

# Beneath the Trocette: evidence for Roman and medieval Bermondsey

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## Introduction

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL evaluation took place in 1991 on the site of the former Trocette cinema (TQ 3325 7931) in Bermondsey, in the London Borough of Southwark. The discovery of medieval wall foundations relating to the Cluniac priory and later Benedictine Abbey of St. Saviour led to archaeological excavation of the threatened areas. The results of the 1995 excavation have added significantly to our knowledge of the monastic precinct.

## Historical and archaeological background

The site known as the Trocette (site code TOB95) was thought to lie within or closely adjacent to the precinct of the medieval monastery (Fig. 1). Although itself not part of the Scheduled Ancient Monument (Greater London Monument no. 169) of Bermondsey Abbey, the site was adjacent to the scheduled area.

Archaeological evidence for the later prehistoric and Romano-British periods on the Bermondsey eyot has recently been summarised by Heard<sup>1</sup>. The area was fairly intensively farmed and there is artefactual evidence for a building(s) of potentially high status in the vicinity in the Roman period.

Documentary evidence<sup>2</sup> suggests that a Minster church stood on the abbey site in the Middle Saxon period. The site was recorded as a royal manor in the Domesday Book and in 1089 was granted to the French priory of La Charite-sur-Loire. The new priory was dedicated to the Holy Saviour and was the third, very prestigious, Cluniac house to be established in England. From its beginnings, the monastery's location a short distance downriver from the city of London, coupled with its kingly associations, meant that it was a significant social,

economic and probably academic centre. For more than two hundred years it also had strong links with continental Europe through its position as daughter house of an influential French priory and as part of a vigorous new movement within western monasticism.

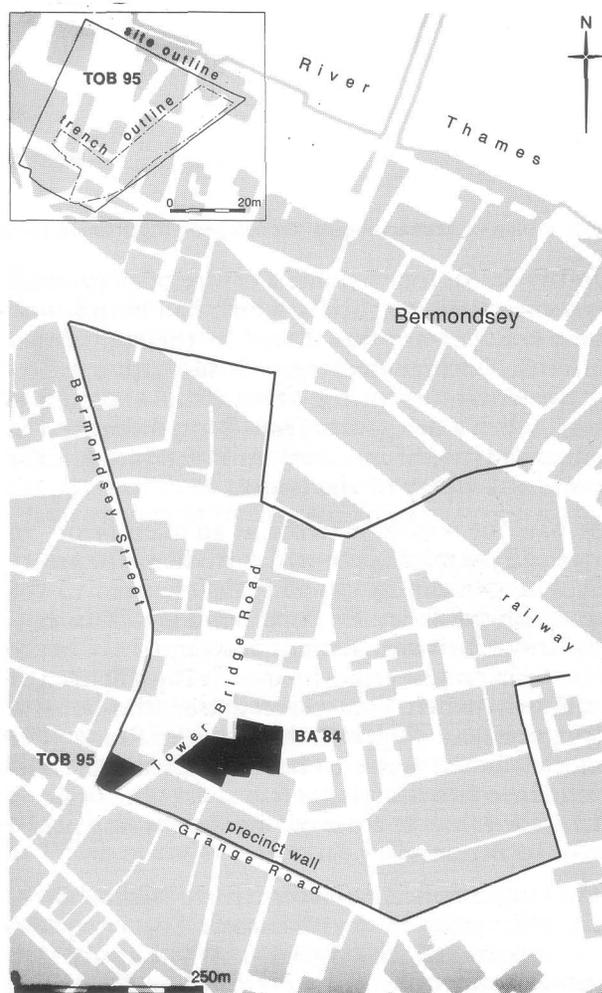


Fig. 1: the Trocette site (TOB95) and the site of the conventual buildings (BA84) shown against the conjectured extent of the monastic precinct. Insert shows the trench location within the Trocette site outline.

1. K. Heard 'The hinterland of Roman Southwark: part 1' *London Archaeol* 8 no 3 (1996) 76-82.

2. F. M. Stenton 'Medehamstead (ede?) and its Colonies' in J. G. Edwards, V. H. Galbraith and E. F. Jacobs (eds.) *Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait* (1906).

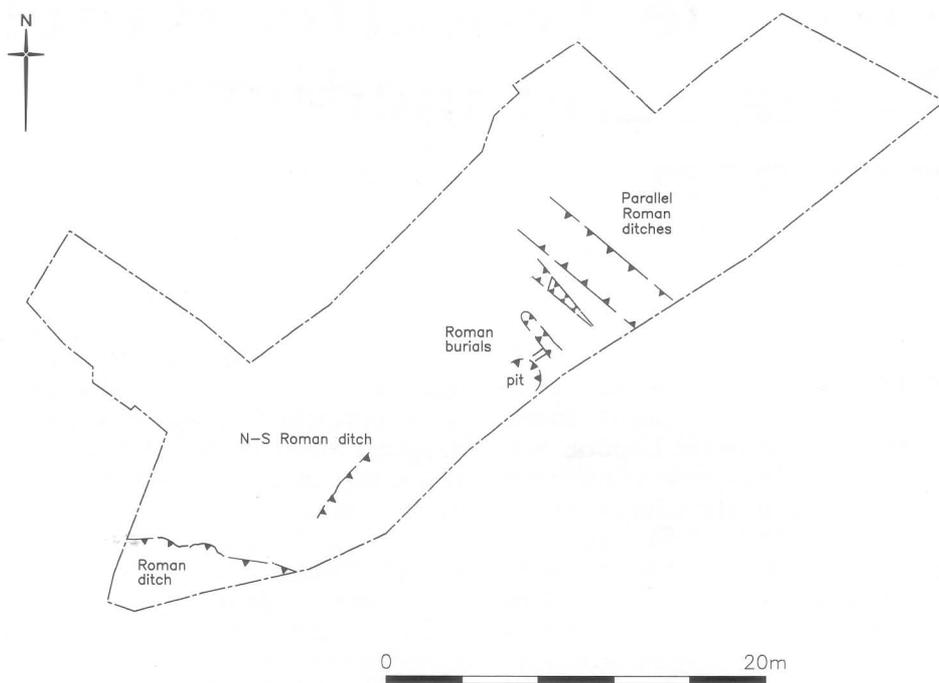


Fig. 2: plan of archaeological trench showing Roman features.

In 1117 St. Saviour became a centre of pilgrimage when an ancient crucifix which had been found near the Thames was placed in the conventual church. Documentary records indicate a subsequent downturn in the fortunes of the monastery, when a delegation from Bermondsey to the Chapter General in Cluny in 1237-8 pleaded the near bankruptcy of the house.

St. Saviour was sequestered as an alien priory in 1337, and the prior appointed custodian. The priory became denizen in 1381 and was elevated to the status of an abbey by Pope Boniface IX in 1399. Relations between Bermondsey and La Charite finally became severed during the Papal Schism of 1378-1409<sup>3</sup> when France recognised the pope at Avignon and England the pope at Rome. The mother house seems to have accepted this independence unwillingly; as late as 1432 the prior of La Charite-sur-Loire is recorded as having paid a visit to Bermondsey.

The king exercised his prerogative to present boarders to the prior. In 1313 William de Topclyve, who had long served the king, was sent by Edward II to spend the rest of his life at Bermondsey. Katherine,

widow of Henry V, passed the remainder of her life at the abbey, and Elizabeth Woodville, widow of Edward IV, was condemned by an order in council in 1486 to forfeit all her lands and goods and to be confined in Bermondsey abbey until her death<sup>4</sup>. The Earls of Gloucester also claimed rights to receive maintenance with the prior when they were at Bermondsey.

The abbey was dissolved in 1538, and the site granted to Sir Thomas Pope, Treasurer of the Court of Augmentations, who re-used some of the monastic buildings as the basis for his mansion, Bermondsey House. The house became the residence of the family of Radcliffe, the Earls of Sussex from 1556 to c.1610. Thereafter the mansion seems to have fallen into disrepair, although the principal buildings survived sufficiently long to be depicted by antiquarians such as Henry de Cort, John Chessell Buckler and John Carter<sup>5</sup>.

Archaeological excavation, carried out between 1984 and 1988 under the site code BA84, recovered evidence for the chapel, infirmary, reredorter, drain and infirmary cloister (Figs. 1 and 4). In the area to

3. R. Graham 'The Priory of La Charite-sur-Loire and the Monastery of Bermondsey' *J Brit Archaeol Assoc* 32 pt 2 (1926) 157-191.

4. *Victoria County History of Surrey*.

5. A. R. Martin 'On the Topography of the Cluniac Abbey of St. Saviour at Bermondsey' *J Brit Archaeol Assoc* 32 pt 2 (1926) 192-228.

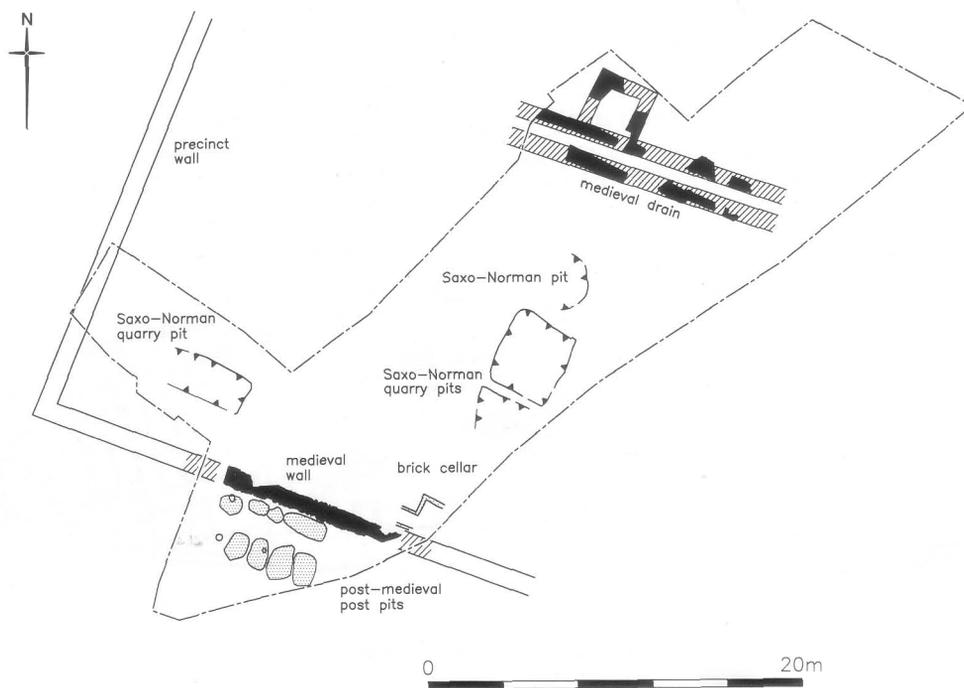


Fig. 3: plan of archaeological trench showing mediaeval and structural post-medieval features.

the west of these buildings, part of the dorter and frater and the western part of the reredorter and drain were recorded but not fully excavated. At least three major building phases were identified, commencing in the early 12th century and continuing until *c* 1500.

The layout of the conventual buildings, as established by the BA84 excavations, led to the expectation of service buildings or guest and lay accommodation being discovered on the Trocette site. Additionally, the site was located within the presumed south-west corner of the walled precinct boundary, at the south end of Bermondsey Street where it meets the east-west axis of Grange Road (Fig. 1). The following report outlines the results of the investigations.

## Results of the excavation

### Natural deposits

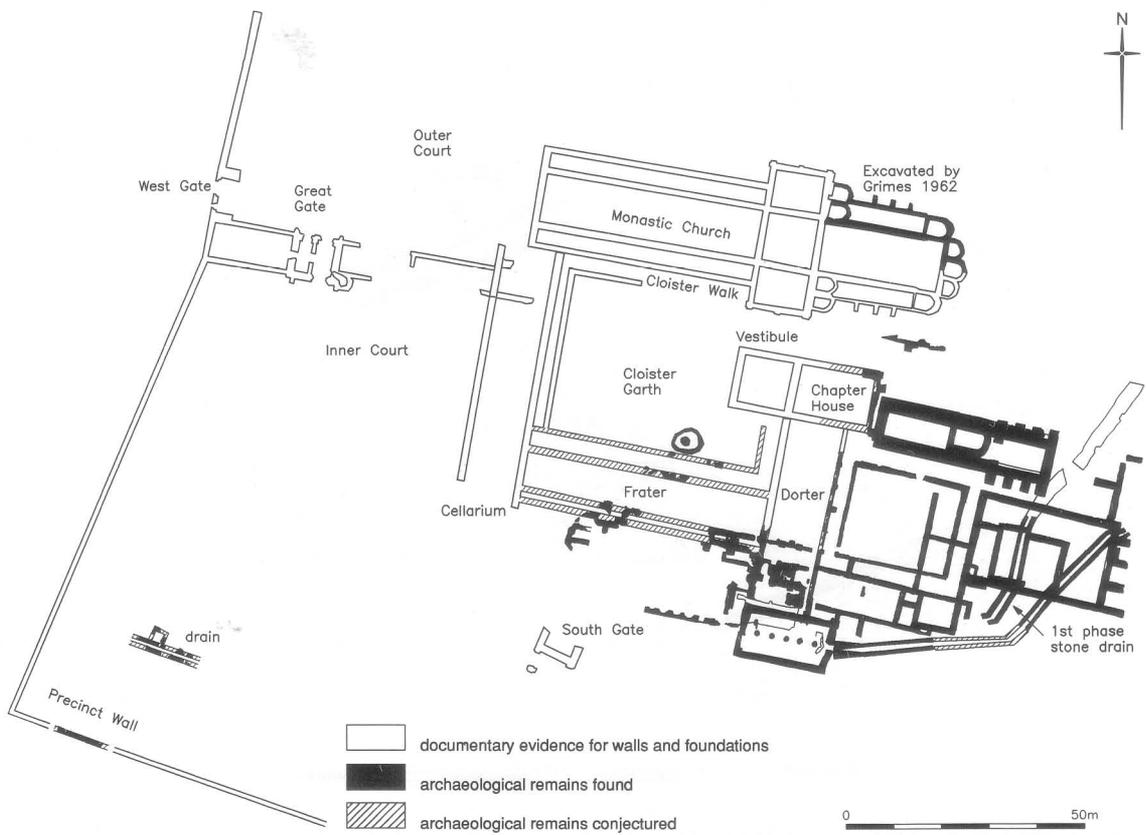
The natural deposits were sands and gravels, which were uniformly truncated throughout the site. Constant digging, ploughing and re-working of the overlying soil had removed and disturbed the upper 300mm of the natural sub-soil. Consequently, there was, over a greater part of the site, a band of mixed or weathered natural, which was thicker to the south of the medieval precinct wall (Fig. 3).

### Roman

Four ditches (see Fig. 2) and four pits were excavated. Pottery from the excavated Roman features fell entirely within the late Roman period, and did not form closely dated groups. A north-south aligned ditch produced pottery dated *c* AD 50-250. The three east-west aligned ditches were dated to the last quarter of the 3rd century and may reflect a later change in field boundaries or systems.

Two ditches at the north end of the trench were parallel and probably contemporary. Because of truncation, the excavated fills were silts at the base of each feature and so the 160-300 date may indicate the period when the ditches were open and in use, rather than when they were backfilled. The northernmost ditch contained 20 fragments of bone representing at least two large mammals, one of which was a horse. At the south end of the site was a ditch, aligned north-east to south-west, which had been re-cut at least once.

In the area enclosed by the northern and the south ditches were the bases of two truncated pits (not shown) and two inhumations. One pit was severely truncated by a medieval wall and another, further north, by medieval quarry pits. The earliest inhumation was aligned north-south, with the feet towards the south. Only the legs survived, the upper body being completely removed by the



**Fig. 4: the monastic buildings from BAS4, with the medieval drain and wall from the Trocette site to the south-west.**

insertion of the second burial. A roughly-squared slab of ragstone seemed to have been deliberately placed over the knees. Pottery sherds found in the grave fill dated the burial to between 120-160. The remains of the second burial were also incomplete, consisting of the pelvis, legs, hands and part of a foot. The body was aligned east-west and five regularly spaced nails indicated that it may have been in a coffin, or placed on a bier of some kind.

### Saxo-Norman

The features and structures from this period are representative of the primary construction phase of the conventual buildings further east (Figs. 3 and 4). Three large quarry pits containing Roman and Saxon pottery mark the beginnings of medieval activity on the site. Here, in the outer reaches of the precinct, some of the quarrying took place that was to provide the aggregates for the rammed gravel foundations of the monastic walls. One of the quarry pits cut through the east-west Roman burial described above. It was 4m square, with near-vertical sides, and contained pottery dated to 900-1050. The other quarry pits displayed a similar regularity of form, as though dug as part of an organised project.

It seems likely that the gravel from these pits was used in the single, large, east-west foundation located at the south end of the site (see Fig. 5). Elements of wall superstructure survived above the chalk and gravel foundation, and these were mortared chalk with ragstone facing on both north and south sides. The exposed wall was up to 1m in width and 9.80m long. Near the eastern limit of excavation, dressed chalk blocks formed rough voussoirs, indicating that the structure had been carried across either a void or unstable ground.

At the northern limit of the excavation trench, the north and south sides of a stone-lined drain were recorded. They were built out of mortared chalk blocks with internal rag facing. The base of the drain was a compact mixture of small chalk and ragstone fragments in a gravel and mortar matrix, dated by Early Medieval Shell and Sand ware to 1000-1150. This pottery was the only type present in the silt fill of the drain and the date was confirmed by the presence of an early type of roof tile.

An additional structure had been recorded in 1991 during the evaluation, when the archaeological trench had been wider, in relation to a different redevelopment proposal. A small rectangular cell with chalk foundations abutted the drain on its

north side. The section of the 1995 trench showed that this structure was carried across the drain via well-constructed arches of impeccable chalk voussoirs.

To the south of the drain was a large pit containing cattle bones and the burnt fragments of a cooking pot in Early Medieval Shell and Sand ware. Another pit, at the south end of the site, contained sherds from a cooking pot in Late Saxon Shelly ware (900-1050).

### Later medieval

There is an apparent hiatus of at least one hundred years in the occupation or use of the Trocette site during the medieval period. Deposits that sealed the disused drain contained jug fragments that date them to the late 13th century. The sandy silts that accumulated against the medieval wall, under the arch in the foundation, bore a similar date.

### Post-medieval

Immediately adjacent to the medieval wall, on its north side, was a brick cellar which extended

beyond the eastern limit of the trench (see Fig. 3). The cellar appeared to be aligned with the wall. The backfill material consisted largely of chalk and ragstone blocks and mortar, that is, demolition debris from a monastic structure, and was dated to 1700. Inserted over this material at a later date was a brick floor, which continued to maintain the alignment of the medieval wall. Close up against the wall on its south side, one corner of a rectangular pit was excavated. The pit was at least 0.80m deep, with vertical sides and a minimum east-west dimension of 1.80m. It had been backfilled at roughly the same time as the cellar, around 1700.

To the west of the pit were two groups of parallel post-pits (Fig. 3). Each group comprised four pits, with a post-hole at the western termination. These had been backfilled between 1600 and 1650. The southern row had an additional post-hole half way along its length. The pits followed the alignment of the precinct wall, the northern row being close up against it. Although shallow (no pit was deeper than 0.5m), the pits undoubtedly contained up-



Fig. 5: the Trocette site from the south, with the precinct wall in the foreground

right posts which formed a structure 6m long and 2.2m wide.

In the post-Dissolution period, large pits were dug within the monastic precinct. The backfill of two such pits contained pottery dating to 1600, and some disturbed human bone.

Later in the post-medieval period, use of the site was largely industrial. Two barrel pits and a number of tanning pits had been backfilled in the period 1750-1900. Three of the tanning pits were wood-lined, and one had a brick base. Their backfill contained pottery from *circa* ten vessels, which were probably discarded freshly broken and within a short time-span. These comprise a closely dateable group, which included substantial remains of a Westerwald stoneware chamber pot, sherds from a finely potted Chinese porcelain cup and saucer and an English copy in soft-paste porcelain, all attributable to the mid-18th century. Two circular, brick-built soakaways were excavated, one of which had a construction date of 1750 and a backfill date of 1820.

### Discussion

The site in the Roman period was open land divided by boundary or field ditches. There may have been a change in boundaries towards the end of the 3rd century, as indicated by the difference in alignment between the earliest and the later Roman ditches. It is likely that the land was under agricultural use; any more precise statement is precluded by the absence of plant remains in the deposits sampled on site. The double ditch at the north end of the area may have formed an enclosure for animals: the presence of horse and cattle remains in the northern (inner?) ditch may confirm this. The human burials accord well with the evidence for the area, which is for isolated inhumations along the Grange Road/Long Lane axis of the Bermondsey eyot<sup>6</sup>.

There was an absence of activity on the site until the Late Saxon/Saxo-Norman periods, c.1050 to 1150. The organised excavation of large quarry pits can be interpreted as part of the construction phase of the Cluniac priory. It is beyond doubt that the single large chalk foundation, aligned east-west at the south end of the site, is the monastic precinct wall, recorded in detail for the first time as part of the Trocette excavation. By the mid-12th century, therefore, the site is part of the priory grounds. Ceramic and building material evidence from the stone-lined drain places it in phase with the first drain excavated on the principal abbey site (see Fig.

6. Heard, *op cit* fn 1, 80.

4). The position of the drain indicates that it must have turned through some significant angles along its course. Such changes of direction may partly have mirrored the alignment of the precinct wall, which may have turned through ninety degrees from Grange Road to continue northwards to Grange Walk, thereby meeting the South Gate. Both the pottery and the stratigraphy point towards a hiatus in activity between 1150 and 1250, when the area of the site appears to have been a quiet corner of the monastic precinct and perhaps nothing more than open fields. Even after 1250 the evidence is sparse and consists of no more than accumulated silts, which seal the disused drain and fill the vaulted opening under the precinct wall.

In the immediate post-Dissolution period, the site probably continued under private ownership within the walled confines of the mansion Bermondsey House. Certainly, the brick-built cellar may have belonged to the time of the tenure of the Earls of Sussex, or shortly after. It had been backfilled by 1700 and succeeded by another building, which was also butted onto the north face of the precinct wall.

On the south side of the wall was a small timber framed structure, dated to c.1600, which may have been a stall or pen or perhaps a small shop or booth. All these post-Dissolution structures confirm that the precinct wall was standing to some height until at least the beginning of the 18th century. The beginnings of urban development seem, therefore, to have been focused on the structures of the monastic precinct, and these dictated, to a very great degree, the layout of this part of the modern borough, certainly until the construction of Tower Bridge Road early this century.

The industrial use of the site probably commenced at or around the time of the disuse and backfilling of the cellar, that is, about 1700. The site seems to have been part of a small tanning workshop until 1750, after which the two soakaways were constructed. Historical maps show the continuing residential development of the site along the surrounding street frontages from around 1800.

### Acknowledgements

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