

Fig. 1: plan showing location of St. Bride's church in relation to medieval walled town and three other churches excavated by Professor Grimes: 1 St. Albans; 2 St. Mary Aldermanbury; 3 St. Swithuns. (Chrissie Milne, London Archaeological Research Facility)

The medieval Lady Chapel at St. Bride's Church

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— Andrew Reynolds

Archaeology at St. Bride's

When the Roman and Medieval London Excavation Council (RMLEC) began their work at St. Bride's church, Fleet Street, in 1952 (Fig. 1), a new chapter in the development of medieval archaeology opened. This was the first parish church in England to be excavated totally in plan using modern archaeological techniques. Credit for this pioneering advance lies with Professor W. F. Grimes, who was responsible for a remarkable series of research excavations on bomb-damaged sites in London between 1947 and 1962. Initially, the RMLEC were invited solely to locate a crypt, part of a Lady Chapel in the north-east corner of the church. A record of this long-forgotten feature had been made by John Pridden, curate of the church from 1783-1803, and had aroused the curiosity of his 20th-century successor, Rev. C. M. Armitage. The ar-

chaeologists successfully located the well-preserved feature almost immediately, and persuaded the rector that a more extensive excavation of the church would be equally profitable. Had it not been for the 18th-century drawing of the crypt, a pioneering chapter in the history of London's archaeology may never have taken place¹. That medieval crypt and a fragment of its associated Lady Chapel still survive beneath the north aisle. These historic features were the focus of a recording exercise in 1992-3 conducted by a team from, appropriately enough, the Institute of Archaeology (University College London), the institution served by Professor Grimes from 1956-1973. This article summarises some of the results of the recent study.

1. W. F. Grimes (1968) *The Excavation of Roman & Medieval London*.

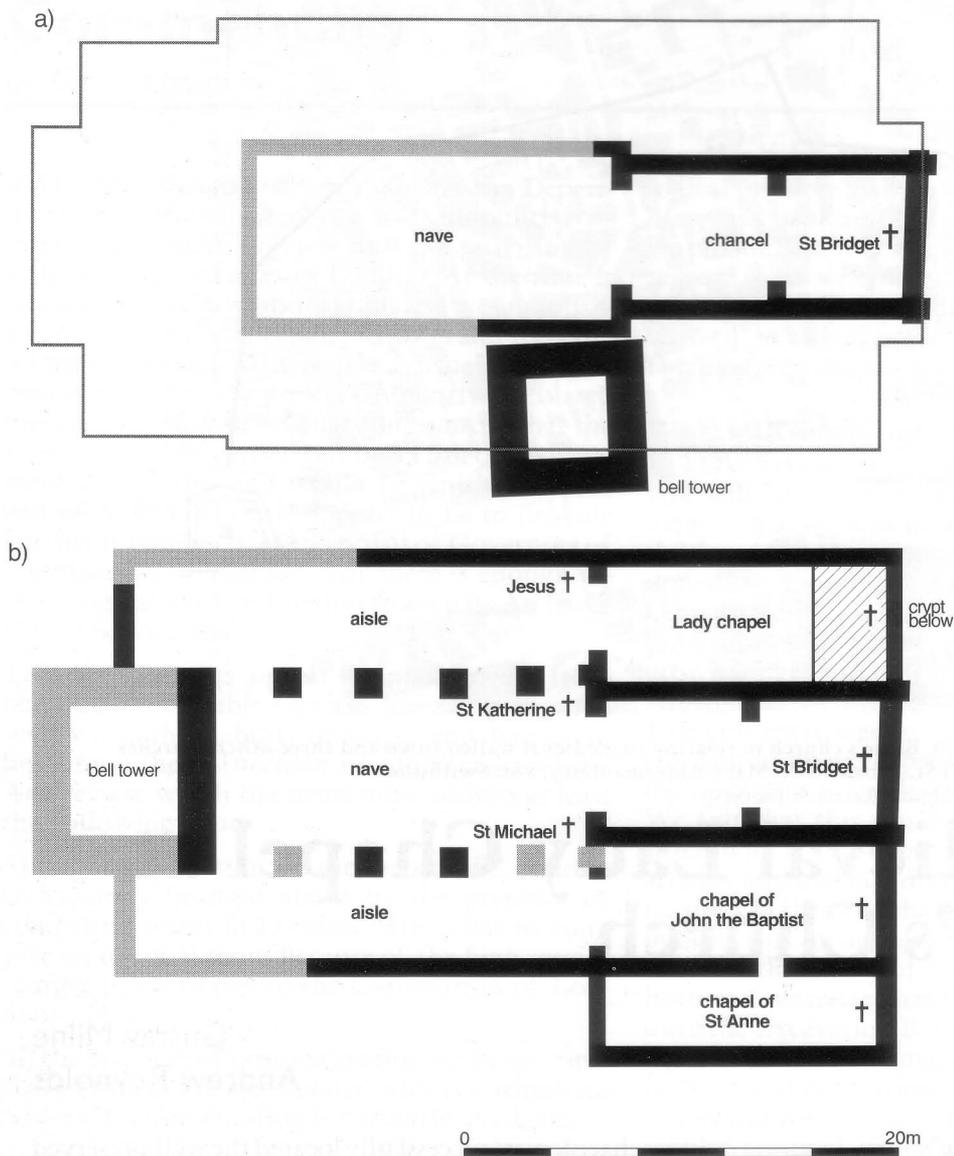


Fig. 2: schematic plan of St. Bride's church in the late 12th to early 13th century (A) compared with the later medieval development (B) which saw the establishment of a series of chantry chapels and altars. (Chrissie Milne, London Archaeological Research Facility)

Church development (Fig. 2)

One of the first major results of the archaeological investigation of the English parish church was the demonstration that these buildings were capable of considerable development, often growing from a modest two-celled structure to a very much larger complex building². The expansions and contractions of the plan of St. Martin's church at Wharram Percy in Yorkshire, for example, were initially seen by the excavators as a reflection of the growth and decline of the rural population it

served: however, later work showed that other factors needed to be taken into consideration, such as the vagaries of local aristocratic interest as well as structural failure³. Of particular importance is an understanding of changing liturgical practice, which saw many churches enlarged by the addition of private chapels, particularly the richer urban parishes. Thus one of the more significant forces behind the expansion of medieval churches was not so much a growing population as an investment of private wealth in the fabric of the building.

2. W. Rodwell (1981) *The Archaeology of the English Church*.

3. J. G. Hurst 'Wharram Percy: St. Martin's Church', in P. Addyman & R. Morris (eds), *The Archaeological Study of Churches* CBA

Res Rep 13 (1976) 36-39; cf R. Bell et al *Wharram, a Study of Settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds: vol 3: the church of St. Martin* (1987) Medieval Archaeology mono no. 11, 204-13.

The development of St. Bride's church (Fig. 2) is an excellent illustration of this point, for by the 15th century it boasted no less than three private chapels (also known as *chantry chapels*). Each had been built with the contributions of a fraternity or guild of pious parishioners, rather than from the bequest of a single wealthy individual. One chapel was dedicated to John the Baptist, one to St. Anne and one to the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is with the latter structure, the Lady Chapel in the north-east corner of the church, that this article is concerned, following the recent wall recording exercise⁴.

Brotherhood of St. Mary

In 1389, John Riley and John Walworth, wardens of the Brotherhood of St. Mary at St. Bride's church, declared that their guild was so old that it was 'ordained from a time to which the memory of man extends not'. The earliest documentary record of the Lady Chapel around which their actions centred is in 1361. The chantry certificate of 1388/9, from which our quote was taken, gives a full account of the Guild of St. Mary⁵. It explains that

4. Field records compiled under site code SB092 for the London Archaeological Research Facility.

certain persons had initially provided funds to keep a candle lit before the statue of the Blessed Virgin, and subsequently (at an unspecified date) built a chapel for her worship and provided for a chaplain to perform services at her altar. The bequests which make provision for such chantries include those of John Wigan in 1361, Nicolas Spuryer in 1383-1408 and Simon Petigru in 1391. The Brotherhood and chantry were dissolved in 1545 by order of Henry VIII, but the crypt was used as a burial vault until it was sealed up in the mid-19th century.

Recording chapel and crypt 1952-93 (Fig. 3)

A remarkable series of medieval walls and foundations are on display in the basement of the present church of St. Bride. These remains were revealed during the extensive excavations of 1952-4 and represent parts of the church which had survived the Great Fire of 1666 as well as the fire bomb attack of 29th December 1940. They include a 10m length of the north wall of the Lady Chapel, surviving up to six courses high, as well as the medieval crypt which stands complete with its three-bay vaulted

5. W. Godfrey *St. Bride, Fleet Street* (1944) London Survey Committee, vol 35, 114.

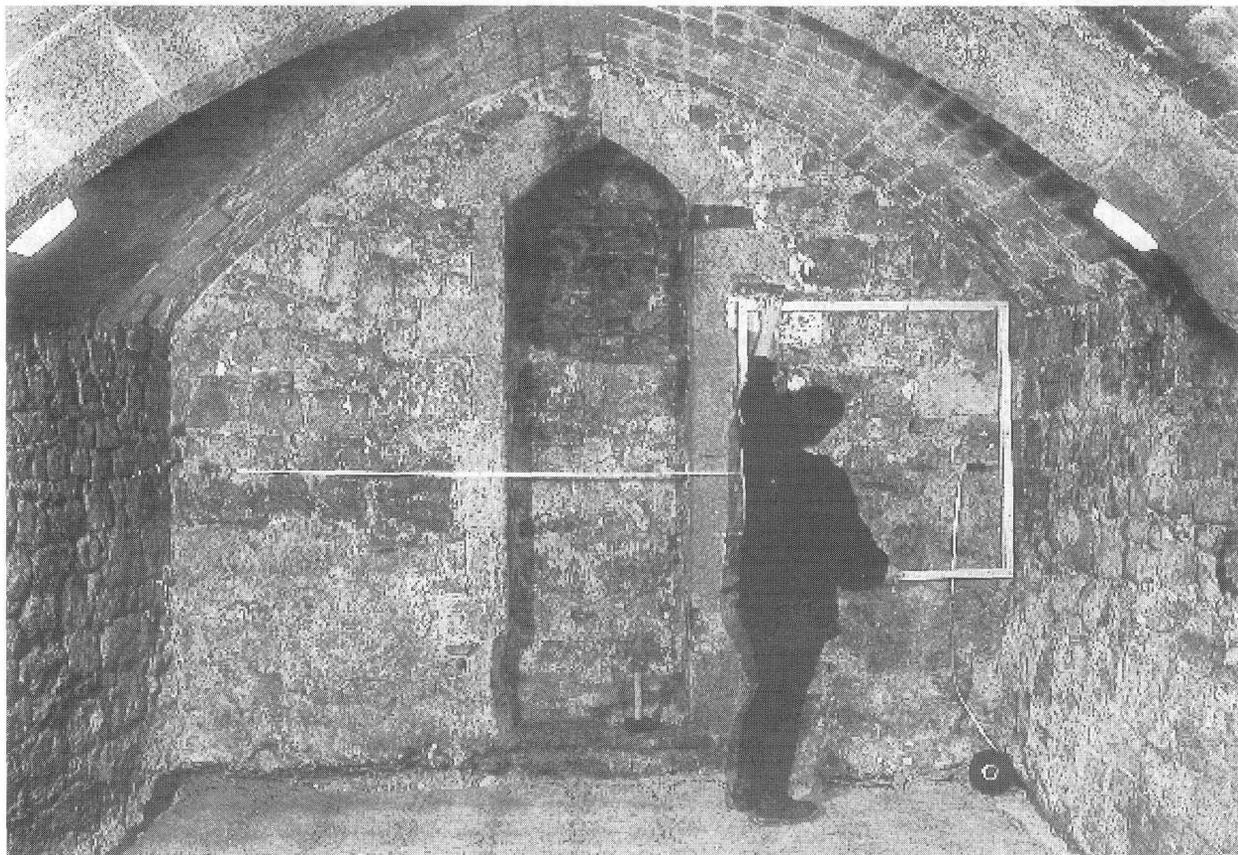


Fig. 3: Sarah Sample records the north wall of the crypt below the Lady Chapel at St. Bride's. Note junction of north and west walls. (London Archaeological Research Facility)

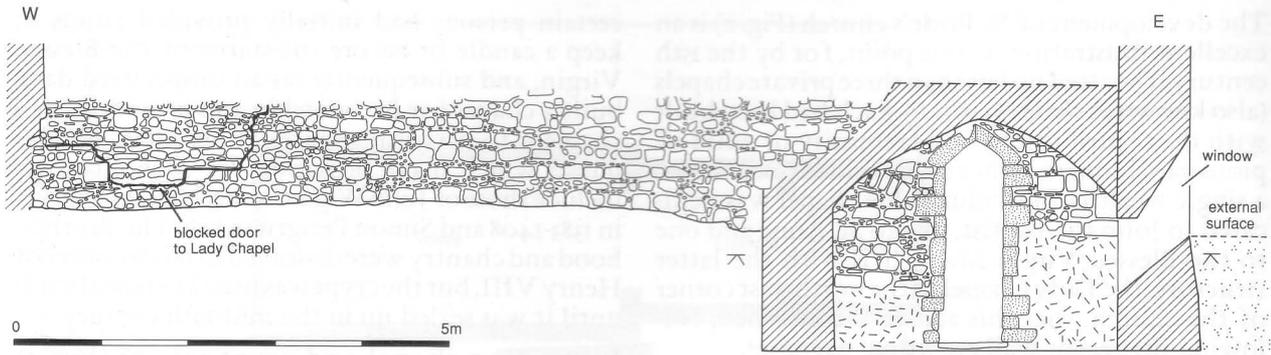


Fig. 4: semi-reconstructed elevation of surviving remains of Lady Chapel, with foundations omitted. It shows internal face of the north wall, with crypt below altar.

(Sue Hurman, London Archaeological Research Facility) roof. When work began on the posthumous preparation of the final report on excavations conducted by Professor Grimes, it was noticed that there were few detailed elevation drawings of any medieval walls in the field records which have survived from the 1950s. With the kind permission of Canon John Oates, the medieval fabric was therefore re-recorded in 1992-3, in advance of the redesign of the exhibition and the redecoration of the medieval crypt. A common datum was established, and the medieval walls were drawn stone-by-stone at 1:20, noting stone types and mortar used. Some of the results of this work are shown in Figs. 3-6. By combining the new information with the original field records, it was possible to reassess the interpretation of the sequence suggested in the interim report published 25 years ago⁶.

Beneath the chancel of St. Bride's is an enigmatic Roman building with a tessellated pavement. It has

been suggested that this represents the remains of small mausoleum in a late Roman cemetery, which may have formed the focus for the establishment of the medieval church⁷. Discussion of this important point lies outside the scope of this article, but it is worth stressing that a pit or backfilled well containing pottery provisionally dated to the 10th or early 11th century was excavated in 1953, the upper fills of which were cut by the apsidal end of the first masonry church. This relationship is clearly shown on an unpublished section drawn by Grimes⁸.

The curved east wall of the chancel was replaced by an enlarged squared east end in the 12th century (Fig. 2), a narrow northern aisle was added to the nave in the early 13th, and this aisle had been widened by the 15th century. The Lady Chapel was built during this period, i.e. between the 13th and 15th centuries. The construction of the chapel and its crypt was initially seen as part of a single unified

6. *Op. cit.* fn 1, 182-97.

7. R. Merrifield *London, City of the Romans* (1983) 133.

8. Held in the Grimes London Archive (Museum of London) with the other surviving records of this excavation, filed under reference WFG62; see also *op. cit.* fn 1, 186-7.

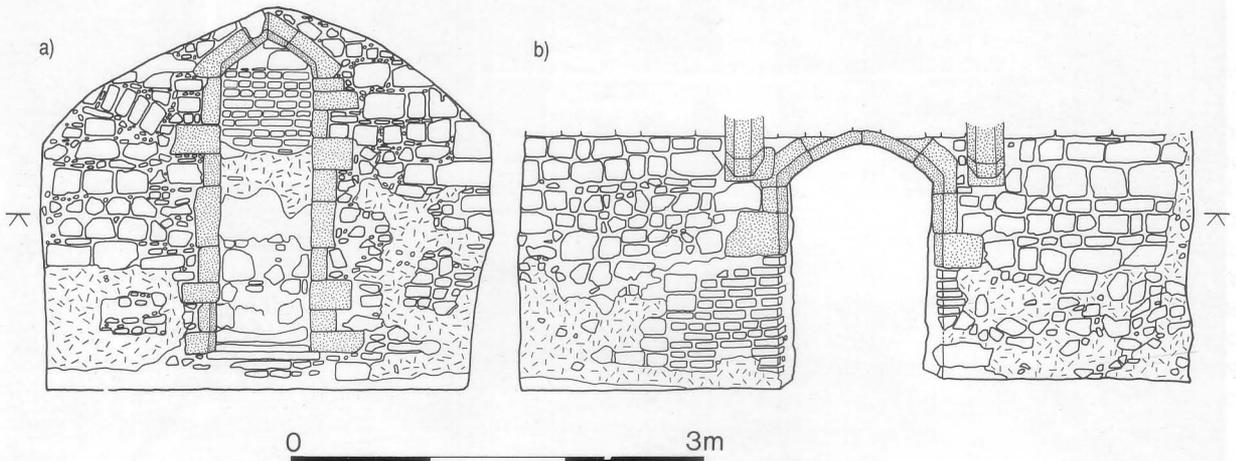


Fig. 5: internal elevations of crypt below Lady Chapel: Greensand blocks stippled. A) north face with blocked medieval door; B) east face with medieval window now converted into modern door;

development⁹: detailed recording in 1992-3, however, has shown that the Lady Chapel was subject to comprehensive remodelling, the crypt belonging to a second construction phase.

Phase 1: the Lady Chapel

The Lady Chapel extended the full length of the 12th-century chancel. Externally, it was just over 1m wider than the early 13th-century north aisle, which it abutted. This necessitated the construction of a short return wall at its west end, in order to draw the two structures together. The construction techniques involved were distinct from those employed elsewhere in the church. The long north wall consisted of pseudo-chequerboard masonry, achieved by using a combination of roughly squared chalk and ragstone blocks, with the wide joints heavily packed with stone chips. The composition of the wall changes slightly toward its western end where the remnant of the former entrance into the chapel from the north is visible, represented by the jambs on either side of the base of the doorway (Fig. 4). The rest of this feature was removed and blocked, presumably when the north aisle was widened in the late 14th or 15th century, after which access would have been possible from the main body of the church. The height of the threshold of this doorway gives an indication of the level of the external ground surface at the time when the Lady Chapel was first built and, shows that its floor was suspended some 0.25m above the level of the foundation offset.

As for the east wall of the Lady Chapel, the superstructure belongs largely to the second phase, except probably for the junction of the north and east walls. However, the offset foundations appear. *Op. cit.* fn 6, 190; Fig. 45.

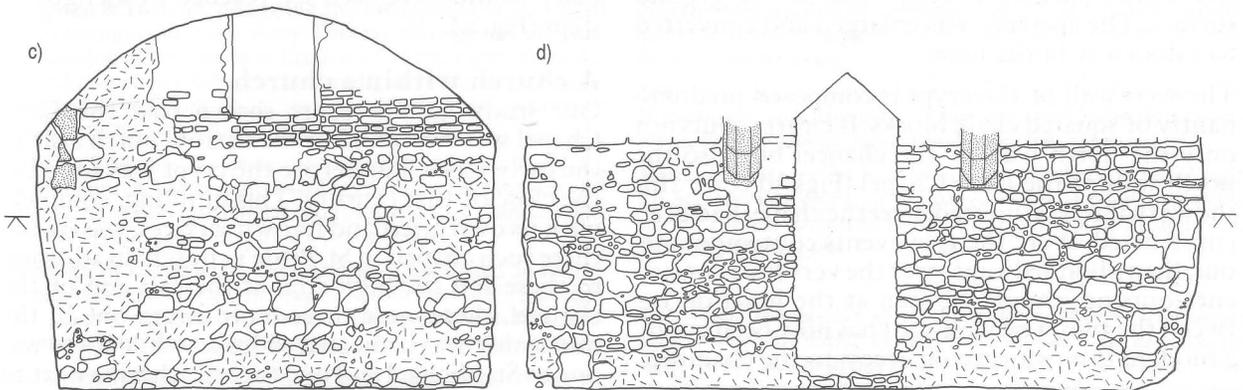
pear to belong to the first phase of building, although they are somewhat different in character to those of the north walls.

Phase 2: Crypt (Fig. 5)

The construction of the crypt caused substantial alterations to be made to the Lady Chapel. The first of these would have been the excavations of over fifteen cubic metres of deposits at the eastern end of the chapel down to the level of the present crypt floor. This exposed the foundations of the north wall of the 12th century chancel to the south, revealing what had once been an external pilaster of squared Greensand blocks (Fig. 5c). It also exposed the north and east foundations of the phase 1 Lady Chapel, which seem to have been cut back before being rendered (Fig 5a & b; Fig 6). The next operation appears to have been the insertion of the doorway into the north wall (Fig. 5a) and the splayed light shaft into the east wall (Fig. 4; 5b). On stylistic grounds both these features suggest a construction date in the late 13th century or early 14th century, according to Tim Tatton-Brown¹⁰.

The north door allowed access into the crypt from the churchyard above by way of steps. On its western side, it appears to cut through the blocking of an enigmatic Phase 1 arched feature, while more Phase 1 masonry is visible to the east. The wall fabric around the head of the doorway represents post-insertion infilling.

The light shaft necessitated a substantial alteration to the inner face of the east wall of the Phase 1 building (Fig. 5b). The external face of the shaft survives, complete with three square holes for the vertical bars. The level from which the light shaft is. *Pers. comm.*



C) south face with rendering over 12th-century chancel wall cut by brick tomb;

D) west face cut by modern doorway set between medieval vault ribs.
(Sue Hurman, London Archaeological Research Facility)

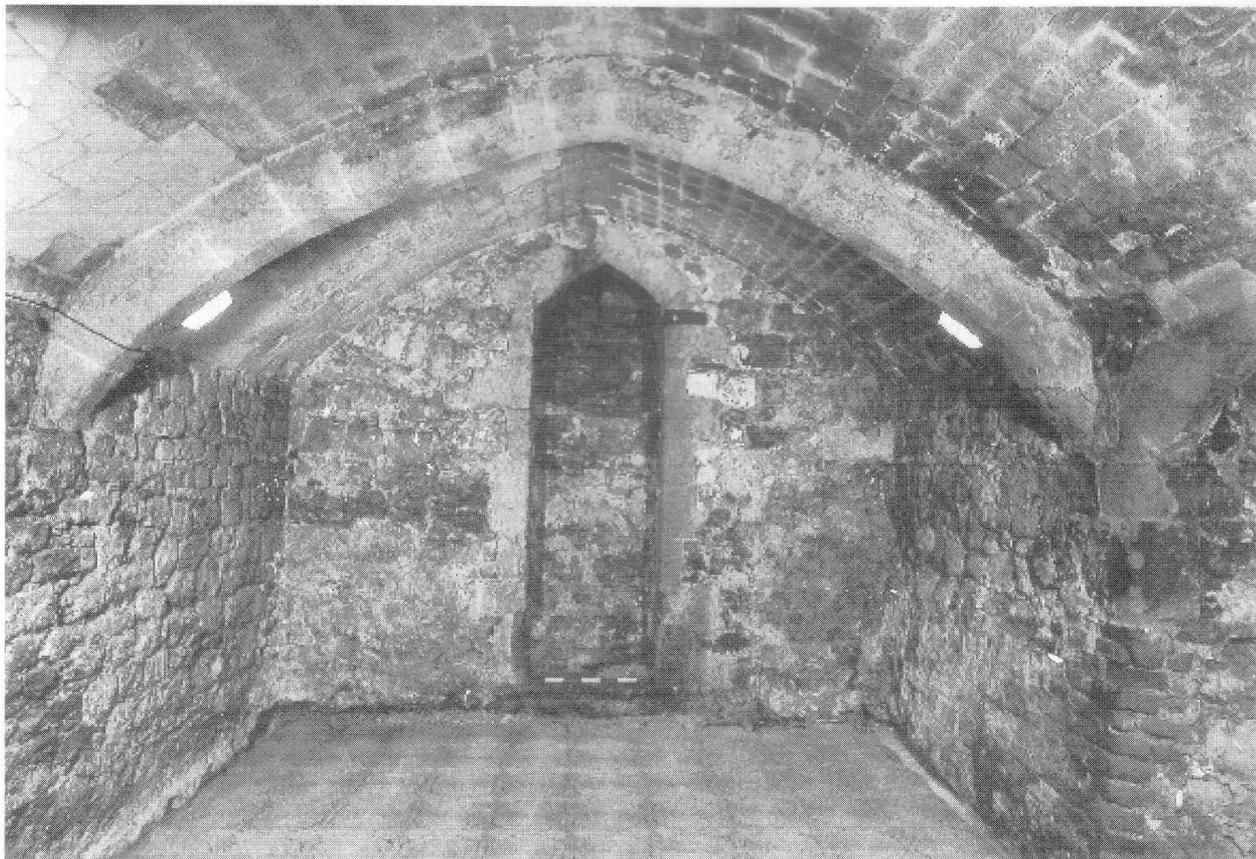


Fig. 6: North face of crypt below Lady Chapel, showing blocked medieval door with 5 x 100mm scale on threshold. Note how coursing on north and east walls changes 0.7m above floor level, marking division between the phase 1 walling and the later exposure of their foundations, subsequently rendered, after lower crypt floor inserted. The west wall was then added (to left).
(London Archaeological Research Facility)

descended, presumably the contemporary surface of Bride Lane, indicates that the ground beyond the churchyard was lower than that within (*cf* Fig. 4), a common feature in a graveyard where intensive burial ensures a steady rise in the ground surface. The aperture was enlarged and converted to a doorway in the 1950s.

The west wall of the crypt is composed predominantly of squared chalk blocks. It clearly abuts not only the north wall of the chancel but also the north wall of the Lady Chapel (Figs. 5d & 6): this shows that it was inserted *after* the chapel had been constructed. Were the two events contemporaneous, then a bonded joint, or at the very least consistent coursing, should be seen at the junction between the two. The west wall has now been cut by a modern doorway giving access to the chamber.

The crypt was capped with a chalk block vault of three bays separated by Greensand ribs. The use of white chalk, when newly installed, would have greatly aided the illumination of this sunken room.

The crown of the vault was set over 1m higher than the contemporary floor level in the Lady Chapel above it, and it is suggested that this was used to create a raised dais upon which the altar to Our Lady would have been set, reached by a flight of steps (Fig. 4).

A church within a church

Our study has therefore shown that the Lady Chapel was erected after the narrow north aisle in the early 1200s, but before the crypt was added at the close of that century. This building, complete with its own priest and its own services, was one of three such chapels in St. Bride's church. In addition to these and the high altar at the east end of the chancel, there were three more altars: one in the north aisle was dedicated to Jesus, while there was one to St. Michael and one to St. Katherine next to the opening in the Rood screen at the junction of nave and chancel (Fig. 2). Each altar seems to have been supported by a brotherhood responsible for such items as the provision of candles on a daily

basis to the funeral arrangements for their members. The more successful of such enterprises as these then seems to have afforded the salary of their own priest and ultimately to have built a separate chapel to house the altar and its chaplain, a church within a church.

This pattern of events seems to mirror the development of the urban parish church in general: perhaps a group of pious craftsmen initially funded the construction of a chapel in their neighbourhood after which it was enlarged by gift or subscription. Prior to the 12th century, a group of townsfolk who wished to provide for their souls might choose to found a new church on a convenient local site: by the 13th century, following the clear establishment of parish boundaries, the response of such a brotherhood would be to erect an altar or chapel *within* the existing parish church. By that date, the golden age for parish church foundation was passed, but the age of the urban chantry chapel had only just begun. It would last until the drastic reforms of the 16th century swept away both the ornament and the livings associated with those altars and chapels. At St. Bride's, one third of the floor space of the high medieval church was given over to those chantries, a clear sign of the prosperity of its wealthier parishioners. It is indeed surprising that such a substantial fragment of the Lady Chapel survived Dissolution, Fire and the Blitz. It now stands as a memorial to a guild of

pious Londoners who worshipped here 'from a time to which the memory of man extends not', but which archaeological research suggests can be traced back to the 13th century. Since the crypt can also be seen as the birthplace of medieval church archaeology in England (following its rediscovery by Professor Grimes in 1952), it is arguably a monument of national significance.

Acknowledgements

The London Archaeological Research Facility's project at St. Bride's enjoyed the welcome support of the City of London Archaeological Trust, Touche Ross and Whitehall Court (Holdings) Ltd. We gratefully acknowledge the tolerance of Canon Oates, who kindly gave us permission to record the medieval walls. Assistance and information came from many quarters, including Tim Tatton-Brown, Dr. Richard Gem, Mark Samuel, Dr. John Schofield, Fiona Seeley, John Shepherd and Bernard Worssam, (although errors in the report cannot be laid at their door), as well as the advisory board of the Research Facility. The wall recording was undertaken by a UCL team including Gregor Ceh, Paul Charlton, Nathalie Cohen, James Goddard, Charles Harward, Jonathan Sellars, Sarah Semple and Morgan Williams, with photography by Ryszard Bartkowiak (front cover; Figs. 3 & 6). Figs. 1 & 2 were drawn by Chrissie Milne; Figs. 4 & 5 by Sue Hurman.

Excavations and post-excavation work

City of London. Enquiries to Museum of London Archaeology Service, Number One, London Wall, London EC2Y 5EA (071-972 9111).

Croydon & District, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections 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. Enquiries to Mrs Muriel Shaw, 28 Lismore Road, South Croydon, CR2 7QA (081-688 2720).

Greater London (except north-east and south-east London), by Museum of London Archaeology Service. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to MOLAS, Number One, London Wall, London EC2Y 5EA (071-972 9111).

Borough of Greenwich. Cataloguing of excavated and other archaeological material, the majority from sites in the borough. For further information contact Greenwich Borough Museum, 232 Plumstead High Street, London SE18 1JT (081-855 3240).

Hammersmith & Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from Fulham Palace. Tuesdays, 7.45 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, SW6 (071-731 4498).

Kingston, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Kingston Heritage Centre, Fairfield Road, Kingston (081-546 5386).

North-east London, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, E15 4LW (081-534 4545).

Surrey, by Surrey County Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Rob Poulton, Archaeological Unit Manager, Planning Department, Pelham Lodge, Kingston, Surrey (081-541 9457).

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, SE17 (071-703 3324).

Individual membership of the Council for British Archaeology includes 10 issues a year of British Archaeological News, as well as the supplement CBA Briefing, which gives details of conferences, extramural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The subscription of £15 p.a. includes postage, and should be sent to C.B.A., Bowes Morrell House, 111 Walmgate, York, YO1 2UA (0904 671417).