

# St Vedast revealed

Paul Jeffery

A RECENT report in the Summer 1993 issue of the *London Archaeologist*<sup>1</sup> is much to be welcomed. All too often archaeologists called upon to examine old buildings and structures where minor amounts of repair work are being undertaken, submit reports which are then buried in filing cabinets and not generally available to other workers, particularly those of other disciplines who may be unaware of on-going work. Even minor details of the exploration can be revealing and authors are not necessarily the best judges of what may be important to others. The cleaning of the south wall of St Vedast is a case in point, where the detail revealed had much to tell us about the architectural history of the building.

The primary hypothesis of the paper by Milne and Reynolds – that there is still much of mediaeval London surviving beneath the surface of present day buildings – is undoubtedly true, especially in the parish churches where mediaeval walling which survived the Great Fire of 1666 was incorporated into the new building. The rebuilding accounts for the City churches<sup>2</sup>, suggest that few, if any, of those parish churches reconstructed by Sir Christopher Wren<sup>3</sup> then consisted entirely of new fabric on new foundations. This is certainly true of St Vedast, where much mediaeval walling survives on its old foundation beneath the window sills of the east front and in the south wall of the church; the 10 feet section to which Milne and Reynolds gave their particular attention representing only the most obvious part of this.

Even a casual glance at the south wall of the church shows that it has a complex architectural history<sup>4</sup>. The reuse of worked flint and of stone rubble, the presence of fire-stained stone, the blocking of a window and doorway, the introduction of a red facing brick in one section and the extensive repointing of the rubble walling all provide evi-

dence of the attention given to it over a long period of time. The unravelling of the history of the eastern end of this wall, where there is no ashlar facing, is particularly difficult. It contains much fire-stained material together with worked flints, as might be expected from a rebuilding of an early mediaeval church in the City of London, following a major fire, but there is little else to indicate its history. Fires were of frequent occurrence in the City of London and the characteristic red masonry is not always stained from the fire of 1666.

What is particularly confusing in the history of St Vedast, Foster Lane, is a report of land given to the parish by the Saddlers' Company in 1614 to enable the vestry to enlarge the east end of the church. Many authors refer to this report and it has been copied or paraphrased extensively without comment. It is given by Newcourt in the following words:

“This Church was repair'd and beautify'd in 1614 and at the Chancel-End was added twenty foot of Ground, which Ground, so to lengthen the Church, was given to the Parish, out of a fair Court then belonging to Sadlers-Hall”<sup>5</sup>.

On the face of it, such a gift does not seem to be extraordinary – many City churches had expanded by acquisition, gift or otherwise, of land adjacent to the parish church which had then been enlarged or rebuilt to include it. Other livery companies made similar gifts. What is unusual about this is that it should have been made in 1614. Pious intentions of both private and other benefactors were often expressed in this way in the 14th and 15th centuries, but must have been rare in the 17th.

Quite apart from the lack of any archaeological evidence to indicate the junction of the new plot added across the east end of the church, there is a further reason for scepticism. Regretfully, there

1. Gustav Milne and Andrew Reynolds St Vedast church rediscovered' *London Archaeol* 7, no. 3 (1993) 67-72.

2. Guildhall Library (GL), MS 25539/1-12.

3. Sir Christopher Wren had both a general and financial responsibility for all the 51 churches rebuilt after the Great Fire, although it is now recognised that not all were erected

to his designs.

4. For a general review of the architectural history of St Vedast, see Paul Jeffery *The Church of St Vedast-alias-Foster, City of London* The Ecclesiological Society (1989).

5. Richard Newcourt (d. 1716) *Repertorium Ecclesiasticum Parochiale Londinense* (1708) I, 563-4.

are now no St Vedast vestry minutes earlier than 1733, and the minutes of the Saddlers' Court of Assistants were lost in the fire-bombing of 1940. However Sherwell, in his *History of the Saddlers' Company of 1937* (the minute books were then available to him) noted that the gift of land at the east end of the church was not recorded in the Company's books<sup>6</sup>. Such a gift is most unlikely to have been made without debate in the Court and the decision would undoubtedly have been recorded in the minutes. Where then is the authority for the gift and how much reliance can be placed upon the story?

The text given by Newcourt in 1708, by Strype in 1720<sup>7</sup>, and in many more recent texts is based upon that given by John Stow in the 1633 edition of his *Survey*<sup>8</sup>. It does not appear in his editions of 1598, 1603 or 1618. Even in the 1633 edition it is not in his main text, but in an addendum entitled 'The Remaines or Remnants of divers worthy things which should have had their due place and honour in this Work if promising friends had kept their words'. The report of the Saddlers' gift is therefore not a testimony by Stow himself, but of unknown origin. At best it is a record of events from the now no longer existing parish vestry minutes, and at worst a record of knowledge passed by word of mouth. Stow, in this particular entry of 'divers worthy things', refers also to the church having been repaired, pews new made, a window of the north aisle enlarged and the whole church trimmed and beautified in the year 1614. In much of the later literature the date 1614, when the church was 'trimmed and beautified', is firmly associated with the gift of land to enlarge the church, but Stow does not explicitly say so.

This association with the date 1614 is now known to be incorrect. An enrolled indenture recording the gift from the "masters and good men of the mystery of Saddlers" to the rector and parishioners of St Vedast<sup>9</sup> is dated 12 March 1427 (old style). At this early date it is unlikely that minutes were kept of either the St Vedast's vestry or the Saddlers' Company Court meetings. Enrolling the indenture was a means of recording the transaction in permanent form. (The earliest known minute book

of the Company, among those lost in 1940, commenced in 1605; this gift of land would therefore not have been recorded in the Company's records available to Sherwell.) The plot at the east end of the church was said to have been 5 1/4 yards 1 inch wide on the south side, 5 1/4 yards 1/2 inch on the north and 20 yards long. Other details relate to doors, a window and eyelets opening from a tenement owned by the Company, into the church. A stone doorway issued from the tenement on the south side of the church giving free entrance to and exit from the church. The window was also on the south side of the church.

With this knowledge, a tentative history of the fabric from the late mediaeval time can now be assembled. The almost complete rebuilding of the west and north fronts (and the east from the sills upward) in 1695-9 focuses attention on the south wall. As there is now no sign in the fabric of any addition to the east end following the gift of 1427, it may be inferred that the south wall has since been rebuilt. This rebuilding is probably that referred to by Stow in his edition of 1598 when he described the church as 'lately new builded'. The reason for rebuilding is not known, but the fire-stained masonry suggests that it may have been as a result of a fire, so far unrecorded. Milne and Reynolds suggest a date of 1517 and John Throwston, a sherriff of London in 1516, gave £100 towards the rebuilding. At sometime following the rebuilding, but still in the early part of the 16th century, the stone doorway of earlier date was moved to its present position from a site further east, being then re-set in masonry which included fire-stained blocks. Even later in the century the doorway was blocked using masonry fragments, including Purbeck or other similar marble, possibly from demolished chapels and their funerary monuments from within the church<sup>10</sup>. In 1614 the church was then 'repaired, trimmed and beautified'.

It was this church which was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666. The south wall, largely protected by the tenement on its south east corner, which had by this time become the Saddlers' Hall, survived reasonably intact both the Great Fire and the rebuilding of 1669-72 and also that of 1695-9. The major

6. J. A. Sherwell *The History of the Saddlers' Company*, 2nd edition K. S. Laurie (1937).

7. John Strype *Stow's Survey of London* (1720) I, 126.

8. John Stow *A Survey of London* (1633) 836.

9. Roll A55, *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the Corporation of the City of London*, 1413-37 (ed) A. H. Thomas (1943) 211-2.

10. Milne and Reynolds, *op cit* fn 1.

changes to it were as a result of the repositioning of the tower on the south-west corner of the church<sup>11</sup> by the mason, Edward Strong, senior, and the substitution of a round-headed window for the late-mediaeval, perpendicular window of the early 16th century rebuilding. There is no documentary evidence for this change of window, but when the church was being rebuilt in 1695-9, the carpenter, John Longland, provided centering for 28 windows<sup>12</sup>, which must have included this one in the south wall, now blocked. The disturbance to the masonry of the wall, particularly on the east side of this blocked window is probably of this date.

The Saddlers' Company occupied premises to the east and south of the church, with a party wall to the church. These premises were destroyed with the church in the Great Fire, and then rebuilt at about the same time, 1668-72. The rebuilt hall was damaged by fire in 1815<sup>13</sup> and totally destroyed by a further fire in 1821:

"That on Monday the twenty sixth of February an alarming fire broke out in certain buildings in or near Gutter Lane and Cheapside belonging to the Worshipful Company of Saddlers and in the tenure of Messrs Butlers, Chymists and Druggists which not only destroyed such buildings with several houses situate in Gutter Lane aforesaid and much other property but also endangered the church."<sup>14</sup>

It may have been endangered, but there is no indication, in the vestry minutes, of any damage to the church.

It would seem that, in the subsequent rebuilding of Saddlers' Hall, beginning in 1822, the building was extended westward, probably to the position now marked by the 1-foot indent in the south wall. This required the blocking of the window in the south aisle, replaced by a new window in a position further west. The new hall was constructed of red brick and the upper part of the south wall of the church containing the new window was also faced with the same hand-made red brick.

The eastern part of the south wall is now of rubble with no facing ashlar. It shows the interior of the party wall, after the removal of the Saddlers' Hall ruins in the post-war reconstruction of the area. This unfaced wall extends westwards well beyond the original limit of the party wall and beyond the blocked window, indicating that some of the original mediaeval ashlar facing of this wall was probably removed when Saddlers' Hall was extended in 1822. Some of the stone thus removed may have been used as infill for the window. To this rebuilding of the hall can also be attributed the removal of the eastern jamb of the mediaeval doorway and the patching recorded by Milne and Reynolds.

In 1864 the Saddlers' Company purchased the plot known as No. 2 Foster Lane, previously the Sun Tavern, hard against the church tower, opening a passageway from Foster Lane to the Saddlers Court. In 1874 the Company produced a proposal to extend their building along the south front of the church<sup>15</sup>. This additional building would have taken in the passageway and entailed blocking two windows, one in the south aisle and one in the tower. Skylights were proposed to light the south side of the church, but no action was taken and the proposal was soon abandoned.

The hall was destroyed and the church gutted by fire-bombing on the night of 29 December 1940. The walls of the church again remained standing and these were used for the reconstruction of the church by Stephen Dykes Bower, 1953-62. Changes were made to the interior of the south wall to improve its alignment, but otherwise the south wall remains much as it was prior to the fire-bombing, except for the removal of what remained of Saddlers' hall, later rebuilt on Gutter Lane. Thus, in addition to the 10-foot length of mediaeval wall to which greatest attention was paid by Milne and Reynolds, almost all the remaining part of the late mediaeval south front from tower to the east end now shows its interior rubble walling. The brick work has been patched along its eastern side with modern bricks, no doubt in the post-war reconstruction.

11. John Ogilby's *Large and Accurate Map of the City of London* (1676) gives a small scale plan of the church as rebuilt 1668-72. It shows the tower in the centre of the west wall.

12. Building accounts, GL, MS 25539/9. The west wall had 2 roundheaded windows, north wall 8, (4 round and 4 segmental), east wall 3, south wall 1, clerestory 4, tower 10.

13. J. A. Sherwell *The History of the Saddlers' Company*, 3rd edition, K. S. Laurie (1956) 114.

14. Vestry minutes of the United Parishes of St Vedast, Foster Lane and St Michael le Quern, GL, MS 779A, 1821.

15. Vestry minutes of St Vedast, Foster Lane, GL, MS 779/4, 24 February 1874.