

Fig. 1: view, looking north, of structures 1-13 and 16-17 under excavation at 4-12 Norton Folgate.

(Photo: Museum of London)

# Excavations of the Priory and Hospital of St Mary Spital

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## History

ONE OF THE most important institutions ministering to the poor and sick of medieval London was the Augustinian Priory and Hospital of Blessed Mary without Bishopsgate, later known as St. Mary Spital. It was founded in 1197 by Walter Brown and his wife Roisia, probably in association with other London citizens, on land on the east side of Bishopsgate near the city bars. The original Priory church probably fronted directly onto the road. Walter had purchased the lands detailed in his foundation charter from a

number of local owners and tenants who held gardens and cottages along Bishopsgate and strips in the common field behind, stretching east to Lollsworth Field. Within a generation the Priory had consolidated its hold on the area, completing the blocks of property which were to form the main precinct and an outer precinct to the south, and extending its interests north and south into the parishes of St. Leonard's Shoreditch and St. Botolph's Bishopsgate. It was perhaps this consolidation which led to the Priory's re-foundation in 1235. This involved sub-

stantial rebuilding, for the church was moved so that the new west door was on the site of the original east end<sup>1</sup>.

There were twelve regular canons performing religious duties while seven sisters and five lay brothers attended to the sick, all under the rule of a Prior. The Prior and canons agreed to add another canon in 1349 to celebrate divine service for the souls of the king and his ancestors. These numbers seem to have been largely maintained until the eve of the Dissolution, the Prior and eleven canons acknowledging the royal supremacy in 1534<sup>2</sup>. At this time the Hospital provided 180 beds for the poor and sick, one of the largest such institutions in the country<sup>3</sup>.

The purpose of the Hospital was to house pilgrims, widows and the sick poor, with a special responsibility towards pregnant women and orphans born in the Hospital. Little is known of the care of the inmates except that they had sheets on their beds and that lamps were hung between them<sup>4</sup>. In the early 14th century the Hospital was obliged to maintain several retired government servants as corrodians at the king's command<sup>5</sup>. The Priory also supported numerous chantries both in its own church and chapels and in parish churches in the city, resulting from the bequests of citizens dying in the Hospital<sup>6</sup>.

A considerable supply of water was required for all the inhabitants of the precinct. This was provided in 1278 when the Bishop of London granted the Hospital a spring called Snekockeswelle or Simcock's Well in the parish of Stepney, with the right to pipe the water westward under his land to the canons' infirmary and other Hospital buildings. This supply was still operating in 1540<sup>7</sup>. However, in the 1370s the Priory was suffering problems with recurrent winter floods in the church and other buildings in the precinct, following the blockage of a drain further south down Bishopsgate. The destruction caused by these floods and the general depression in property values associated with the Black Death probably account for the apparent poverty of the house and its state of disrepair in the late 14th and 15th centuries<sup>8</sup>.

1. W. Dugdale *Monasticon Anglicanum* vi 623-6; Victoria County History *A History of London* i 530-5; London County Council *Survey of London* xxvii 21-3, 39-51; British Library Cotton MS. Nero Ciii ff. 219-223v.
2. *Registrum Radulphi Baldock et Stephani Gravesend Episcopi Londinensis* ed. R. C. Fowler (Canterbury and York Society 1911) 32-3; A. K. McHardy *The Church in London 1375-1392* (London Record Society 1977) no. 4; *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII* vii 921; *Seventh Report to the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records* 292.
3. J. Stow *Survey of London* (ed. C. L. Kingsford) i 166; *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (Record Commission) i 401.
4. *Calendar of Papal Letters* iv 393; ix 489-90; *Calendar of Close Rolls* 1339-1341 600; J. Gairdner (ed.) *The Historical Collections*

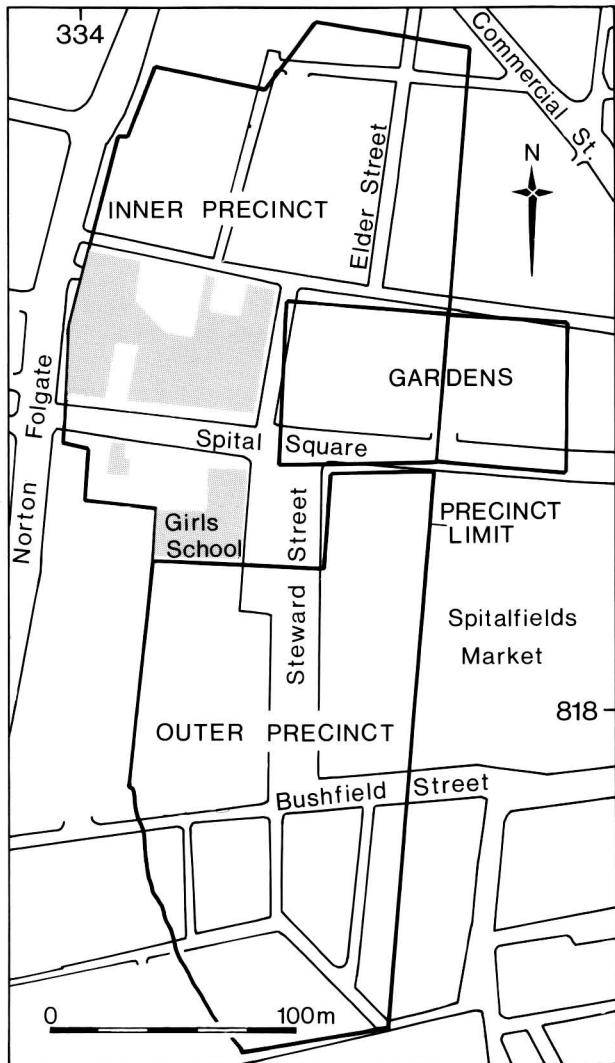


Fig. 2: site location plan showing areas of excavation.

As the Dissolution approached in the 1530s, the last Prior leased out the peripheral buildings and enclosures of the precinct, reserving only the core for himself and the remaining canons and sick<sup>9</sup>. The

*of a Citizen of London* (Camden Society - New Series xvii - 1876) p. ix; *Reg. Baldock* 32-3; Guildhall Library MS. 9171/3 f.20.

5. e.g. C.C.R. 1307-1313 236; 1330-1333 159, 336; *Calendar of Chancery Warrants* 1284-1336 103.
6. e.g. *Calendar of Patent Rolls* 1313-1317 92; 1324-1327 98; *Calendar of Wills ... in the Court of Husting* ed. R. R. Sharpe, ii 204; *Valor Ecclesiasticus* i 401.
7. *Historical Manuscripts Commission Report* ix 29; *L and P Henry VIII* xvii 1154 (50).
8. H. T. Riley (ed.) *Memorials of London ...* 374-5; V.C.H. *London* i 532-3; C.C.R. 1339-1341 600; *C. Papal Letters* ix 489-490.
9. *Valor Ecclesiasticus* i 400; *L and P Henry VIII* xvii 1154 (50); Public Record Office E.303/8/28; SC.6/Hen 8/2396 f.73.

church roof and the rood loft collapsed in August 1538 and the lead from the roofs was later taken by the Clerk of the King's Works to repair Westminster Hall<sup>10</sup>. The Priory was dissolved in 1538 and parts of the precinct were granted out to various people, most of it eventually coming into the hands of Stephen Vaughan. Sir Richard Gresham, the mayor, petitioned the king that the work of St. Mary's and three other hospitals might be continued under municipal control. This petition did not succeed, but the sick were allowed to remain in occupation of the Hospital buildings for the term of their lives<sup>11</sup>.

### Archaeological excavations

(For the location of numbered buildings, see Fig. 3)

Parts of the Priory buildings were exposed during the redevelopment of Spital Square in the 1720s, but no details of the discoveries are extant<sup>12</sup>. The first archaeological recording in the area of the precinct was done in 1935 by Frank Cottrill on behalf of the Society of Antiquaries, during the rebuilding of 4-13 Spital Square. In recent years the Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology has conducted excavations on the sites of the Central Foundation Girls' School on the south side of Spital Square in 1982 and 1985, 1-3 Norton Folgate in 1985, and 4-12 Norton Folgate (Fig. 1) and 4, 15 and 38 Spital Square in 1988 (see Fig. 2). It has also undertaken several watching briefs in the area. These investigations have elucidated some of the phases of development of the Priory and Hospital.

The time between the first and second foundations of the Priory (1197-1235) was represented archaeologically by nine burials in a row running north-south, found at 38 Spital Square. On the east side of this early cemetery was a shallow boundary ditch. When the church was rebuilt, the level of this area was raised by dumping, and the west front was built on approximately the same line as the ditch. Shortly afterwards a clay and gravel yard surface was laid to the west of the wall. The church was not cruciform in the normal sense. It may have had a porch, but there was almost certainly no nave. Instead, it was designed with a 4-bay building (1) to the north which was the hospital initially and subsequently a transept. Chapels were probably located along the eastern side of building (1), and within the north aisle of the chancel. The dedications of four of these chapels are known. A tower is shown on Wyngaerde's *Panorama of London*.

The site of the second (1235) church was probably very boggy so the external walls, built of chalk with

10. L and P Henry VIII xiii(2) 13; xvii 256; L.C.C. Survey xxvii 23.

11. L and P Henry VIII xvii 1154 (50); P.R.O. E.315/213 f.5; B.L.

ragstone facing, were built on foundation arches. Within them a large amount of brickearth was dumped in order to raise the ground level by up to 0.6m (2ft). Towards the end of this phase, circular ragstone pier foundations were built to support the vaulting. Construction involved undercutting in order to create an 'anchor' for the weight of the superstructure. Above the wall foundations, the ragstone was crudely dressed in contrast to the Caen stone quoins at the returns and the two moulded green sandstone semi-octagonal arch responds at the north end of building (1).

Circular columns were erected on the pier foundations whilst the levelling of the ground was being completed. Each was made of fine-moulded green sandstone wedges which formed a drum 0.85m (2ft 9in) in diameter, set upon a simple circular podium and crowned with a circular scalloped capital. One column (A) (see Fig. 3) remained *in situ*; it had a socket in it, perhaps for a wooden screen. A later phase of refurbishment and construction within the church may be associated with the building of the hospital hall to the west and the blocking of the door to the cemetery. A possible roodscreen foundation made of chalk was laid across the west end of the chancel southwards from pier B, and quantities of fragmented green sandstone were allowed to build up on the floor of the church. At a later date two chalk buttresses were inserted on the west side of piers B and C in order to retain a pressure from the east and south.

The church ground was consecrated before the building was completed. Certainly, two (possibly three) burials were cut into the gravel working surface in the crossing prior to the laying of the first proper floor. A hearth made of rooftiles slotted vertically into a clay bed indicated the presence of workers on site during construction. Two further round hearths of clay and ragstone were also built during later phases of levelling.

The floors of the church were of mortar or clay and were replaced many times during the life of the building. No sign of tiles *in situ* or impressions was found. Eight burials were recorded with building (1), presumably post-dating the use of that building as an infirmary. Their layout around an anthropomorphic chalk tomb suggests a chapel to the east of the transept. One of the later burials contained a papal bulla (Pope Urban VI, 1378-1389) (Fig. 4). A hearth was discovered in the south centre aisle of the transept, and what may have been a heart or viscera

Cotton M.S. Cleopatra Eiv f.222.

12. Mon. Ang. vi 623-4.

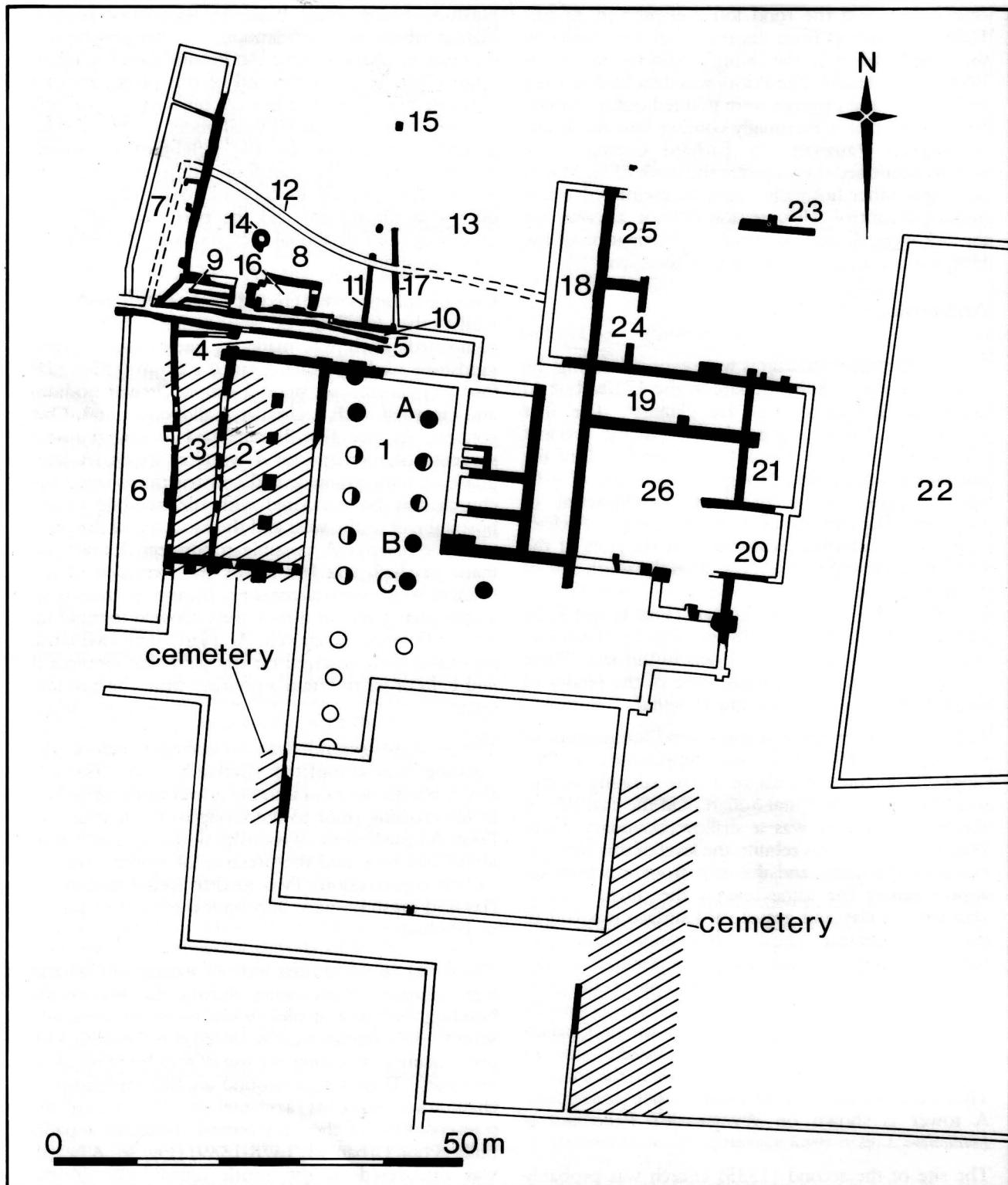


Fig. 3: plan of the Priory and Hospital of St Mary Spital.

burial. Six burials were located in the crossing. One was in a lead coffin within a standing green sandstone tomb; three further burials were recorded by Frank Cottrill for the Society of Antiquaries in 1935 within the chancel. Documentary sources name at least 25 people who were buried within the church.

At the Dissolution the foundations of the north chancel wall were partially robbed. The lack of demolition material suggests a careful reduction rather than destruction. It is almost certain that most of the church became open ground shortly after the Priory's suppression. The east aisle of the transept was subsumed into a new property boundary, and its north wall was reused as the south wall of a new building. A doorway was inserted in this wall, its threshold laid with late medieval tiles. The re-use of many of the chamfered ashlar blocks and column drum segments in cess-pit walls of 17th-century date, and their excellent condition, suggests that a ruinous portion of the church remained in use for many years.

### Cemetery

A total of 103 burials have been excavated from a cemetery to the west of building (1). They were associated with the hospital. The north and west boundaries of the cemetery were not physically delineated although the burials cease on the same alignment. The eastern boundary was the church, the southern limit is uncertain. There was large-scale disturbance of the burials, some of which were removed in 1937. There were eight north-south rows of graves running west from the infirmary and there appear to have been at least 24 graves in each row. The majority of the graves were discrete and there was little intercutting. The original population (assuming that there were no further graves to the south) may have been approximately 170. The cemetery was filled from the church to the road. Some of the graves on the west side post-dated the construction of structure (2) but pre-dated the construction of (3) (see below). So the cemetery must have been used for a short time after the construction of the infirmary. Five graves of the western row were dug at the north end, but the row was never completed. Room was left at the north end of the eastern grave row to allow access to the door into the infirmary (1). A significant proportion of the burials were adolescents and infants. A number of graves also appear to have contained coffins: many graves are of a distinct coffin shape, some had poorly preserved coffin remains and one grave at the north end, which lay in waterlogged clays, had an almost entirely preserved wooden coffin which was pegged together, rather than nailed. One of the burials further south had its skull resting on a chalk pillow. There was only one communal grave which lay in the fourth



Fig. 4: two gold rings and a papal bulla.

(Photo: Trevor Springett)

burial row and contained five inhumations – possibly a family group.

It was probably soon after the construction of building (2) (see below) that a large cemetery was begun to the south-east of the church. This was reached by a road running south from the hospital around the cloisters (modern day Spital Yard occupies part of this road). The cemetery was bounded on the west side by a chalk wall, the other boundaries remain unexcavated. A total of 406 skeletons was recorded, including a significant proportion of infants, reflecting the hospital's role in caring for expectant mothers and orphans. The southernmost area produced 125 bodies and had been so intensively used that it was impossible to identify any rows or grave cuts. A larger area in the north produced only 40 bodies lying in rows, with most cuts being identified. This suggests that the northern end may have been reserved for monastic burials, and the southern end for hospital inmates. The multiple burials in two graves may have been victims of a sudden epidemic. Structures within the cemetery, yet to be excavated, included the Spital Cross and the charnel house or chapel of St Mary and St Edmund built in the late 14th century.

### Infirmary

A rectangular hall (2) was built against the west wall of building (1) over the hospital cemetery. It was built from ragstone on large foundation arches. Four rectangular pier bases lay down the centre of the hall separating it into two aisles. The size of the piers and walls and the presence of buttresses suggest that the building was of two storeys. A clay floor which contained a tile hearth was found in the north-eastern corner. The former cemetery doorway may have been blocked at this point and another entrance made into the church at the southern end. The beds were probably laid in four rows against the walls and pier bases, although the method of sub-division is unclear. Building (1) probably did not continue in use as an

infirmary after the construction of the new infirmary building (2) since burials were made within it.

Contemporary with the infirmary was a drain (5) running from east to west across its north end. The thickness of the walls and the buttress against the north wall suggest that it supported a structure lying between the north end of the infirmary and the drain. This was probably the infirmary latrine (4). The east wall must have been destroyed by the construction of later walls on the same line. The drain came from the east and may have been used by other buildings such as the kitchen. It would have run out into a ditch along the east side of Bishopsgate. Underneath the foundation arch of the west wall of the latrine lay a sluice gate with a stone floor. The exact function of this is unclear, but refuse including wooden bowls and plates (Fig. 5) was let out of the sluice into a large pit. This pit was filled before the construction of building (3).

An extension (3) was built onto the west wall of the infirmary. It originally ran up to the drain to the north. Like the infirmary it was built on foundation arches. The walls were constructed from chalk with chalk and gravel foundations, although at the north end, where it ran over very boggy ground, the foundations were entirely constructed from chalk. Buttresses were placed on the outside of the wall on the line of the first and third infirmary column bases from the south suggesting a two storey building. The west wall continued to the south where it would probably have joined the west gate. To the west lay garden (6)<sup>13</sup> up to the street frontage. Its size is not known but it was presumably bounded by the drain on the north and the west gate to the south. The western edge of the precinct may have followed the present building line giving a width of 5·6m (16·20ft) for the garden.

To the north of the drain (5) lay building (7) which contained two stables<sup>14</sup>. North of the stables was part of a second gate leading in from Bishopsgate. Evidence for this comes from an iron hinge at the west end of Folgate St, recorded in the late 18th century<sup>15</sup>. This building also delineated the Sisters' Garden (8)<sup>16</sup> on its west side.

### Rebuilding

In the 14th century extensive remodelling of the

13. Catalogue of Ancient Deeds. Vol 5 P 434.

14. 1550 - *Inq. P.M. London.* i 86.

15. Ellis Shoreditch 313.

buildings took place. Drain (5) was largely robbed of its stone and a new latrine block (9) was built to the north-west. It consisted of two parallel drains with a chalk wall between them, floored in green sandstone blocks. The chalk wall was later rebuilt in flint. The substantial northern wall supported the overlying structure, whereas the southern drain wall would not have been structural. The drains ran from east to west before turning south-west to join the original line of drain (5), although now at a higher level. In the north wall of this section was a groove for a sluice. The latrine block probably ran south to a wall which cut across the north end of (3). To the east of the latrine a long hall (10) overlay the robbed out drain (5). Entrance from the Sisters' Garden to building (10) was via a porch whose west wall still retained its ashlar facing. At the north end was a large post-hole for a single doorpost. A number of partition walls divided the building up into smaller compartments utilising parts of the drain walls which had been left unrobbed. The partitions stopped short of the south wall, allowing access to all parts of the hall. The hall narrowed towards the east end of the excavated area, and here in its north wall was a doorway built from green sandstone. The function of this building is not certain, but it may have been the Sisters' Dorter. During this period a chalk wall (11) running north from (10) was constructed. It ran up to drain (12) and delineated garden (8) to the west and garden (13) (probably the Kitchen Garden<sup>17</sup>) to the east. Drain (12) was also built at this time. It appears to have run from the Convent Kitchen (18)<sup>18</sup> to the east. This must have replaced drain (5) but was narrower and less substantially built. It had a ragstone floor which was later replaced in tile where it had slumped. The drain ran through a brick arch which was inserted into the west wall of (7). Well (14) may also have been built at this period. It was 3.88m (12ft 9in) deep and had an internal diameter of 1m (3ft 3in). A chalk wall (15) located to the north may also be of this date. Only a very small portion was revealed but its construction was similar to some of the walls in this phase. Its function is unknown, but the *Copperplate* map and Ogilby and Morgan's map of 1677 suggest that it may have been the western wall of a rectangular building aligned from east to west.

Sometime after the construction of the west half of

16. L.C.C. Survey xxvii 47-9.

17. 1540 - P.R.O. E.315/213 f.5.

18. L.C.C. Survey xxvii 47-9.



Fig. 5: wooden bowls from pit at sluice outlet.

(10), a small tenement (16) was built onto its north side. This utilised the east wall of the porch and the north wall of (10). Its other walls had foundations of chalk rubble with chalk and ragstone walls above. Within this building was a series of clay floors and occupation layers, and at the west end a substantial fireplace incorporating a tile hearth. It was presumably one of many tenements used as homes by people for a rent paid to the Priory.

Towards the end of the medieval period wall (17) was constructed as a new boundary between gardens (8) and (13), replacing wall (11). It was built on a different alignment from that of the other walls – SE-NW. It was heavily truncated at its southern end but its junction was found with (10). It was built over drain (12) and had grooves for a sluice on the east side to empty the drain. It was faced with dressed flint work on this side.

### Unphased Structures

The structures to the north and north-east of the church were mostly located during watching briefs in the 1930s, parts of (18) by watching brief in 1982, and (22) and (23) by excavation in 1988. Cottrill's plans from 1935-37 have come to light, although his notes have not, so the layout of the structures can be deduced but their functions and phases are unclear. Building (18) was possibly a rectangular structure; only the south and east walls have been uncovered, so neither its full length nor width are known. Within it were found a clay floor and a half of an oval oven 2m (6½ft) across which was built of green sandstone, brick and tile and was filled with soot. Building (18) was almost certainly the Convent Kitchen. It bounded the east side of the Kitchen Garden (13) and was served by drains (12) and possibly (5). Buildings (19) and (20) both contained tile floors and were structures of some note. The extent of the external buttressing on the north wall of (19) suggests that this would have had two storeys, which is confirmed by the buildings occupying its position on the *Copperplate*

19. 1278 – *Historical MSS. Commission ix 29*; 1418 – G.L. 9171/3 f.20; 1540 – P.R.O. SC.6/Hen 8/2396 f.74.

(Photo: Trevor Springett)

map. It seems likely that (19) was the Prior's Lodging and that (21) may have been the Canon's Infirmary. It is known that the Infirmary lay on the east side of these buildings close to the Prior's Garden<sup>19</sup>. To the east of (21) lay garden (22) which may have been the Prior's Garden<sup>20</sup>. This was divided from the probable convent garden (23)<sup>21</sup> by a partially robbed boundary wall.

At the north end of the precinct lay the great barn and ancillary buildings. North of these, outside the precinct, lay a series of almshouses owned by the Priory, along Shoreditch High St.

The excavated evidence has revealed a pattern of development of the Priory and Hospital from Walter and Roisia's original foundation across the north and east sides of the precinct. On the south side was the probable site of the cloisters. Little excavation has been carried out in this area, although the west range and possibly the south wall of the south range have been located. Now that the area of the precinct has been scheduled as an Ancient Monument, future sites may clarify the ground plan before development proceeds. Post-excavation analysis of the results of the earlier Museum of London excavations continues: archive reports should be completed by the end of 1989, and it is hoped that a full report will be published shortly.

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20. 1540 – P.R.O. SC.6/Hen 8/2396 f.74.

21. 1540 – P.R.O. SC.6/Hen 8/2396 f.74.