

The religious life and the worldly life: London's monasteries and towns

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The Black Death strikes!

(Previous page)
Excavations at the Royal Mint, with the Tower of London beyond, and Tower Bridge in the distance. In the foreground are the graves of the Abbey of St Mary Graces, with underneath, just emerging, two of the long trenches filled with the victims of the Black Death, the skeletons still in position. The square blocks are the foundations of the demolished Royal Mint.

Right. A slice through the north side of Merton Priory. The Lady Chapel is at the bottom, followed by the choir, the north transept and the north aisle. The West End is right at the far end.



THE medieval city of London was encircled by a ring of monasteries. As medieval London was already rather overcrowded, many of these monasteries were built on landholdings that were acquired piecemeal, and which rarely formed convenient blocks. As a result they evolved distinctive layouts to fit the available land.

The only two monasteries that we have excavated with a classic layout were both outside medieval London, at Bermondsey and Merton. Bermondsey, only a mile to the south of the City, was a Cluniac monastery, founded in 1089 when William Rufus granted the manor of Bermondsey to the priory of La Charite-sur-Loire. The church itself had been partly excavated by Professor Grimes in 1956 and 1962-3, following war-time bombing. However between 1984 and 1988 a council housing redevelopment covered the area of the infirmary and east range of the cloister, and we were called in to excavate before building work began.

The site began as a small infirmary alongside the no doubt unhealthy monastic main drain. But in the late 12th – early 13th century there was a comprehensive replanning: the infirmary hall was rebuilt on a grand scale, with its own chapel and cloister. Over 200 burials were excavated within the monastic cemetery. English Heritage succeeded in negotiating an agreement whereby

much of the area was dug only to the top of medieval layers and was then covered for future preservation.

At Merton, excavations on the site of the Augustinian Priory were undertaken in 1976-8 by the South West London Archaeological Unit and resumed in 1983 and 1986-90 by DGLA in advance of the construction of a Sainsbury's Savacentre. These excavations revealed the plan of the Church, Chapter house, Infirmary range and several ancillary buildings.

The Church proved to be 100 metres long – one of the largest known in London – with four main phases of construction, beginning in the early 12th century. Seventy graves were excavated within the Church, in the lay cemetery north of the Church and canons' cemetery to the east of the Chapter House. A further thirty-five graves inside the Chapter House are presumed to be burials of the Priors.

This classic monastic plan revealed at Bermondsey and Merton was the exception rather than the rule in London; the inner monasteries were very much more irregular.

St Mary Graces

THE Abbey of St Mary Graces, just east of the Tower of London, is a case in point. This house was unusual in the Cistercian Order not only for its late foundation but also because it lay only just outside the city – quite contrary to the normal rules of the Order which prescribed a rural location. It was founded by Edward III in 1350 and conceived as an ambitious scheme which in the event was never fully executed. For a while in the 1390s it was the meeting-place of the English Chapter of the Order and it continued to play a leading role in the affairs of the Order in the fifteenth century.

Between 1986 and 1988 the DGLA excavated the larger part of the Abbey precinct, a site of some two hectares in extent occupied in modern times by the Royal Mint.

The most spectacular remains on the site underlay the monastery – a Black Death cemetery from which the remains of 672 individuals were recovered. At first the plague victims were buried in single graves, in 14 rows. However as the plague became more intense, there was no time to dig single graves, so they were buried in three long trenches, up to 5 bodies deep. Burials continued to be made up to 1349 – a year before the monastery was founded.

The ground-plan of the Abbey was different in form to the classic Cistercian model



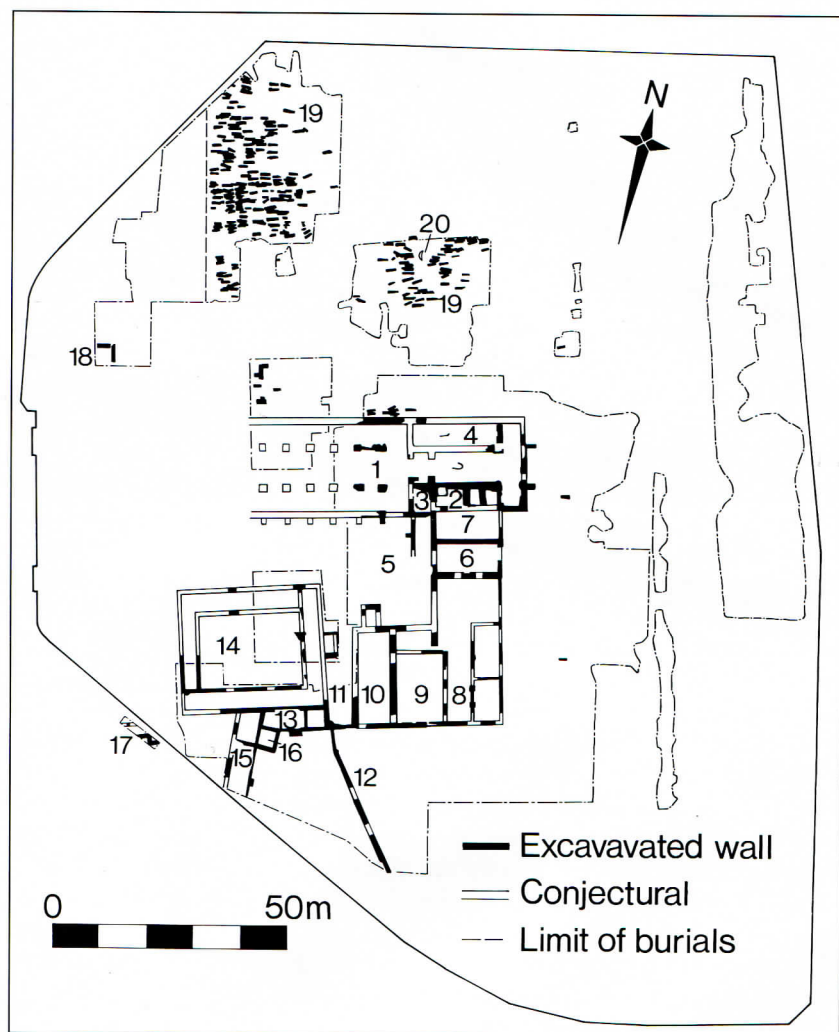
This 13th century tourist souvenir was made of pressed copper alloy, and was found in the fill of the Great Drain at Bermondsey Abbey.

of two centuries earlier. Thus the Church had a nave and a choir but no transepts – no doubt influenced by contemporary friaries. Preaching was now the important thing, and it was no longer so vital to have lots of altars for the monks to say their offices.

In the Chapter House (6) the stone benches for chapter meetings survived round the walls. There was a cloister (5), detached secondary cloister (14) and a well-preserved kitchen (13) and frater (10). 133 burials were excavated inside the church and its chapels, including some in vaults. The main monastic cemetery (19) was to the north of the church, overlying the Black Death burial-ground.

After the Dissolution the site was occupied from 1565 by the Royal Naval Victualling Yard or supply depot. The church had been pulled down, but the south range was converted to its new use: a further room (9) was turned into the bakehouse, a garner (15) became the salthouse, the infirmary (8) was used for the storage of barrel staves and extensive slaughter yards existed over the site of the former cemetery. It was not until 1739-1748 that the Navy moved to new premises at

Below. St Mary Graces had a somewhat irregular plan. The church (1) had no transepts, one cloister (14) was detached, the dormitory (10?) was placed next to the reredorter (11) over the great drain (12).



Deptford, and in 1806-1811 the Royal Mint was transferred to the site from the Tower of London. It remained there till it was moved to its present site at Llantrisant in Wales in 1967-75.

London's Villages

LONDON tended to eat up the surrounding towns and villages. In the 19th century, many of these were swallowed completely, and today a new threat is impending: redevelopment. One of DGLA's principal concerns has been to investigate the origins and development of London's towns and villages, and from the many sites investigated, we have chosen two to illustrate different changes; Uxbridge which was one of the typical market centres, and Kingston upon Thames, which from its name at least, should have been something rather more: a King's town?

Uxbridge was a typical market town fifteen miles west of London: it was first mentioned in a document of 1110, was granted a market around 1180, and possessed a chapel-of-ease by the early 13th century. In the early 1980s, the long, narrow burghage plots characteristic of medieval towns still survived intact in several parts of the town. But was there a pre-market village there?

Redevelopment began in 1983 with plans for the comprehensive redevelopment of a large part of the remaining town centre. The DGLA moved in. The most informative results have come from 15-17 High Street. Here the earliest medieval occupation comprised a roadside ditch and shallow gullies defining the edge of a burghage plot; all of which could be dated to the late 12th century. Later, in the 14th and 15th centuries, the site was occupied by timber buildings with internal fireplaces and ovens. When these were demolished around 1550, they were replaced by a timber-framed building, which survived substantially intact in 1983 (see picture overleaf). One of the first tasks facing DGLA after it was founded was to complete a proper record of the building before it, too was demolished.

As excavations in the town have progressed, it has become evident that much of the High Street frontage was not occupied before the town obtained its market grant; and that the burghage plots, and perhaps part of the High Street itself, were very probably laid out *en bloc* in the open fields around 1180. Like many other small market towns in southern England, Uxbridge can probably be considered a "new town"; if there was a pre-market settlement, DGLA is still looking for it!



Opposite. The foundations of the old bridge at Kingston upon Thames.

Left. Interior of 16th century building at 15-17 High Street Uxbridge, just before demolition.

Kingston upon Thames

ONE of the more important towns was Kingston-upon Thames, and here too the town centre has seen major redevelopment. In the Middle Ages, Kingston was the site of the first bridge above London bridge, and one of the most spectacular excavations revealed the approach road to the old bridge. Work in 1985-6 revealed piers of the 13th century stone and timber bridge, but it had clearly been altered and added to innumerable times before its demolition in the early 19th century.

The approach to the bridge would have been lined with merchant houses, and an impressive vaulted cellar or undercroft of flint and chalk blocks, perhaps built in the 14th century as part of a merchant's house, was excavated on the approach road a short distance from the bridge. This aroused considerable local interest, so the cellar was not demolished but was boxed up, lifted and relocated in a different part of the redevelopment, out of danger from groundworks.

More recently, excavation of the Charter Quay site in 1988-90 has allowed us to examine a wide swathe of the High Street frontage, stretching right back to the Thames. Here we found substantial buildings along the High Street frontage. Further west, close to the river, a timber revetment dated provisionally to the 14th century comprised elm posts retaining oak planks. On closer examination



the planks turned out to be reused: they formed part of the side of a very large clinker-built boat or barge, presumably a derelict which seemed ready-made for building into the waterfront.

However in the Middle Ages, the High Street was also the industrial centre. At least nine large kilns were found, dating to the late 14th or 15th century. These were used for manufacture of pottery known as "Kingston Ware", found on many late medieval sites in south-west London and Surrey. The manufacture on the High Street meant that they could be transferred direct to the river for transport to their eventual markets.

When this 14th century undercroft at Kingston was about to be demolished, it was boxed up and moved to a new location.

