

# Finding the Red Lion: the latest on the earliest playhouse found in Whitechapel

*Back in early June, an exciting discovery hit the news – the earliest known purpose-built playhouse, known as the Red Lion, had been found in Whitechapel. Following an introduction to the Stepney Way site in London Archaeologist (15 (12) 345–9), Stephen White, the lead archaeologist for ASE, now provides the latest on the Red Lion playhouse.*

**BELOW:** the excavation area (red line) and excavated features relevant to Red Lion farm and playhouse (purple), overlaid on a map based on Gascoyne's 1703 map and with land mentioned in historical land deeds also indicated.

Unsurprisingly, the announcement of the discovery followed several years of archaeological investigation at Stepney Way, which started in 2015. In January 2018, the last phase of evaluation transformed into a full mitigation stage, leading to an 18-month long excavation and the recovery of huge finds assemblages including 389kg of ceramic building material, 689kg of pottery, 62kg of clay tobacco pipe, 271kg of animal bone, and about 8000 litres of bulk samples.

As we progressed with the post-excavation work,

reviewing the excavated features and completing specialist assessments, we returned to the question of the Red Lion playhouse. Combining the material culture with stratigraphic evidence, and historic documents and maps, we could finally begin to make the assertion that we had found the Red Lion and its playhouse with a high degree of confidence.

We were obviously eager to tell the world about this incredibly important find, and our post-excavation assessment report was soon to be in the public domain as part of the planning documentation. We wanted to cut through its lengthy 90,000 words (!) and pull out the nuanced argument, bringing together all the evidence, and tell our best-informed story of the Red Lion. And it certainly worked – from local societies to researchers around the world, the news was met with interest, excitement, speculation, and a healthy dose of scepticism. The latter was not unexpected, given the long-term interest in the playhouse and its location.

## Locating the Red Lion

From the outset, there was a possibility that the Stepney Way site was on or near to the purported location of the Red Lion farmhouse, on whose land a playhouse had been built by 1567.

There are three land deeds from 1688 and 1689 which use the location of the Red Lion farm as a signpost for the parcel of land they refer to.<sup>1</sup> Land deeds (nos 2687 and 2688) both dated 4 February 1688, refer to the same piece of land located on a road called Mile End Green that '...fronteth the Redd Lyon'. Land deed (no 2689) dated 13 July 1689, describes another parcel of land lying 'on the Southside of Milend Greene neere the Red Lyon Inne or farme in the parish of St. Mary White Chappell'. This land was separated from the farm by the 'ffoote Path or Cawsway Leading from White Chappell to Stepney Church', which followed the line of the parish boundary between Mile End and St Mary Matfellon.<sup>2</sup>

By extrapolating these mentions of the Red Lion farm and its relationship to nearby roads and landscape features, its possible location on historic



maps can be identified, particularly on the Gascoyne (1703) and Rocque (1746) maps. The 1746 Rocque map clearly shows that the modern road of Raven Row was historically known as Mile End Green but, importantly, only for a small distance along the northern perimeter of our site and, to the west, it bordered empty fields. As we know, the Red Lion ‘fronteth’ (or ‘fronted’) Mile End Green from the land deeds, and its land must span the parish border, based on extensions of buildings that cross this border on later maps, which identify it as part of a complex of buildings (see map). This area corresponds with the northernmost part of the excavation area, where evidence for just such a complex of buildings was discovered. The most likely candidate for the Red Lion farmhouse or inn itself is identified on the map, based on available dating evidence for the structures.

### Locating the playhouse

As well as brick-built buildings, an unusual rectangular wooden structure was discovered, comprising 144 surviving timbers and measuring 12.27m north to south by 9.27m east to west. These dimensions closely match those detailed for a stage cited in historical lawsuits relating to timber theatrical structures built on the Red Lion’s land. These structures could have been a prototype of later playhouses as they mention John Brayne as the proprietor. (He would go on to build The Theatre, Shoreditch, with his brother-in-law, James Burbage, in 1576.)

These historical lawsuits cover the dispute between Brayne and the carpenters he hired to build specific structures on land associated with the Red Lion farmhouse. He accuses the carpenters of shoddy workmanship in both lawsuits. In the first (1567), this is regarding the quality of ‘the Skaffolde’. As a result, four carpenters were dispatched to check the quality of the work and make recommendations on how to improve it – far more than the usual one or two sent in such a dispute, possibly reflecting the large scale of these scaffolds, which are supposed to have been galleries of a sort that surrounded a playing space, as mentioned in the second lawsuit.<sup>3</sup>

The stage features extensively in the second lawsuit from 1569. It is said to have had a frame of timber covered in boards, 5ft high, 40ft long (north to south),

30ft wide (east to west) and was to have a 30ft tall tower (from the ground, 25ft above the stage) with a room at the top.<sup>4</sup> And this was located ‘wythn the Courte or yarde lying on the south syde of the Garden belonginge to the messuage or farme howse called & knowne by the name of the sygne of the redd lyon aboute the wch Courte there are gallores nowe buyldinge scituatē’<sup>5</sup> – note that the scaffolds, which are already built, have now become galleries!

Berry<sup>6</sup> stresses a distinction between the two lawsuits: in 1567, Brayne requested the work to be inspected and improved, whereas in 1569, he was seeking financial compensation. This has been interpreted<sup>7</sup> to indicate that the playhouse had already closed and Brayne was attempting to recoup his costs. However, Ingram<sup>8</sup> suggests that a structure of this size was presumably designed to have a longer life than that of a single play or production. Was the playhouse a failure and so torn down, was it re-purposed for other forms of entertainment, or did it continue to function as a playhouse?

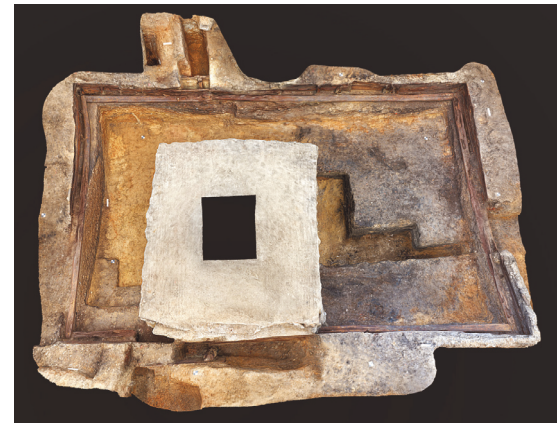
Although referred to as the ‘Red Lion Playhouse’, in line with the literature on the subject, we do not actually know its historical name. Early playhouses were usually named for the area or address they were built at, but not always. This may be why the ‘Red Lion’ as a playhouse is never mentioned again after the 1567 and 1569 lawsuits, even though the evidence indicates that the playhouse complex was redeveloped and re-used through the 17th century. Does it disappear from the records because it was no longer a playhouse, or because it had a different name?

### Archaeological evidence

The timbers uncovered conform to the dimensions and description of the playhouse structures in the 16th-century lawsuits, including the stage, galleries and walls, and provide more information about the form and function of the playhouse.

The archaeological evidence suggests that the entire playhouse complex was rectangular, measuring 30m east to west by 15m north to south. The stage occupied the eastern side, with a space some 12m clear in front of it. An open area beneath the boards was most likely an undercroft that could be used by players to appear onstage, possibly via a trapdoor. Sadly, no evidence remained for the 30ft tower! Double lines of postholes to the west were probably a raised seating area or gallery, whereas a single line of substantial postholes to the north may represent a wall line, probably mirrored on the southern side, which was mostly truncated by later activity.

One of the aspects of further work will be to refine our understanding of these structures: where was the



ABOVE: Still shot from the 3D model produced of the timber structure. The full version is available via Sketchfab at: <https://bit.ly/2CwIF0g>



LEFT: View of the north-east corner of the timber structure during excavation





**ABOVE:** A 17th-century stoneware tavern mug with a Royalist medallion of Charles II, one of many drinking vessels from the site, possibly associated with the development of the Red Lion Inn

entrance; can we identify the opening to the under-stage area; did the playhouse have a roof, or was it in the open air? Once we have fully interrogated the internal structure, we hope to create some reconstructions to allow discussion about how it compares to the European theatre traditions of the 16th century.

How the Red Lion fits into these traditions, and into the catalogue of playing spaces in the UK, is one of the reasons that this find is so significant. As suggested above, the Red Lion playhouse is thought to be the ‘earliest’ in the UK – at least the

earliest structure built solely for the purpose of putting on plays, that was comprised of a stage and galleries. We know of earlier purpose-built stages, such as Rastell’s,<sup>9</sup> but these do not appear to have had other elements we would associate with a playhouse, such as galleried seating. There is, of course, a rich history of playing troupes in the 16th century, and many of them would move from place to place playing in inns, on greens, or whatever venue they could find. What makes the Red Lion playhouse stand out is that, as far as we know, it was built solely as a performance space for these travelling groups.

### Life and longevity

So, the documentary and archaeological evidence suggests that a playhouse complex was built on land associated with the Red Lion farmhouse by 1567. But how long did it stay a playhouse, particularly after Brayne moved on to other projects, and how did its proximity to the Red Lion farmhouse, which itself went through changes as it became a more formal inn, affect its use?

The transition from farmhouse to inn is reflected in the finds’ assemblages. Those contemporary with the construction of the playhouse are of a more domestic nature compared to a massive increase of activity in the late 17th century. This latter period yielded a characteristic ‘leisure’ assemblage, including many objects associated with eating, drinking and smoking. Finds include a huge pottery assemblage of jars, bowls, dishes and plates and a notable quantity of drinking vessels such as cups, tankards, tygs, tavern mugs and gourds. Some examples have tavern/landlord names incised upon them. There was also a vast assemblage of clay tobacco pipe, glass, and objects all indicative of ‘leisure’ activities.

The archaeological evidence also shows the establishment and then rapid transformation of structures in the north-east part of the site, most likely reflecting the transition from farmhouse to inn.

Multiple buildings were constructed in the 16th century including two brick-built cellars, probably used to store beer, that remained in use into the 17th century. Postholes and beam slots set around the cellars indicate a comprehensive complex in the 16th century expanded during the 17th century. This, combined with historical maps and land deeds, make us confident that this is the location of the Red Lion.

What was happening to the playhouse during this transition? The timber structure and associated features show evidence of reworking and repairs/rebuilding through to the early 17th century, with disuse by the mid-17th century, followed by reuse towards the end of the century. My current thinking is that, during the early 17th century, the playhouse could have continued as an entertainment space, now associated with the Red Lion Inn. One potential use is animal-baiting, based on the presence of dog skeletons and the remains of horse meat joints that they were possibly fed (see also Rielly *LA* 15 (11) (2020) 312–19 and Clark letter, this issue).

In the mid-17th century, the archaeological record conforms to the historical narrative of entertainment venues being closed during the Civil War, with a rebuild/reopening occurring in the late 1670s. Our current understanding of the chronology suggests that the playhouse was constructed prior to the conversion of the Red Lion farmhouse to an inn, and it remained in use as a playhouse or baiting structure while this transformation took place. One possible interpretation of the chronology is that the transformation from playhouse to baiting pit, and farmstead to inn, were contemporaneous, charting a significant time of development and change for London’s Mile End.

### What’s next for the project?

Which leads us back to the significance of the find and what happens next? The Post-Excavation Assessment is complete, which means a preliminary (but still extensive!) review of the evidence has been undertaken. Of course, the purpose of this stage is to assess the character of the archaeological evidence, what it can already tell us, and what it has the potential to tell us with further investigation, so there is still much more analysis of the data to come. However, it is clear that the site has enormous significance, and an incredible potential to help us understand this fascinating chapter of London’s archaeology and history ... so watch this space!

### Acknowledgements

UCL Archaeology South-East would like to thank Mount Anvil for funding the project and RPS Consulting for commissioning the work. Contributors to this piece were Stephen White, Emily Johnson, Louise Rayner, Lauren Gibson and Antonio Reis.

1. W Ingram *The Business of Playing: Beginnings of the Adult Professional Theater in Elizabethan London* (1992) 105–10.

2. *Ibid.*

3. H Berry ‘The First Public Playhouses,

Especially the Red Lion’ in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40 No 2 (Summer) (1989) 134; Ingram, *op cit* fn 1, 111.

4. *Ibid.*, 137–8.

5. Ingram, *op cit* fn 1, 147.

6. Berry, *op cit* fn 3, 135.

7. *Ibid.*, 144–5.

8. *Op cit* fn 1, 111.

9. J Dillon ‘John Rastell’s stage’ in *Medieval English Theatre* 18 (1996) 15–45.

Keep up to date with ASE via social media:  
Facebook:  
[www.facebook.com/ArchaeologySouthEast](http://www.facebook.com/ArchaeologySouthEast)  
Twitter:  
[@ArchSouthEast](https://twitter.com/ArchSouthEast)  
Instagram:  
[@archaeologysoutheast](https://www.instagram.com/archaeologysoutheast)