

Fig. 1: site location

Locating the first Knights Templar Church

Alison Telfer

Introduction

This article presents the results of work carried out by the Museum of London Archaeology Service on the site of 43-46 Southampton Buildings, City of London, London WC2 (Fig. 1). An excavation and watching brief took place between February and April 2000, in advance of the construction of a new lift shaft in the area of the light well, in the north-eastern corner of the development site.

Drain runs were also excavated in the area of the adjacent basement. The work was commissioned by CgMs Consulting and undertaken on behalf of the Worshipful Company of Coopers.

The archaeological fieldwork produced evidence of Roman activity, which had been truncated by a substantial medieval chalk foundation, consistent with the location and design of the circular 'Old Temple' of the Knights Templar, dating to the 12th century.

Archaeological and historical background

The area lies just to the south of the Roman road which ran along the line of Holborn and New Oxford Street from Newgate towards Silchester. The site is about 800m from the Roman City wall, above the western bank of the Fleet Valley.

Roman law prohibited the burial of the dead within Roman towns, and cemeteries were sited alongside the main routes into and out of towns. Burials previously found at Barnard's Inn, to the east of the site, have been assumed to be part of a westwards expansion of the Newgate cemetery. The outlying areas of the Roman town were also used for quarrying and agriculture.

The settlement of Holborn is mentioned in the Domesday Book in 1086. Its core was where the main Roman road crossed the River Fleet. The name is thought to derive from the words *Hole-bourne*, meaning a stream in a hollow.

The most significant building in the area in the first half of the 12th century was the first church in London of the Order of the Knights Templar. Land between High Holborn and Chancery Lane was granted to Hugh de Payens, the Head of the Order, and a house was founded in 1144. From this base donations and recruits were sent to the Order in Palestine during the Crusades. In 1185, the Templars consecrated their 'New Temple' after moving to a new location near the Thames. The two Temple churches are shown on the Lobel reconstruction map of 1270 (Fig. 2).

The round church became popular outside of the military order of the Temple; every 12th century church that was dedicated to St. Sepulchre was built in this form and there are several examples of round churches with other dedications and with no apparent connection to the military orders.¹

After the Order had moved to larger premises, the 'Old Temple' was sold to the Bishop of Lincoln, who used it as his London residence.² Prior to its demolition in 1595,³ the property included two messuages, stables, orchards and a dove house.

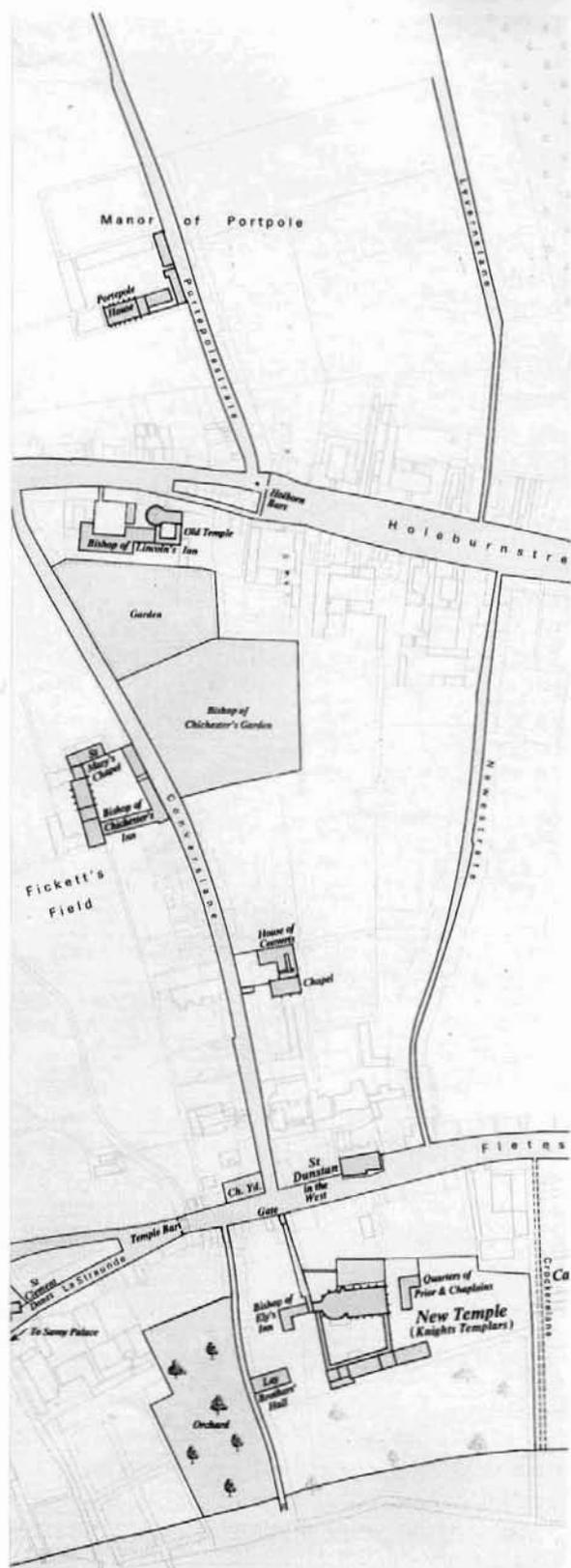
Results of the archaeological fieldwork

Redeposited brickearth, present in the areas of the light well and the basement, possibly represented the backfill from Roman quarrying, the earliest archaeological evidence surviving on the site.

The Roman features revealed during the excavation appeared to belong to two main episodes of activity, both consistent with suburban activities. The initial phase comprised the excavation of a ditch orientated north-south, roughly perpendicular to the Roman road which High Holborn follows today. An adult male skeleton was present at its base, aligned east-west and in a supine position, giving the appearance of ceremony. Iron nails were also recovered, suggesting the existence of a coffin. Pottery from the deposits immediately overlying the skeleton consistently dated to the 1st and 2nd centuries.

The second phase of activity consisted of inter-cutting pits, which may have related to cultivation. They had truncated the ditch, as well as the skull and proximal ends of the upper arms of the skeleton buried at its base. Pottery from the deposits backfilling these features exhibited a wider date range from the 1st to the 4th centuries. Fragments of

Fig. 2: Lobel's City of London map showing locations of 'Old Temple' and 'New Temple'



burnt bone from within the fills suggested the disturbance of cremations nearby.

A substantial curving segment of chalk foundation was recorded, directly truncating the Roman pits (Fig. 3). It had been trench-built on top of the natural gravel. Its location is consistent with foundations of the 'Old Temple' of the Knights Templar, which had been recorded, just to the north, during excavations in 1905, prior to the construction of a bank on Chancery Lane.⁴ The foundations had also been seen in 1876, when a circular colonnade of six columns was recorded during excavations for the construction of a bank at 324-5 Holborn⁵ and in 1704.⁶ The circular design of the nave was modelled on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

The circular nave of the 'New Temple' by the River Thames contains twelve buttresses arranged radially, and measures about 18m in diameter internally. The discovery of part of the nave of the 'Old Temple' has enabled a projected plan of the entire foundation to be created (Fig. 4). The

circumference is difficult to extrapolate exactly from the foundation segment seen in the light well and there is room for error. With this in mind, the projected plan gives the 'Old Temple' an internal diameter of about 17m, suggesting a similar scale of build to that of the 'New Temple'.

There was no evidence to suggest the existence of other structures or cut features associated with the Knights Templar church, either in the area of the light well, or in the basement of the building.

Discussion

Excavations at Barnard's Inn (BAA 87), directly to the east of the site, revealed Roman burials dating to between the 2nd and 4th centuries. The presence of the skeleton at Southampton Buildings confirms that the cemetery extended westwards from Newgate along this part of High Holborn. Although only one skeleton was found, the sample area was very limited. The additional presence of the burnt bone fragments suggests the potential for further funerary remains in the area.



Fig. 3: archaeologist excavating Roman burial to the north of curved chalk foundation in area of light well; Roman pitting can be seen to the south

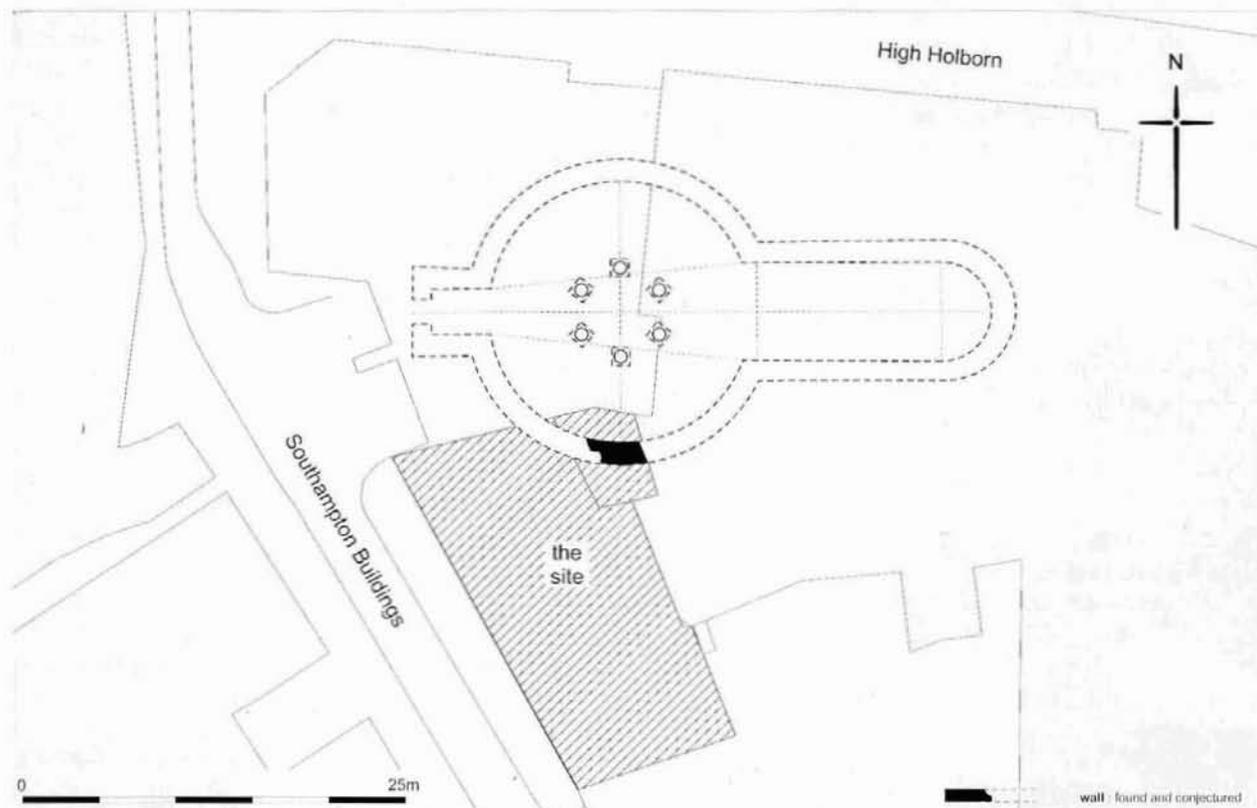


Fig. 4: plan showing recorded segment of wall foundation in area of light well with projected outlines of porch, nave and chancel

The discovery of part of the nave of the 'Old Temple' has enabled the remains of the medieval foundation to be tied into the O.S. grid. The projected plan may be useful as a predictive tool, as well as providing a comparison with other Temple churches. Further remains of the chalk foundation could survive in this area between Southampton Buildings and High Holborn. The lowest depth of the chalk was recorded at about 17m OD, which could be of a sufficient depth to survive basement truncation elsewhere.

The archaeological investigation at 43-46 Southampton Buildings successfully demonstrates the potential which small excavations can hold in

revealing very valuable information.

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