

Arts & Antiques

The Cheapside Hoard: London's Lost Jewels by Abby Cronin

Steeped in mystery, magic and history, the discovery of the Cheapside Hoard in 1912 is best described as 'striking gold'. Currently on view at the Museum of London, this is the story of chance discovery, which happened when buildings dating back to 1667 were being demolished at 30-32 Cheapside in the City of London. Workmen broke through a brick cellar with their picks and shovels and noticed something glistening in the soil. The glints turned out to be a remarkable cache of some 500 extraordinary jewels and gemstones dating from the 17th century and some 1300 years back to the Byzantine period. Today the Cheapside Hoard is recognised as the most important cache of Elizabethan and early Stuart jewellery in the world. Historically, Cheapside has always been a

major commercial thoroughfare in the City of London. Today it is one of the City's modern financial centres, but from the late 15th up to the 17th century it was known as Goldsmith's Row, the hub of the goldsmiths' trade when tenements and shops were occupied by retail and manufacturing goldsmiths.

Why has it taken one hundred years for this extraordinary cache of jewels to go on display to the public? The most reliable account highlights the role of 'Stony Jack', better known as George Fabian Lawrence (1862-1939). It seems Stony Jack had a career as a pawnbroker, dealer and collector of antiquities and was sometimes an employee of both the Guildhall and London museums. But he was also well known for his dealings with navvies and it was when the navvies turned to



Pendant Pearl Cage
Courtesy of the Museum of London



Emerald Watch
Courtesy of the Museum of London

Stony Jack and spilt the cache of Cheapside Hoard jewels on the floor he recognised how precious this stash was. He "set about washing off the soil and, gradually, tangled chains of enamelled gold, cameos, intaglios, carbuncles, assorted gems and hardstones, rings and pendants were revealed in all their brilliant splendour". (*1) In due course he turned the jewels over to the new London Museum, now the Museum of London. Subsequently other items were bought by the British Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum. After some sixty years, however, the thorny matter of ownership caused much debate. Finally, in 1976 the Hoard was given to the new Museum of London, a combination of the Guildhall Museum and London Museum.

Curator Hazel Forsyth has described the collection as a "time capsule of craft skill and global trade". Years of research, scholarship and professional conservation have gone into uncovering the details and stories embedded in these exquisite jewels. Forsyth and her colleagues have studied the "brooches and necklaces, rings and chains, pearls and rubies, scent bottles and fan holders, two carved gems which date back 1,300 years to Byzantium – and a watch set into a hollow carved out of one stupendous emerald which was originally the size of an apple."(*2) Preparation for the exhibition has been an enormous task and visitors will marvel when they see the myriad display of exquisite jewels delicately presented in a series of themed vitrines. Magnifying glasses are close to hand so that everyone will be able to get a close-up view of the complex details of the design and construction of the jewels. There is even a full-size scale model of a goldsmiths' workshop in the first gallery.

Several high tech videos set in the walls provide insight into the multistage construction of selected jewels. Gallery walls are lined with portraits of 17th century wealthy and mainly titled men and women dressed in fashions of the day. They show how sparkling jewels were displayed on garments made of rich textiles. The portrait (c 1620) of Elizabeth Wriothesley, Countess of Southampton is especially illustrative of how jewels were worn. Elizabeth is portrayed wearing elaborate attire with pearls threaded on her lace coif, tiered ruby or garnet earrings, a diamond-set letter S on her chain and finally a bracelet and a ring on the small finger of her right hand.

One of the highlights in this vast hoard of magnificent jewels and stones is the emerald-cased watch, a timepiece which reflects the global trade in gemstones.(pictured) The emerald was probably sourced in South America or possibly acquired in Asia when Columbian emeralds were sent to India and Burma. The emeralds were possibly cut in Seville or Lisbon and then conveyed to Geneva. Finally, it is likely that the stones were cut in London. This is a unique piece, as far as is known. Another highlight is the Salamander brooch, the signature piece featured in the publicity material for this exhibition. Set with Columbian emeralds and Indian diamonds, the legs and underparts are covered in opaque enamel speckled with black and brown enamel dots representing the animal's scaly flesh(*2). It is known as a symbol of the resurrection. Salamanders and lizards were thought to have a special place in visual and decorative arts of the period. These jewels were especially fashionable across Europe, but particularly in Spain. Several survive and one was recovered from the 1588 wreck of the Spanish Armada ship *La Girona*.

Other outstanding pieces from the Hoard include the Ferlite watch, the Stafford



Salamander Brooch
Courtesy of the Museum of London

Intaglio, a pearl pendant, and the scent bottle. Dating pieces presents enormous difficulties because none were ever marked or hallmarked. So the curatorial team had very little indication of how old the pieces in the hoard were. With the Ferlite watch, however, fortunately the maker's name was engraved on it. This signature identified the watchmaker as Gautier Ferlite, who had moved from London to Geneva where he became master of the company. This information helped to date the watch from 1610-1620. Another extraordinary piece of dating evidence was discovered on the tiny cornelian damaged seal. It is known to be the heraldic badge of Lord Viscount Stafford, who was created Viscount in 1640(pictured). Pearls, universally loved, were found in a number of Hoard pieces, but the pearl wirework pendant (pictured) was a very popular design in the 1630s. What is particularly important here, however, is how making the wirework involved a complex multistage process. Meticulous craftsmanship was required and at least 27 separate processes

were needed to produce one pendant. (*3) You can see a video of the stages of this process which shows the step-by-step sequence of its construction.

While it is impossible to name the most spectacular piece in the Hoard, the scent bottle (pictured) deserves special attention. Here craftsmanship is simply magnificent. This vessel was designed to either rest on its base or hang from a pendant chain. Made from gold and set with an abundance of gemstones, it is exceptional. The jewels may have been chosen for their metaphysical significance because rubies, diamonds and opals were thought to have magical-even therapeutic qualities. Forsyth writes, "The Cheapside Hoard scent bottle is particularly distinctive because it is so richly bejewelled on an enamel ground.... the only one known of its type...." (*4)

Although meticulous research has gone into the first presentation of the Cheapside Hoard, the mystery of why the Hoard was buried and never retrieved remains unanswered. Unable to find definitive answers, we are



Scent bottle
Courtesy of the Museum of London



Signed Gilt Watch
Courtesy of the Museum of London



Stafford Intaglio
Courtesy of the Museum of London

left with few possible clues. Was the treasure buried beneath the cellars at 30-32 Cheapside when the Civil War (1642-1651) broke out? Perhaps craftsmen-soldiers left off working in the goldsmith's trade and went off to war –never to return. Further speculation centres on the role the plague may have played. Fear of getting the plague may have driven people from London, possibly burying the treasure and intending to retrieve it once the disease had passed. But a more plausible explanation is that the Hoard was buried in the cellars beneath the floors in Cheapside and when Cheapside was destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666, nothing of the buildings remained and buildings which were built after the Fire left cellars untouched for three centuries. To date, there is no definitive answer. As Forsyth speculates in her brilliant catalogue, "Rather like the salamander, which contemporaries believed could be nourished by and withstand fire, the Hoard survived the fire and post-fire rebuilding". (*5)

This is a truly magical exhibit. It is open

to the public until 27th April 2014. Make a date to visit the Museum of London located at 150 London Wall. You won't be disappointed. <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/london-wall/visiting-us/getting-here/>

Notes:

1. P.9 Forsyth, H. *The Cheapside Hoard: London's Lost Jewels*. Philip Weston Publishers, 2013

2. P.220-Forsyth. *Catalogue*

3. p. 83. Forsyth. *Catalogue*

4. p. 94. Forsyth. *Catalogue*

5. p..222 Forsyth. *Catalogue*

**You Tube have several videos discussing The Cheapside Hoard: London's Lost Jewels *http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kS2gr_x2kSo*

**You Tube: Curator discussing Cheapside Hoard with Shaun Leane The Hidden Jewels of the Cheapside Hoard - Secret Knowledge*

**<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lbEg3-nBO0>*

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*Grape Pendant
Courtesy of the Museum of London*