

# The Priory of St Leonard Stratford-at-Bow and Parish Church of St Mary Bromley-by-Bow

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In Bromley High Street, Bromley-by-Bow, in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, is St Mary's Churchyard, the last visible vestige of what was once the Priory of St Leonard Stratford-at-Bow. Over a period of 469 years the site of the priory church, and its successor, the parish church of St Mary Bromley-by-Bow, has suffered piecemeal destruction. The result has been to produce one of London's most damaged and neglected monastic and historic parish church sites.

## Location, geology and topography

St Mary's churchyard is located between Bromley High Street on the north-west and north, the Blackwall Tunnel northern approach road (A102) on the east, residential properties fronting Priory Street on the south, and St Leonard's Street on the west. The site is centred at TQ 337 838 (Fig. 1).

The site of the Priory buildings lay on the eastern edge of a gravel terrace, at around 9.4m OD, in a prominent "landmark" position overlooking the low-lying marshy valley of the River Lea to the east. The Priory must have been particularly conspicuous when viewed from Bow Bridge to the north-east on the main approach road to London from Essex.

## The priory complex from medieval historical sources

The Priory of St Leonard's Stratford-at-Bow, a house of Benedictine nuns, is first recorded in 1122.<sup>1</sup> In the 16th century there was a tradition amongst the nuns that the founder of the Priory had been a bishop of London, possibly either Maurice (1086–1107) or Richard de Belmeis I (1108–1127), although Leland believed that it

was founded by Bishop William (1051–1075) with William Roscelin as co-founder.<sup>2</sup>

Very few details of the priory complex are recorded in the surviving late medieval and early post-medieval documentation. A grant of timber by the King to assist in building work on the priory church is recorded in 1267.<sup>3</sup> The Priory was granted a licence by Edward II (1307–1327)



**Fig. 1: site location**

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to acquire land worth up to £10 per annum, notwithstanding the Statute of Mortmain. In accordance with this licence, in 1350 John de Saint Pol, warden of the house of converted Jews in the city, granted to the Prioress and nuns of Stratford-at-Bow land, fishponds and buildings at the Stews in Southwark, to support a chantry he was founding in the Lady Chapel, which he had built in their Church. The chapel was to be served by a chaplain and a clerk.<sup>4</sup>

Although never a large establishment, the Priory became fashionable in the second half of the 14th century, and was mentioned in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. This appears to have been because it was chosen as a place of residence by Elizabeth of Hainault, sister of Edward III's queen Philippa. Elizabeth was buried in the Chapel of St Mary in 1375.<sup>5</sup> According to Stow, other medieval burials in the church included Joyce, the wife of Sir Hugh Blount, in 1375; William Gobyonne in 1435; and Robert Sudbury in 1484.<sup>6</sup> John de Bohun, son of the Earl of Hereford, and his wife, may have been buried here in 1336, but this is likely to be a confusion with Stratford Langthorne Abbey.<sup>7</sup>

The decline of the priory complex is probably best gauged from the number of nuns who were resident. In 1354 there were thirty nuns in the Priory.<sup>8</sup> By 1380–81 only fourteen nuns are recorded, including the Prioress and Sub-prioress.<sup>9</sup> In 1520 there were eight professed nuns and one novice;<sup>10</sup> and in 1528 ten professed nuns.<sup>11</sup> Other sources frequently refer to the poverty of the Priory and its exemption from taxation.<sup>12</sup> At its suppression in 1536 the Priory was valued at £108 1s 11d according to Dugdale, or £121 16s according to Speed.<sup>13</sup>

### **The priory complex from post-Dissolution historical sources**

A royal grant of 1537 comprised the "house and site of the Priory", the church, steeple and churchyard, and the Manor of Bromley.<sup>14</sup> On the eve of the dissolution of the Priory, its buildings are known to have included a Hall (probably the Frater, containing a tun); a Parlour (containing andirons, and therefore with a chimney); a Kitchen; a Buttery; a Dorter (containing "diverse boards", perhaps partitions); a Great Chamber

(containing a feather bed); a Maid's Chamber; Chambers over the Parlour and the Buttery; a Brewhouse; a Malting House (with a lead cistern); and a Barn.<sup>15</sup> The manorial courts were probably held in the Hall. The Priory paid annual fees to a chaplain to celebrate mass in the Church, and an under-steward, both of whom are likely to have been accommodated in the precinct. The steward and receiver-general are more likely to have been outsiders who were paid retainers. The buildings were all in the hands of the Prioress.<sup>16</sup> The first account of the site when it was in the king's hands mentions four tenements and a Porter's Lodge; one tenement and the lodge were empty.<sup>17</sup> There was no specific mention of a cloister, but the range of conventual buildings present suggests that they would have been linked by a quadrangle of cloisters in a conventional pattern to the south of the nave of the church. Besides the buildings in the precinct, there were courtyards, gardens, orchards and fishponds.<sup>18</sup>

St Leonard's Priory was dissolved by Henry VIII with the smaller religious houses in 1536. The books from the Priory were taken to Westminster Abbey to form part of the library of the new episcopal see of Westminster.<sup>19</sup> The last Prioress was allowed to retain some of the Priory demesne lands temporarily, to cover current household expenses, and she was also allowed Priory goods worth 35s 2d. Most of the contents of the buildings were sold by the king's commissioners to Ralph Sadler, including the cattle and the corn, and some to Mr More, the Lord Chancellor's Steward.<sup>20</sup> Sybil Kirke, the last Prioress, received an annual pension of £15, and was still alive in 1553.<sup>21</sup>

Shortly after the dissolution in 1537, the Crown sold the site and buildings of the Priory, along with the manor of Bromley and most of its other lands, to William Rolte; but he did not hold them for long. In February 1539 they were granted to Sir Ralph Sadler, and Henry VIII confirmed his ownership by a grant of letters patent in April 1541.<sup>22</sup> A survey of Sadler's lands in 1540, and a rental of 1542, indicate the ranges of buildings surviving from the Priory. The manor house or mansion had a Hall, a Chamber, a Kitchen and a Cellar, with other adjacent buildings, and also granaries. Also within the Priory precinct there were four adjoining tenements, rented out at

annual rents of 40s, 6s 8d, 26s 8d and 20s; the cheapest was occupied by William Huddleston, the former Abbot of Stratford Langthorne. Two small dwellings on either side of the gates were occupied for free by the janitor and the parish chaplain. Two great barns and half of the great stable were rented out to bakers. The Dovehouse stood in its own small courtyard within the three-acre Great Court. Behind the buildings of the precinct to the east was a four-acre pasture called the Grove.<sup>23</sup> The gatehouse probably opened westward onto what is now St Leonard's Street. A lease from Sadler of the Priory site, erroneously dated July 28 Henry VIII (1536), included the two barns, the dovehouse and its courtyard, the garden, a piece of land lying within *the briekkeswale* there, and the pasture of the Grove on the east side of the site.<sup>24</sup> An old brick wall from the Priory was said to survive in the parish churchyard in the 1790s.<sup>25</sup>

An inventory of the goods of the parish church drawn up in 1549–1550, shows that in the previous three years some of them had been sold to pay for repairs: the chapel had been whited and painted; its windows had been glazed and mended; its porch covered with lead; its tiles and lead gutters mended. Repairs had also been made to the clock, the churchyard wall and gates, and the curate's house, including a dwelling for a poor man which was maintained within it. A cloth had been fitted in front of the rood loft depicting the king's arms and passages from the scriptures. The steeple still contained five bells in 1552/3, when there were also three old chests in the vestry, and a pair of organs in the church.<sup>26</sup>

### The fabric of the church

It is generally thought that at the Reformation the nave and any side chapels of the priory church of St Leonard were demolished and that the chancel of the priory church was then modified to serve as a parish church for Bromley-by-Bow, taking on the dedication of the old lady chapel of St Mary rather than that of the priory church. This building survived until it was almost completely demolished in a "restoration" of 1842–3. The building retained at the Reformation included a substantial blocked Norman choir arch at its western end, with dog-tooth ornament.<sup>27</sup>

The theory that the old parish church of St Mary was in origin the chancel of the priory church was put forward in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of September 1798:

"The arch belonging to the convent of St Leonard near Bow, has been repaired without the church, and has no appearance of antiquity; within, it has been as usual, whitewashed till the carving is nearly filled up. The present church has, in all probability, been a chancel, as the arch has reached from the pavement to the roof at the North end."<sup>28</sup>

This interpretation of the arch's function was broadly repeated in the *Illustrated London News* on the 25th November 1843:

"The building indeed which has been almost wholly demolished formed in all probability the eastern portion of a larger edifice, and the ancient arch mentioned by antiquarians was without doubt the opening into the chancel from a nave, of which every trace has long since been removed."

James Dunstan, writing in 1862, offered a variation on this simple interpretation. He was formerly the vestry clerk, knew the old parish church well, and was present at its demolition. He believed that an internal division of one step between the "chancel" and the "nave" (as he knew them) was of pre-Reformation origin, with the "chancel" originally being a lady chapel or a sanctuary reserved to the priests serving the Priory.<sup>29</sup> The positioning of a lady chapel or sanctuary at the east of a Chancel often occurred in monastic churches, while the case for a post-Reformation re-use of such a lady chapel at



Fig. 2: illustration of c. 1800 reproduced in *The Copartnership Herald of the Commercial Gas Company Volume IV for the year 1934-35*

Bromley-by-Bow is supported by the dedication of the parish church to St Mary rather than to St Leonard.

Dunstan's interpretation may be supported by surviving illustrations of c. 1800 (Fig. 2) and c. 1842 (Fig. 3), and by internal features recorded within the church. The first illustration shows the north and east elevations of the church, and indicates a division in architectural style between the east end of the church with its tall closely-set buttresses, and the west end with its lower more widely-spaced buttresses. Such a division would seem unlikely if the whole building had originated as a chancel only. Also of note is the elaborate tracery of a probably medieval east window above the late Stuart apse, and the fine quality stonework at roof parapet level. The illustration of c. 1842 was apparently first reproduced in Dunstan's 1862 work, and shows the south and west elevations of the church. Although much cruder than the earlier illustration, it again shows a similar distinct architectural division between the structure of the nave (with three widely-spaced buttresses and three vaults beneath), and the chancel (with three closely-spaced buttresses and no vaults).

Dunstan recorded the internal distinction between the chancel and nave:

"The old church consisted of a chancel and nave, both the same width, separated by an ascent of one step (up to the chancel), which step was twenty three feet seven inches west of the eastern wall ..... The walls of the chancel were ornamented with cornices of richly carved oak, coupled with the antique stone stalls...."<sup>30</sup>



Fig. 3: engraving from J. Dunstan 'The History of the Parish of Bromley, St. Leonard, Middlesex' (1862)

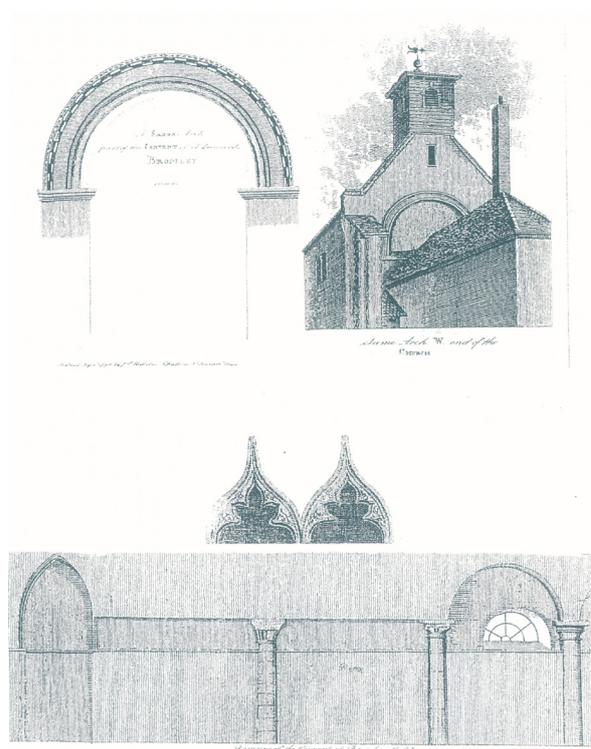


Fig. 4: late-18th-century engravings

These "stalls" had first been described by Lysons: "In the south wall of the chancel are five stone stalls (or rather perhaps four stalls and a piscina, but the lower part being entirely concealed by the wainscot it cannot be ascertained), two of which have round arches; the others are gothic."<sup>31</sup>

Lysons appears to be describing a *sedilia* (an identification also made by Dunstan in 1862), located in what could have been the south wall of a Lady Chapel or sanctuary. Usually a *sedilia* would consist of three canopied seats associated in one composition with a *piscina*. Lysons' description suggests three canopied seats (the three stalls with gothic arches over them), and either a double *piscina*, or a *piscina* and an adjacent doorway. Within the nave there were indications of former structures on the south side: "Some ancient columns in the south wall of the nave, the capitals of which are decorated with foliage and other ornaments, show that the building was extended farther on that side."<sup>32</sup>

These features are recorded in a late-18th-century engraving, which also appears to show two of the *sedilia* seat canopies and the Norman arch at the

west end of the church (Fig. 4). The Reverend Sinker writing in 1909 further records that:

“in 1825 when several generations of conglomerated whitewash were scraped off the walls on the south side, some old arches were discovered.”<sup>33</sup>

Most probably these openings had led from the chancel of the priory church into an aisle or side chapel on its southern side, demolished at the Reformation.

Sinker, drawing heavily on Dunstan, provided a basic description of the interior of the church, which:

“consisted of a chancel and a nave both of the same width, separated by an ascent of one step only.

...The main entrance to the Church was in the North West corner and was of Gothic Architecture...

...upon removal of the north wall there was found, bricked up and plastered over, a very ancient doorway of small dimensions and Norman architecture.

Immediately adjoining was a porch. There was a descent of one step to the porch from the churchyard and again another step from the porch to the floor, when a gradual descent commenced and continued for several feet until one arrived at the main level of the nave. The roof of the old church was of nearly the same height from the floor as the present, though it had not that lofty appearance on the outside, in consequence of the floor being about five feet below the level of the present church. Between the chancel and the nave was a screen which was removed at the reformation.”<sup>34</sup>

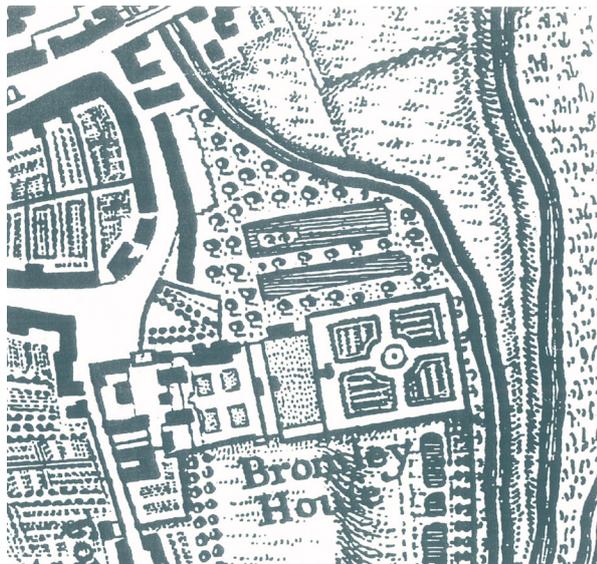


Fig. 5: John Rocque's map of 1746

The church appears to have been provided with a medieval font of Norman style, which Dunstan records:

“when the church was repaired and beautified (in 1825) the churchwardens had its antique devices recut...”<sup>35</sup>

Following the demolition of the church in 1842, the font was installed in its replacement, only to be discarded between 1862 and 1909; it had entirely disappeared by the latter date. In 1842 the church retained only three late medieval windows; the others may have been replaced by Sir William Benson in 1692, who also added a crude apse (with his family burial vault beneath) at the east end of the church. Beneath the nave of the church were six burial vaults, three on each side, which were probably integral late medieval features. A further burial vault was located under the mid-17th-century vestry at the west end of the church and presumably predated it, although a precise date is unknown.

The steeple recorded in 1537 may have stood over the arch at the west end of the church, as this is where a steeple is recorded (possibly with a belfry beneath it) in accounts of the 16th, 17th and early 18th centuries.<sup>36</sup> When the church was demolished it was recorded that:

“in removing the (west) wall..., a very ancient doorway was discovered, which was of Norman architecture, in which were stone jambs surmounted by a stone arch. In these jambs were portions of old “hinges” of very rude construction; this was probably the old “belfry dore.”<sup>37</sup>

## The Manor House

The former priory buildings south of the church became the estate centre of the upper manor of Bromley, which had passed by 1634 to Sir John Jacob. He demolished the priory buildings and constructed a new brick mansion called Bromley House in their place.<sup>38</sup> John Rocque's map of 1746 (Fig. 5) shows a number of details of the Bromley House estate. The church of St Mary is located on the north-east of the estate centre; the apse, porch and vestry are clearly identifiable. The churchyard is shown as being entirely on the north side of the church. Other than the church and churchyard no features definitely attributable to the priory complex can be identified. However the general form of the Bromley House estate,

with buildings concentrated to the north-west and west, and a series of walled gardens, enclosures, orchards and fishponds running eastwards down to the banks of the River Lea may convey an impression of the priory layout.

By 1819, when Horwood's map was published (Fig. 6), the Bromley House estate had long been broken up and the character of the area was rapidly changing. By this date all vestiges of the priory and the subsequent manorial complex had been swept away, apart from the church and churchyard. The churchyard had by this date been expanded south of the church, with the result that parts of the former priory complex now fell within the churchyard:

"After the removal of the Manor House, the site having become the property of a private individual, the parish purchased a portion of the land for the purpose of enlarging the churchyard, and now the ancient site of the nunnery became again attached to the chapel of Saint Mary, or the parish church. In digging graves in this part of the churchyard, the old foundations of the priory frequently presented obstacles to the sexton's operations, and many small coins of a very ancient date are often found. These foundations are no doubt the remains of the Priory as the materials are of the same description as that found in the foundations of the old church, whereas the Manor House was of bricks."<sup>39</sup>

### The death and destruction of a church

Although repaired in 1825, it was apparent by 1842 that the roof of the medieval church required stripping and re-tiling, and that the ceiling and lathing required replacement. At the same time it was decided to enlarge the church southwards by the removal of the south wall. However, removing the south wall caused the collapse of the west wall with its magnificent Norman arch:

"When it was determined to enlarge the old church, there was no intention of disturbing this relic of antiquity; but upon removing the south wall, the supporting buttress of the arch on the south side gave way, which caused the arch to crack, and then it was discovered that the ornamental stone facings ..... which consisted of the lozenge and other .... devices, entered but little into the wall, the arch itself consisting of nothing but a body of concrete..."<sup>40</sup>

This disaster required the construction of a new west end to the church, which was positioned

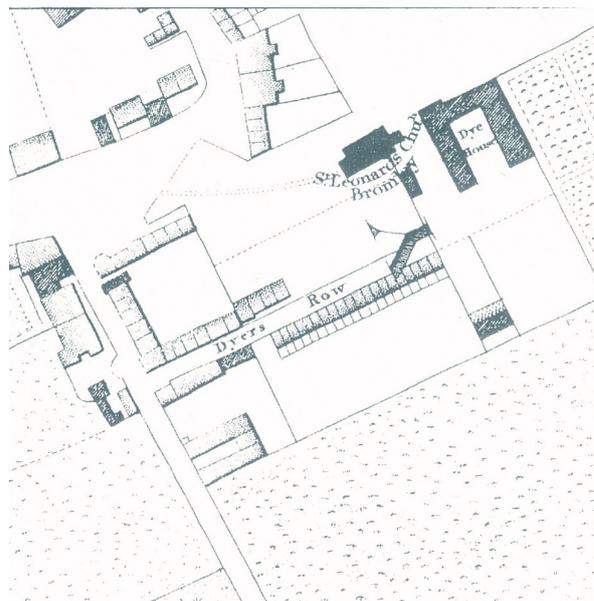


Fig. 6: Horwood's map of 1819

over the site of the former vestry. On completion of the new south and west walls, which were higher than their predecessors, it was found that the north wall was insufficiently robust to carry the weight of the new brickwork required to heighten it, as well as the weight of the timber of the new roof. The old north wall was therefore also demolished and replaced. Having now demolished the bulk of the old church, it was decided to replace the east end of the church with a semi-circular apse, effectively removing the last visible elements of the old church.

The "rebuilt" church did however include some elements of the earlier building. The floor level of the new church was some five feet higher than the old, and the burial vaults under the vestry and the late 17th-century apse were both incorporated under the new building. It is likely that the six medieval burial vaults under the old church were also filled in and sealed up under the new structure. Most of the interior funerary monuments within the old church were retained and transferred to the new; they are listed in the *Survey of London* volume.<sup>41</sup> The north-east and south-east angles of the old chancel, to a height of about fifteen feet, together with parts of the external buttresses, were retained within the new church (although entirely obscured by new fabric), apparently so that the "rebuilding" should

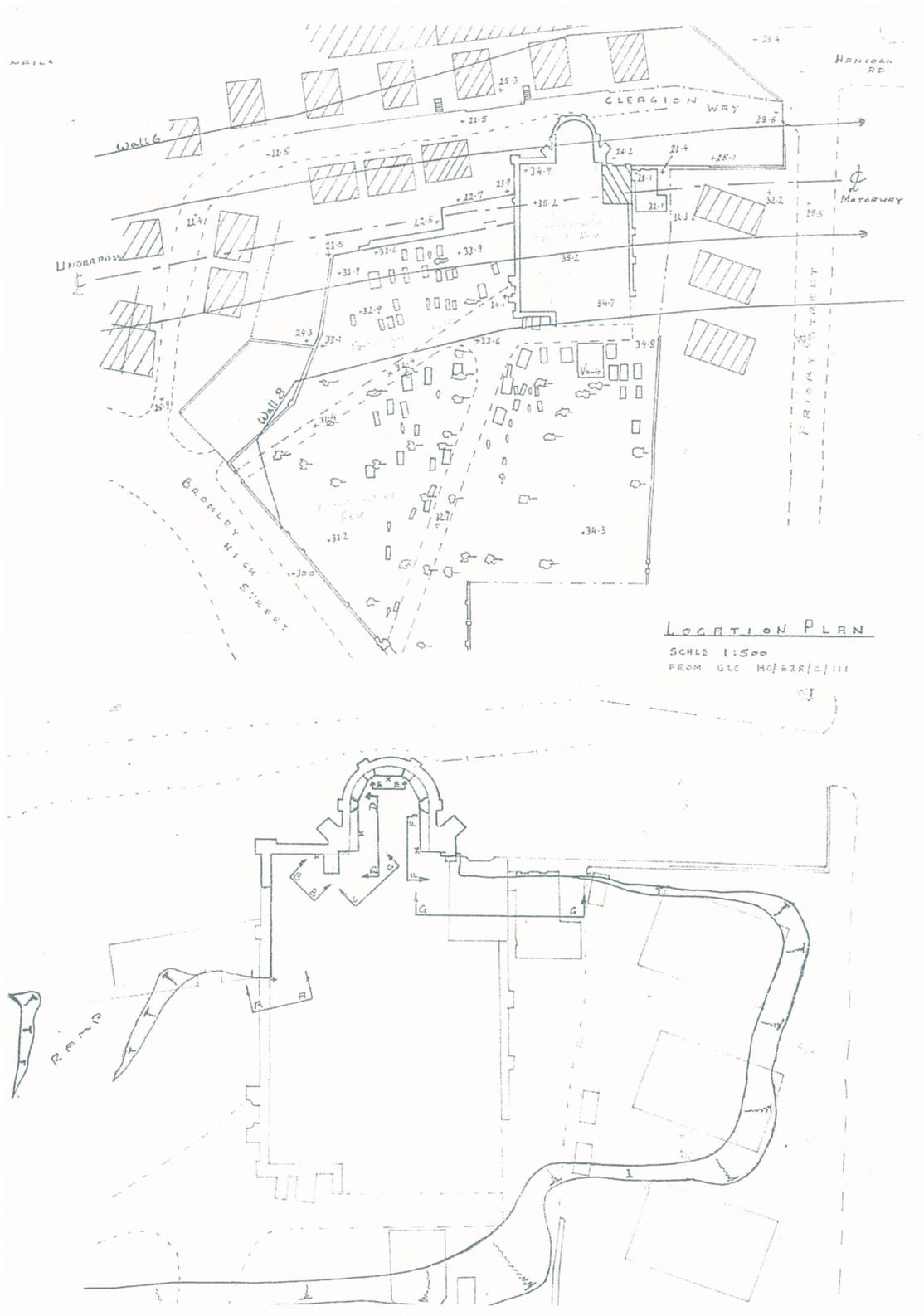


Fig. 7: plan of church and graveyard 1970

not be legally construed as the construction of a new church.

The rebuilt church of St Mary received a direct hit during a German bombing raid in March 1941 and was damaged beyond economic repair. Subsequently the church was demolished to ground level. In 1968 construction work commenced on the Blackwall Tunnel northern approach road, and unfortunately the site of St Mary's church lay directly in its path. Notice of the intention to remove human remains from the site of St Mary's church and part of the graveyard was given in the *East London Advertiser* on 2nd May 1969, and this work together with the removal of the remains of the church's sub-structure was subsequently executed without archaeological record. The entire footprint of the Victorian church was removed along with approximately 25% of the graveyard, as contemporary engineers' plans make clear (Fig. 7).

All remnants of the late medieval Lady Chapel or sanctuary, the chancel, and any side chapels or aisles to the chancel, were probably completely destroyed at this time, although much of the monastic nave and the Priory buildings to its south-west may have been largely unaffected. Subsequently the truncated graveyard was inappropriately converted into an adventure playground. Photographic evidence shows that it was this conversion rather than wartime bomb damage that destroyed or damaged the bulk of the gravestones and monuments within the churchyard.

### Current conditions and future options

Since the closure of the adventure playground, the churchyard has suffered from neglect and vandalism, and more recently has become the focus of occult activity (Fig. 8). Observation on site in March 2004, following recent partial vegetation clearance, suggested that the



**Fig. 8: slaughtered black cockerel with evidence of occult practices**

churchyard retains as many as a hundred 18th- and 19th-century gravestones, tombstones and vaults (47 have previously been surveyed), while many more may be present below ground level. The bulk of the churchyard is likely to contain a sequence of burials *in situ* extending back into the 12th century. The available evidence suggests that the churchyard includes the sites of the nave of the late medieval priory church of St Leonard and of other monastic buildings to its south-west. Remains of these buildings may well survive *in situ*.

Currently proposals are under consideration to convert the churchyard into a community garden. Within the context of these proposals, if careful design measures are adopted, it should be possible to achieve the preservation *in situ* of any archaeological remains, and to secure their long term future. However, in order to ensure that past mistakes are not repeated, consideration should now be given to affording this important monastic site the benefit of statutory protection.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dr Nicholas Doggett for his advice, and to Karen Batten for her assistance with the text.

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## Excavations and post-excavation work

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**Kingston**, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society (KUTAS). Processing and

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**Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd.**, Unit 54, Brockley Cross Business Centre, 96 Endwell Road, Brockley Cross, London SE4 2PD. Environmental- and finds processing, cataloguing and archiving of excavated material. Contact Finds Manager, Märit Gaimster (020 7639 9091).

**Surrey**, by Surrey County Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Rob Poulton, Archaeological Unit Manager, Surrey History Centre, 130 Goldsworth Road, Woking GU21 1ND (01483 594 634).

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