

A London Life in the Brazen Age, Francis Langley; 1548-1602
William Ingram

London 1500-1700: The Making of the Metropolis,
Edited by A.L. Beier & Roger Finlay

Reviews by Deward Hastings

Francis Langley was a piece of work . . . a slimeball, a scumbag, and for most of his life an immodest success at it. Come to London as a youth with but a few pounds and an uncle's address in his pocket, apprenticed with no desire as a Draper, he became over the next few decades one of the City's more significant moneylenders. At a time when usury laws limited "interest" to ten per cent, Langley, though not the inventor of it, became a master of the "late payment penalty", or "bond" as it was then called (often in amounts twice exceeding the original loan), and prospered by lending to those who, while still possessed of redeemable assets, were unlikely to be able to timely repay. Dirty money then being no different from dirty money now, this left Langley with his fingers in the whole wide range of Elizabethan London's unsavory pies.

He may have had some social skill beyond those of the abusive manipulator, for he seems to have managed a few "friends" (at least briefly), and a number of "associates", but his enemies far outnumbered them. In the end his world divided into two parts; those who detested him but spoke well of him publicly either out of need for his service or because he had some "dirt" on them, and those who loathed him and made no secret of it.

Langley's name is known today, to those few who do know it, not for his vices, though they were many, not because he crossed paths with Burghley or the Cecils, not for his numerous appearances in Chancery (and other) Court(s), not for his being neighbor and possibly landlord to Susan Holloway's brothel, but for two almost incidental of his endeavors . . . that he had built on his land at Paris Garden the Swan playhouse, and that he, for a while at least, held part interest in the Boars Head Inn and theatre. Most histories go no further . . . William Ingram's "A London Life in the Brazen Age, Francis Langley, 1548-1602" does. It does not present us a "complete life" or an in depth presentation of the man. You will not come away knowing how he dressed, what foods he ate, or any detail at all of his private or personal life. This rather short book follows him only from court to court, parish to parish, following the paper trail of his economic and near criminal endeavors. It's value lies more in the exposing one particular nasty side of London's economic affairs, of fleshing out just another small part of the puzzle of what Elizabethan life was really like, than in introducing us to a man who none of us would have liked, or wanted to know.

For those inclined to know a broader context in which to place the economics at least of Elizabeth's London there's "London 1500-1700, the making of the metropolis", edited by A.L. Beier & Roger Finlay. A collection of essays divided into three parts (Population and disease, Commerce and manufacture, and Society and change), and full of maps, charts, tables and graphs outlining the real economic state of the outstanding European city of its time, I found myself reaching frequently for this book while reading the Langley biography to get the measure of just how much fabric and cloth passed through the Port of London, where the citizenry spent their entertainment dollar, or how many Londoners actually suffered the Pox. This book will not appeal to those inclined to daytime soaps or the harlequin romances, but is a worthy addition to the shelf of anyone interested in understanding the wider economic and social aspects of life in Tudor and early Stuart England. Like the Langley biography, though, this book does not present "the whole picture", just another piece, albeit a necessary one, in the puzzle.