

# Post-medieval brickmaking & brewing in Brick Lane: an excavation at the Truman Brewery Block C, E1

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## Introduction

Between 2014 and 2017 L - P : Archaeology undertook evaluation followed by excavation at the Truman Brewery, London E1 6QL in advance of the redevelopment of Block C in Wilkes Street (Fig 1).<sup>1</sup> The overall fieldwork involved the excavation of three trenches. Trench 1 was located in an open yard at the eastern edge of the site, between a service tunnel and the west wall of Block D. Trench 2 was located in the southern part of the site, against the inside of the western wall of Block C. Trench 3 was excavated near the north-western corner of the site, just outside the Block C footprint.<sup>2</sup>

The fieldwork produced evidence of six periods of activity. Period 1

(c. 1570–1660) was characterised by quarrying and brickmaking, which was followed by housing development in Period 2 (c. 1660–1755). The Truman Brewery was originally established as the Black Eagle Brewery in the 1660s,<sup>3</sup> but its buildings did not extend westwards to the area of investigation until Period 3 (1755–1820) and only absorbed it completely in Period 4 (c. 1820–1855). A major redevelopment of the brewery took place in Period 5 (c. 1855–1970) and Block C was built in Period 6 (c. 1970–2014).

The site geology is London Clay overlain by Taplow Terrace sand and gravel.<sup>4</sup> Overlying deposits of natural brickearth have also been found in the area. The modern ground level of the

site lies at 13.50m OD and the lowest archaeological deposits were recorded at 9.80m OD.

## Historic background

The site lies approximately 800m north-east of the Roman city wall at Bishopsgate. In the Roman period, the site area would have been either open fields or situated within Roman London's eastern cemetery. Stow's survey mentions discoveries of Roman cremation burials in the area.<sup>5</sup>

Post-Roman development extended eastwards beyond the City wall. Settlement grew along the line of modern Whitechapel Road c. 500m to the south of the site and the 12th-century priory hospital of the Blessed

Virgin Mary without Bishopsgate was established c. 380m to the west of it.<sup>6</sup> In the early 16th century, the site continued to be open land within Lollesworth Field, which was leased to the hospital and used as a pasture.<sup>7</sup> The Reformation Parliament of 1529 agreed to the dissolution of monasteries and the priory was seized in 1539.<sup>8</sup> Lollesworth Field was sold and from 1576 it was quarried for clay used in local brick-making.<sup>9</sup>

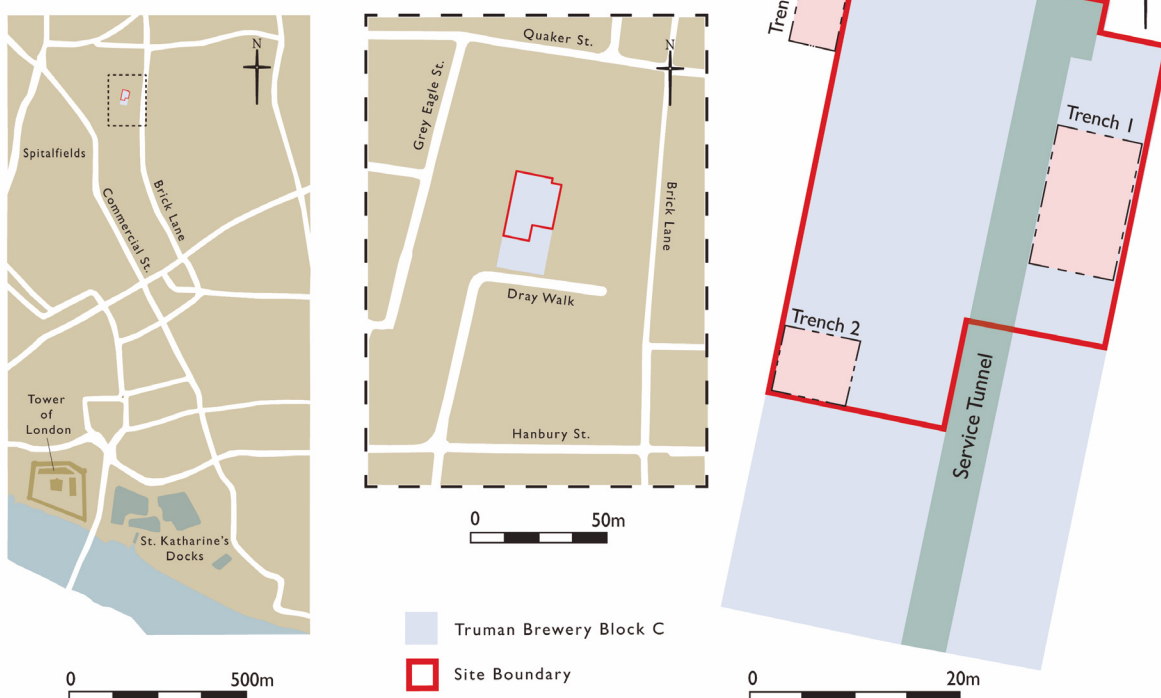


Fig 1: site location showing (a) general position in East London, (b) site vicinity and (c) the development and excavation trenches 1–3

Brick Lane, situated about 60m to the east of the site, is commonly believed to have gained its name from local clay quarrying and brick manufacturing before the fields were urbanised in the mid-17th century. Roadside development is thought to have included a small brewhouse established by Thomas Bucknall.

After its acquisition by Joseph Truman in 1679, the brewhouse began to flourish and expand, becoming the largest beer producer in the country by the mid-19th century.<sup>10</sup> The brewery closed in 1989 and the disused buildings were converted into bars, shops and offices.<sup>11</sup>

**Period 1: quarrying and brickmaking (c. 1570–1660)**

Although Brick Lane is depicted on the 'Agas' map of c. 1562 as nothing more than a dirt track through fields, its use and importance increased as the East End population grew to c. 50,000 by 1630.<sup>12</sup> Documentary accounts mention the existence of 'lompettes', and 'tilehouselands' in the fields between Shoreditch and Cambridge Heath Road, presumably referring to quarrying and the production of building materials for new housing.<sup>13</sup> The clay quarrying removed evidence of earlier activity and cut into the underlying geology, whose truncated surface was observed between 9.80m and 10.50m OD across the three excavation areas.

Clay extraction appears to have been undertaken horizontally rather than by localised pitting. These large quarries contained horizontal backfills sealing the truncated ground surface. Quarried surface [134] in Trench 3 was disturbed by hoof prints, indicating that the quarried material may have been transported across the site by draft animals, possibly by horses or oxen, depending on the weight of the loads (Fig 2). While no cart-wheel ruts were observed, this may be due to the limited size of the excavation area.

The quarry base was sealed by a compacted deposit of crushed bricks, ceramic tiles, lumps of burnt clay and ashes [133]. Micromorphological analysis concluded that the inclusions had been subjected to very high temperatures, and probably represented clamp waste or the remains of a kiln located nearby.<sup>14</sup> The clean interface



Fig 2: quarry surface [134] showing hoof prints in Trench 3 (Period 1); view looking south

at the base of the quarry indicated that it was not left open and exposed to the elements for long before backfilling began.

Quarry pit [26] in Trench 1 was backfilled with sand and gravel overlain by redeposited construction debris and dumps of domestic waste. The sequence suggests that the quarrying was contemporary with development in the vicinity and that the disused quarries were used for general rubbish disposal before being built on.

Pottery sherds and pipe fragments recovered from the quarry backfills can only be broadly dated, though two

sherds of a jug and a flask dated to 1600–50 were recovered from domestic dump [44] at the relatively low level of 10.30m OD in the sequence of backfills. A pipe bowl from Trench 2 rubbish spread [103] at 10.70m OD is dated to 1610–40. These finds suggest that the quarrying, dumping and backfilling took place relatively late in the period and just before residential development of the site.

**Period 2: Wheler's estate (c. 1660–1755)**

Much of Lollesworth Field was occupied by shops, workshops and crowded working-class housing by

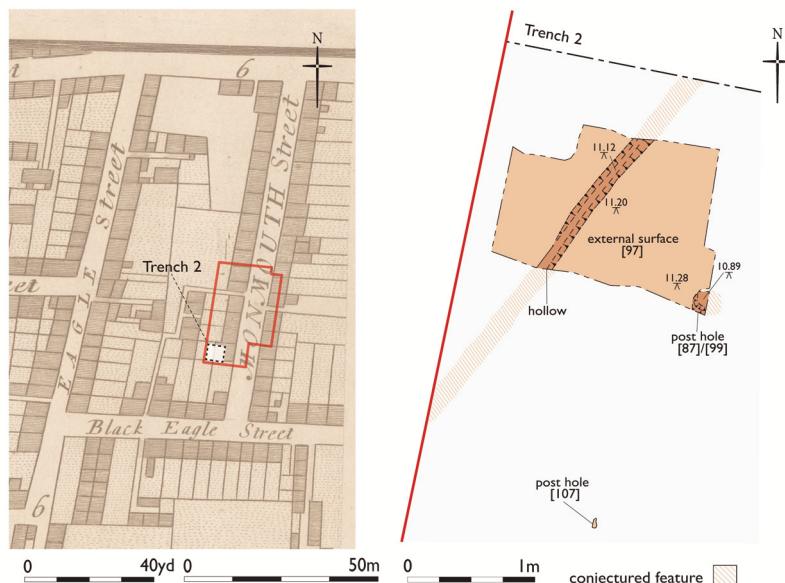
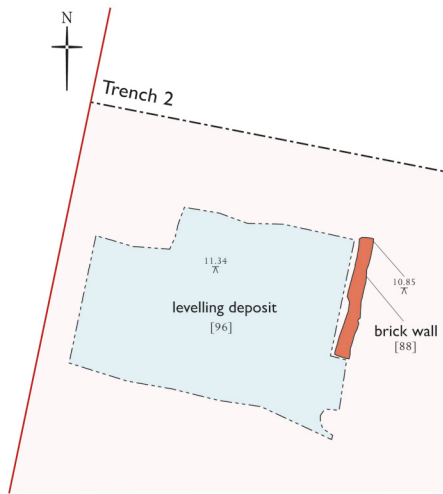


Fig 3: (a) Ogilby and Morgan's map of 1677 showing the Wheler's estate and Monmouth Street (© British Library Board: Maps Crace Port. 2.61); (b) external surface [97] and north-east/south-west aligned hollow in Trench 2 (Period 2) in the backyard of a property on the west side of Monmouth Street



**Fig 4: (a) Horwood's Plan of the Cities of London dated to 1792-99 showing Wilkes Street housing and the brewery to the east (© British Library Board: Maps Crace Port. 5.174); (b) rubbish pit [88] and levelling deposit [96] in Trench 2 (Period 3) associated with a property on the east side of Wilkes Street**

1680, when the East End population had grown to c. 140,000.<sup>15</sup> The Ogilby and Morgan map of 1677 (Fig 3a) shows the extent of the Wheler estate in the vicinity of the site. The streets were laid out in the 1660s by the mariner John Stott on a plot of land known as the Longhedge Field.<sup>16</sup>

The only firm evidence of this early occupation was recorded in Trench 2 where a deliberately compacted clay make-up [100] was overlain by clay hardstanding [97] to form a surface at 11.20m OD. Surface [97] was cut by a north-east/south-west aligned hollow c. 80mm deep (Fig 3b). It is likely that this sequence was located on the grounds of a residential property in the area of the 'dog leg' back alley shown on the 1677 map and later known as Hockenhull Court. This may have been a yard area, with the hollow associated with domestic or workshop activity. Two posts, recorded as [87]/[99] and [107], were roughly aligned with the hollow but their purpose is unclear.

**Period 3: Wilke's estate and the expansion of the brewery (c. 1755-1820)**

Documentary sources dated to the 1730s refer to the derelict state of the Quaker Street housing, located c. 80m to the north of the site, and localised rebuilding programmes.<sup>17</sup> It was most likely the poor condition of the Wheler's estate that eventually led to the redevelopment of the area in the mid-18th century. Nathaniel Wilkes granted a lease to the bricklayer John Lorrington, allowing Wilkes Street to be

constructed in the area of Hockenhull Court in c. 1755. Substantial terraces of houses were built along Wilkes Street and are depicted on Horwood's 1790s map (Fig 4a).<sup>18</sup>

Trench 2's evidence for changes to the street layout began with a levelling of the surface at c. 11.20m OD and the deposition of a c. 150mm-thick deposit of demolition rubble [96] (Fig 4b). Redeposited 17th-century pottery, clay tobacco pipes and medieval floor tiles were recovered from the rubble, suggesting that it came from a variety of sources.

A brick-lined sunken feature [88] survived in the form of a 1.4m long and 0.7m high north-south oriented wall of plain unfrosted bricks that would have originally formed the western side of a rubbish pit. The pit had been backfilled with domestic and industrial waste, with fill [91] including glass and pottery as well as ash and clinker. Four green glass

wine bottle sherds dated the fill to the late 18th to early 19th centuries.

The 18th-century brewery continued to expand along the western side of Brick Lane as the growing demand for porter saw production increase to over 60,000 barrels a year by 1760.<sup>19</sup> Although Horwood's map suggests that the brewery buildings occupied the eastern part of the site, by that time no associated remains were encountered in Trench 1.

**Period 4: expansion and encroachment (1820s-1850s)**

By the mid-19th century, the brewery's production was on course to make it the largest of its kind, and continuing success necessitated further expansion.<sup>20</sup>

Monmouth Street, which ran north-south across the eastern part of the site, was encroached on by the expanding brewery and covered with new buildings between 1819 and 1826.<sup>21</sup> Archaeological evidence shows that the new brewery buildings extended westwards into the backyards of the Wilkes Street properties.

Two east-west oriented pier walls



**Fig 5: 1830s lithograph of large fermenting vats on the site of the Brick Lane brewery (© British Library Board: Document Supply Wq1/5735)**



**Fig 6: the mid-19th century Wilkes Street frontage of Truman Brewery's, view looking south; photo taken in 1955 (© London Metropolitan Archives, City of London)**

[94] and [119], both resting on substantial concrete bases, were recorded in Trench 2 and can be associated with this phase of brewery expansion (not illustrated). The walls lay c. 4m apart, their bases located at c. 10.20m OD. Associated floor levels were truncated. The walls may have been buttresses marking the westernmost limit of the brewery at the time. Contemporary foundations were not encountered in Trench 3 to the north, which is thought to have lain just to the west of the brewery buildings.

Pier [94] was truncated by a large V-shaped, concrete-lined, east–west aligned cutting [85] measuring at least 3.5m wide and over 1.2m deep. The feature may represent a sump or overspill drain for a vertical vat similar to those seen in a contemporary lithograph of large stilt-mounted vats (Fig 5). The sump would have held a pipe draining brewing dregs from the centre of the vat's base on to the working floor.

Drainage ran east to an internal collection drain and then south to connect to the Black Eagle Street sewer. Although Beck's 1843 sewer map<sup>22</sup> (not illustrated) shows that there was a closer sewer beneath Wilkes

Street, access may have been blocked by a terrace of roadside housing.

#### **Period 5: modernisation and replacement of the old brewery buildings (c. 1855–1970)**

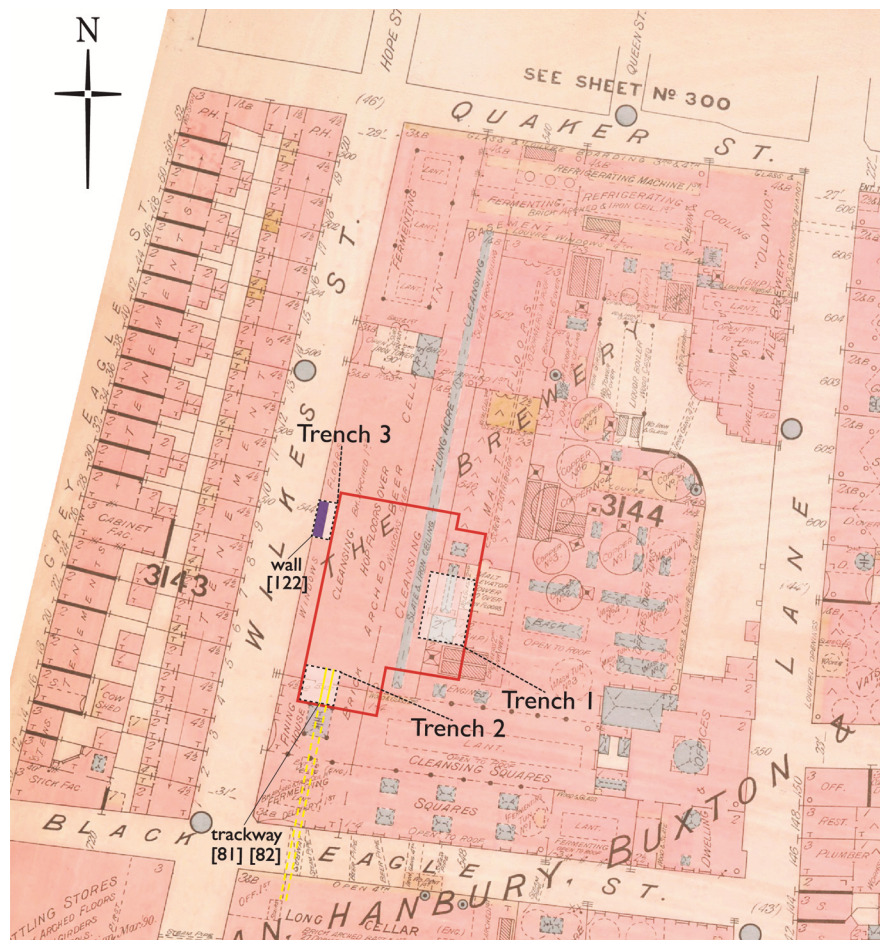
Brewery production had reached 400,000 barrels per year by the mid-19th century.<sup>23</sup> The Wilkes Street terraces were demolished between 1855 and 1858 to create space for the next stage of the brewery's expansion, the new building described as 'an impressive example of industrial architecture'. Its front elevation was constructed of yellow brick with mortar dressings and massive pilasters resting on concrete plinths and rising two storeys high, which divided the facade into equal bays with a large central gate (Fig 6).<sup>24</sup>

The external wall [122] (c. 1m-thick) was preserved in Trench 3, the location corresponding with that shown on the Goad insurance plan of 1890 (Fig 7). The wall was set on a massive concrete foundation [127] with a base

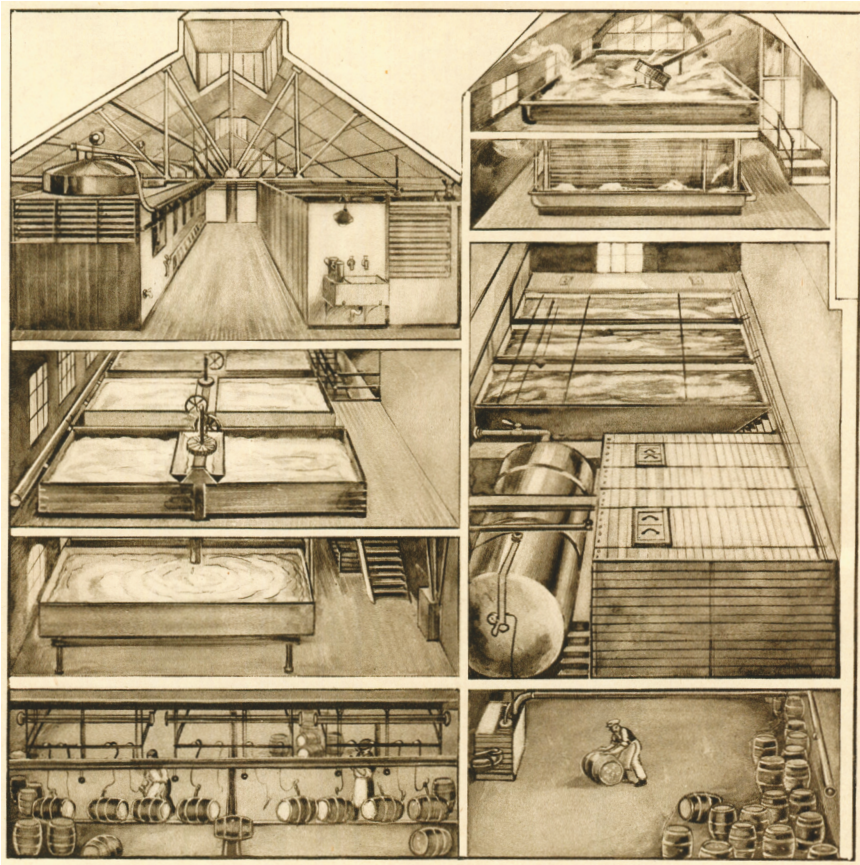
at c. 9.80m OD. This substantial structure was needed to support two levels of heavy machinery, the weight of the large holding tanks and their liquid contents.

As part of this major rebuilding programme, the earlier drainage trench [85] was levelled with demolition rubble [84] in preparation for a concrete floor, a part of which is still in use in the basements of a commercial property immediately to the south of the site. The subterranean working surface [80]/[123] was recorded at 11.90m OD in Trench 3, dropping to 11.50m OD in Trench 2 c. 20 metres to the south.

Two rails of an iron trackway [81] and [82] were recorded in Trench 2, embedded 0.30m apart in floor [80] (see Fig 7). The rails were probably part of a triple-rail trackway about 0.60m wide that was used to move beer barrels within the brewery. The tracks likely continued to the beer stores south of Black Eagle Street, where the Goad's plan clearly marks a 'subway'. A twisted rail recovered from later demolition



**Fig 7: Goad's 1890 fire insurance map showing the Block C development located in the area of the brewery where final liquids were cleaned, fining was added for clarity and the result put into casks. A north–south trackway was used to move beer barrels to storage rooms south of Black Eagle Street (Period 5). (© British Library Board: Maps 145.b.22.(.11))**



**Fig 8:** drawings issued as a supplement to *The Black Eagle* magazine, published by Truman Hanbury & Buxton in 1931, show brewery activities in the development area, including cleaning beer and filling casks before they are rolled along a track (bottom left) to storage (Courtesy of The National Brewery Centre)

backfill [124] in Trench 3 may indicate a northbound continuation of the trackway. Contemporary illustrations of the brewery show casks being moved along similar trackways (Fig 8).

**Period 6: the construction of Block C (1970s–2014)**

The final phase of redevelopment at the site took place in the early 1970s as the demand for traditional types of beer declined and lager became more popular; necessitating a substantial modernisation of the brewing facilities.<sup>25</sup> Block C was constructed within the site area to support even larger vats and filtered beer tanks, each holding 14,400 gallons of lager.

Block C was built around a concrete-encased steel frame sitting on deep piles. The earlier brewery floor [80]/[123] was used as a temporary piling platform during construction. A layer of tarmac covered the 19th-century iron tracks [81] and [82], reflecting the shift to use of forklifts or hand trolleys for the movement of goods. Block C was demolished in 2014 to allow the current development.

**Conclusion**

Up to 3.5m of archaeological strata dating from the 17th century onwards were preserved on the Truman Brewery Block C site. The three excavated trenches provided a limited opportunity to examine the archaeological sequence, including earlier phases of

the brewery buildings. The findings have improved our understanding of the use of the site, which was initially dominated by quarrying, later became a residential area and was finally taken over by an expanding brewery operation that became one of the largest breweries in the world in the second half of the 19th century.

The fieldwork has shown that 17th-century clay quarrying took place over a short period of time, starting just before residential development in the area and continuing alongside it (Period 1). The quarries probably supplied brick kilns located nearby. The disused quarries were used for the dumping of large amounts of material that included general landfill, domestic rubbish and construction debris.

Two phases of residential development took place between the late 17th century and early 19th century (Periods 2 and 3). The new housing estates would have been occupied by families of migrant workers and craftsmen living in crowded conditions (Fig 9). Courtyards like Hockenhill Court were comprised of buildings arranged tightly around a yard.

A single property would have housed several families, perhaps even a family per room, with shared sanitation facilities on the ground floor. Unfortunately, a lot of the details that might have shown the evolution of these residential quarters was lost to the construction and expansion of the brewery. It is hard to imagine the daily difficulties faced by the poor inhabitants



**Fig 9:** children of working-class families in the East End in c. 1900 (© Museum of London)

of these streets or what they thought of the brewery that slowly but inevitably absorbed their properties and hastened the breakup of their communities.<sup>26</sup>

The brewery encroached on the surrounding streets and houses in a series of expansions, occupying all or part of the current development site from the mid-18th century onwards (Periods 4–6). Associated structural remains reflect the brewery's growth and success as well as its eventual decline. During its 19th-century heyday, the brewery extended over six acres of land and had 'the appearance of a town itself than of a private manufacturing establishment'.<sup>27</sup>

Keeping up with the changing tastes of British consumers wasn't an easy task as each new trend required substantial expansion and modernisation of the brewing facilities in line with the newest technological advances. As demands evolved from porter to ale and lager, rebuilding programmes and installation of new equipment had to be prompt if the brewery were to maintain its strong position in the market.

While competition intensified, new business opportunities also arose, reflected by changing advertising campaigns and promotions (Fig 10). Despite political upheavals, wars, social reforms, changes in taxation and imports, the Truman brand not only survived, but thrived. This long history of success began to change after Truman's merger with Grand

Metropolitan Hotels Ltd in 1971. The strategic acquisition of the brewery turned out to be less profitable than expected and production at the Brick Lane site finally ended in 1989.

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Fig 10: a 1951 Festival of Britain poster emphasised the longstanding tradition and prestige of Truman's beer (© British Library Board: General Reference Collection 010349.m.34)

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6. British Historic Towns Atlas – a map of Medieval London shows London between 1270 and 1300. The map is based on the map of London c. 1270 which appeared in the Atlas of London up to 1520, but has been revised to take into account modern historical and archaeological discoveries: see <http://www.historictownsatlas.org.uk/> and <https://www.layersoflondon.org> [accessed 27 July 2021].

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23. *Op cit* fn 10, 33.

24. *Op cit* fn 20.

25. *Op cit* fn 11, 10.

26. Horace Warner's book *Spitalfields Nippers*, first published in 1912, contains photographs that reflect the hardship and poverty of life in the East End. The images are also available from *Spitalfields Life* at <https://tinyurl.com/43kmcchz> [accessed 27 July 2021].

27. *Op cit* fn 10, 33.