

The Waltham Abbey Madonna

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EXCAVATION by Waltham Abbey Historical Society (directed by P. J. Huggins) in the town centre in November 1974 brought to light a stone statue of the Madonna. This is felt to be of special interest and to warrant publication prior to the final excavation report.

The statue was found in what is now the garden of a shop on the north side of Sun Street. The site was thought from documentary evidence to have lain within the monastic precinct, and the primary achievement of the work was to show that the south-east corner of the precinct wall remained as part of an existing wall of the garden. Previous work in other gardens to the west of the site had revealed a medieval cemetery, which lay south of the area known to have been occupied by the Augustinian abbey church. A trench dug in the present investigation was intended to define the eastern extent of the cemetery: instead it revealed a shallow ditch in which lay the statue, aligned east-west and lying on its back in the manner of a burial, with rubble apparently laid over it in the 16th century.

Unfortunately the statue had been mutilated in antiquity, but it clearly represents the figure of the Virgin Mary, holding the Christ Child on her right arm and seated on a cushioned pedestal. The whole figure is now about 2ft. 6in. (0.75m.) high and is carved from a single piece of Reigate stone. The head of the Virgin had been broken off and so too had the Child taking with it the supporting hands and legs of the mother. There seems little doubt that the mutilation was the work of an iconoclast during the reformation.

The back of the statue was hollowed out to a rough-hewn finish, presumably to reduce the weight. The upper mouldings of the pedestal are not parallel to those of the base and their forward inclination suggests that the figure was to be seen from below. It seems that the Madonna was intended to stand in a high niche, while the unweathered condition of the remaining features suggests a position inside a building.

The costume of the Virgin comprises three garments: a cotehardie or sideless gown, possibly extending only to the hips, with a central row of large buttons (four remain), each 1½in. diameter, which may have been purely ornamental. Under this garment was worn a kirtle or underdress with long tight sleeves fastened on the forearm by small



(Photo: J. H. Littlefair.)

buttons, of which seven remain on the left and one on the right arm. The skirt of the kirtle (which may have been covered by the cotehardie) has almost disappeared but would have fallen in folds to the floor. The feet are missing. Over the cotehardie a mantle or cloak is fastened across the chest by a chain with roseate clasps or *fermailes* on each corner. The neckline of all three garments follows a low boat-shaped line. Some of the hair of the Virgin remains waving loosely behind and below the shoulders. The Child was evidently positioned

reclining on His mother's lap and supported by her right arm. A trace of His right arm can be seen stretching upwards, with the fingers remaining intact, grasping the centre of the Virgin's neckline and thus hiding the top button of the cotehardie. The lower part of the Child's loose flowing robe can be seen in the photograph below the knees of the mother.

No trace of paint remains on the statue but it was no doubt painted, and possibly decorated in several colours.

Mr. J. G. Beckwith of the Victoria and Albert Museum has dated the statue to c. 1380 on the basis of the costume, a date borne out by several brasses and effigies which show this style of buttoned sideless cotehardie in vogue during the last quarter of the 14th century and being replaced by the high-waisted dresses of the early 15th century. Mr. Beckwith also suggests that the statue was made in a London area workshop and agrees that the quality of the carving is high. Reigate stone was frequently used in the Abbey for ornamental work.

The Lady Chapel of the monastic church and the

chapel of the Guild of Our Lady, established at Waltham about 1350, are the obvious places in which such a statue would have been erected. The Guild is known¹ to have possessed an image of Our Lady by 1389: the condition of the present find and its apparently careful burial seem to support the idea that it is this image which has now come to light. The mutilation, and possibly the removal, would have been in accord with the proceedings² at the General Visitation of 1547 but the statue could still have been held in regard until and even after the dissolution of the Guild in the following year: the Abbey itself had been dissolved in 1540.

The statue has now been placed³ in the present Lady Chapel at Waltham as a reminder both of the careful workmanship of its carver and no doubt of a pious benefactor, and, sadly, of the ruthless vandalism of the 16th century. It does seem however, that a gentler hand laid the mutilated statue to rest in a quiet corner of the cemetery as a final act of devotion. So little remains of the medieval glories of the Abbey of Waltham that this latest piece of evidence is a valuable addition to its history.

1. J. E. Oxley, *The Reformation in Essex to the Death of Mary* (1965) 65.

2. *Ibid* 150-1.

3. With the ready co-operation of the vicar, Rev. K. H. Pilar.

Roman Reliefs from the City

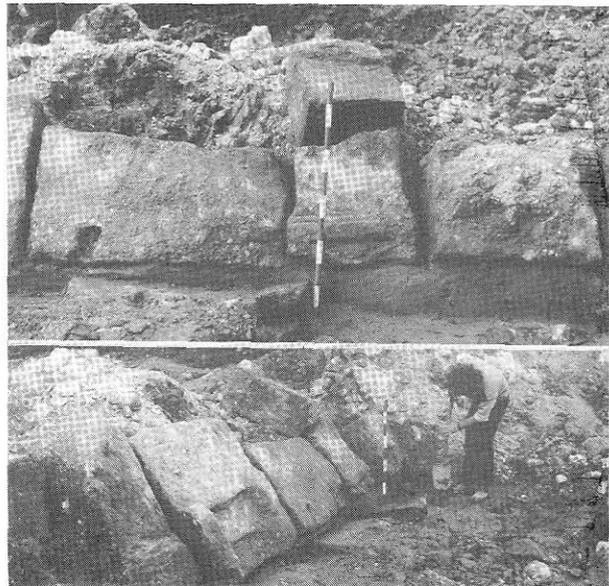
LAST JANUARY salvage excavations by the Department of Urban Archaeology just east of the Mermaid Theatre, near Blackfriars, produced a 40m. stretch of the Roman riverside wall whose existence had been hotly disputed. (see last issue of L.A.).

Since then a careful and prolonged watching brief has revealed more evidence of the wall, in most places collapsed, as well as Roman and medieval roads and medieval timber waterfronts.

Perhaps the most startling and significant find, however, has been the unearthing of up to forty sculptured stones, including a semi recumbent winged Victory holding a torch, a standing helmeted Mars or Minerva (not a cavalrman as reported in the daily press), two building inscriptions, altars, as well as various heads, torsoes and limbs. The pride of the collection is a relief of four seated figures holding various objects — a baby, a dog, fruit and bread.

As with the city bastions the Romans went out and 'quarried' earlier masonry, probably from various sources — buildings, monuments and cemeteries — for use in the riverside wall, which arguably, may also be late Roman in date.

Preparatory processing has already begun and the final publication of the Roman riverside wall and the sculptured stones will appear next year.



Two views of some of the sculptured stones *in situ*, with an altar in the centre of the upper photograph.

(Photo: John Maloney)