

Fig. 1: site location

Holywell Priory and *The Theatre* in Shoreditch

Julian Bowsher locates one of London's earliest theatres

Introduction

The small settlement of Shoreditch lay astride a major route leading north from the City. There was clearly some Roman occupation in the area, but by the medieval period it was dominated by the Augustinian Priory of Holywell (Fig. 3). After the Dissolution its former grounds became famous as the site of the 'first playhouse of Elizabethan London' – *The Theatre*, built in 1576.¹ The playhouse is not only important for its position in the development of English theatre, but also for its Shakespearean associations. Archaeological excavations by the Museum of London Archaeology Service at 86–90 Curtain Road and 3–15 New Inn Yard, EC2, have glimpsed remains of the Priory and perhaps the Theatre and provided an insight into archaeological survival in the area.

The site (code CNU02) lies within an Area of Archaeological Interest as

designated by the London Borough of Hackney and comprises several different properties bound by Curtain Road to the west, New Inn Yard to the south, New Inn Broadway to the east and other properties to the north (Fig. 1).² The building on the corner of Curtain Road is a large warehouse of late-19th to early-20th-century date, but buildings along New Inn Yard are likely to be of 18th-century origin. Extensive remodelling for residential development resulted in an initial archaeological watching brief on geotechnical Test Pits in the winter of 2002/03 (Fig. 2: TP 1–2, 4–5 and 5A; TP3 was not excavated) but they revealed little of archaeological importance. An evaluation in March 2003 involved a large trench at ground level with two smaller ones in basemented areas to the west (Fig. 2: Trenches 6–8). This was followed by a watching brief during construction works in the basement.

Archaeological results were largely confined to Trenches 6, and 8 and a watching brief in the central and western parts of the basement.

Natural topography

The underlying geology of the area is brickearth over and within Hackney Gravels of the Pleistocene period. In the Shoreditch area the surface of this brickearth varies. It lies at around 13 m OD 100 m to the north³ and at 12.56 m OD 140 m to the south-east.⁴ The ground surface at the site lies at around 15 m OD. The full depth of the stratigraphic sequence was recorded in Trench 8, but greater spatial analysis was afforded by excavation through the basement slab.

The archaeological sequence

Generally, a clay deposit found in almost all the excavation areas could have been the natural brickearth,

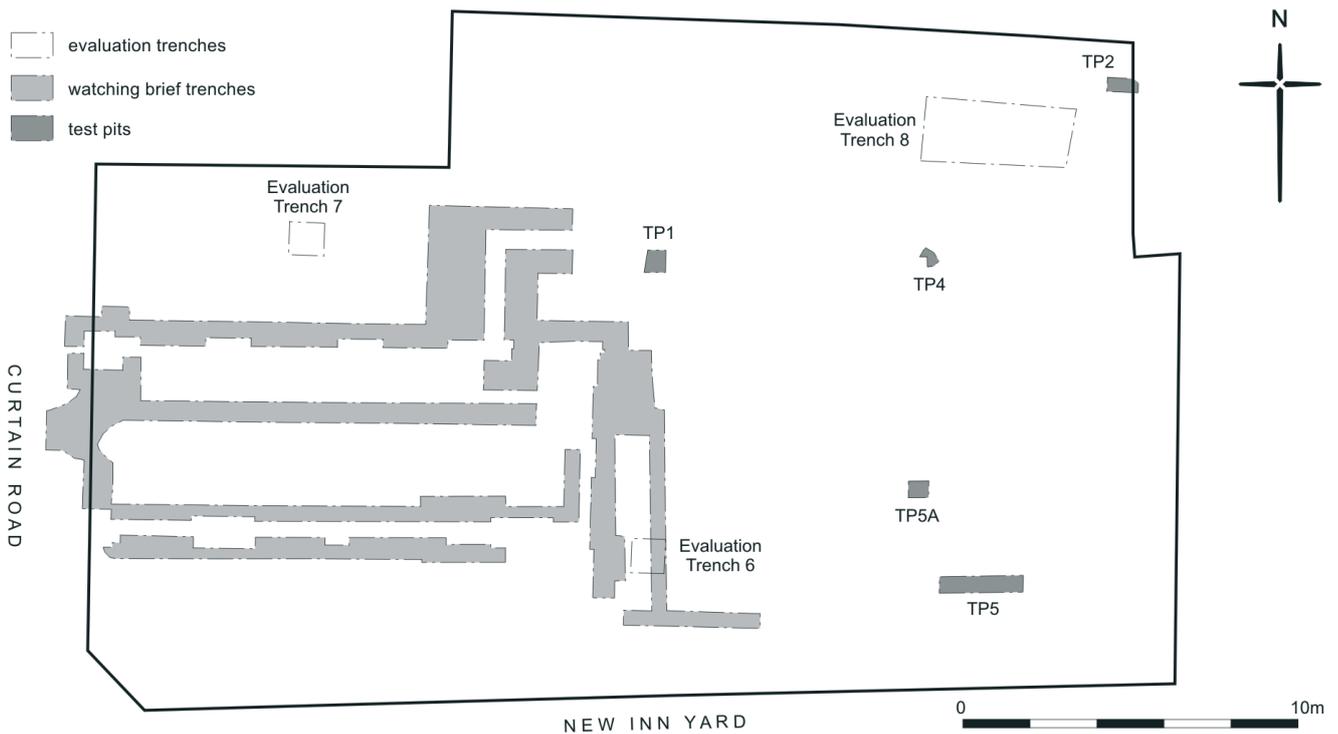


Fig. 2: location plan of test pits, trenches and watching brief areas.

though the amount of anthropogenic material in it is more suggestive of re-deposition. A fragment of Roman brick from this layer may be associated with exploitation of the natural landscape further to the east. This brickearth/clay layer may represent the initial consolidation of the site in the medieval period; fragments of tile suggest a medieval date, although this was not confirmed by more diagnostic material such as pottery. However, an upper mixed clay in Trench 8 produced pottery dating from the period 1480–1650, and in the western part of the basement the clay was overlain by a silty deposit that produced pottery of a similar date.

Evidence of the Priory and its Great Barn

The structural remains encountered in the basement trenches all cut into the clay surface, although it is presumed that they were originally cut from a higher level. Excavations at 183–185 Shoreditch High Street (HLP89) revealed a ground surface contemporary with the life of the Priory at between 12.70 and 13.30 m OD. This would suggest that the footings recorded in various areas of the basement might have been between 0.63 m and 1.23m deep and therefore fairly substantial.

What are probably the earliest identifiable remains are the foundations of a north-south wall encountered at the western end of the basement (Fig. 5), aligned along the present Curtain Road. These foundations were clearly greatly truncated and only survived for 0.40 m in depth. There was no datable material within the foundations and the sandy mortar is of a type that could date from any time between the 13th and 16th centuries. Nevertheless, the inclusion of a partly worked fragment of Kentish Ragstone suggests a date not earlier than the 15th century. This foundation is most readily identified with the

western perimeter or boundary wall of the Priory complex (Fig. 3). Its superstructure was almost certainly the “bricke wall ther next unto the feildes comonley callede ffinsbury feildes” recorded in 1576.⁵ With the various disputes of land tenure following the Dissolution, an entranceway seems to have been built through this wall in the vicinity of the site.⁶ Although the Priory was founded in the 12th century, its original grounds were probably only defined by a perimeter ditch. The enlargement of the site, possibly in the early 16th century,⁷ may have prompted the construction of a wall

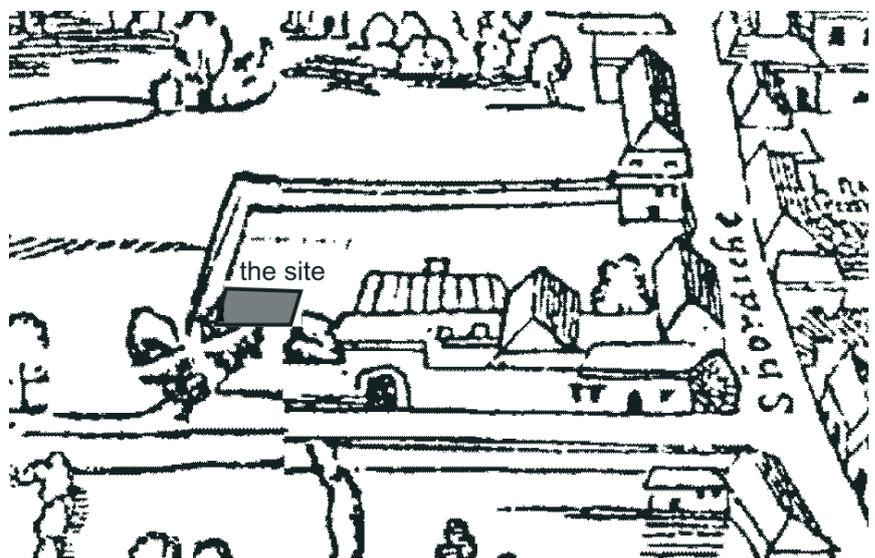


Fig. 3: view of Holywell Priory looking north, from the ‘Agas’ view, c. 1550

utilising brick – largely unused until the 15th century. The Priory was dissolved on the 10th October 1539 and “most of the principal buildings disappeared almost at once” though its south gateway survived until the late 18th century and a fragment of walling (in the south-east part of the grounds) survived just into the 20th century.⁸

The east-west wall foundation found in Trench 6 may also have been an internal building of the Priory but, apart from being of similar build to the perimeter wall, was also undatable (Fig. 4). The most obvious candidate for the identification of this structure is the Great Barn. Most of the agricultural and industrial buildings of the Priory were situated in the western part of the grounds and later property deeds established the site of the Great Barn almost precisely in this location.⁹ It is assumed that the barn was built almost if not totally adjacent to the perimeter wall of the Priory – and thus perhaps of similar date. It was described in 1600 as

one great tiled Timber barne of foure scoare foote of assise in length and foure and twentie foote of assise in breadth or verie near thereabouts verie substantiallye builte¹⁰

Thus the fragment of foundations uncovered, should, according to reconstructed plans, be part of the north wall of the Great Barn, near its north-east corner.¹¹ The identification of this wall is of great importance to the location of *The Theatre* which was on the north side of the Great Barn.

The Theatre and the shoring up of the Great Barn

In 1576 James Burbage and his brother-in-law John Brayne leased for 21 years a plot of land in the former Priory precinct, on which Burbage then built a playhouse known as *The Theatre*. The plot comprised old buildings fronting eastwards onto Holywell Court, whose grounds or gardens extended back to the brick precinct wall. Under the terms of his lease he was at liberty to demolish any of the houses on the site but he was to maintain and repair the brick wall (or build as new the same) next to the fields.¹²

By this time, the Barn was also in a dilapidated state and needed to be supported against the new Theatre. Much of the evidence for these details comes, again, from the various legal cases concerning the site.¹³ During the

Burbage v. Allen case of 1600, one of the questions for witnesses (or, Deponents) was:

Was there not a decayed longe barne parcel of the said premises demised to the said James Burbage sometymes in the tenure of one Richardes, and Stoughton, and was not the saide barne at the tyme of the leas made to the said James Burbage ruynous and decayed, so as to the same was fayne to be shored upp unto the playhouse called the Theater, when it was builte, and hath not the said James Burbadge and the nowe Complainant from tyme to tyme repaired the same Declare yo knowledge herein¹⁴

Answers given by the Deponents certainly agreed that the Barn had been shored up against the Theatre.¹⁵ Some of the answers provided further details, such as defining the part of the Barn;

one end of the Barne did faile to suche ruyn as that they weare Constrayned to underprope yt wth Shores¹⁶

and how many shores;

This Deponent sayeth that he knowethe the ould Barne mencioned ...

... he remembereth the same Barne was shored uppe wth twoe or three Shores from the Playhouse Called the Theater¹⁷

even fuller details of the work;

this deponent sayeth that he well remembreth the decayed longe Barne ... And [that] the said James Burbadge did then cause the same Barne to be shored upp, grouncelled, Crosse beamed, dogged together And so strengthened and repaired yt from tyme to tyme¹⁸

Shores were (and are) timber beams or props, typically raked against that which they were ‘shoring’. Being ‘groundcelled’ meant that they were braced by ground sills, that is horizontal strengthening at probably ground level, though cross beams might have been 45° or horizontal members halfway up. Large staples, known as iron dogs, were commonly used in timber-work at the time. When *The Theatre* was dismantled in 1598 (and its timbers transported across the river to be used in the construction of the *Globe*) the Barn shoring hitherto braced against it had to be sunk into the ground. This possible alteration in the shoring is, it is suggested, alluded to in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*

You take my house when you do take the prop That doth sustain my house¹⁹

Egan suggests that Shylock’s metaphor relates the real buildings at the site with the players’ concern over moving.²⁰

Based on this information, the identification of other features found in the basement north of Trench 6 might be hazarded. A 1.96 m wide chalky deposit, that lies 1.70 m north of the



Fig. 4: view of the foundations of the north wall of the Great Barn

Barn, could represent remains of a trench used to base shoring poles within (Fig. 5). Furthermore, an adjacent conglomeration may therefore represent part of the foundations of *The Theatre* (Fig. 5). This material was very compact and included fragments of what were probably pieces of reused building material such as Reigate stone, chalk and brick, as well as an isolated fragment of medieval tile that had come from a building of high status. Such material may well represent spoil from demolished Priory buildings. These two features were dug to the same depth and appeared to abut, suggesting a contemporary build. Although the superstructure of *The Theatre* was dismantled in 1598, there is nothing to suggest that its foundations were removed. The Barn certainly survived

‘... and now yt is but Shored upp from the ground ...’²¹

possibly still utilising *The Theatre*’s buried foundations.

The Theatre is assumed to have been a polygon, like the *Rose* and the *Globe*, with an estimated diameter of up to 25 m (82 ft). If the identification of this foundation is correct it would place the southernmost wall line some 3.20 m north of the Barn. However, such fragmentary remains cannot allow even a guess as to its true (polygonal) shape or diameter. It might be noted here that if the entrance to the plot on which *The Theatre* was built was approached from the east, its stage was likely to have

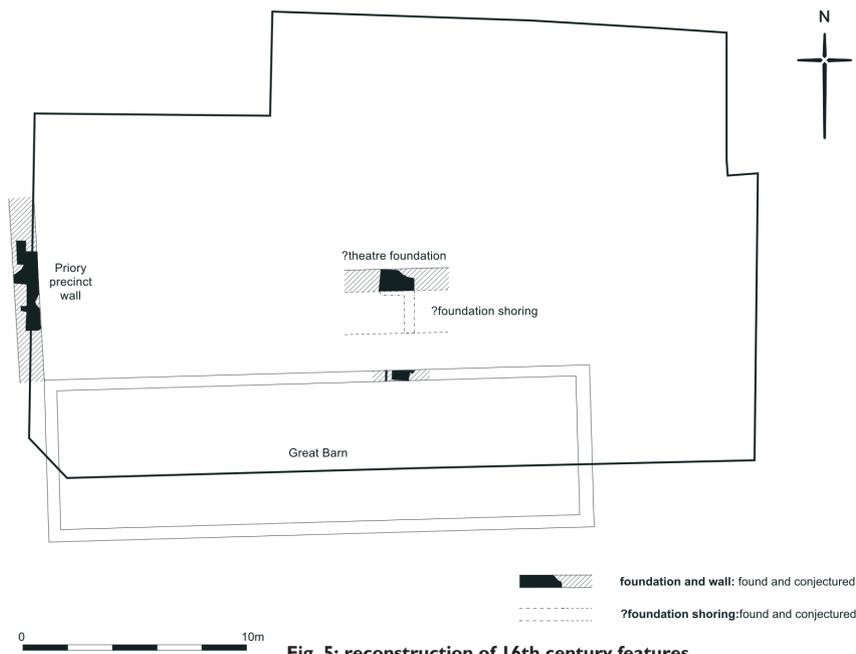


Fig. 5: reconstruction of 16th century features

been in the western half of the building. The stages of the later *Rose* and probably the *Globe* were opposite their main entrances, respectively to the north and to the south.²²

Later evidence

Due to the truncated stratigraphy within the basement, no further development could be gauged, but in Trench 8 a sequence from the same OD level could be followed. The lowest layers in Trench 8 largely comprised dumps that could only be broadly datable from the late 15th to the later 17th century. They were probably related to periods of construction or destruction and may

best be associated with post-Dissolution activity.

The Barn had been divided into tenements by the late 16th century,²³ and as such it is possible that it survived, with any necessary alterations, into the 18th century. New Inn Yard was in existence at least from the late 17th century and a western gateway into the Priory grounds was postulated at the junction of what is now Curtain Road and New Inn Yard, thus near the south-west corner of the site. Some development from that period may be associated with the fragmentary wall and well in Trench 8 (not illustrated) – the well suggesting

that it was outside whatever was enclosed by the wall to its east. New Inn Yard was widened in the mid-18th century,²⁴ and the evidence from Trench 8 supports the notion of redevelopment; the wall and well both went out of use and a thick deposit dating to no later than the mid-18th century sealed all earlier activity. Similar thick 18th-century deposits were recorded in excavations at 1–6 Bateman’s Place (BMN00) to the north, and redevelopment at this time probably covered a wider area.

Conclusions

A definition of some structural elements of Holywell Priory is of importance and the study of early medieval monastic complexes would undoubtedly be enhanced by further examination of this monument. If the more fragmentary remains could be definitively associated with *The Theatre* they would be of perhaps greater significance. It was amongst the earliest buildings of its type and the direct precursor of the *Globe*. What is clear is that structural foundations associated with the Priory, and perhaps *The Theatre*, do survive below the basement levels of c. 12.60 m OD within 86–90 Curtain Road. Horizontal stratigraphy below the basement also includes re-deposited material possibly associated with the initial development of the site, and divergent natural strata, which may explain the exploitation of the natural terrain.

1. It is now known that the *Red Lion* in Stepney was built in 1567 and that an unnamed playhouse in Newington Butts was built at about the same time as the *Theatre*.
 2. The centre of the site lies at NGR 533290 182380 and the excavation site code is CNU02. MoLAS would like to thank Child Graddon Lewis (Architects & Designers) for funding the programme of investigations and this report. MoLAS site staff included the author, Anthony Francis and Richard Hewett. Photography was by Maggie Cox, surveying by Mark Burch and David Mackie and pottery and clay tobacco pipes analysis by Jacqui Pearce. The illustrations for this article were prepared by Kenneth Lymer. I am grateful to Dr Gabriel Egan for comments on this paper.
 3. It was at 12.76 m at 97–113 Curtain Road (CUA98), and at 13.12 m OD at 1–6 Bateman’s Row (BMN00).
 4. 183–185 Shoreditch High Street (HLP89).
 5. C.W. Wallace *The First London Theatre, Materials for a History*. *University [of Nebraska] Studies* 13 (1913), 170.
 6. E.K. Chambers *The Elizabethan Stage* (1923) II, 386;

op. cit. fn 5, 170, 172.
 7. J. Bird and P. Norman (eds) *The Parish of St Leonard, Shoreditch. Survey of London, vol. VIII* (1922) 154.
 8. *Ibid.*, 167.
 9. W.H. Braines ‘The site of The Theatre, Shoreditch’ *Records London Topographical Soc* II (1917) 1–27, *passim*; *op. cit.* fn 7, 179. See also the reconstructed plan of the priory in *op. cit.* fn 7, Plate 83.
 10. Quoted by Giles Allen in his answer given in the case of *Burbage v Allen* 1600, reproduced in *op. cit.* fn 5, 193; G. Wickham, H. Berry, and W. Ingram *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660* (2000) 380.
 11. *Op. cit.* fn 7, 182.
 12. *Op. cit.* fn 5, 174.
 13. H. Berry (ed.) *The first public playhouse: The Theater in Shoreditch 1576–1598* (1979).
 14. *Op. cit.* fn 5, 225. This was Question 10.
 15. *Op. cit.* fn 5, 227, 236, 241, 243.
 16. *Op. cit.* fn 5, 220. The answer of Henry Johnson.
 17. *Op. cit.* fn 5, 231, the answer of Thomas Bromfield.

18. *Op. cit.* fn 5, 233, the answer of Thomas Osbourne.
 19. *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.3.372–4.
 20. G. Egan ‘Shylock’s unpropped house and the Theatre in Shoreditch’ *Notes and Queries* 248 (2003) 37–39.
 21. *Op. cit.* fn 5, 236, the answer of William Ffurnis.
 22. The *Rose* and the *Globe* are both seen on a number of contemporary engravings. There is no identifiable view of the *Theatre* (see now H. Berry ‘The view of London from the north and the playhouses in Holywell’ *Shakespeare Survey* 53 (2000) 196–212), and most of what we know about it comes from documentary sources (*op. cit.* fns 10, 330–387, and 13). Its influence on later playhouses, particularly the *Globe*, is discussed in J.M.C. Bowsher and P. Miller in prep. *The Rose and Globe – Tudor playhouses of Bankside, Southwark: excavations 1988–1991*. Museum of London Archaeology Service, Monograph Series, as is a discussion on stage orientation.
 23. *Op. cit.* fn 5, 201, 216.
 24. *Op. cit.* fn 7, 181.