The archaeology of the Great Fire of London considered

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'London was but is no more'1

The Great Fire of London is rightly presented as one of the most iconic moments in the history of the metropolis. The statistics sculptured on Christopher Wren's Monument to convey the scale of the damage wrought on the fabric of the City² in those fateful days between 2nd and 6th September 1666 are often quoted.³

The recent passing of the 350th anniversary of this catastrophe was marked by an impressive series of exhibitions, talks and lectures, special events, walks and tours, and performance and music organised under the banner Great Fire 350.⁴

The Museum of London curated the Fire! Fire! exhibition which added to the National Maritime Museum's Pepys, Plague, Fire and Revolution hosted from November 2015 to March 2016.⁵ An individual's experience of the Great Fire in the present, in particular during the anniversary weekend, was captured by social media platforms such as Twitter.⁶ The Great Fire continues to excite and engage the imagination of school children through its teaching in the Key Stage 1 curriculum.

Whilst many archaeological sites have yielded evidence of the Fire, usually published on a site-by-site basis⁷ with two resumés,⁸ this article attempts to capture for the first time what is distinctive about the archaeology of the Great Fire and the various research themes which emerge from its study.

'Into the jaws of death ... walked one'9: a history of the archaeological study of the Great Fire

This account begins with how the Great Fire was first encountered in the archaeological record at the point when professional archaeology in London (and the United Kingdom as a whole) had started to take shape and develop in the years immediately after

the end of the Second World War. 'Thanks to the high explosive and incendiary attention of the Luftwaffe, London has been presented with the finest opportunity to explore its archaeological roots since the Great Fire of London' reflected Ivor Noël Hume writing in 1978.¹⁰

Noël Hume was a field archaeologist employed by the Guildhall Museum with a handful of volunteers and meagre resources, at a time when 'rescue archaeology' was in its infancy and afforded no protection by planning and precious little in law. In December 1949, he was tasked by the Corporation of London with conducting fieldwork on building sites in the City. Somewhat ironically it was the destruction caused by the Luftwaffe to large areas of the City that first enabled the discovery of the archaeological evidence for the 1666 catastrophe. 11

Yet prior to Noël Hume, Adrian Oswald was the sole archaeologist at the Guildhall Museum. During the demolition of All Hallows Church, Lombard Street in 1940 to make way for an extension to Barclays Bank, a workman discovered part of a Tudor cellar that once served a small building wedged between the church and Gracechurch Street (Fig 1, site 1).

The 17th-century glass assemblage subsequently retrieved by Oswald remains one of the largest and finest examples of archaeologically-recovered glass of the period in the United Kingdom. Better known as the Gracechurch Street hoard, it is composed of Venice and façon de Venise drinking glasses with potash bottles and phials, and was interpreted in The Connoisseur¹² by Oswald and Philips as an accumulation of unwanted glass prior to this feature being sealed by the Great Fire. 13 This explanation has divided opinion. Hugh Willmott, who reassessed the glass and site

archive in 1996, has dated the whole assemblage as no later than the first third of the 17th century and suggests the evidence for the cellar being sealed by the Fire is scant. 14 Significantly none of the glass had been burnt. 15 The one trade token found nevertheless provides a 1645 terminus post-quem and it is unlikely that the building that this cellar serviced would have survived the events of September 1666; the link between the Gracechurch Street hoard and the Great Fire remains unbroken in the Museum of London's Exhibition, Fire! Fire!, a preview of which featured in an earlier issue of the London Archaeologist. 16

Noël Hume's work on sites in the blitzed City yielded considerable archaeological evidence of the Fire. He was quick to recognise the analytical potential offered by the rich postmedieval finds assemblages of pottery, glassware, pipes and the food remains he excavated, which included those related to the conflagration.¹⁷ An excellent summary of these sites and Noël Hume's contribution has been published by Ian Blair and Bruce Watson.¹⁸

The 300th anniversary of the Great Fire in 1966 fell upon a London still scarred and recovering from war. The *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society,* which provided the principal vehicle¹⁹ by which archaeological sites and finds in the City and its environs were then published, contains nothing on this event.²⁰ Noël Hume had taken up his post in Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia some years earlier in 1957, thus ending his brief but influential career in London.

For Blair and Watson the narrative is clear: 'The story of the Great Fire of London and its archaeological evidence is intertwined with the personal history of Ivor Noël Hume....'. The baton for recording the Great Fire and post-

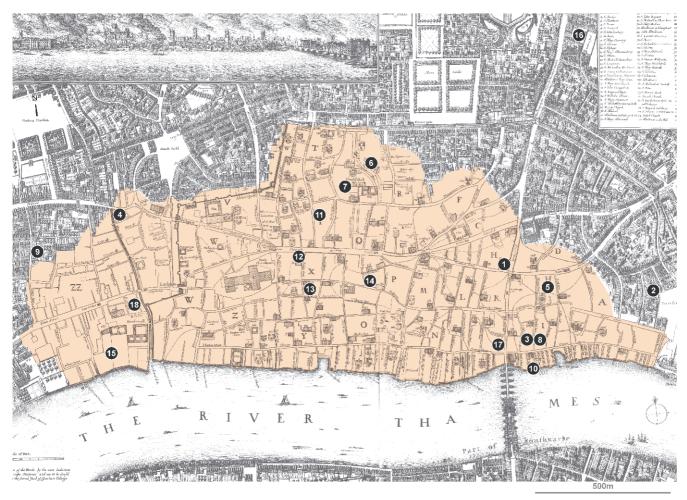


Fig 1: the City of London showing the extent of the Great Fire destruction (orange tone) based on John Leake's survey (1669 second edition) with the various sites mentioned in the text indicated:

1. 54 Lombard Street (GM101); 2. 10 Trinity Square (TRN08); 3. Pudding Lane (PEN85); 4. 60 Holborn Viaduct (HBO10); 5. 20 Fenchurch Street (FEU08); 6. Basinghall Street (BAZ05); 7. Guildhall (GYE92); 8. Monument House, Botolph Lane (BPL95); 9. New Fetter Lane (NFT10); 10. Billingsgate Fish Market (BIG82); 11. 14-18 Gresham Street (GHM05); 12. New Change (NCZ07); 13. Gateway House, 1 Watling Street (GM160); 14. 40-66 Queen Victoria Street and 82 Queen Street (GM144); 15. Former City of London Boys' School (BOY86); 16. Spitalfields (SRP98); 17. Regis House (KWS94); 18. St. Bride's Church (WFG62)

medieval archaeology in London would have to be taken by others.

'... I did remove my money and Iron chests into my cellar - as thinking that the safest place.'22

The diarist Samuel Pepys was right to trust his instinct that his cellar would survive the Great Fire even if all above was swept away. Sadly whilst the cellar, and the cheese and wine he also buried in his garden²³ was not found during excavations at Trinity Square (Fig 1, site 2),²⁴ cellars feature heavily in this article by virtue of the fact that, unlike the buildings they once served, 25 these were either stone, chalk or brick-built (or combined all three) and located below ground. Work has demonstrated that many survived the Fire, and together with wells and cesspits, cellars provide a considerable body of

evidence for the medieval, Tudor and Stuart London in the archaeological record.

Whilst these poorly-lit spaces might not seem the most illuminating to those studying early modern London, to archaeologists, cellars represent places of some importance. As the Fire ravaged the largely timber-built buildings of the City, the weight of the burning above ground structure collapsed and filled these subterranean voids. Upon excavation this debris is found to have either sealed the cellars contents in situ and/or it yielded considerable structural evidence, with architectural fragments, fixtures and fittings, and objects, all combining to give a sense of the activities that occurred in the above building before the Fire took hold. Whilst the function of the cellar/building which yielded the Gracechurch Street hoard has yet to be revealed, archaeology has proved crucial in unearthing objects used by the haberdashers and victuallers of Restoration London.

Sealed cellars

First under consideration are those sites whose cellars revealed contents sealed and preserved in situ by Great Fire debris. Of all the cellars depicted on Ralph Treswell's various London surveys of property made between 1585 and 1614, only two were marked for an 'active' function; most were presumed as being used for storage.²⁶ London's cellars and warehouses were brimming with commercial and mercantile stock, and an excavation on Pudding Lane reflects this (Fig 1, site 3). Here the charred remains of up to 20 burnt barrels were stacked in a way that



Fig 2: charred remains of pitch barrels lying on the brick floor of a cellar destroyed on Sunday, 2nd September, 1666 (scale 0.20 m)

suggests they had been stored on five racks in a scorched brick-built cellar that once served a property close to where the fire started.²⁷ This produced the most evocative image of the archaeology of the Great Fire (Fig 2). Analysis of the black liquid residues found adhering to the barrels demonstrated they had held wood pitch, a distilled version of Stockholm tar, 28 a waterproofing resin used as the main wood and rope preservative of the era. It is also highly flammable and would have added considerable fuel to the Fire as it first took hold in the early hours of September 2nd. This echoes two lines from the broadside ballad²⁹ London Mourning in Ashes written shortly after the Fire with the words 'Pitch, Tarr, Oyl, increase the spoyl / old Fishstreet 'gins to frye'. 30

Insights into the rituals and routines of drinking and smoking in Restoration London are found among the in situ objects recovered in the cellars of three retail drinking establishments destroyed by the Fire (Fig 3): the Three Tuns tavern at Holborn,³¹ a probable ale house on Rood Lane and The Bear Inn of Basinghall Street (Fig 1, sites 4-6). These added to the material found in the cellars serving the Guildhall (Fig 1, site 7), located just to the west of The Bear Inn.³² The chronological control afforded by the Great Fire enabled a precise comparison as the objects found in each accurately reflected their content at the point the cellars were entombed by the collapse of the above building.

What marks the assemblages are the remarkable similarities in the European sources of pottery and glass supply they share and the range of vessels, used in markedly different spaces and places. All these premises, however, served their customers and guests with ale, beer, wine and other beverages from robust Frechen stoneware pitchers and bottles from the Rhineland, supplemented by distinctive Essexmade red ware flared mugs or tygs.33 They offered tobacco shipped from the Virginia planters to be smoked in locally-made pipes, and kept fragile Venice and façon de Venise glasses. The range of interpretive possibilities that emerge from the inter-disciplinary analysis of just one façon de Venise vessel (a beaker from the Rood Lane cellar) has been recently published.³⁴ These material and object combinations would not have looked out of place if presented on a still life Dutch genre painting of the period, which reflects how culturally England connected to a shared Protestant northern European drinking culture. It also reminds us how smoking and drinking required sophisticated trade and exchange networks that linked Europe with the New World.35

Charred debris evidence Second is the evidence gleaned from the objects and the building and architectural materials found in the charred debris of a gutted and burning building as it plunged through the floor and filled the cellar.

This is best revealed by archaeological work on Monument House on Botolph Lane (Fig 1, site 8), a site located around the corner from Pudding Lane and close to the source of the Fire. Here the debris found among the interconnecting brick-built cellars, serving a building known as the Great Tenement, yielded a notable assemblage of 200 iron objects thought to signify the stock-in-trade of an ironmonger, although Hazel Forsyth has recently questioned this interpretation.³⁶ The Continental floor tiles, London- and Dutch-made wall tiles, and a Reigate-stone fireplace

mantelpiece found, give a sense of the decoration, ornamentation and function of the overlying rooms.³⁷ The quantity of iron left behind had nevertheless escaped the call to arms and attentions of the various City companies immediately after the Fire, who had set about retrieving scrap metal and damaged ironmongery to be recycled or reconditioned.38

Other filling episodes have been revealed elsewhere, first in a cellar located at the edge of the north-western limit of the conflagration on New Fetter Lane (Fig 1, site 9),³⁹ those by the waterfront on Billingsgate Fish Market (Fig 1, site 10), 40 and again in the cellar at Pudding Lane already considered. Here the debris contained fused hooks and eyes used for clothing and upholstery - significant as there were three hook-and-eye makers working in this location in 1666 - with Christopher Peele, a member of the Haberdashers' Company, appearing the most likely candidate for this material.41

'Vault for turds'42

Ivor Noël Hume and his small team excavated a number of domestic finds assemblages derived from the decayed organic and rubbish deposits that accumulated in cesspits before September 1666.⁴³ Their sudden abandonment - usually marked by Fire debris - was seen as evidence that the properties they once served were being rebuilt, an event which led to these cesspits being closed and sealed.

The Fire's continued importance in dating these rich post-medieval finds groups has been demonstrated since. Excavations at 14-18 Gresham Street (Fig 1, site 11) uncovered a cesspit that once served a property on Wood Street. Here a medieval chalk cellar was modified into a cesspit during the Tudor period before it was systematically removed and its cut backfilled with a large quantity of pottery, pipes and building materials, at least some of which can be related to Dr Scarborough's apothecary that once stood here.44 This robbing and filling was linked to the redevelopment of the area after the Great Fire. Similarly, the ceramics and glass recovered in a cesspit close to Wood Street that serviced a plot located between Friday Street and Bread Street from the New

Change excavations in south-west Cheapside (Fig 1, site 12) also register a strong apothecary signature. ⁴⁵ The disuse of an internally divided Tudor brick-built cesspit was also found on this site with its southern compartment found filled with Great Fire debris. ⁴⁶

Other features became the unintended receptacles for the volumes of debris that was created by the Fire as it raged, or was raked or shovelled into these voids during the post-Fire cleanup and reconstruction that followed. This last fate seems to have been particularly reserved for the wells of the City, features often located in yards on Ralph Treswell's London property surveys of 1585 to 1614. Considerable quantities of ash and debris was found filling a medieval chalk-built well that once served a plot that fronted Philpott Lane, 47 discovered at the site of 20 Fenchurch Street (Fig 1, site 5) and excavated prior to construction of the latest landmark to London's capacity for constant renewal, the skyscraper nicknamed the Walkie-Talkie because of its distinctive shape.

During Noël Hume's tenure, the upper fills of two similarly constructed masonry and chalk-lined wells composed of burnt debris with finds assemblages were recorded at Gateway House (Fig 1, site 13), close to New Change. ⁴⁸ Work on a site located on Queen Victoria Street and Queen Street in 1953–4 (Fig 1, site 14) revealed a brick-lined well which was infilled after the Great Fire with considerable destruction debris that included burnt bricks and charred timbers. ⁴⁹

The amount of spoil created was seized upon by the estate developers and entrepreneurs behind London's post-Fire building boom to alter ground levels and 'tweak the topography' of London. ⁵⁰ Sites have shown that destruction material was dumped on the western edge of the confluence of the River Fleet and Thames to assist sequences of land reclamation (Fig 1, site 15). ⁵¹

A more novel approach to this readily available spoil was taken by the property developer and entrepreneur Nicholas Barbon for the construction of the Old Artillery Ground estate in Spitalfields in the 1680s (Fig 1, site 16). Here, his builder-developers built the cellars and foundations upon the







Fig 3: the remains of three cellars that served a possible ale-house on Rood Lane (right), the Bear Inn on Basinghall Street (bottom left), and the Guildhall (top left)

existing ground levels before they dumped nearly two metres of Great Fire debris, in between building rows, to make up the road and yard levels.⁵² This was presumed cheaper and quicker than the usual process of digging foundations for the new lower floors.

Ghosts of the pre-Fire City

Finally, excavations have delivered another important contribution to our understanding of Restoration London. Whilst many cellars and subterranean infrastructure such as wells, cesspits and drains were sealed and lost to the Fire, only to be discovered by archaeologists centuries later, many were retained, refurbished and incorporated into the new London that emerged.

This continuity has been identified on three sites. Firstly, work at New Change in south-west Cheapside (Fig 1, site 12) demonstrated that three Tudor brick-built cellars were incorporated into the fabric of No. 16 Cheapside⁵³ and No. 17 Cheapside⁵⁴ with a medieval cellar similarly retained when No. 44 Cheapside was built.⁵⁵ A Tudor brick-lined cesspit remained in use until the 1750s before it was filled with some of the equipment used by the druggists Singleton & Co of 42 Cheapside. 50 Cellars on the site of Regis House in Fish Street Hill (Fig 1, site 17) were also relined and repurposed for the buildings that quickly sprang up after the Great Fire, structures that otherwise showed no evidence of being touched by its flames or debris.⁵⁷

Yet the ghosts of the City's destroyed medieval parish churches remain hidden in the vaults and foundations of Christopher Wren's replacements. St Bride's (Fig 1, site 18) provides just one example. Here the foundation of the medieval (south) tower had been deliberately incorporated into the post-Fire reconstruction, and a considerable portion of the earlier church still survives, as exemplified by the crypt below the Lady Chapel. ⁵⁸

Conclusion

With the above-ground traces of the Fire long removed and the buildings of the medieval, Tudor and Stuart city either swept away in the first week of September 1666 or through subsequent renewal, archaeologists excavating its remains should remember the privileged position they enjoy as being among the few who touch, record and experience these remains in the present.

For the sake of brevity, the individual elements of the numerous finds assemblages that can be related to the Great Fire have not been dwelt upon, however the chronological certainties offered by the Fire provide an important baseline for understanding a battery of artefacts and eco-facts.

Looking at this material as the evidence of loss are useful mechanisms by which the archaeology of this catastrophe can be viewed. Similarly, the salvage, repair and reuse of the subterranean pre-Fire city in the reconstructed London that followed, and the various cellars, cesspits and wells, should not be viewed as the passive receptacles of artefact groups. There is a need to articulate these structures to the buildings they served, and the various rich constructional techniques they employed appear fruitful lines for further enquiry.

This article has attempted to

consider the archaeology of the Great Fire and how it is characterised in the archaeological record through a methodology that combines and weaves the history of its investigation in the City with stratigraphic evidence and numerous object assemblages. It is hoped this study enables fresh avenues of research, work that will allow the archaeology of the Great Fire to move forward from being considered to, instead, being reconsidered.

This article is dedicated to Ivor Noël Hume and Adrian Oswald. They worked bravely in the most challenging of conditions for London's archaeology.

Acknowledgments

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- 6. Principally curated under hashtags #GtFire350 #Londonsburning #GreatFire.
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- (b) N. Jeffries, R. Featherby and R. Wroe-Brown 'Would I were in an alehouse in London': a finds assemblage sealed by the Great Fire in the City of London' Post-Medieval Archaeol 48 (2) (2014) 261–84.
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- 16. Op cit fn 13, 17 and B. Wallower 'Illuminating the Great Fire' London Archaeol 14 (9) 250–1.

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- 20. Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc **21** (3) (1967); Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc **22** (1968).
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- 22. R. Latham and W. Matthews (eds) The Diary of Samuel Pepys A Selection (2003) 662.
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