

The London Guildhall: an Archaeological History of a Neighbourhood from Early Medieval to Modern Times

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The heart of City Government from its establishment in the 12th century until the present-day, the Guildhall of the City of London remains perhaps our best link with the medieval city. This extensive history is, for the first time, considered in its entirety in this volume, an archaeological history of its site from the earliest post-Roman occupation until the present day. Given the significance of the Guildhall it is surprising that the only previous scholarly work to consider it is Caroline Barron's 1974 *The Medieval Guildhall of London*.⁽¹⁾ This publication is undoubtedly a natural successor to that earlier volume: indeed Professor Barron has acted as academic consultant to this study, and many of her original conclusions are borne out by the excavations detailed here.

The funding of archaeological work has always been a precarious subject, with the interpretation and publication of findings often relying on a combination of statutory obligations and goodwill from developers. Thus recent publications from the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) have, for example, included a monograph on St Mary Merton, funded by Sainsbury's, who now occupy its site.⁽²⁾ However, other recent works have reflected a trend to assess and collate earlier excavations in conjunction with newer projects in order to provide definitive volumes on major London topics, notably London Bridge.⁽³⁾ While the City of London Corporation naturally provided a suitably generous sponsor for this publication, the authors have adopted this approach of providing a 'total archaeology', documenting not only the excavation of the site of the Guildhall Art Gallery (1985–99) but bringing together findings from all digs and site recordings within the 'block' containing the Guildhall, hence the subtitle – 'An Archaeological History of a Neighbourhood'. Such is the scale of the resultant work that not only does this publication come in two volumes, with an supplementary CD-ROM, but a complementary publication considering the area in the Roman era has now been published to complete coverage of the site.⁽⁴⁾

While the Guildhall itself is of course at the heart of the study, there are in fact two stories told in parallel, that of the Guildhall as a structure, and that of the surrounding neighbourhood –representing a microcosm of the development of the city at large. The text is quite neatly divided into the two volumes, the first

presenting a chronological narrative through 18 distinct archaeological phases, each one considering separately the development of the Guildhall structure, the surrounding tenements, lanes and the churches of St Lawrence Jewry and St Michael Bassishaw. The second volume, by contrast, provides a thematic interpretation and summary not only of the evidence for the Guildhall and the other notable structures, but also specialist analysis of street patterns, craft activities, everyday life as inferred from finds in domestic structures and of burials.

With regards to the Guildhall itself, an original foundation date of between 1120 and 1130 is argued by uniting unspecific documentary references with observed development of the access lane from the south and evidence of an earlier recess in the north wall of the west crypt, which itself had been dated to c.1300 by Barron. Several further clarifications and confirmations of Barron's original conclusions are made, for example excavation of the Chapel, construction of which had been dated to the 1290s, was found to be contemporary with the reconstructed Guildhall of the 14th century. This stage of the Guildhall is identified as a reconstruction of the earliest structure, featuring the insertion of vaulting, creating a five bay undercroft, rather than six bay as previously thought, used by the court of Husting, and an upper chamber divided into two rooms for the Courts of Common Council and of the Mayor. The west side of the Guildhall Yard was also found to have been walled, all the way to the gatehouse which faced onto Cat Street, while the yard itself was first metalled at this time with gravel, but its south-east corner bore evidence of being used as a temporary workshop for the building works. Further 14th century works discussed include the construction of a porch allowing access to the upper floor of the Guildhall, and a further porch serving the college of priests installed to the south, which also provided access to the lower floor of the Guildhall.

The most interesting phase of the Guildhall, as recounted in great depth by Barron, is the rebuilding which commenced in 1411 under mason John Croxtone. The authors admit, however, that 'recent archaeological excavations have added little to our understanding' and the chronology and interpretation presented is largely that of Barron's original account. Nonetheless many details conjectured in 1974 are elaborated, such as the reuse of the old Guildhall undercroft to become the west crypt, and especially the demolition of the old chapel, the location of which had hitherto only been estimated by virtue of the fact that it had been demolished as part of these works. Excavated adjoining the south-east corner of the old Guildhall, its north aisle was evidently demolished prior to the license to do so obtained in 1430, while the south aisle was retained during reconstruction. Notable observations include the fact the porch was complete before the body of the 15th-century Guildhall, correcting the commonly held option, derived from Stow, that it was the last stage of construction. Perhaps the most notable discovery, however, pertains to the foundations of the new chapel, laid in or around 1440, after the demolition of this last section of the old chapel. Two stones were found at the base of these foundations, at a considerable depth, uniquely painted with the names, in ornate blackletter script, of two aldermen who had been appointed to supervise the construction of the chapel in 1442, Henry Frowyk and Thomas Knolles. These intricate 'foundation stones', each illustrated on the cover of one of the volumes, are interpreted as representative of a dedication ceremony at the commencement of building work, reminiscent of first-brick laying ceremonies conducted by modern dignitaries. Comparisons are made with a similar recorded ceremony at St Stephen Walbrook in 1429, but no other such stones have been found from such contexts.

Further 15th-century developments, including the famous library, founded by John Carpenter as executor of Richard Whittington, are discussed in detail. Deep foundations meeting a latrine at the west end confirm Stow's description of a two storey building standing the south of the chapel, but show that its entrance was at the east end facing the private college precinct rather than being an integral part of the Guildhall yard, which may come as some surprise to students of the medieval library.⁽⁵⁾ The post-medieval history of the Guildhall complex is also considered, albeit in considerably less detail, understandably given that only relatively minor building works were to take place prior to the early 19th century. Rebuilding work following the Great Fire is described merely as 'an engineering as opposed to architectural task'. Of singular note was the new porch, which is reconstructed here primarily from antiquarian evidence, as is the restored chapel. Further coverage of 18th-century renovations and additions, primarily by George Dance, are again covered primarily through the evidence of paintings and drawings.

Another important structure discussed is Blackwell Hall, which appeared from the early 13th century as a buttressed stone hall in private occupation. Purchased from the de Bankwell family (from which it derives its name) by the City in 1395, it was established as a cloth market. Little remains known about this building until its reconstruction in 1588, again documented by Stow, for the archaeological work considered only revealed a handful of its piers, some evidently reused from the medieval structure, and a well. Rebuilt after the Great Fire, it survived until 1820, when it was demolished along with the chapel – 18th-century drawings are again used to complete the picture.

Neighbouring the Guildhall site to the south-west was the church of St Lawrence Jewry, dated to the 11th century by graves of c.1050 and an initial stone structure of c.1080, it took its appellation from the neighbouring stone houses occupied by Jews in the 12th century. Detailed chronologies of the expansion and rebuilding of this church are provided, telling a story of increasingly complex division of space until the reformation, followed by post-fire reconstruction of the present open preaching space. Interesting finds include a shell used as a palette for red paint, evidently used in pre-Reformation decoration of the church. Excavation has allowed considerably more detailed consideration of the churchyard, located to the north, and presently part of the Guildhall Yard. Favourable conditions allowed survival of an usual number of burials, many complete with coffins and boards, providing an almost unique insight into medieval burial practice. Graves were shallow, and two thirds showed evidence of coffins or boards – one even yielded preserved evidence of a shroud. Extensive analysis is provided including reconstructions and statistical comparison of burial techniques. The church of St Michael Bassishaw, located to the north, is also included within the study, but in noticeably less detail.

Details of buildings for private occupation provide the final part of this neighbourhood 'jigsaw'. Perhaps most interesting are the analyses of tenements identified as belonging to Jews prior to the expulsion of 1290. The tenement located directly to the east of the site of the main gatehouse of the Guildhall complex was found to contain a *mikveh*, or ritual bath, dating to the time of the construction of a stone house in the mid 12th century. The whole range of buildings on the Cat Street frontage have been identified from a grant in Husting, but disappointingly no positive archaeological evidence for Jewish occupation appears to have been possible. The lives of other occupants of the area are documented through evidence of commerce and craft, confirming through off-cuts and other waste a dominance of metalworking, skinning, and leatherworking trades. The latter is especially well recorded through the survival of over 600 samples, all of which are recorded in the supplied appendices and tables. Detailed consideration is given of the inns which appeared on Cat Street from the 15th century, their development prompted by the importance of the Guildhall and Blackwell Hall as 'nodal points' of the city. The earliest of these, the Saracen's Head, later the White Lion, was located directly adjacent to the Guildhall gatehouse, on the site of the earlier Jewish house with the *mikveh*, but does not appear to have incorporated anything of the earlier structure.

The final chapter includes detailed technical reports and analyses of all categories of finds from the sites, ranging from burials to beetles. In contrast to many previous archaeological texts, this section of the book is largely bereft of tabular data, which is instead included on the enclosed CD-ROM in Microsoft Word and

Excel files. While this allows the physical size of the already weighty set of volumes to be restrained somewhat, and represents a major improvement in terms of accessibility over the inclusion of microfiches, sometimes used for this purpose, one does worry whether data supplied in this way will remain accessible into the future, as the proprietary formats, and indeed CD-ROMs themselves will inevitably be superseded in time. Nonetheless, the provision of these tables, primarily detailing pottery and botanical finds, offers a useful source of data for those experts using such information while representing a suitable compromise in allowing the books to remain of manageable proportions.

Throughout the book archaeological details are elucidated by reference to documentary sources, for example confirming the relationship between the private chapel of St Mary, attached to Blackwell Hall, and its conversion from a synagogue serving the Jewish houses to the south on Cat Street in the 12th century. While this approach is necessary to provide a coherent narrative, it does make for a rather untidy division between the chronological and thematic volumes of the publication, with considerable overlap and some repetition between them. However, as a reference book, this provides the benefit of making both sections readable independently. I would suggest that while the first volume contains immense detail, it is more suited to an archaeological audience, while the second volume contains sufficient narrative within its interpretation to serve as the first point-of-call for the historian.

In terms of interest for the historian, while this publication offers a wealth of detail, it might be apparent by now that there are few major new discoveries offered, those of most note possibly being the evidence of the stone-laying ceremony, and the analysis of burial practice. Likewise, few new insights into the role of the Guildhall in the operation of civic government are presented. The opportunity to do so is, of course, largely limited by the fact that the medieval Guildhall is so well documented, as demonstrated in Barron's earlier work. While, for example, the operation and location of the major courts – the Court of Husting, of Common Council and of the Mayor – were already known, we do gain insight into the processes by which their operation is likely to have been accommodated during the rebuilding of the Guildhall. Likewise, confirmation is offered of the relationship between the phases of rebuilding and the vacillations of the City's relationship with the Crown. Perhaps the greatest insight gained from this work is, however, the way in which the Guildhall as a structure is contextualised. Seen in splendid isolation in most academic studies, it is often possible to perceive great medieval buildings as 'set apart' from the busy, often dirty, life of the city that surrounded them, yet here we see that for much of its history, the Guildhall was largely hidden away from view within its crowded precinct, surrounded by 'common or garden' tenements housing noisy metalworkers, and skinnners whose civic pride ran so short that they used its yard as a dumping ground for the carcasses of skinned cats!

Overall this study is unquestionably comprehensive in both its archaeological and historical interpretation; even though it's concluding remarks describe it as 'inevitably partial and selective'. There is no doubt that it serves extremely well as an updated de-facto reference on the London Guildhall. The team of authors have been successful in combining their respective specialist fields to yield a book that remains readable throughout for the reader whose knowledge may cover only certain aspects of its remit, or indeed the non-specialist willing to take the time to get used to archaeological conventions and terminology (which are well explained in a comprehensive glossary). Both volumes are lavishly illustrated throughout, not only with copious maps, architectural reconstructions and photographs, often in colour, but also with numerous fold-out A3 watercolours depicting the site at numerous intervals throughout its development. Organisation, while sometimes, probably inevitably, repetitive, is always logical, allowing the reader to both follow the narrative, and to access specialist data in a coherent manner. The tension between the genres of the technical reference and the narrative history that I have alluded to does not, however, detract from the value of the publication. Fundamentally it lives up to its title of *An Archaeological History of a Neighbourhood* and is relevant not only to historians and archaeologists with interest in the City of London and its government, but to all students of medieval ecclesiastical, economic and social history.

Notes

1. Caroline M. Barron and Terry Ball, *The Medieval Guildhall of London* (London, 1974).[Back to \(1\)](#)
 2. Pat Miller and David Saxby, *The Augustinian Priory of St Mary Merton, Surrey Excavations 1976–90* (London, 2007).[Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. Bruce Watson, Trevor Brigham, and Tony Dyson, *London Bridge: 2000 Years of a River Crossing* (London, 2001).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. Nick Bateman, Carrie Cowan, and Robin Wroe-Brown, *London's Roman Amphitheatre: Guildhall Yard, City of London* (London, 2008).[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. John Stow, *A Survey of London*, ed. C. L. Kingsford (Oxford, 1908), p. 275.[Back to \(5\)](#)
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[\[1\] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/3744](https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/3744)