

Archaeological investigations at North Street/George Street, Barking

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Summary

In late 1996 and early 1997 an archaeological evaluation and subsequent excavation was undertaken on a site at North Street and George Street, Barking by Pre-Construct Archaeology (Fig. 1). Evidence of human activity from 750 AD to the present was recovered. The most significant feature excavated was an apparent property boundary established c. 850-1050, running east-west across the site at a right angle to North Street, and suggesting that the latter may have been in existence by the Late Anglo Saxon period. The association of this feature with evidence of low-status domestic occupation, and its location 280m north-east of the probable precinct of the medieval Abbey, may indicate the existence of a secular settlement, contemporary with the Anglo Saxon Abbey complex.

Introduction

This report examines the results of an archaeological excavation at a former local authority car park and former builders' yard at George Street and North Street, Barking (OS grid reference TQ 4410 8430).¹ An evaluation carried out in December 1996 identified Anglo Saxon, medieval and post-medieval activity in four trial trenches (Trenches 1-4). Although archaeological deposits could be preserved *in situ* across most of the site, two of the areas trial-trenched required further excavation (Trenches 5 and 6). Excavation Trench 6 was an enlargement of evaluation Trench 3. This excavation work was carried out in February and March 1997.

The site

The published 1:50,000 scale geological map² of the area indicated that the site was underlain by

flood plain gravel overlying London Clay. The evaluation revealed that brickearths of probable late glacial origin overlay the gravels in the eastern half of the site. There were no recent alluvial deposits on the site.

The site was located on level ground at about 8.2m OD. West of the site, ground level falls gently toward the river Roding. Widespread truncation was identified, in particular the presence of a very large basement between Trenches 2 and 3 of the evaluation. Trench 2 contained no archaeological features, due to severe modern truncation.

The investigations

Prehistoric

No evidence of prehistoric activity was identified *in situ*, nor, perhaps surprisingly, were any residual prehistoric artefacts, such as flint or pottery, recovered from the site. This is considered unlikely to result solely from past post-depositional impacts, and may therefore reflect a genuine lack of prehistoric activity in the immediate vicinity of the site.

Roman 50-200 AD

A number of Roman tile fragments were present in later features across the site. Only one feature, a shallow cut [117] in Trench 3/6, produced only Roman material: a fragment of brick. However, rather than representing Roman activity on the site, it is thought that this was imported to the site in the post-Roman period, representing the reuse of Roman building material in the Anglo Saxon or medieval periods.

Anglo Saxon

Evidence for Anglo Saxon activity was identified only in Trench 3/6 on the extreme north of the site, and then generally only in the west end of

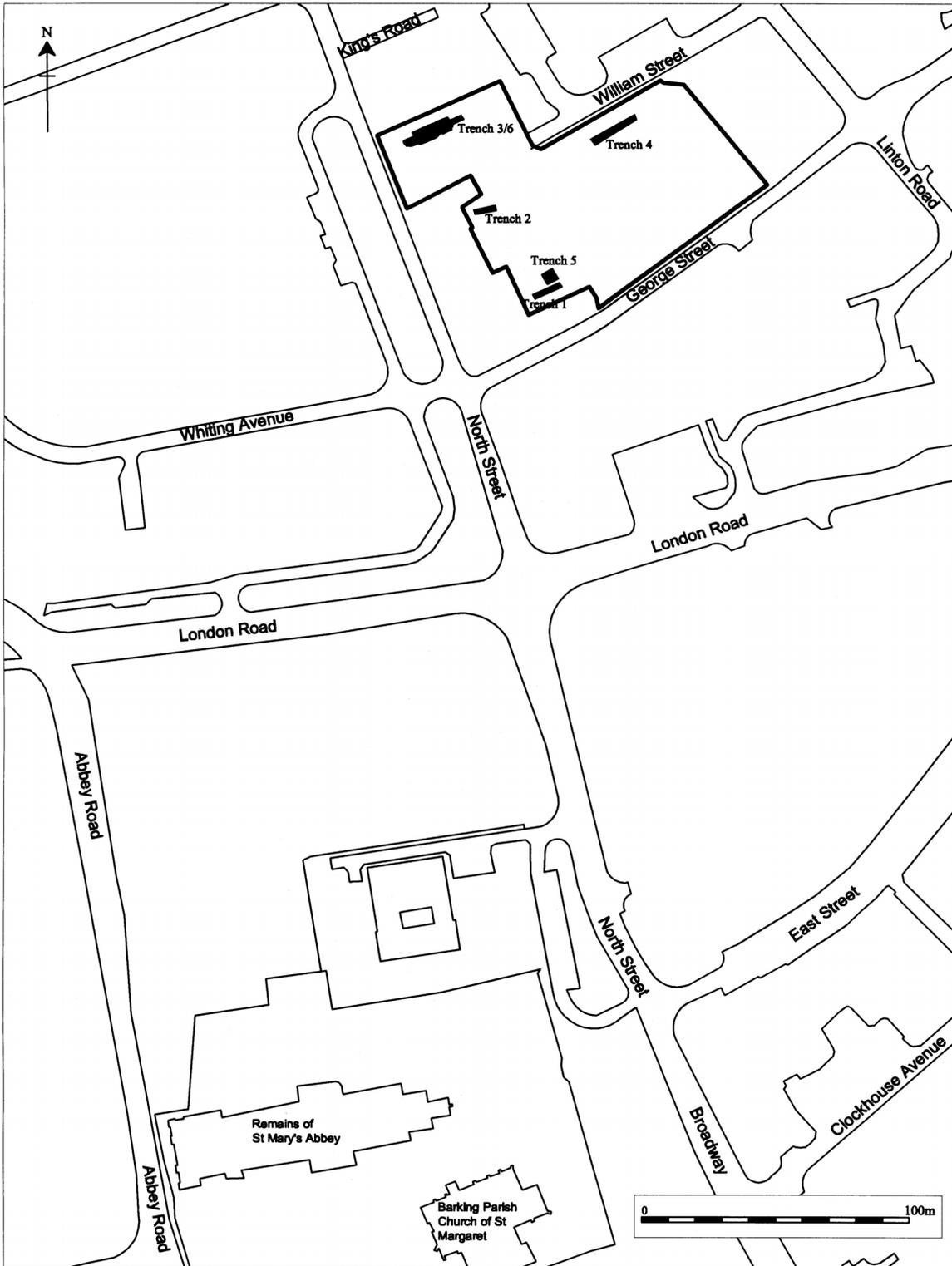


Fig. 1: site showing trenches and relation to St Mary's Abbey

the trench (Fig. 2). Several phases of activity appear to have been represented.

The earliest AngloSaxon feature, a single small pit [319], was located in the southwest of the trench. The fill of this feature contained two handmade body sherds of a Middle Saxon shell-tempered ware dating to between 750 and 850.

Toward the centre of Trench 3/6 as finally excavated was a linear ditch, aligned east-west, some 5.3m long and 0.60m wide, represented by contexts [294], [304] and [323]. The ditch terminated in a butt end on the east. Associated with this ditch was a series of pits and postholes [26], [30], [151], [168], [187], [263], [286], [288], [306], [327], [331] and [333]. There appears to be no coherent pattern to these features, but the absence of stratigraphic inter-relationships suggests they were contemporary.

The ditch was cut by a pit [285], which in turn was cut by another posthole or pit [282].

Although [285] contained no dating evidence, the feature [282] can be dated from pottery to the period 900-1050.

The Saxon pottery assemblage from these features comprised 55 sherds from 15 contexts, and represents a domestic assemblage deposited sometime between 900 and 1050. Four fabrics are present, Early Medieval Sandy Ware, Ipswich-type Ware, Late Saxon Shelly Ware and Middle Saxon Ware. Both the Ipswich-type Ware and Middle Saxon Ware are clearly redeposited with

single examples of these wares being present in this group. Late Saxon Shelly Ware and Early Medieval Sandy Ware make up 50% and 43.8% respectively of the assemblage. Three vessel shapes are present; two examples of cooking pots, and one each of a pitcher and of a bowl. Late Saxon Shelly Ware and Early Medieval Sandy Ware commonly occur together in the same groups in early medieval assemblages from the London area.³ The lack of variability may be the result of the small size of the sample, or more likely, reflects a lack of access to a greater diversity of ceramics by the household(s) which produced the debris, despite its proximity to Barking Abbey which clearly had had access to a wide range of pottery in the Late Anglo Saxon period, including foreign imports.⁴ The abbey is thought to have been abandoned as a result of the Danish invasion in the 9th century, but is supposed to have been reoccupied before 960.⁵

Medieval (1100-1500)

A concentration of features from this period occurred in Trench 3/6, but the period was also represented in Trenches 1 and 5.

The features comprised pits, postholes and stakeholes, and are thought to represent 'backlands' activity to the rear of properties fronting North Street. All of the pits are thought to have been rubbish pits, or perhaps in some cases gravel extraction pits later filled with rubbish. A number of short alignments of



Fig. 2: Trench 3/6, Anglo Saxon features

postholes and stakeholes were identified. Most notable of these were [139], [141], [143] and [145], and [131], [133] and [135]. These may represent garden fence lines or pole frames for horticultural use. None is thought to represent buildings.

The pottery recovered from the features suggests that a fairly intensive period of activity *c.* 1100 to *c.* 1350 was followed by a period of much lower activity *c.* 1350 to *c.* 1500.

Post-medieval (1500 – 1900) (Fig. 3)

There was evidence for post-medieval activity across the whole site, which appeared to have been continuously occupied from *c.* 1500 to the late 20th century. The evidence was consistent with a mix of domestic occupation and commercial activity – residues of cattle butchery being noteworthy. By this date the site was clearly zoned, with settlement concentrated toward North Street in the west of the site, beyond the area of excavation, while the east of the site comprised gardens and backlands.

Discussion

The earliest Anglo Saxon activity, represented by a single pit and residual pottery from other features, appears to be broadly contemporary with the first suggested Anglo Saxon occupation of Barking Abbey (*c.* 666 – late 9th century), while the later Anglo Saxon activity is broadly contemporary with the second suggested Anglo Saxon occupation of the Abbey (before *c.* 960 to 1066 AD).

The distance of these features from the precinct of the medieval Abbey suggests that they may originate from a secular settlement rather than part of the Anglo Saxon monastic complex. The pottery assemblage certainly suggests low-status domestic occupation. The grants from William I to the abbess of Barking in the late 11th century concern rights within and without the ‘Burh’, suggesting that there is a secular settlement under the control of Abbey.⁶

The most important Anglo Saxon feature identified was the east-west ditch in Trench 3/6. The line of this ditch was followed by a property boundary which survived into the 20th century, suggesting that its function was land division, while the evidence of domestic occupation,

represented by the rubbish pits, might indicate it was a boundary between two properties.

The orientation of the ditch to North Street might indicate that the road existed by the Late Saxon period, and therefore that any properties divided by the ditch might have fronted on the road. The possibility of Late Saxon secular settlement north and east of the medieval Abbey precinct has important implications.

The foundation, or replanting, of towns by monastic houses beyond their precinct walls, is a feature of the process of urban growth in the 10th and 11th centuries. Such towns include Bury St Edmunds, Durham, Hartlepool, Peterborough and Whitby.

Typically, these new foundations appear to have consisted of market places lined with burgage plots outside the main abbey gates. Such an origin for the later town of Barking is not impossible, and is indeed hinted at in the town’s urban topography, with East Street running east from the medieval abbey gate crossed by the line of North Street/Gascoigne Road, and with the medieval Market House built just outside the gates of the curfew tower.⁷

There appears to be a substantial secular settlement at Barking by the late 11th century indicated by the Domesday Book entry:⁸

“St Mary’s has always held Barking for 30 hides. Then 4 ploughs in lordship, now 3; 4 possible. Then 70 mens ploughs, no 68; then 100 villagers, now 140; then 50 smallholders, now 90; then 10 slaves, now 6 woodland, 1000 pigs; meadow, 100 acres; 2 mills; 1 fishery, 2 cobs, 34 cattle, 150 pigs, 114 sheep, 24 goats, 10 beehives.”

The medieval (1100-1500) activity on the site can perhaps best be interpreted as again representing activity at the rear of domestic properties fronting onto North Street. As with the Saxon period, the pottery assemblage appears to represent a low-status household or households.

The period after 1350 through to 1500 saw significantly less activity on site. During this period there may have been a shift in settlement toward the south around the Market Place.

During the post-medieval period the levels of activity on the site increased to match those of the early medieval period. Again, the archaeological record appears to represent activity at the rear of

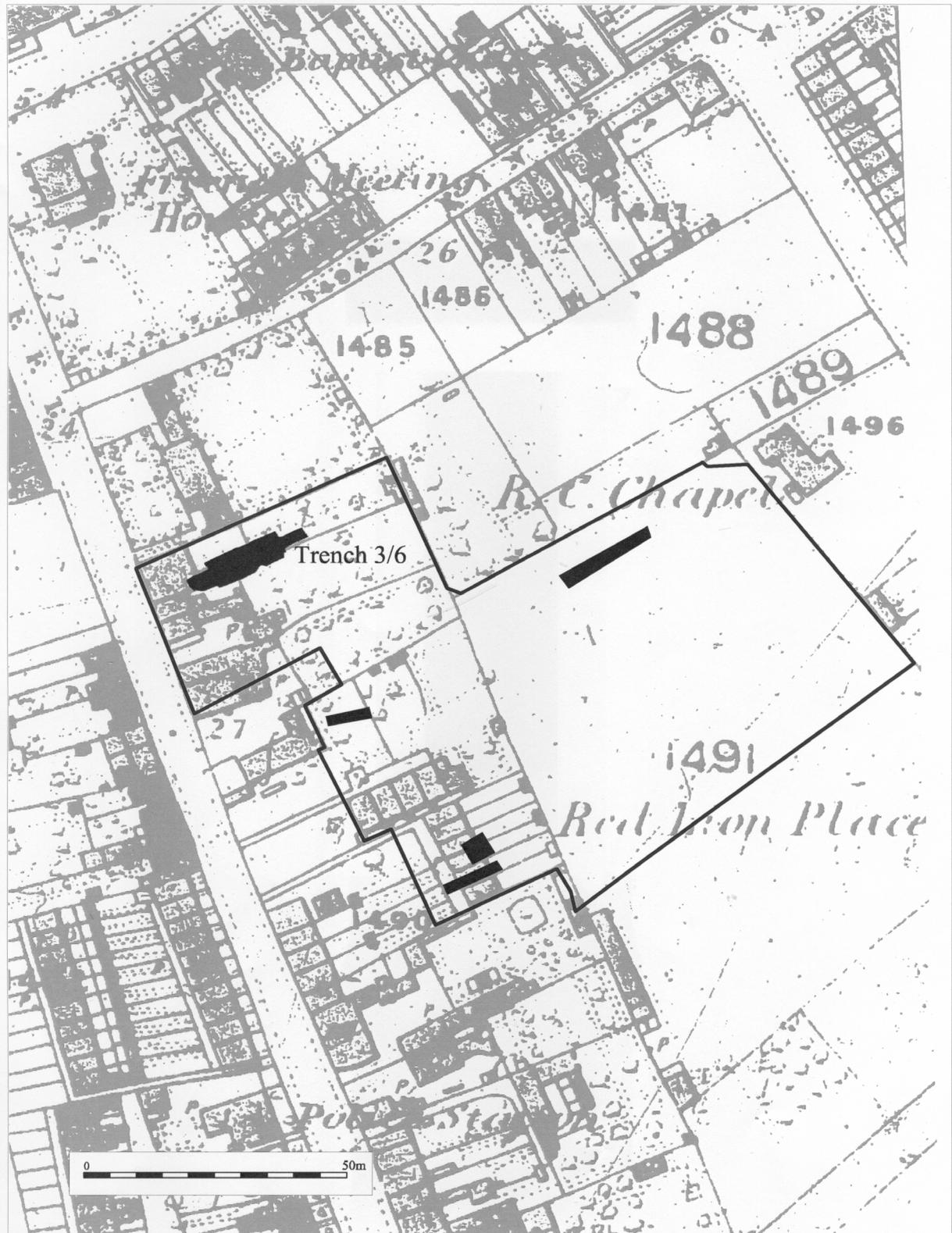


Fig. 3: site boundary and excavation overlaid on 1864 1st edition OS map.

properties fronting North Street. However, for the first time commercial activity appears to be represented, with evidence of livestock butchery and processing. By this period the main economic focus of the town had moved south of the Market Place and toward the town quay which came to support one of the largest fishing fleets in England.⁹

The ceramic assemblage for this period, although containing a number of imports, still indicates a relatively low-status household or households. Of interest is the marked difference in activity levels between the land on the west of the site, close to North Street, and the land on the east of the site believed to be agricultural. In the latter, there is almost no evidence of human activity.

Documentary evidence in the form of the 1609 survey of Barking¹⁰ indicates that the Red Lion Public House, on North Street west of the study site, had by then existed for several generations, and it seems probable that much of the North Street frontage of the study site was also built up by this time. In the earliest accurate map of the study site (Ordnance Survey 1864-77), the study site is shown with its North Street frontage fully developed; the land behind the buildings laid out as yards and gardens and the land further east as open and agricultural (Fig. 3).

Conclusions

The archaeological investigation at North Street/George Street, Barking has indicated the possibility of Late Anglo Saxon settlement north and east of the precinct of the medieval Abbey. It is possible that North Street itself was of Late

Anglo Saxon origin. The existence of a Late Anglo Saxon proto-urban settlement beyond the documented Saxon monastic settlement would not be without parallels.

The sequence of archaeological deposits excavated suggests a continuity of land division, land use and low-status occupation from the Late Anglo Saxon into the medieval period. Continuity of land use extended into the early modern period, with properties on the North Street frontage, backlands behind and agricultural land beyond. This historic pattern of settlement was swept away by late-19th-century development.

Although the excavations at North Street/George Street were extremely limited, they can be seen to have made a positive contribution to our understanding of the nature and extent of Late Anglo Saxon and medieval Barking.

For the first time, it has been possible to suggest the location of a secular settlement, outside of but perhaps economically dependent on the late Anglo Saxon Abbey. The excavation was not able to prove a direct link to the Abbey, but cultural material recovered shows contemporaneity of place, within and without the precinct walls. This alone is of primary importance in understanding the development and expansion of Barking, and clearly sets new research priorities for further archaeological investigations in the vicinity of this excavation.

These results emphasise the critical need for the full publication of the archaeological excavations undertaken by Newham Museum Service in and around Barking's Anglo Saxon and medieval Abbey during the 1980s.

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1. The Valence House site code for the project was BA-GS96.
 2. Sheet 257, 1974.
 3. A. G. Vince (ed.) *Aspects of Saxon and Norman London II. Finds and Environmental Evidence*. London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Spec Pap 12.
 4. M. Redknap 'The Saxon pottery from Barking Abbey: part 2, the continental imports' *London Archaeol* 6, no. 14 (1992) 378-381.
 5. M. Redknap 'The Saxon pottery from Barking Abbey: part 1, local wares' *London Archaeol* 6, no. 14 (1992) 353-360.
 6. C. Wart *The Early Charters of Essex. The Norman Period*. Department of English Local History, Occ Pap 11 (1957) 6, entry no. 79.
 7. K. MacGowan and C. D. Jarrett 'The previous archaeological excavation' in C. D. Jarrett *Excavations at the Barking Church of England Primary School, North Road, Barking*. Unpublished, Newham Museum Service. Fig. 13. Appendix 2.
 8. *Domesday Book, Essex*. Gen. Editor John Morris, edited by Alexander Rumble (1983) 9.7.
 9. B. Weinred and C. Hibberd (eds) *The London Encyclopedia* (1983) 41; S. Jarvis *Essex: a county history* (1993) 122-4.
 10. C. J. R. Hart *Barking Town in 1609* (1950) 127.