



Fig. 1: St Alphage's Tower, London Wall (Photo: Caroline Sandes)

St Alphage's Tower, Cripplegate: monument to tenacity

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Brief History

Occupying a small niche on the edge of the London Wall road, and in sharp contrast to the modernist buildings that overlook it, are to be found the rather forlorn ruins of a medieval church tower (Fig. 1). This tower is all that remains of the second St Alphage's Church. The first St Alphage's was located only metres to the north, against the Roman and medieval City wall (an impressive stretch of which is conserved in the pretty St Alphage's Gardens that surround it). The history of both churches is detailed by Gustav Milne,¹ so briefly: this second St Alphage's was originally St Mary Elsing Church of the hospital and priory founded by Sir William Elsing in 1329. Much of the priory passed into private hands after the Dissolution of 1536–7, but when the first St Alphage's Church fell into disrepair, the parishioners were

allowed to take over the tower and chancel of St Mary Elsing for their new parish church, renaming it St Alphage's. The Great Fire of 1666 destroyed many of the City's churches but the second St Alphage's survived to be rebuilt in 1777, incorporating the medieval tower. In 1913 a neo-Gothic façade was added to the front, but in 1923 the parish was amalgamated with that of St Mary Aldermanbury. St Alphage's nave was demolished and the surrounding land rented out for commercial properties. The tower and vestibule survived, most probably because the church was entitled to a tithe, providing the rector with additional income. The tower and vestibule contained an altar and six chairs, and remained in use up to World War II not only as a place of prayer but also where, at lunchtimes, tea in winter or lemonade in summer was sold (Fig. 2).²

The Blitz and the Corporation's 'Undertaking to Preserve'

The Blitz devastated Cripplegate, leaving it one of the worst areas of bomb damage in London. St Alphage's was gutted by fire in 1940 and was declared beyond repair by the Church Authorities. In 1941, however, they wrote to the War Damage Commission declaring otherwise, possibly because they had remembered that St Alphage's held a tithe entitlement. Consequently some first aid was carried out on the building, and the surviving wall monuments were protected behind deal frames and bituminous felt for the remainder of the war.³

By 1951, after the abolishment of tithe entitlements in 1948, the Bishop of London and the Diocesan Reorganisation Committee produced their final proposals for the City's war-damaged churches. They reduced the

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number to be restored from forty-six to twenty-four and once again condemned St Alphage's to demolition.⁴

No action was taken and in 1954 the Corporation of the City of London put forward a compulsory purchase order (CPO) for the area that included the towers of St Alphage's and nearby St Alban's, Wood Street. This proposed CPO required an inspection of the monuments by the Ancient Monuments Board⁵ of the Ministry of Works (MoW), which was carried out by A.H. Brookholding-Jones. He reported that St Alphage's was stable and required only cleaning and consolidating, all of which could be done for £500. The Corporation declared that it was their intention to preserve the towers of both St Alphage's and St Alban's to the MoW's satisfaction and to incorporate the former into the redevelopment scheme.⁶ With this undertaking, the CPO was approved.

Principle vs Procrastination

The subsequent, sometimes farcical, story of the struggle to save St Alphage's is detailed in a MoW file with the unassuming title of 'Work 14: 2588: Ancient Monuments: City of London (Area 4): Compulsory Purchase Order, including St Alphage, London Wall, and Tower of St Alban, Wood St: Legal Arrangements'.⁷ In 1958, the Corporation, employing the developers Sir Robert McAlpine and Sons Ltd, began the rebuilding of the area as part of the Barbican Development. Despite the Corporation's undertaking to preserve the tower, there was some disquiet as to what this would mean, as Brookholding-Jones expressed to the Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments (CIAM), "Having been swallowed up, what is now to be done with this sad relic when shortly it finds itself stranded on the shores of the Brave New World ...?" (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2: St Alphage's before 1940 (Copyright National Archives)

The Corporation, however, was unenthusiastic about retaining St Alphage's and St Alban's, and there was an attempt to get permission to demolish them.⁸ Likewise, not everyone in the MoW was in favour either. The preservation of St Alphage's was first proposed when the CIAM was B.H. St John O'Neil who, along with the Corporation's City Engineer, Francis Forty, had during the war conspired to preserve various stretches of the City Wall, particularly the piece in St Alphage's Churchyard.⁹ By 1958, however, O'Neil had been replaced by Baillie Reynolds, who seems to have initially been unaware of the Corporation's undertaking and was unsympathetic towards St Alphage's. While he was in favour of retaining St Alban's, as its architect had been Sir Christopher Wren, there is a memo in the file from him saying that St Alphage's was, despite its medieval fabric, of no particular merit and should be recorded and demolished. Brookholding-Jones would not hear of such a thing and responded indignantly, "CIAM you kid, I think. I have not acknowledged". Ultimately the MoW insisted on the Corporation honouring their undertaking on the basis that "the City had ducked possible objections to their acquisition of the land by giving us this undertaking to preserve and that a subsequent withdrawal would have looked like bad faith – to which we would have been party".

A certain amount of going round in circles ensued, with the Corporation refusing to give any further indications of its plans without knowing what the MoW wanted preserved, and the MoW refusing to give any indication of what it wanted preserved without knowing what the Corporation's plans were. At some point a white line was marked on the ruins to indicate at what level the tower was to be reduced to in order to accommodate the planned overhead walkway, but this line cut through some of the arches, which was unacceptable to the MoW (Fig. 4). Discussion ensued of various options, such as lowering the northern portion of the remains that contained more modern work including the large neo-Gothic window. The MoW finally agreed "that in our view the southern portion of the building should not be removed down to the



Fig. 3: St Alphage's in 1955 (note City wall of St Alphage's Churchyard in foreground to right) (Copyright Guildhall Library)

level of the white line... With regard to the northern portion, either of the proposals outlined in your letter would be satisfactory... although we think that the first proposal, to remove the three walls down to the white line, is preferable to leaving the south wall standing on its own without the East and West walls to give it meaning".

Little further happened for another year, but on the 29th June 1960 there is a letter to the MoW from the City Planning Officer saying, "I have been advised at a late hour today that the remains of the Tower of St Alphage, London Wall ... are in a dangerous condition and may have to be demolished."

In the process of removing the north neo-gothic arch and reducing the height of the east and west walls, the developers had caused the tower to become unstable. A 'Dangerous Structure Notice' was issued with instructions from the City of London Dangerous Structure Surveyor, Barker, that the tower had immediately to be secured, repaired or demolished.

Regardless of the increased complications and cost, the MoW still refused to let the Corporation out of its undertaking. What followed is a lesson

in the art of procrastination on the part of the developers, presumably because they hoped that the tower would collapse of its own accord. By early October, none of the required measures to stabilise the tower had been taken, so the MoW wrote to notify Barker of this. The developer's architects, Maurice Sanders Associates, responded that their clients, the developers, were not the owners of the tower and had no responsibility towards it except to make provision for the remains within the development, as stipulated in the Building Agreement. The letter went on to point out that Barker was insisting that the Dangerous Structures Order be complied with immediately or he would instigate legal proceedings against the Corporation as the owners of the building. The letter then pointed out that the architects had heard nothing from the Corporation's solicitors since they had written to the City Comptroller on the 25th July and since the matter had now become urgent they would demolish the monument within the next seven days unless they were instructed to the contrary.

In response to this, the MoW duly reminded both the Corporation and the

architects that there was an undertaking to preserve the monument, but, as noted in the MoW file on the 18th October, "The outcome will be interesting to watch – it is possible of course that the collapse of the building will solve a number of legal difficulties for the parties concerned".

Despite this real danger of collapse, the MoW decided against photographing or recording the tower in case this action was seen as an acceptance on their part of the tower's imminent destruction. A letter from the City Planning Officer of the 27th October reassured the MoW that they respected the undertaking to protect the site, but if the Dangerous Structures Surveyor declared that it had to be demolished, so be it. The increasing frustration felt by the MoW at the reticence on the part of the developers and the Corporation to honour their undertaking to protect St Alphage's is clearly evident in a MoW memo that complains, "the building and our patience being the only sufferers".

In mid-November, a meeting was held on the site between the MoW and the Corporation to make plans for the stabilisation of St Alphage's, but by the following April nothing more had

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happened despite several letters from the MoW to the City Planning Officer. The perilous nature of the tower's existence is best summed up by an MoW memo of the 20th April 1961 asking if the tower had been seen recently and whether or not it was still standing...

Saved

At last, almost a year after the tower had been served with a Dangerous Structure Notice, to the evident relief of the MoW, a letter arrived on the 27th April 1961 from the City Engineer, Forty, announcing that St Alphage's had just come to his attention as the City Planning Officer had passed the file over to him because it was now at a stage where Forty was to be involved. Forty continued that he was aware of the Corporation's undertaking to preserve the tower even though the developers were of the opinion that "owing to the state of instability" of the remains, the only option was to demolish them and reconstruct. Since, though, it would not then be a "true Ancient Monument", the developers suggested, predictably, that the only practical course would be to demolish it.

But still nothing happened. Forty wrote to the MoW on the 22nd June explaining that he had contacted the developers about this, had been told that it would be dealt with at their next board meeting, but then had heard nothing, so he was now going to contact the Comptroller and City Solicitor to give them a legal reminder. The following day, a letter arrived from the architects to the MoW, explaining that they had been instructed by the developers to make arrangements to reinstate the tower and asking to be put in touch with a suitable consultant.

By the end of September, despite the MoW sending a list of specifications for the required preservation works to the developers in August, there had been no further communication, nor had any work started. On the 4th October, there is a letter from the architects to explain that work on St Alphage's had not started because it was suddenly discovered that the site lay on the edge of the GPO demised land to their underground railway tunnel, and getting permission from the

GPO to carry out work on the church was likely to take some time. There is an exasperated note added to the bottom of the letter by a Mr Clarke of the MoW, "To all above – even the P.O. are involved in delaying tactics".

The GPO, however, gave clearance for work at the end of October, but the developers and their architects had one last delaying tactic to try. On the 25th January 1962, the architects wrote to the City Engineers Department to complain about lack of co-operation from the MoW. Forty duly forwarded this letter to the MoW who, naturally enough, considered it to be a "gross misstatement of the facts." Forty then replied to the architects, and on the 5th March received a response from the latter saying that the MoW had renewed their interest in the site and work had commenced. From the files, it is evident that Forty clearly did not believe the architects' accusations, but the MoW were unhappy with Sanders' response,

and wrote to Forty on the 17th April to record that "we consider the charge of a lack of co-operation to be completely unfounded."

At long last, some eight years after the CPO and two and a half years from the point when the tower was served with a Dangerous Structure Notice, there is a memo of the 8th November 1962 advising that the restoration job had been completed. There was some consternation on the part of the MoW about the finishing of the wall endings facing Route 11, but, not surprisingly, it was decided to let the matter rest. The work was considered completed and the file closed on the 4th March 1963.

St Alphage's today – threatened again

St Alphage's Tower and its neighbouring site, the City Wall in St Alphage's Gardens, are part of a larger assemblage that includes the Roman and medieval bastions and City wall



Fig. 4: St Alphage's c. 1959 (note white lines below window and across arch in foreground) (copyright National Archives)

fragments, and St Giles Church Without, that are within the Barbican proper. There are not many places in the world where one can see Grade II listed Modernist architecture, as the Barbican is, interspersed with Scheduled Ancient Monuments. Given the destruction of the area during World War II, and the large-scale clearance to build the Barbican, the survival of these important Roman and medieval fragments, including St Alphage's, that mark out London's early beginnings, is a true achievement and owes much to the dedication of individuals of the Ancient Monuments Board and others such as Francis Forty. One of the most precious aspects of these sites is that they are outside and there for anyone to enjoy and marvel at.

But St Alphage's Tower is under

threat once again. First, it has changed little since it was conserved, and is in fact in desperate and shameful need of remedial conservation work. There is far greater threat looming, one that also threatens St Alphage's Gardens and its City Wall. JP Morgan is planning a colossal corporate headquarters of one million square feet (90,000 sq m) that will swallow up both these Scheduled Ancient Monuments, remove St Alphage's Gardens and the walkways, and seriously impact on the listed Barbican.¹⁰ The Barbican Association and local residents are fighting this proposed development.¹¹

St Alphage's Tower, a rare surviving piece of the City's medieval church architecture, has occupied its site for more than 670 years. It is a poignant reminder of the City's long and eventful

history, not least, in its ruined state and with its modernist surroundings, of the destruction of World War II and the subsequent recovery of the City. But, what is to happen now to St Alphage's? Should we allow our accessible public past to disappear into inaccessible private property, and should we allow this venerable old ruin, a survivor of fires and wars and development since 1329, to be, as Brookholding-Jones worried in the 1950s, "engulfed and disappear beneath a roof, never to see the sun again"?¹²

Acknowledgements

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1. G. Milne *Excavations at Medieval Cripplegate, London: archaeology after the Blitz, 1946-68* (2002).

2. Henry n.d. in *Inland Revenue 1940 IR 37:148: St Alphage's File between 1940 and June 1962*. Held at the National Archives, Kew.

3. IR file IR 37:148.

4. IR file IR 37:148.

5. The Ancient Monuments Board was a precursor to English Heritage.

6. Ministry of Works 1954. Work 14: 2588: Ancient Monuments: City of London (Area 4): Compulsory

Purchase Order, including St Alphage, London Wall, and Tower of St Alban, Wood St: Legal arrangements. File Date: 3/8/54; closed 4/3/63. Held at the National Archives, Kew.

7. All the facts and quotes in the rest of the article come from this file, unless otherwise stated.

8. Corporation of London, 1954. Minutes of the Improvements and Town Planning Committee Meetings Volume 57; Corporation of London, 1956. Minutes of the Improvements and Town Planning Committee Meetings Volume 59. Held at the Corporation of London Records Office, Guildhall.

9. F.J. Forty *London Wall by St Alphage's Churchyard: exposure and presentation of Roman and Medieval work on the town wall of London*. The Guildhall Miscellany No. 5 (1955).

10. D. Hipwell *The House of Morgan* (2008). <http://www.propertyweek.com/story.asp?sectioncode=38&storycode=3111886>; last accessed 2/07/08.

11. <http://www.barbicanstalphage.com>; <http://www.gopetition.co.uk/petitions/no-redevelopment.html>; last accessed 2/07/08.

12. MoW File 14:2588.

Letter to the Editor

Bermondsey Abbey precinct

A.R. Martin wrote a seminal article on the layout of Bermondsey Abbey in 1925,¹ which is based largely on what survived until the 19th century included in the house built by Thomas Pope on the site. However, he also included a map showing the boundaries of the precinct of the abbey for which he adduced no evidence and which is not correct, but has been repeated in reports including that on excavations at 163–167 Bermondsey Street.² I have outlined the evidence for the northern boundary of the precincts lying just north of the abbey church.³ Further to the evidence produced there is that when the precinct was granted to Sir Robert Southwell after the Dissolution there is no mention of tenements in Bermondsey.⁴ It is apparent that the southern boundary given by Martin is

also inaccurate. The gatehouse, whose remains Martin shows in Grange Walk, must be the Eastgate which is described as leading to the grange of the abbey, that is Grange Walk, which must therefore be outside the precinct; since, further west, the precinct certainly extends to near Grange Road it must turn north at that point to run along the north side of Grange Walk. It may not have had a wall along this stretch, as it did have further west, because in the 16th century at least, there was a range of buildings running east from the Eastgate, but these may have been built against the west principal wall at its southern end.⁵

At the east end of Tanner Street there were two closes of pasture, the Convent Pasture and the Wyldes containing 18 acres and 12 acres respectively. These are often mentioned

in association with the precinct⁶ but are never specifically described as within the precinct and they are not mentioned in the lease of the precinct to Southwell in 1539.⁷ The eastern one definitely stretched from Tanner Street to Grange walk and the other one probably did, so that, if they were not in the precinct, Martin's eastern boundary is also wrong and should be somewhat further west.

Bermondsey's precinct was thus much smaller than Martin claimed and is similar in size to other monastic establishments in the London area. This does not mean that Bermondsey did not own the sites of 163–167, it may well have done, but that would not mean that they were within the precinct.

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1. *JBAA New Series* 32, 192–226.

2. *London Archaeol* 12, no. 1 (2008) 9, Fig. 1.

3. *SLAS News* 99 (December 2002) 5–6.

4, 5. PRO E318/20/1032.

6. E.g. PRO E318/20/1032.

7. PRO E315/212 f136.