



*Seventeenth-century jewelry we could wear today*

# THE CHEAPSIDE HOARD

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For centuries, the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths owned tenements in an area of London known as Cheapside. To us, “cheap” might suggest inferior products or a run-down part of the city, but it definitely was not. “Ceap” is an Old English word meaning trade or purchase, and this area, one of the largest in London, was a central location for goldsmiths and jewelers.

In 1912, after it was decided that the area’s tenements would be razed, workers began the task of demolishing buildings. One day, as a worker was digging, he heard an unusual sound as his pickaxe struck through the floorboards. He had, in fact, hit a wooden chest buried beneath the basement of the building.

And there began the story of the Cheapside Hoard, perhaps the greatest collection of English seventeenth-century Elizabethan and Jacobean jewelry ever found. The chest contained more than 230 pieces of jewelry and gems. While some was fit for kings and queens, the pieces were definitely crafted for wealthy merchants and their wives of that time.

The building’s owners had thoughtfully added a clause to their demolition contract that required workers to turn over any “antiquities and articles or objects of interest or value.” But that didn’t happen. Instead, workers were loyal to someone else—“Stony Jack” Lawrence, a collector and dealer in antiquities who believed many articles of value were being lost when buildings were torn down. He preached to workers, as he told the *Daily Herald* later, that “every scrap of metal, pottery, glass, or leather that has been lying under London may have a story to tell the archaeologist and is worth saving.”

Accordingly, the workers filled their pockets, their lunch pails, and sacks and brought them to Lawrence. Onto the floor before him, they dumped the contents, which were

caked with dirt from lying underground for some 300 years. Lawrence had quite a job cleaning away the grime of centuries. But soon he could see the tangled gold and enamel chains, rings, earrings, pendants, cameos, intaglios, and numerous uncut gems and semiprecious stones revealed in all their glory. There was no doubt that this was a treasure trove unlike any other and extremely important in understanding the jewelry tastes and craftsmanship of that period. A few days later, workmen returned with knotted handkerchiefs filled with more jewels to add to Lawrence’s pile.

Fortunately for us today, Stony Jack Lawrence recognized that the safest place for this cache of jewelry was the new Museum of London, where all could enjoy and study the collection. He secretly met with the museum’s directors and trustees and, within days, was appointed Inspector of Excavations for the institution. Lawrence secured additional pieces from the workmen and rewarded them for their assistance.

When the hoard was finally displayed at the Museum of London in March 1914, it caused quite a stir and garnered admiration from the general public and jewelry historians alike. Perhaps the most amazing aspect of jewelry pieces in the hoard is how contemporary they appear to be. Beautifully enameled chains with gold links, delicate flowers and leaves, pearls, and gems are similar to those in currently popular costume



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and fine jewelry. These lovely chains, one of which is longer than four feet, were worn doubled around the neck, while shorter chains are thought to have been worn wrapped double around the wrist as a bracelet. Chandelier earrings with dangling bunches of grapes could also be worn today, and few would recognize the period of their true origin. Interestingly, earrings of that time did not always come in pairs and both men and women typically wore a single earring. This type of earring was often worn with a thread attached, which was strung through a hole in the ear and tied. Pins made of gem-encrusted floral designs, salamanders, and crosses are comparable to those purchased today in department or jewelry stores. All of the pieces in the hoard provide inspiration for today's beadworkers as well.

**B**ut how did the hoard end up in its underground resting place? It might have been a burglar's loot, hastily buried but never retrieved due to illness, death, or even imprisonment. Or could it have been a shopkeeper's stock,

buried for safekeeping but never revealed? Plagues and pestilence that struck down otherwise healthy people within hours were frequent in the seventeenth century, with severe outbreaks in 1603, 1625, and 1636. If not hit by such misfortune, perhaps a shopkeeper was worried about his stock being seized for taxes, debts, or unpaid rent and buried his valuables to prevent seizure. We'll probably never know for sure who hid it or why the hoard was placed there.

Regardless of the unsolved mystery of how and why the hoard was buried, successive generations of jewelry lovers can be grateful to Stony Jack Lawrence for his passionate preservationism, as well as to the Museum of London for its ongoing display of this valuable window into seventeenth-century adornment.

REFERENCE:

*The Cheapside Hoard* by Hazel Forsyth (Museum of London, 2003).

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