

Merton Priory

Years of painstaking analysis brings the publication next month of a new study of one of southern Britain's largest and most important monasteries. Peter Rowsome provides a preview.

The Augustinian priory of St Mary Merton, located on the banks of the River Wandle in Surrey, was founded in 1117 by Gilbert, Sheriff of Surrey, and was favoured by Henry III, who visited frequently.

Despite its size the monastery was all but forgotten by the early 20th century, when Colonel Bidder uncovered the ground plan of the church and chapter house. More work took place to the west of the church in the 1960s and over the chapter house in the 1970s. Between 1986 and 1990 excavations by the Museum of London



were funded by Sainsbury's in advance of construction of the new Savacentre and revealed much more of the medieval priory. *The Augustinian priory of St Mary Merton, Surrey: excavations 1976–90* by Pat Miller and David Saxby, funded by English Heritage and due out at the end of May 2007, analyses and brings together in one place the results of the investigations, allowing the layout and development of the priory to be traced from the 12th century to the Dissolution.

Work on a stone church was begun in c 1170, sited on a platform above the flood plain and marsh. Intriguingly, *ex situ* architectural fragments and the stratigraphic and documentary evidence suggest that there was also a slightly earlier stone church in the vicinity. The late 12th-century church was rebuilt in the 13th century, probably after the documented fall of the tower in 1222. Thirteenth-century buildings to the south of the new church included the cloister and east and south ranges. An infirmary complex with its own cloister and chapel lay to the south-east. The main cloister was apparently separated from the nave by an open space, an unusual feature in an Augustinian house. A gatehouse, mill and aisled guest hall were also identified within the precinct. In the 14th century the addition of a new presbytery and Lady chapel extended the church to over 110m long, while the chapter house was rebuilt with an apsidal end and the infirmary hall was subdivided to



provide private accommodation. Other buildings near the infirmary were related to domestic and medical functions.

The priory buildings, particularly the church, were largely demolished after the Dissolution and the salvaged stone used to build Henry VIII's palace at Nonsuch. Important architectural mouldings, window glass and tiles recovered from the demolition deposit have enabled a detailed reconstruction of the appearance of the priory buildings.

The monograph includes essays on key research topics, including Merton's place in the Augustinian Order and the significance of royal patronage. Evidence of the monastic layout includes a reconstruction of the chapter house and priory church, which culminated in the 14th-century eastern extension, a major lost work of the Decorated period in south-east England.

The infirmary is of particular interest, and was intended for the care of the monastic personnel but sometimes admitted servants, corrodians>>



ABOVE An adult male interred in the north transept was found clutching an iron hernia belt

FAR LEFT View of the north side of the main church from the east, uncovered during the excavations of 1986–90

LEFT Decorated knife scabbard recovered from a 14th-century deposit at Merton Priory