

Looking to the future at the Royal Mint site

The possible redevelopment of the Royal Mint site has caused this review of earlier excavations, conducted by the DGLA in the 1980s. The discovery of part of a Black Death cemetery and the remains of a Cistercian abbey then, makes the site's future one of interest now.



A new Chinese Embassy has been proposed for the Royal Mint site, East Smithfield, E1. Tower Hamlets councillors have raised concerns that the plans to build secure basements and underground meeting rooms will disturb burials and the Abbey's foundations. Founded by Edward III in 1350 on the site of the Black Death cemetery, the Abbey of St Mary Graces became one of the richest and most powerful Cistercian Houses in Britain. It both oversaw the discipline and morals of the Cistercian Order in Britain and provided relief for the poor. The Dissolution caused the Abbey to be closed in 1538. Soon after, the site was used as a Victualling Yard by the Royal Navy until 1740, and it was then occupied by Government warehouses until it was cleared for the new Royal Mint in 1799.

Evidence for the burials and the Abbey of St Mary Graces was found between June and August 1984 when the DGLA (the former Greater London unit) carried out trial work just east of the Tower of London at the former Royal Mint site – a summary was published in *London Archaeologist*.¹ A trial excavation of the 2-hectare (5-acre) site, formerly occupied by the Cistercian Abbey, sought to establish how much of the abbey had survived. That trial work confirmed that archaeological deposits including extensive burials and buildings were present.

In June 1986, large-scale excavations by the DGLA began and continued until June 1988, uncovering evidence for extensive Roman quarrying and possible boundary ditches. Some areas were sealed by

medieval levelling deposits of clay or broken roof tiles, into which were cut burials dating to the emergency burial ground of 1349 for victims of the Black Death.²

The Black Death was able to spread rapidly across great distances and it was fatal in many cases. Records show that the epidemic reached London by November 1348, peaked between February and April and was on the wane by the end of May 1349. It then progressed north. The City authorities faced a problem with what to do with the rising number of deaths and established two extramural burial grounds – one at West and the other at East Smithfield.³

Excavations at the Royal Mint showed that there were two distinct areas of Black Death mass burials. They were clustered in three mass burial trenches and 14 rows of graves. The remains of 762 individuals were recovered. The corpses were placed up to five deep in the trenches, with a mix of coffins, shrouds or everyday clothing judging from the finds of buckles and brooches. Almost all the burials were supine and orientated east–west, except for a few prone or crouched examples in the burial trenches.⁴

Some 230 bodies had been interred in coffins. Coffins and finds appeared to be evenly distributed between trenches and graves, suggesting that the different burial methods were not determined by social considerations, but were possibly due to the fluctuating mortality rates during the plague. They represented a mixed population group, with a good spread of both sexes and all age groups, providing an interesting view of the mid-14th-century population.

A large burial ground was also associated with the later Cistercian Abbey of St Mary Graces (1350–1540). It covered a substantial area and revealed 420 burials, which were clustered in two groups – in the churchyard and abbey buildings. The inhumations within the churchyard lay north of the church and extended westwards where burials overlaid the earlier western Black Death cemetery. The burials followed a standard medieval Christian style of burial and appeared to have no particular differentiation in social status. The skeletal data for both have been recorded on the Centre for Human Biology database.⁵

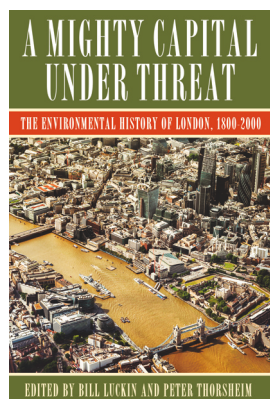
It is estimated that approximately 40–50% of the cemetery is still *in situ* below the Royal Mint's

TOP The Royal Mint
© Julie Cookson
(CC BY-SA 2.0)

BELOW Burials in one of the mass burial trenches
© Museum of London



A Mighty Capital Under Threat: the environmental history of London, 1800–2000



Bill Luckin and Peter Thorsheim (eds)

University of Pittsburgh Press

2020

288 pages, 12 figs & photos, 9 maps

ISBN: 978-0-8229-4610-6

£35

Reviewed by Gustav Milne

The London we know today can trace its direct roots back to the modest settlement developed on the Thames in the late 9th century by Alfred the Great. In spite of fires, plague and foreign invasions, it became a capital city, the largest and most prosperous in the land. But size alone is not always a measure of success, as this volume shows. *A Mighty Capital Under Threat* contains nine essays looking at the period when the population of London (or Greater London as it would now be called) increased from 1 m in the 1801 census, to an astonishing 6.25m by 1901, and reached 7.1m by 2001.

These studies focus on the 'array of emergent self-generated environmental threats' that beset a city which expanded faster than its ability to secure clean water, clean air, adequate disposal systems for waste water or refuse; or to contain industrial pollution, provide adequate housing and urban green space for all of its large population. During these centuries, those environmental problems led to unhealthy living conditions for many, leading to cholera outbreaks and other contributors to unnecessarily high mortality

rates. Nevertheless, high levels of inward migration ensured the population continued to grow.

The deteriorating conditions were exacerbated by a lack of good governance: the period under study opens in an era of 'laissez-faire localism' with the administrative burden laid on the shoulders of individual ecclesiastical parishes. The great urban sprawl was really no more than a forced conjunction of villages and small towns, often with their own independent approach to environmental matters. Only in 1855, when the Metropolis Management Act, with its Metropolitan Board of Works, was established, could city-wide improvements be contemplated across the new vestries.

This structure was dissolved in 1888, to be replaced by the London County Council, but even that body was initially unable to protect water quality or contain air pollution across the capital among other problems. Change for the better rarely came proactively from the authorities, but only after external persuasion and protracted negotiation.

In addition to the contributions by Bill Luckin and Peter Thorsheim, there are chapters by leading authorities on the process of urban growth, water supply, industrial pollution, urban green space and on the development of the concepts of environmentalism itself. Taken together, these Anthropocene studies show how one growing conurbation of unparalleled size initially misunderstood or ignored the environmental consequences of its expansion.

It's a sobering but, hopefully, instructive lesson in a post-COP26 world. For the first time in human history, more people live in towns than in rural communities. With a projected global population rise from 7.2bn to 9.6bn by 2050, many new towns are being built. They say that all history teaches is that nobody learns from the lessons that history teaches. Hopefully all those interested in urbanisation, especially town planners, will read this volume and take heed.

courtyard. Any future development might necessitate further excavation of the Black Death cemetery and aspects of the abbey complex.

The Greater London Archaeological Advisory Service has acknowledged that the site's archaeology is important and it is in the same Tier 1 Archaeological Priority Area as the Tower of London, while the former Royal Mint building itself is Grade II* listed. An Historic England spokesperson has said:

Historic England's Greater London Archaeology Advisory Service (GLAAS) has been working with the applicants and the local planning authority to manage the significant archaeology at the Royal Mint Court site as part of a current planning application.

All parties acknowledge the national importance of the archaeology of the Black Death cemetery and the preserved remains of the Abbey of St Mary Graces, as

well as the need to sympathetically manage the later heritage of the site. We welcome the principle of creating a public heritage centre at the site that can present and interpret its rich past, alongside additional measures that can bring an important part of London's story to the public.

We do not envisage extensive archaeological excavations as a result of any future planning consent for the scheme. This is because the applicants have sought to re-use existing structures in many key parts of the site, rather than build afresh. If any further fieldwork is appropriate as part of a planning permission, then it will be agreed and monitored by GLAAS. We would expect that the results would also feed into the wider heritage outreach programme around any consented development.



South-east corner of the Abbey's Chapter House
© Museum of London

1. P Mills 'The Royal Mint: First Results' *London Archaeol* 5 (3) (1985), 69–77.

2. I Grainger, D Hawkins with P Falcini & P Mills 'Excavations at the Royal Mint site 1986–1988' *London Archaeol* 5 (16) (1988), 429–36.

3. D Keene *The Black Death Cemetery: East Smithfield, London* reviewed in *Trans London & Middlesex*

Archaeol Soc 59 (2008), 243–5.

4. See the full excavation reports: I Grainger, D Hawkins, L Cowal, R Mikulski *The Black Death cemetery, East Smithfield, London* MoLAS Monogr 43 (2008); I Grainger, C Phillpotts *The Cistercian abbey of St Mary the Graces, East Smithfield, London* MOLA Monogr 44 (2011).

5. A summary of the results of the skeletal analyses from

the Black Death burials in the East Smithfield cemetery can be found in the Centre for Human Biology database. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3n7watvc> [accessed 17 February 2022]. And a summary of the results of the skeletal analyses from the Abbey of St Mary Graces in the same database is available at: <https://tinyurl.com/57t3rh5d> [accessed 17 February 2022].