

Fig. 1: The Royal Mint site with the approximate position of St. Mary Graces.

The Cistercians and their London House

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TO THE EAST of the Tower of London and north of East Smithfield lie the empty buildings of the Royal Mint which moved here in 1811. Prior to that the area was occupied by tobacco warehouses and victualling yards for the Royal Navy but during the Middle ages a notable religious house stood here. This was the Cistercian Abbey of St. Mary Graces, known as New Abbey or Tower Hill Abbey to John Stow and his contemporaries. The Cistercians, an Order of monks founded in the late 11th century and establishing themselves in England in 1128,

were dedicated to reviving the harsh simplicity of early monasticism. They initially sought out remote, sparsely populated parts of the country where they themselves worked the land. However, by the 14th century the Order had largely moved away from direct farm management to become a landlord letting out rural estates to laymen and investing in urban property thus making a town house desirable, preferably in London. This need for a London base coincided with a desire by Edward III to found a religious house as fulfilment of a vow upon being

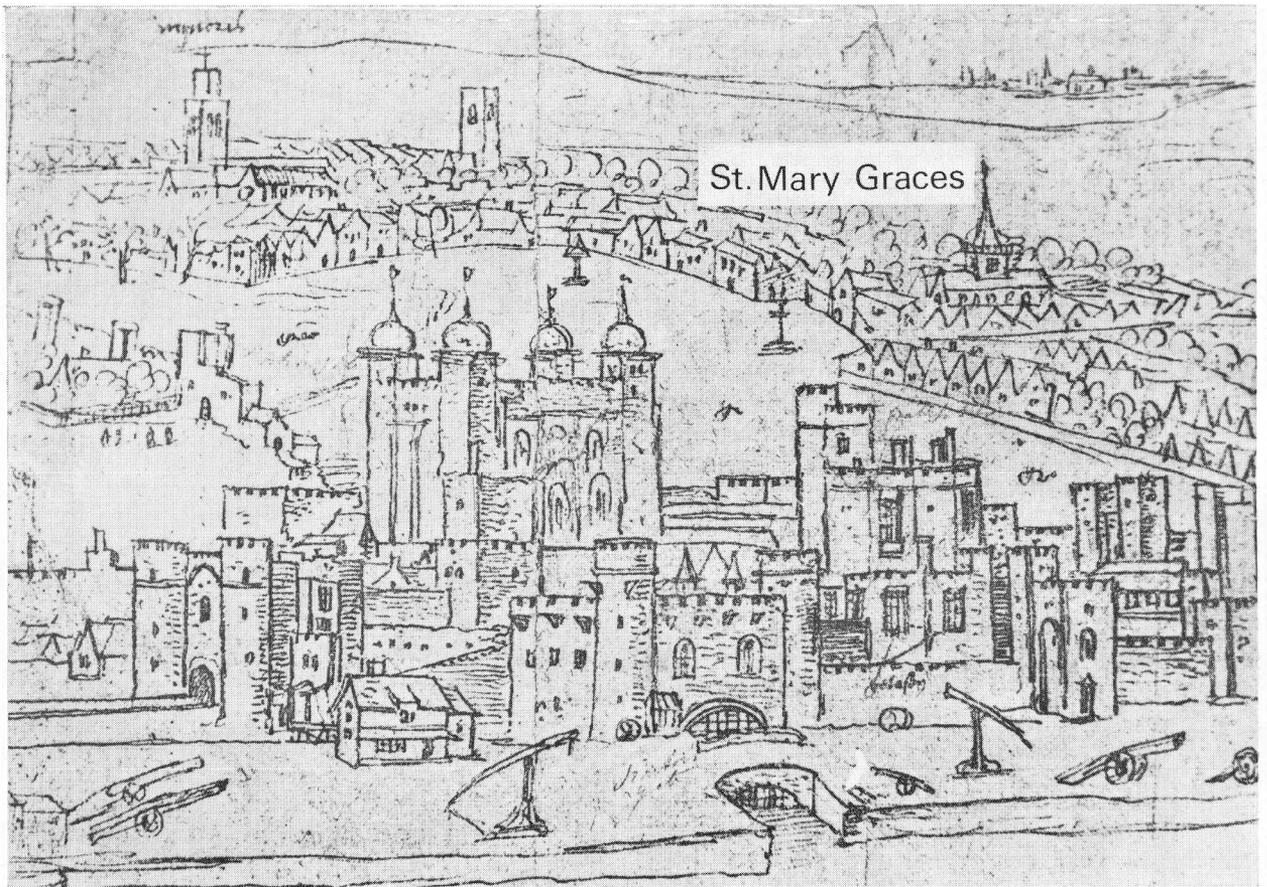


Fig. 2: Part of Wyngearde's view of London showing St. Mary Graces.

delivered from death at sea. Accordingly, in 1350 Edward III established the abbey of St. Mary Graces (the last English Cistercian House) on the site of a Black Death cemetery just outside the City walls.

The House comprised five monks and a superior and though an impoverished foundation at first it soon became quite rich. This increased wealth and corresponding influence was in part due to a political crisis within the Church. During the Great Schism in the mid 14th century (when there were three claimants to the Papal tiara) the Cistercian chain of command and discipline was broken when contact between the English and French Houses was forbidden. The king, Richard II, took this opportunity to exert control over the Cistercians through the recently founded St. Mary Graces which he commanded to convene a general chapter to re-establish discipline. Thereafter the House received bequests of money and property becoming the third wealthiest Cistercian House by the Dissolution.

It seems the building of the monastery progressed only slowly, the chapel of the Black Death cemetery probably being used by the monks and perhaps was even incorporated in the abbey church. By 1391 the church was almost complete and the construction of the abbot's house and infirmary had begun. During the late 14th century and early 15th century chantries were founded and a chapel had been added by the late 15th century. The abbey was dissolved in 1538 and granted in 1542 to Sir Arthur Darcy who, according to Stow, "clean pulled down" the buildings. In 1560 £1,200 were paid to Darcy for the site which was then occupied by the naval victualling yards until work began on the Royal Mint in the late 18th century.

In formation on the layout of the monastic buildings is scant and it is possible the general plan may show significant variations on the usual Cistercian arrangements at it was a late foundation of royal origin fostered as the political head of the

Order in England.

Two plans, one 16th century, the other 17th century, show a few fragments of the monastic buildings, particularly the cloister, thereby giving an approximate position for the church and claustral suite (Fig. 1). The church is depicted on a view by Wyngaerde c. 1522-1540 but few details are discernible (Fig. 2). However, it appears to have had a central tower and spire. The documentary reference to a chapel gives no clue to its position but it probably lay to the north of the high altar. The other buildings in the precinct would have included the usual domestic quarters for the monks plus barns, stables, outbuildings and a western gatehouse, possibly shown on Wyngaerde's drawing. Construction bills indicate the abbot had a large separate residence in which he could entertain fellow abbots visiting London. As St. Mary Graces was also a royal House the king could require the abbot to accommodate royal guests. The abbot's lodgings were undoubtedly commodious and comfortable, possibly even surviving the Dissolution as a private residence. Perhaps the "great mansions" mentioned at Tower Hill in 1600 as officers' quarters were part of the Abbey buildings. To the east of the church lay the monks' cemetery while the north side of the church served as a burying ground for laymen. Abbots were usually interred in the chapter house on the east side of the cloisters.

In 1975 the Royal Mint moved to Wales so, with the increased redevelopment of the eastern side of the City, the Mint site has come to be regarded as one of the prime areas awaiting 'revitalisation.' It is likely that any redevelopment at the Mint will expose and destroy considerable portions of the monastery, particularly the east arm of the church,

the east range, half the south range, the abbot's house, the infirmary and auxiliary buildings. Trial work in 1970 showed mediaeval walls had been reused as post mediaeval foundations, indicating significant remains of the abbey could survive.

At the present time the Inner London Archaeological Unit is negotiating with the Crown Estate Commissioners for access to the site and it is hoped preliminary work will begin later this year. Inevitably the work would be expensive but the information which could be retrieved would more than justify the cost. The evolution of the Cistercian monastic plan from the 12th century through to the 16th century can only be traced when this, the last Cistercian House, is examined and the extent to which changes within the Order affected the architecture determined. Moreover, the environmental remains, largely lost at sites such as Rievaulx and Fountains, could be examined in a scientific manner. Recent work at the misericorde of Westminster Abbey resulted in a unique view of the Benedictine monks' diet through well preserved organic remains. Should St. Mary Graces have comparable preservation then invaluable data on late mediaeval Cistercian life could be retrieved. Furthermore the monastic graveyard and the earlier Black Death cemetery may provide additional material for the demographic study of mediaeval London.

The importance of the site of the abbey which was the *de facto* leader of the English Cistercians cannot be overestimated. The opportunity to examine even small portions of London's religious Houses is rare so when almost an entire monastic precinct is threatened it is essential that the chance for an archaeological excavation is seized.

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