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**Environmental Management in Medieval London: Was  
London a “Filthy City”?**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of**

**Master of Arts  
In  
History**

**At Massey University, Manawatu  
New Zealand**

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**2013**

## Abstract

The BBC series “Filthy Cities” presented medieval London as knee deep in muck, with rivers of butchers’ waste washing into streams and chamber pots emptied on the heads of hapless passers-by. This thesis asks whether medieval London was really a “filthy city”. It also investigates medieval attitudes towards the London environment, as a living space, pollution sink and a source of sustenance. The evidence for the state of the environment in medieval London and how the environment was managed is contained in a variety of primary sources, largely court records, ordinances, complaints and directives to abate pollution.

In order to provide a framework for analysis, this study examines whether environmental models currently used to manage and monitor the environment might provide a useful method for assessing the state of the environment in medieval London. A modified Driver-Pressure-State-Impact Response environmental reporting framework is proposed, taking account of the data limitations and the paucity of data on the environment *per se*. The selection of indicators for drivers and pressures on the environment is based on available information on the medieval economy, demography, housing, and industrial processes from documentary and archaeological sources. The key drivers are economic, cultural and demographic and give rise to pressures related to population, density, consumption, and associated resource demands and waste disposal problems.

Records of regulations and complaints provide information on both pressures and responses to environmental problems. Building on and considerably extending previous work, this study provides a detailed analysis of the Assize of Nuisance court records. It focusses on cases of environmental nuisance and supplements these with information on ordinances and cases from the Mayor’s Court. As shown in the modified DPSIR framework, responses may be precipitated by environmental problems, or that have spin-off environmental benefits. This thesis assesses public infrastructure and services, and private activities, serving to reduce environmental effects. It also looks at how the city

managed the Thames, and in particular the conflicts between various uses. Overall, the evidence suggests that the city's environment was well managed other than in times of crisis such as the plague epidemics, given the resources and technology available. The inhabitants of medieval London may have tolerated a dirtier smellier environment than inhabitants of modern-day western cities, but beyond a certain threshold, they were highly intolerant of pollution of their immediate environment.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my supervisor Dr Karen Jillings for her support and valuable insights during the development of this thesis. Karen's background in plague research, using scientific and archaeological evidence as well as primary documents, and her ability to take a broader view has been invaluable. I would also like to thank Dr Geoff Watson for his assistance with the all-important administrative side of academic life, and Dr Andrew Brown for helpful suggestions early in the process. In addition, thank you to Dr Christopher van der Krogt for planting the suggestion of combining my environmental background with history to write environmental history.

In terms of developing the concepts of this thesis, I am indebted to presenter Dan Snow and the BBC for the thought-provoking "Filthy Cities" series, and I do regret not being able to obtain any of the "scratch and sniff" cards that accompanied the televised version. I am also grateful to Dr Margaret Murphy, of Carlow College Dublin, for a more academic video presentation on medieval Dublin that sparked my quest to examine the environment of medieval London.<sup>1</sup> Not having easy access to the original documents, I am very grateful to the early historians and archivists who have translated and published a wide variety of primary records and medieval compilations, and their modern equivalents who have painstakingly made this information available digitally.

Finally this research would not have been possible without scholarship funding from a Massey University Masterate Scholarship, a New Zealand Federation of Graduate Women grant, and a Max Chapple Memorial Scholarship.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.medievalists.net/2012/06/23/dirty-old-towns-environmental-impacts-of-medieval-irish-towns/>

## Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
CHAPTER 1: Introduction	1
CHAPTER 2: Sources of information and historiography	8
Primary sources	8
Early historiography	12
Recent historiography	14
How polluted was medieval London?	18
Addressing the research gap	22
CHAPTER 3: Analytical framework, drivers, pressures and impacts	25
Assessment of environmental frameworks and models	25
Selection of indicators	35
Drivers	38
Pressures and impacts	45
Conclusion	59
CHAPTER 4: Responses	61
Introduction	61
Local government in medieval London	63
Regulating private and public nuisance activities	66
Assize of Buildings	69
Wardmote articles and city ordinances	71
Implementing the Assize of Buildings and City Ordinances	73
Analysis of nuisance complaints	78
How accessible was the Assize court?	102
Ward presentments	108
Conclusion	111
CHAPTER 5: Public goods and private initiatives	114
Water supply Conduit	114
Public services and infrastructure	118
Did Plague result in more proactive environmental management?	122
Managing the Thames and other watercourses: conflicting environmental, economic and social interests	131

Management of fisheries and navigation	138
Trash Palace: Recycling and re-use of materials	145
Conclusion	151
CHAPTER 6: Environmental attitudes and the state of the environment in late medieval London	154
Attitudes to the environment	154
Assessing the state of the environment	163
The need for further work integrating data sources and disciplines	169
Appendix 1: The Assize of Buildings	172
Appendix 2: Wardmote Articles and Inquests	177
Appendix 3: Relevant City and Crown ordinances in other collections	179
Appendix 4: Methodology and analysis of the Assize of Nuisance records	182
Bibliography	185

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Map of medieval London	5
Figure 2: Environmental Management Systems	26
Figure 3: Driver-Pressure-State-Impact-Response (DPSIR) model	28
Figure 4: Modified Driver Pressure State Impact Response (DPSIR) model	29
Figure 5: Urban metabolism and the cultural dimension of the system.	31
Figure 6: Relationship between people, culture, systems activities and the environment	33
Figure 7: Modified DPSIR model	34
Figure 8: Number of nuisance complaints per case	80
Figure 9: Assize cases heard per year	80
Figure 10: Cases heard per five year period	81
Figure 11: Total essoins and named essoins per five year period	82
Figure 12: Cases heard, named essoins and un-named essoins	83
Figure 13: Outcomes of cases heard by the Assize	84
Figure 14: Complaints by type	84
Figure 15: Nuisance complaints grouped into types, in 5 yearly periods	87
Figure 16: Cesspit, privy and wastewater complaints per five year period	89
Figure 17: Stormwater complaints, number of complaints in each five year period	95
Figure 18: Stormwater complaints per year 1301 to 1327	96
Figure 19: Complaints related to privacy	98
Figure 20: Complaints and appeals related to buildings	100
Figure 21: Gender breakdown of plaintiffs and defendants.	103
Figure 22: Status of the women appearing before the Assize	104
Figure 23: Complaints during the time of plague	125

## List of tables

Table 1: Driver-Pressure-State-Impact Response model parameters and possible indicators for medieval London.	36
Table 2: Relationship between drivers, pressures and impacts, and proposed indicators	37
Table 3: Organisations dealing with environmental issues in late medieval London	64
Table 4: Comparison of breakdown of complaint types with similar analysis by Schofield	85
Table 5: Breakdown of complaints about sewage and wastewater	90
Table 6: Enforcement actions	101
Table 7: Most frequent occupations of plaintiffs and defendants	107
Table 8: Plague years and clean-up measures	130
Table 9: Analysis of surnames of fripperers based on location:	149