

Spitalfields life

An account of the early modern suburb of Spitalfields, due out in 2015, presents an archaeological history of the place, the people and their possessions



One of the largest and longest-running archaeological excavations in London took place at Spitalfields Market between 1991 and 2007. The site is located outside the city wall and east of Bishopsgate Street Without, the main south–north thoroughfare out of the historic city. The sequence of recovered archaeological remains extended from the Roman period to the 19th century. In this new book, Chiz Harward, Nick Holder and Nigel Jeffries report on the most recent part of that story, from the 16th century onwards.

The Spitalfields suburb developed on the site of the medieval priory and hospital of St Mary Spital, suppressed by Henry VIII in 1539. Pre-closure, parts of the priory precinct had been leased and thereafter the estates were created which characterised this area in the centuries that followed. Stephen Vaughan, ‘king’s servant’, acquired most of the former inner precinct, converting medieval buildings into mansions and tenements. A medieval religious survival was the Easter sermon which continued into the late 17th century. The newly laid out Spital Yard could accommodate the huge crowds this attracted, the medieval chapel and cross were renovated, and a viewing stand was built for Christ’s Hospital. Much of the former outer precinct became a military training ground between 1538 and 1682 and was used by the Artillery Company and the Gunners of the Tower. Excavation revealed evidence of the master gunner’s house and a star-shaped practice fortification built in the 1630s/40s.

Development in the later 16th century extended to the area between Bishopsgate Street and the artillery ground, and in the early 17th century into the Spital fields and gardens to the east of the former priory. The first new streets were created and artisans and merchants prospering in the expanding economic climate of 17th-century London took up tenancies of the new houses.

The London-wide building boom reached Spitalfields after the 1660s. The Whelers built the (original) vegetable, fruit and meat market and in 1682 the property developer Nicholas Barbon purchased the old artillery ground. Barbon built a new style of low-cost, standardised, brick row house, well equipped with hygiene and sanitation facilities – the London terraced house. Elsewhere in Spitalfields new streets and buildings were being laid out over the fields and orchards, and old sites redeveloped as fashionable new terraces. The east side of Bishopsgate was more of a patchwork: 17th-century brick buildings stood alongside medieval properties, both used as commercial premises and warehouses with accommodation above. To the rear, a complex network of alleys led to a crowded environment of mews, tenements, stables and yards.

The last visible remains of the priory and ‘the spital’ were buried or destroyed in the early 18th century when development of Spital Square, begun by Paulet St John, was continued (and extended) by Isaac Tillard. Building here then slowed, except for construction of Union Street which improved access to Spitalfields Market.

Selecting from the huge quantity of archaeological data recovered, the authors try to reconnect the

archaeological assemblages with particular properties and their tenants. This approach – ‘household archaeology’ – was most successful with the post-1660 Spitalfields assemblages. The objects discarded in the privies of these houses – pottery, glasswares, clay tobacco pipes and other domestic items, together with botanical and faunal remains – throw new light on the household economies and leisure activities of the residents, a number of whom were involved in the silk industry and included Huguenot and Jewish families. The architecture, sanitation, rubbish disposal, leisure activities, religious and working life of this flourishing post-medieval suburb are all given a new archaeological perspective here.

The Spitalfields suburb 1539–c 1880: excavations at Spitalfields Market, London E1, 1991–2007 by Chiz Harward, Nick Holder and Nigel Jeffries, MOLA Monograph 60
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ABOVE Glass from 1820s cesspit clearance group ©MOLA
RIGHT Corner of Fort Street and Gun Street in 1884 (London Metropolitan Archives, City of London, q803178x)