

Fig. 1: site location: the shaded area was available for trial work.

# The Royal Mint: First Results

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BETWEEN JUNE AND AUGUST 1984 the Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology carried out trial work just east of the Tower of London at the former Royal Mint (Fig. 1) on behalf of the Crown Estate Commissioners. Formerly occupied by the Cistercian Abbey of St Mary Graces, the 5 acre site (2 ha) was examined by cutting a series of trenches (Fig. 2) by machine to establish how much of the Abbey survived.

Founded by Edward III in 1350 on the site of a Black Death cemetery, the Abbey of St Mary

Graces became one of the richest and most powerful Cistercian Houses in Britain. On account of its status the Abbey was appointed from time to time to oversee the discipline and morals of the Cistercian Order in England, Ireland and Wales. In addition, St Mary Graces provided relief for the poor, being specially commended by the Bishop of London for these good works in 1368. At the Dissolution, the Lord Mayor of London specifically begged Henry VIII to allow the City to maintain this function. Notwithstanding this plea, the House was dissolved in 1538. Soon afterwards the site was used as a



Fig. 2: plan of the walls and robber trenches, with trial trenches shown as dotted lines.



Fig. 3: composite plan of the excavated walls with documented walls (broken line) and postulated line of walls (void line).

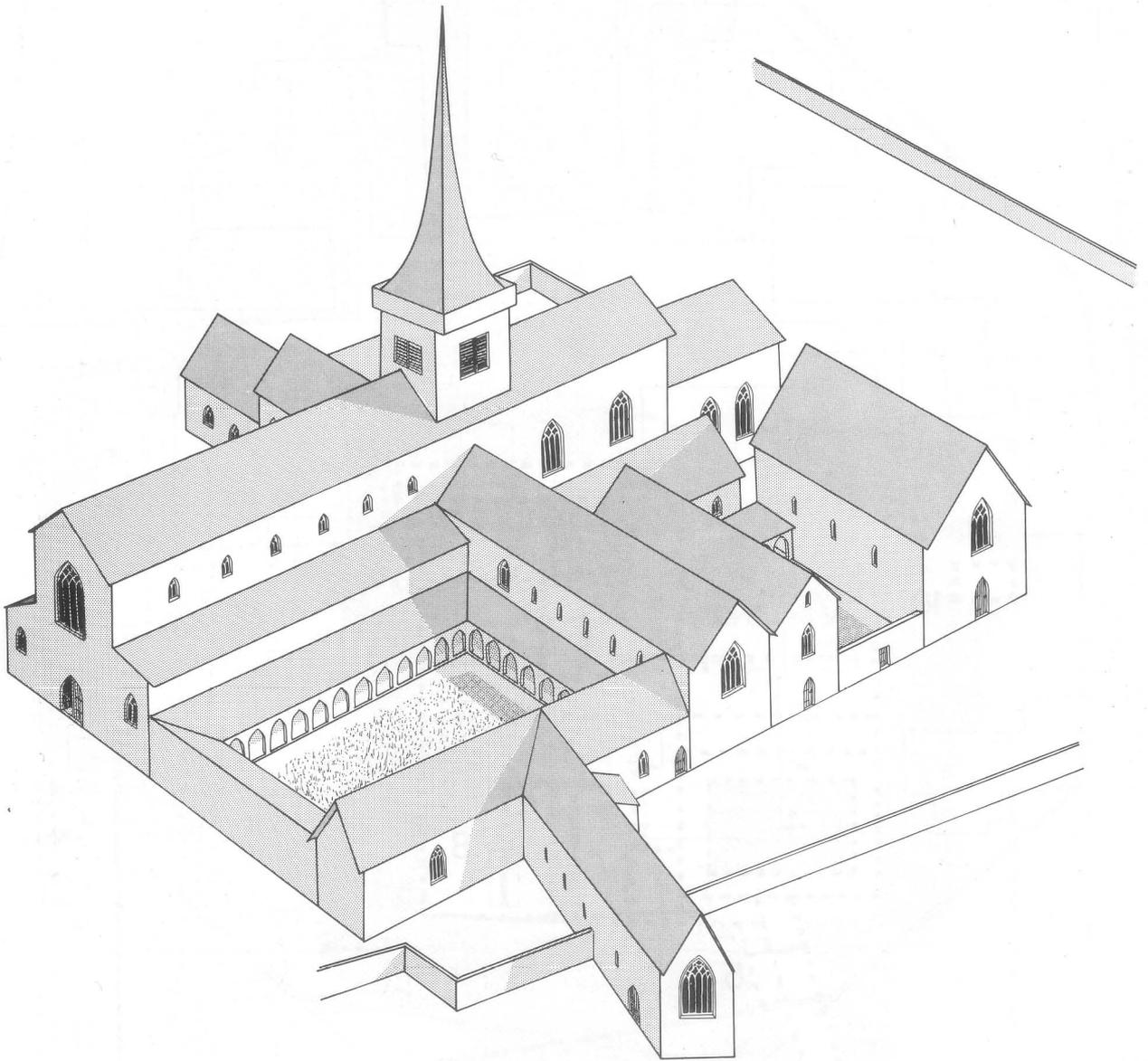


Fig. 4: reconstruction of the Abbey seen from the south-west c 1530.

Victualling Yard by the Royal Navy until 1740, then occupied by Government warehouses until cleared for the new Mint in 1799.

Plans of the Victualling Yards dating to the early 17th century show buildings conforming to parts of the conventional Cistercian plan, so the position of the central core of the Abbey, around the church, was roughly known. Combining the documentary

evidence with the walls uncovered a reasonably full plan of the Abbey has been compiled (Fig. 3), and, with various views and picture plans, a sketch reconstruction has been drawn up (Fig. 4).

The principle features of the Abbey are given below but, of course, the correlation of documented buildings and the remains located is still tentative, being based on parallels from other sites.



Fig. 5: west end of the Lady Chapel with the ?staircase.

## The Church

As the main administration block of the old Royal Mint (known as the Johnson-Smirke Building after its architects) lay across the western side of the transepts and tower crossing, only the east end of the church could be examined. Because this end of the church and particularly the chancel (1) is historically and architecturally the most important, it was decided to avoid disturbing this sensitive part of the Abbey, only examining the eastern perimeter walls. This allowed the extent of the church to be determined but left its fabric and internal details untouched.

The Lady Chapel (2), paid for by Sir Thomas Montgomery some time before 1494, lay east of the chancel. The possible base of a staircase and the northern side of the chapel were uncovered, the west end having a decorative pattern of flint, chalk and ragstone. Parts of the chapel and adjoining buildings stood up to 7 feet (2.2m) high. Between the Lady Chapel and a possible transept chapel lay parts of a

glazed tile floor and the remains of a doorway. A section of relaid 14th century floortiles decorated with flowers and geometric patterns, was found at the east end of another possible chapel.

The south chapel (3), which is mentioned in wills, abutted the 'chapter house' (7) (see below) and had access to the infirmary (8) vja a cloister or passage. The foundations of the chapel's south side were exposed in the bottom of a basement during a watching brief in 1983 so no further work was undertaken during the 1984 phase of trial work.

### The Cloisters (4)

Because of a 'live' sewer in the south-west of the site, the south side of the cloisters (the only side within the area available for trial work) could not be examined but two buildings connected to the cloister, the frater or refectory (5) and an associated storeroom were identified. The extent of the cloisters on the western side had already been established when the foundations of the cloister walls and floors were located in 1970.

### The Frater (5)

Midway along the south side of the cloister and at an acute angle to the rest of the south range lay the frater or dining room. This plan possibly reflected the piecemeal acquisition of properties facing onto East Smithfield for the monks' domestic buildings; this would oblige the builders of the new frater to fit the structure into existing property boundaries. Curiously the 17th century plans show the frater, apparently the original medieval building, extending almost down to the old East Smithfield frontage, having an overall length of 100 feet (30m). Possibly the charity for which the Abbey was noted resulted in an unusually lengthened frater, thus providing a dining space for the 'poore and Impotent people' mentioned in the 16th century as recipients of the Abbey's charity. The frater was found to be damaged on its west side by modern drains but its east wall and adjacent storeroom or warming room stood to a height of at least 5 feet (1.5m). The south transept, the dormitory block and latrines were also unavailable due to the 'live' sewer but the latrine drain (6), its chalk and tile vault largely intact, was found outside the Mint wall, presumably leading from the lavatories to the river.

### The 'Chapter House'(7)

One side of a major building east of the eastern range was uncovered; this is an unusual place for a building in a Cistercian monastery. However, no building is shown on the Victualling Yard plans in the conventional position of the chapter house, that is in the centre of the east range. This large building, some 33 feet by 72 feet (10m by 22m), may have

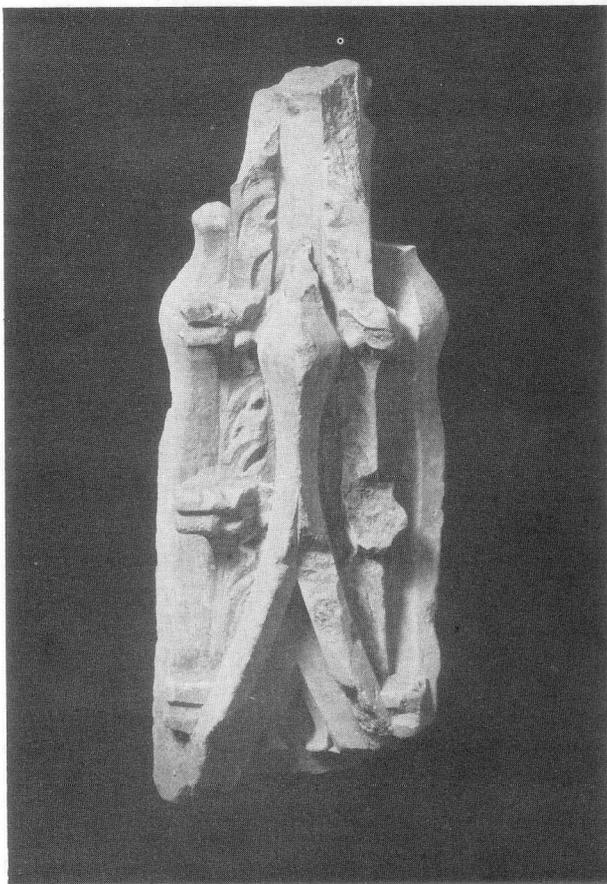


Fig. 6: crocketed finial, perhaps from a canopy tomb; found near the Lady Chapel.



**Fig. 7:** south-east corner of the 'chapter house'.



**Fig. 8: south wall of the infirmary.**

been the chapter house, its size (comparable with Rievaulx's chapter house which served 140 monks) and unusual position may be explained by the need to accommodate about 100 abbots when St Mary Graces convened a General Chapter for the English, Irish and Welsh Cistercians. The walls, standing over 7 feet (2.25m) above the medieval ground level, showed an unusual construction in the foundations. An interior shelf, which protruded near the top of the foundations, may have supported internal stone benches, a distinctive feature of chapter houses. The external face had a decorative pattern of flint and ragstone; a 16th century picture plan shows it was three storeys high, having a south door and large multilight window. A test pit cut by machine showed the foundations to be 6 feet deep (1.8m) and 5 feet (1.5m) thick.

### **The Infirmary (8)**

Separated from the 'chapter house' and church by a small yard but linked by a small cloister or passage was the infirmary. This substantial building, some 42 feet by 72 feet (12.8m by 22m), would have provided a sick bay, kitchen and dining room for elderly and ill monks. The area examined contained floors, the south door and structural features such as a succession of buttresses and a relieving arch across boggy

ground. Some sections of wall stood 7 feet (2.2m) above the medieval ground level. The identification of this building as the infirmary is based on the 16th century picture plan and a grant document naming it as the 'farmery'. We know from bills of account, which detail the cost of foundations, tiling and wooden fixtures, that work on the infirmary commenced in 1391.

### **Other Buildings (9)**

To the north of the Lady Chapel parts of other buildings were exposed. These formed a complex sequence of buildings probably dating from the late medieval and early post medieval periods and adapted by the Navy for use as storehouses. Areas of tiled floors, both plain and decorated, survived. From the plan (Fig. 2) it is clear the walls uncovered belonged to successive buildings but no coherent ground plan could be determined within the trenches.

### **Cemeteries**

To the north of the monastery, indeed under the range of northern buildings (9), was the lay cemetery where some ten burials were encountered. Also found was an indent for a monumental shroud brass (a fashion peculiar to the late 15th - early 16th

century), which had probably been removed from the adjacent Lady Chapel and may possibly have belonged to Sir Thomas Montgomery, the founder of the Lady Chapel who died c 1494. Conventionally the monks' cemetery lay to the east of the Lady Chapel itself. One burial was noted here.

### **Precinct Boundary and Gatehouse (10)**

The precinct of the Abbey was roughly coterminous with the present boundary of the Royal Mint. The Mint wall on the south and east is thought to follow exactly the line of the Abbey precinct in the late medieval period. Though the trial work failed to locate any medieval precinct wall as such, on the east side part of a large ditch was found which may mark its line. Documentary sources mention a mud wall as a boundary division. This would be vulnerable to later intrusions and leave little archaeological trace. To the west of the church lay the gatehouse (10) and a range of ancillary buildings now under the courtyard of the Johnson-Smirke building.

### **Other Deposits**

In addition to the walls and structures located, the trial work also exposed stratified deposits over much of the remainder of the site. The method of trenching imposed by the aims of the trial work precluded a greater examination of these deposits, hence their function is unknown. They do appear, however, to be contemporary with the Abbey and could provide crucial environmental evidence for the monks' diet, health and standard of living, as has been seen at the misericorde of Westminster Abbey.

Timber buildings, for which we have written evidence but which would leave little trace identifiable in a machine trench, might also be located.

Another interesting aspect of the site's archaeology is the period of the Navy's occupation, from about 1560 onwards. The site was the first and, for some time, the only Victualling Yard for the Fleet. It is because the Navy adapted the monastic buildings that such large portions of the Abbey have survived. The excavation showed numerous patchings and repairs to the medieval fabric, reflecting the changes of use to bakehouse, salthouse, cooperage and so on. The development of Britain's maritime industry in the 16th century is little known, so the site has unique importance in naval history.

The trial work has demonstrated that considerable archaeological deposits are present at the Royal Mint, including buildings which survive sufficiently to make public display feasible. Further excavation is essential for a proper understanding of the site, so the Department is negotiating with the Crown Estate Commissioners for time and funds to carry out a full scale excavation.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## **Excavations & Post-Excavation Work**

**City**, by Museum of London, Department of Urban Archaeology. A series of long term excavations. Enquiries to DUA, Museum of London, London Wall, E.C.2 (01-600 3699).

**Croydon & District**. Processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collection every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collection of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Hon. Curator, Croydon Natural History & Scientific Society Ltd., Museum Building, Croydon Biology Centre, Chipstead Valley Road, Coulsdon, Surrey. (01-660 3841 or 22 43727).

**Hammersmith & Fulham**, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from Sandford Manor and Fulham High Street. Tuesdays, 7.45 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, S.W.6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, S.W.6. (01-731 0338).

**Inner and North London Boroughs**, by the Museum of London, Department of Greater London Archaeology (Inner/North London). Several rescue sites in various areas. (01-242 6620).

**Kingston**, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Marion Hinton, Kingston Heritage Centre, Fairfield Road, Kingston. (01-546 5386).

**North-East London Boroughs**, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, E.15. (01-534 4545).

**South-West London Boroughs**, by Museum of London, Department of Greater London Archaeology (South-West London). Excavations and processing. Enquiries to Scott McCracken, St. Luke's House, Sandycombe Road, Kew. (01-940 5989).

**Southwark and Lambeth**, by Museum of London, Department of Greater London Archaeology (Southwark and Lambeth). Several sites from the Roman period onwards. Enquiries to Derek Seeley, Port Medical Centre, English Grounds, Morgan's Lane, SE1 2HT. (01-407 1989).

**Surrey**, by Surrey Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to David Bird, County Archaeological Officer, Planning Department, County Hall, Kingston, Surrey. (01-546 1050 x3665).

**Vauxhall Pottery**, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society. Processing of excavated material continues three nights a week. Enquiries to S.L.A.S., c/o Cuming Museum, 155 Walworth Road, S.E.17 (01-703 3324).

**West London Boroughs**, by West London Archaeological Field Group. Enquiries to 273A Brentford High Street, Brentford, Middlesex. (01-560 3880).