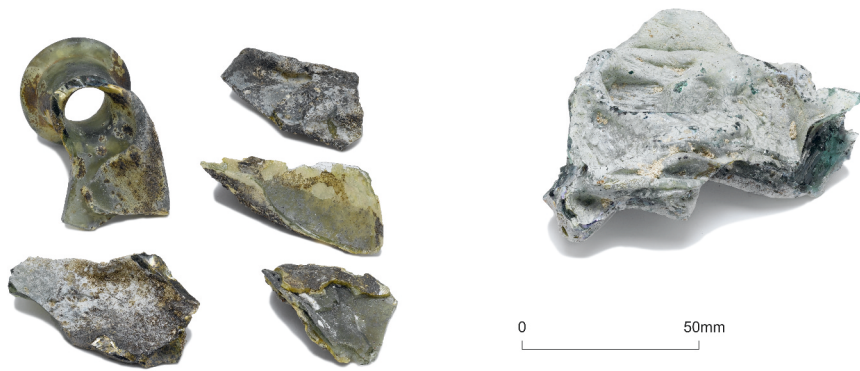


Fig. 6: burnt hexagonal case bottles and a twisted lump of burnt glass

delftware pottery in particular not well-suited to being heated or intentionally made for cooking, the high proportion of vessels distorted in such a fashion on a domestic site is anomalous.

Constituting the most frequent of the artefact types in this feature, the pottery comprised 49 vessels⁸ with most sources of supply, forms and decorative styles common to the second and third quarters of the 17th century; London-made delftware⁹ and the white-fired earthenware products of the Surrey-Hampshire border ware industry¹⁰ are well represented.

The Surrey-Hampshire border industry made attractively glazed vessels, but the exposure to high temperatures and flames led to many here appearing over-fired with blistered glazes (Fig. 5). With this industry focused on making utilitarian forms, deep and flared dishes for food preparation and serving, porringers for eating one-pot meals, together with a tripod pipkin of the ribbed, external-lid-seated variety made throughout the 17th century,¹¹ were retrieved.

Serving mostly pharmaceutical, hygiene and tableware functions, London delftware supplied 29 of the 49 pots in this well group. These pots are particularly fire-damaged and their appearance is similar to the over-fired wasters with blistered and blackened glazes found during excavations on London's delft pothouses.¹² Its condition made identifying cross-joining sherds difficult and so the quantities of the most frequent form here – the eight *gally pots* or drug jars – may be overstated. Similarly used were the two plain ointment pots found which held cold creams or balm, with a chamber pot (Fig. 5) serving sanitary requirements. The delft plate found is of

significance: a form thought to have been first made in London delft c. 1670,¹³ the presence of this plate in an assemblage attributed to the Great Fire of London pushes its introduction by this industry back a few years. Other decorative tablewares include up to six chargers¹⁴ (Fig. 5) of varying preservation and quality painted in styles common to the second and third quarters of the 17th century.¹⁵ Completing the delft are fragments of a lid – once fitting either a posset or coffee pot – and a teabowl, forms first made in London delftware during this period to meet the demands of the capital's burgeoning coffee house culture and an increasingly sophisticated domestic market.

The fragments of two Chinese blue and white porcelain teabowls decorated either in the Kraak or Ming Transitional styles, can be similarly viewed and were obtained in this period through the Dutch East India Company foothold at Batavia in Java (now Indonesia), or via the English East India Company which had a factory at Bantam (also Indonesia) until 1686.

Clay tobacco pipes provide only a minor constituent of this assemblage, with two pipe stems and a bowl retrieved; the bowl corresponds to the Type 10 range dated 1640–60 in Atkinson and Oswald's classification for London-made pipes.¹⁶ The bowl is fully milled around the rim but there are no makers represented via makers' marks to research.

Often fused and twisted together, the burnt and distorted condition of the glass made determining fragment and vessel count difficult, with twisted lumps and fragments of burnt glass more akin to the waste products of a glasshouse retrieved (Fig. 6). Despite its

condition, this small group appears to comprise the portion of a window pane, with two to three green-coloured smaller-sized squared or hexagonal case bottles¹⁷ (Fig. 6) and the fragments of a shaft-and-globe wine bottle. This material is difficult to date precisely; case bottles of this size and shape are generally early to mid-17th century, but there was little in the way of diagnostic features that enabled chronological refinement. Representing finer tablewares and contemporary to the bottles is a stem of a simple rod-stem goblet¹⁸ and the colourless glass fragment from what appears as the base of a larger-sized pedestal goblet.¹⁹ Both are burnt. An item of personal adornment is a spherical blue glass bead <354> with slightly whitened opaque surfaces, but this does not appear to have burnt to the same degree as the majority of the glass and ceramics found. It has a diameter of 9mm and could have come from a necklace or rosary.

The finds in this well are completed by various structural building fittings comprising a small piece of copper-alloy sheet waste (<528>), five iron fittings and several fragments from an iron sheet plate. One of the fittings (<213>) is probably a wall-hook, with a tapering spike and curved arm;²⁰ a similar spike with two thinner curved arms may also be a hook or part of a pricket candlestick (<211>). There is also a pintle (<214>) used in medieval and later buildings for hanging windows and doors. A square-sectioned loop (<210>) may be a link from a large chain or a U-shaped staple (slightly bent at the bottom) used for joining timbers²¹ and a strap fitting (<209>) with the stump of a rectangular-sectioned bar at its centre and six paired holes offset from one part of a hinge or a handle support. The iron sheet plate (<208>, <212>), originally c. 30 × 25cm and recovered in corroded fragments is of unknown function; if a fire-back (for example) it would be very small. This group of structural iron fixtures and fittings appear to have escaped the fire damage that characterises the discussed pottery and glass (above) although the doors, windows or furniture to which this iron was attached had presumably burned.

Philpot Lane and the archaeology of the Great Fire of London

It is highly unlikely that the Philpot Lane property served by the well survived the Great Fire of London of 2–5 September 1666. Since the largely burnt artefacts consistently dated 1640–60, coupled with the post-Fire Assessment stating that all buildings on Philpot Lane were burnt down,²² it is highly likely that this debris was dumped into the well immediately after the Great Fire of London. Despite the extensive damage it caused, the material culture of this disaster has not been particularly forthcoming in archaeological excavations, and so this assemblage is of significance beyond the site itself. The relative invisibility in the archaeological sequence of the Great Fire is largely due to the effective clearance of debris post-Fire, with later Victorian and 20th-century truncation and rebuilding after the Second World War all combining to remove most strata.

One of the first examples of published archaeological evidence of the Great Fire, however, was found close to its source during excavations on Pudding Lane; a cellar containing barrels of tar burnt *in situ* was the result of this disaster.²³ Similarly the nearby

site of Monument House and another on Eastcheap²⁴ just to the north-east of Pudding Lane revealed the cellars of the 'great tenement' destroyed by the fire, and yielded burnt delftware, floor and wall tiles²⁵ and ironwork.²⁶ The assemblages of Rhenish-sourced stonewares, Essex-made black-glazed ware mugs and clay pipes burnt and sealed in the cellars of the Guildhall²⁷ and White Bear Inn²⁸ supplied important information on the materials used for large-scale entertainment and victualling trade respectively during this period. On the very western extent of this conflagration at New Fetter Lane, two cellar deposits contained similar groups of burnt delftware and clay tobacco pipe²⁹ thought to have been deposited as a result of the Great Fire. Outside the City and Bishopsgate to the north-east, large dumps of Great Fire debris were used to raise the ground levels by the builder Nicholas Barbon prior to the construction of the Old Artillery Ground estate in Spitalfields in 1680.³⁰ The finds assemblage in the chalk-lined well under consideration here therefore adds to the increasingly understood structural and artefactual evidence related to the Great Fire of London.

Acknowledgments

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1. R. Wroe-Brown *Urban origins, settlement and industry on Cornhill; Excavations at 20 Fenchurch Street, City of London*, MOLA Arch Study Ser (in prep.).
 2. N. Jeffries and R. Wroe-Brown 'Would I were in an alehouse in London!': a finds assemblage sealed by the Great Fire from Rood Lane, City of London' *Post-Medieval Archaeol* (in prep.); the site will be archived in the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC) under the site code FEU08 and can be viewed by appointment.
 3. J. Schofield (ed), *The London Surveys of Ralph Treswell* (1987) London Topographic Society Publication 135, 27.
 4. The context number is a unique number given to each archaeological context on the site (e.g. a wall, pit, or deposit) and is cited in the text in square brackets, e.g. [831].
 5. The well was excavated to 1.80m deep, the highest part of the feature being at 11.99m OD. It is likely that its base was at least 2m below 9.90m OD, the deepest measurable observation made during excavation. A contemporary chalk-lined well [1422] found prior to the construction of Plantation Place, a modern building to the east of Rood Lane, extended down to 7.72m OD suggesting the contemporary water table was broached at about this level (K. Pitt pers. comm.).
 6. This jetton is attributed to context [221], the backfill of the well, in the site archive.
 7. Context [221].
 8. Reconstructing from 400 sherds; 7070 grams weight.
 9. K. Tyler, I. Betts and R. Stephenson, *London's delftware industry, The tin-glazed pottery industries of*

Southwark and Lambeth MOLA Monograph 40 (2008); F. Britton, *London Delftware* (1987).

10. J. Pearce, *Post-medieval pottery in London, 1500–1700, Volume 1 Border Wares* (1992). J. Pearce, *Pots and Potters in Tudor Hampshire: Excavations at Farnborough Hill Convent 1968–72* (2007).
 11. *Op cit* fn 10, Pearce (2007) 97; fig. 28, 149–54.
 12. *Op cit* fn 9, Tyler et al.
 13. *Op cit* fn 9, Britton, Appendix V, 194, shape I. This plate is decorated in the 'Chinaman among grasses' style.
 14. *Op cit* fn 9, Britton, Appendix V, 194.
 15. C. Orton 'Post Roman pottery' in P. Hinton (ed.) *Excavations in Southwark 1973–6 and Lambeth 1973–9*, London Middlesex Archaeol Soc/Surrey Archaeol Soc Joint Pub. 3 (1988) 295–364. Most delftware charger rims are decorated with intersecting arcs and feathery tufts, with the base of another presenting the daisy pattern.
 16. D.R. Atkinson and A. Oswald 'London clay tobacco pipes', *J British Archaeol Assoc* 32 (1969) 171–227.
 17. H. Willmott *Early Post-Medieval Vessel Glass in England c. 1500–1670* (2002), fig. 112a & 113, 88–9.
 18. Accession no. <601>. *Op cit* fn 20, fig. 114, 89.
 19. Accession no. <602>. *Op cit* fn 20, fig. 81, 71–2.
 20. G. Egan, *The medieval household: daily living c. 1150–c. 1450* Medieval Finds Excav London 6, (1998), fig. 36, 57 & 61; A. Thompson, F. Grew and J. Schofield 'Excavations at Aldgate 1974', *Post-Medieval Archaeol* 18 (1984) fig. 47, 2. This object is 93mm long.

21. I Goodall 'Iron Objects' in M. Biddle *Nonsuch Palace: the material culture of a noble Restoration house* (2005) 374–5.

22. TNA E179/252/32/Part 18, 'Margaret Pattens burnt all'.

23. Sitecode PEN79. See J. Schofield with C. Maloney, *Archaeology in the City of London, 1907–1991: a guide to records of excavations by the Museum of London and its predecessors*. MOL Archaeol Gazetteer Ser 1 (1998) 159.

24. I. Blair and D. Sankey *A Roman drainage culvert, Great Fire destruction debris and other evidence from hillside sites north-east of London Bridge Excavations at Monument House and 13–21 Eastcheap, City of London* MOLA Arch Study Ser 17 (2007) 35–48.

25. *Op cit* fn 24, 35–40.

26. *Op cit* fn 24, 40–6.

27. D. Bowsher, T. Dyson, N. Holder and I. Howell *The London Guildhall: An archaeological history of a neighbourhood from Early Medieval to Modern Times* MOLA Monograph 36 (2007) 234–6.

28. M. Mckenzie, and A. Wardle *35 Basinghall Street, London EC2, Post-excavation Assessment and Updated Project Design* (2008) unpub MOLA archive report.

29. H. Lewis and J-J. Fuldain *12–14 New Fetter Lane, 43 Fetter Lane, City of London, EC4, Post-excavation Assessment* (2012) unpub MOLA archive report. Material found in contexts [221] and [224].

30. N. Holder and N. Jeffries *Spitalfields: the development of the London suburb 1680s–1880s* MOLA Monograph (in prep).