

Fig. 1: site location; site code HLW06

From prehistoric to urban

Shoreditch: excavations at Holywell Priory, Holywell Lane, London EC2

Hana Lewis

Introduction

Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA, formerly MoLAS) carried out archaeological excavations at Holywell Priory, Holywell Lane, Shoreditch EC2, in the London Borough of Hackney, between August 2006 and November 2007 (Fig. 1). The excavations were conducted on behalf of Transport for London and were undertaken as part of the construction of a new urban railway, the East London Line Project (ELLP), Northern Railway Extension.¹

The presence on site of the medieval Holywell Priory and the Earls of Rutland's Tudor mansion was known before excavation. Trial excavations in 1989 at 183–185 Shoreditch High Street (HLP89) had revealed elements of Holywell Priory, including the south aisle wall of the church and areas of the cemetery. At least three Tudor brick walls, presumably associated with the Earls of Rutland's mansion, were also uncovered. They may have been part of a gallery which the Earl built from his house to the Priory church, connecting with the chapel of Sir Thomas Lovell, which had been built by Lovell, Henry VII's Chancellor of the Exchequer, in c. 1500 (Fig. 2).²

It is not possible in this article to discuss in detail all the significant archaeological finds from Holywell Priory, and the site is subject to a forthcoming major programme of research and publication.³

Geology and topography

The Holywell Priory site lies on the boundary between the Hackney and Taplow gravel terraces, which runs roughly along Holywell Lane. The natural geology at the site slopes towards the south and was recorded between 12.28 m OD and 10.73 m OD. A suspected tributary of the Walbrook River, which also crossed the site, was natural in origin but revealed evidence of human intervention and management.

Prehistoric

During the prehistoric period the Holywell Priory area was largely unoccupied, though it has been suggested that Old Street, just to the north of the site, runs along the line of an Iron Age trackway.⁴ The prehistoric finds from the site were predominantly residual, but they indicate that some human activity was taking place in the area at this time. The assemblage included a Late

HOLYWELL PRIORY

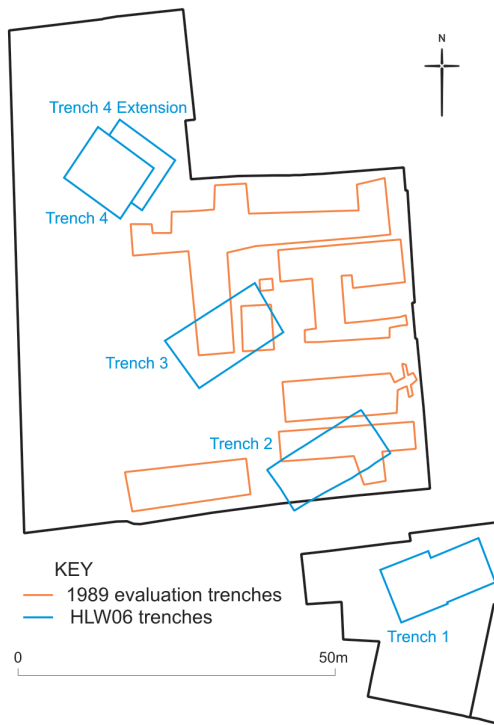


Fig. 2: 183–185 Shoreditch High Street evaluation trenches (1989), in relation to the Holywell Priory trenches (HLW06)

Fig. 4: an 1870 conjectural plan of Holywell Priory, with Trench 4 and Trench 4 Extension overlaid. The arrangement of the south aisle pier bases found on site corresponded to the plan layout.

Neolithic/Early Bronze Age black flint dagger fragment, found near the possible Walbrook tributary, which would have been a natural focal point in the prehistoric landscape.

Roman

The Holywell area remained rural in Roman times. The site was located only *c.* 900m north of *Londinium* (Roman London) and along the route of Ermine Street,

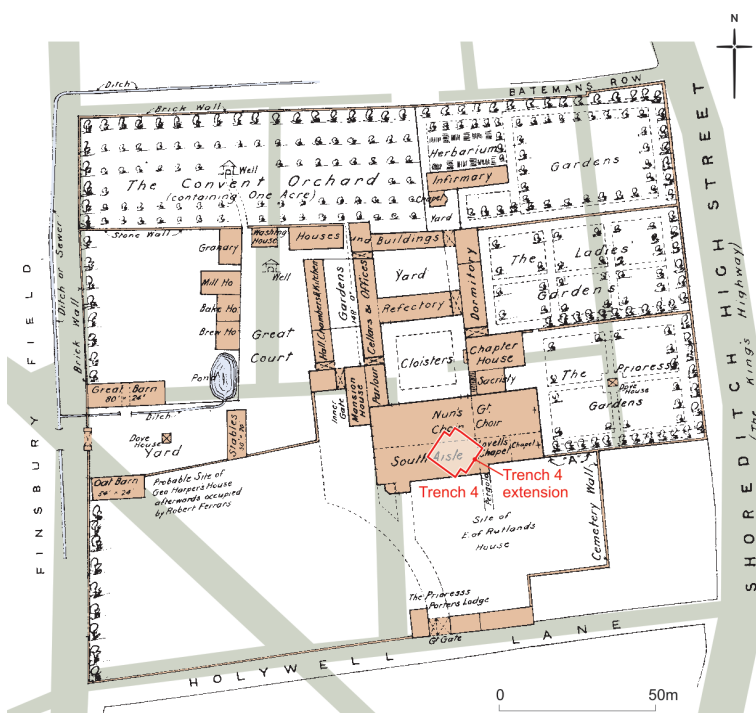


Fig. 3: Roman burials at Holywell Priory

the main Roman road which lead north to *Eboracum* (York).

The evidence for Roman occupation at Holywell Priory included small assemblages of pottery, tile and brick, as well as a drainage ditch or gully which channelled water from the suspected Walbrook tributary, indicating rural land management was taking place.⁵

Adjacent to a substantial property or field boundary ditch, a burial containing two Roman skeletons was excavated, which was radiocarbon dated to AD 80–310 (Fig. 3). This burial truncated another skeleton, suggesting the area may have been used as a small Roman rural burial ground. Certainly, it was common for rural Roman burials to take place alongside roads and several had previously been discovered along Bishopsgate, south of Holywell Priory.⁶

Saxon

Although the place name 'Shoreditch' is thought to be of Saxon derivation, there is little evidence in the archaeological record for Saxon occupation in the Shoreditch/Holywell area.⁷ The only feature excavated at Holywell which may have been Saxon was an east-west running ditch. Its fill contained some medieval pottery of 1270–1350, though radiocarbon dates indicated the ditch could have been constructed in the Late Saxon period, between AD 990–1160. The medieval pottery shows the ditch was contemporaneous with Holywell Priory, suggesting it may have been used for the disposal of waste

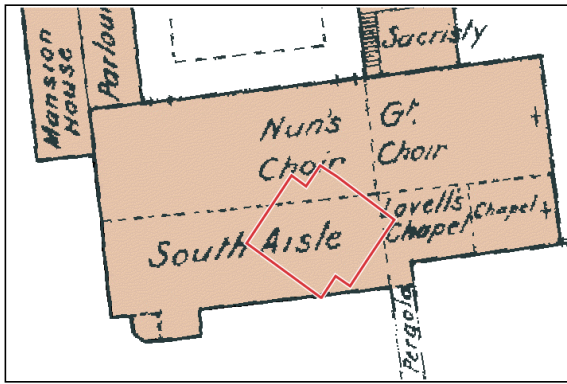


Fig. 5: the 1870 conjectured plan church layout, with trench limits overlaid.

generated from the Priory. A residual Saxon antler comb fragment and a bone pin were also found on site.

Medieval Holywell Priory

The medieval Priory of St John the Baptist at Holywell was founded on the site between 1152 and 1158, for the Augustinian Canonesses by Robert Fitz Generan (or Gelran) (Figs. 4–5). Its lands originally consisted of three acres of ‘moor’, in which was located the natural spring known as Haliwell (Holywell). Land grants and monetary gifts from benefactors meant that by the closing decades of the 12th century, Holywell Priory was prospering. In c. 1535, the Priory possessed holdings in 41 parishes of the City of London and several counties.⁸

The church of Holywell Priory was excavated on site, identified by the remains of the north and south arcades which formed the nave. Two columns and the footing from a third were found *in situ* running east–west and forming the south arcade of the church. The columns were constructed in a circular and quatrefoil design respectively, suggesting the nave was built using a dual alternating design system⁹ (Figs. 6–7). The columns of the north arcade had been entirely robbed out, though the alignment of the series of robbed out pier bases indicated the nave was extended to the north by at least 1 m, probably between 1300 and 1400, a period when many great stone building programmes were taking place across London.¹⁰ It is recorded that in May 1318 Edward II gave a gift to the Prioress of Holywell of six oaks for timber from the royal wood at Waltham, Essex, suggesting a construction programme at the Priory was already under way by this year.¹¹

The bases of the columns *in situ* in the south arcade included in their design some unusual ‘spurs’, which resembled sprouting leaves. These ‘spurs’ were influenced by the waterleaf style of ornament, a popular architectural style from c 1180–1200.¹² The late 12th-century dating of the architectural elements from the columns indicates that the arcade and the nave of the Priory church would have been completed some 22 to 48 years after Holywell Priory was founded, a practical conclusion given the intensity of

labour it would have taken to build the church. The nave was then widened, probably in the 14th century, when the monetary fortune of Holywell Priory had drastically improved through land rents and gifts.

A fragment of the south aisle wall, in alignment with the church wall identified during the Shoreditch High Street excavations, was also excavated, as well as a series of internal walls and foundations which had presumably originally formed chapels or other internal church divisions, running off the arcades. Subdividing walls within the church hint that they derive from the east end of the nave, and some of the walls may have marked the site of the rood screen and the west end of the Nuns’ Choir, where the nuns carried out divine service. Certainly, the columns *in situ* in the south arcade were positioned in alignment with the current property boundary backing onto New Inn Yard, suggesting the church originally extended on this alignment further to the east. If this was the case, then it is entirely possible that the Nuns’ Choir was located within the excavated area, as the High Altar would have been located to the east of the Choir, outside the trench limits (see Fig. 5).

Medieval burials

Within the Priory church, a total of 31 adults and six juveniles were excavated, of which 56% were male and 44% female (Fig. 8).¹³ The burial of both sexes as well as children suggests that the majority of these burials were likely to have been rich benefactors of Holywell and their families, and perhaps minor nobility or even knights.

Dating and analysis indicate that burial took place within the church from its foundation until its dissolution. The bodies were buried in typical Christian fashion: supine with all or most of their limbs extended and heads placed at the western end of the grave.

The majority of the burials were located within the nave, and several of the burials here truncated one

Fig. 6: circular column from the south aisle of the church, with ‘spur’ designs on the corners of its base





Fig. 7: quatrefoil column from the south aisle of the church

another, implying some of the coffin stacks may have been family groups. Three burials were located in the south arcade and three were situated in an east–west alignment in approximately the centre of the nave, (Fig. 9). Due to the pre-eminent position of these three burials, it is probable the occupants were especially wealthy benefactors or even nuns. The westernmost of these burials was also within an undecorated lead coffin, a rarely used and expensive material in the medieval period. A further two burials were excavated to the south of the Priory church, in the area where the Priory cemetery was located, and one of them was radiocarbon dated to 1330–1450.

The Earls of Rutland’s mansion complex

At the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539, Holywell Priory was the ninth richest nunnery in England. The break-up of the precinct into new plots and land rents was under way by this year and the Earl of Rutland established a mansion complex on



Fig. 8: plan of excavated burials within the church, with trench

land to the immediate south of the Priory. The mansion was connected by a gallery to the chapel of Sir Thomas Lovell within the Priory church.¹⁴

The Priory church was systematically demolished and the columns *in situ* in the south arcade were levelled to only three or four courses high. The column alignment was respected by later post-medieval structures, including the walls of a 17th-century building, which were constructed deliberately abutting them. No evidence of the gallery which led to Lovell’s Chapel in the church was discovered. However a building, which is believed to be part of the mansion complex, and several related structures were excavated.

The eastern side of this building had been truncated, but the north–south and east–west walls (c. 3.6 m and c. 2.2 m long respectively) survived and had a series of construction phases. The building was internally divided into two rooms by a somewhat flimsy timber and plaster wall. The internal deposits date the original building to c 1580 and the numerous occupation surfaces, including traces of wooden floor joists, indicate the intensity of activity which must have taken place within it (Fig. 10).

Several external features were contemporaneous with the building, including a truncated metalled (yard?) surface, c. 1.8 m north–south by 2 m east–west, and a steep-sided ditch. The ditch contained two oak posts and a plank, probably revetments, which have been dated to the late medieval period or the 16th century. Samples of the ditch fills contained large assemblages of wild plant remains, including columbine (*Aquilegia vulgaris*) and pink (*Dianthus* sp.) seeds, both of which were used as decorative garden plants.¹⁵ It is therefore possible that the ditch was used for management or cultivation of the mansion gardens.

Post-medieval c. 1600–1830

As London grew rapidly in the 17th and 18th centuries, land became at a premium and many larger estates, including the Earls of Rutland’s mansion, were swallowed up by the expansion of the City and largely replaced by compact rows of tenements. The old Holywell Priory buildings continued to be dismantled or used for other purposes. Notably *The Theatre*, London’s first Elizabethan playhouse, was established on former Priory lands in 1576. By 1601, most of the inhabitants of Shoreditch lived on or near Holywell Street, now known as Shoreditch High Street, which had originally been Roman Ermine Street.¹⁶

On site, the building within the former Priory church and the mansion building remained in use during the 17th and 18th centuries. Seven new tenement buildings were constructed at Holywell during the 17th century, some reusing Tudor bricks which presumably came from dismantled buildings of the former mansion. Four of these tenements fronted north onto Holywell Lane with backyards to their rear, some with cesspits containing domestic refuse including ceramic cooking wares and clay pipes. All

four buildings continued in use during the 18th century and this typical suburban property arrangement can be seen in the Horwood map of 1792–99 (Fig. 11).

One of the most significant post-medieval finds from Holywell Priory was a witching bottle; a stoneware bottle or jug made in *Bartmann* (bearded man) or *Bellarmino* form which was traditionally used as a magic object to place or ward off a curse. The Holywell example was unusual in that it was made from London stoneware in the last quarter of the 17th century in imitation of the Rhenish wares, but it was designed plain, without the usual bearded face (Fig. 12).¹⁷ The witching bottle was hidden underneath a brick floor in Building 25 sometime between 1700 and 1740, presumably by its superstitious occupants.

The majority of the tenements excavated at Holywell Priory were demolished to make way for the Eastern Counties Railway line which opened in 1839–40, linking Shoreditch and Romford.

Discussion

The significance of the archaeological finds from the prehistoric to the post-medieval periods at Holywell Priory is considerable. Although the prehistoric finds were predominantly residual, they demonstrate that human activity was taking place around Holywell during this period, and the Roman burials may further contribute to our understanding of rural burial practices, particularly in relation to major roadways, in this case Roman Ermine Street.

The archaeological remains of Holywell Priory are considered to be of national significance, with the excavation providing a rare opportunity for the



Fig. 9: medieval burial located within the central area of the extended nave of the church

investigation of a medieval nunnery and its associated burials. The discovery of the Priory church on site has confirmed the location of the church, as well as details of its layout, architectural design and building modifications. The findings can be compared with contemporary monastic sites such as Holy Trinity Priory, Aldgate, in order to further our understanding of medieval ecclesiastical houses, particularly in London.

The Tudor buildings and associated artefacts of the Earls of Rutland’s mansion complex have provided some insight into the layout and domestic material culture of the mansion. These discoveries are also an important example in the archaeological record of the



Fig. 10: in the foreground is an outbuilding of the Earls of Rutland’s mansion (facing west)



Fig. 11: Horwood's map of 1792-99, with HLW06 shaded

reuse of a monastic building in an early post-medieval mansion following the Dissolution.

The later post-medieval buildings and artefact assemblages, in particular the pottery, from Holywell Priory will contribute to the understanding of the nature of London's urban expansion in Shoreditch and the domestic character of the tenements which were established on the site.



Fig. 12: Bellarmine witching bottle from Holywell Priory, which had bent pins placed inside it

Acknowledgements

MOLA would like to thank the East London Line Project (ELLP) Northern Railway Extension for funding the archaeological project; Balfour Beatty and Carillion for their on-site assistance; Jon Colclough of Transport for London; Stephen Haynes of Arup and David Divers of English Heritage. The site was managed for MOLA by George Dennis. The author would like to thank all the MOLA staff who worked on the site.

This report includes contributions by Ian Betts (building material), Anne Davis (plant remains), Geoff Egan (accessioned finds), Jacqui Pearce (post-Roman pottery), Chris Phillpotts (historical sources), Natasha Powers (human bone), Mark Samuel (worked stone) and Amy Thorp (Roman pottery). Juan José Fuldain and Carlos Lemos prepared the illustrations and site photography was by Maggie Cox.



1. H. Lewis *Holywell Priory, Holywell Lane, Shoreditch, London EC2, London Borough of Hackney: Post-excavation assessment*, unpubl MOLA archive report (October 2008) 1-2. The National Grid Reference is TQ 533436 182342.
2. B. Sloane *Trial excavations at 183-185 Shoreditch High Street, May - June 1989*, unpubl MOLA archive report (1989) 3-6.
3. The site archive can be consulted in the LAARC (London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7ED) under the site code HLW06.
4. G. Dennis *East London Line Project Northern Extension: New Inn Yard to Holywell Lane (Holywell Priory), London EC2. Site-specific project design for an archaeological excavation*, unpubl MOLA archive report (2006).
5. I. Betts 'The building material' in *op cit* fn 1, 49-50; A. Thorp 'The Roman pottery' in *op cit* fn 1, 62-3.
6. Natasha Powers, *pers. comm.*
7. P. Askew *East London Extension Line (Northern Extension), London Boroughs*

- of Hackney, Islington and Tower Hamlets: An archaeological impact assessment*, unpubl MOLA archive report (2001).
8. J. Kirby 'The Priory of Haliwell' in C. Barron and M. Davies (eds.) *The religious houses of London and Middlesex*, London: University of London (2007) 196.
9. M. Samuel 'Worked stone' in *op cit* fn 1, 95.
10. J. Schofield and R. Lea *Holy Trinity Priory, Aldgate, City of London: An archaeological reconstruction of history* MOLA Monogr 24 (2005) 150-52.
11. *Calendar of Close Rolls (1313-18)* 542.
12. M. Samuel 'The loose and *in situ* architectural stonework' in *op cit* fn 1, 97.
13. N. Powers 'The human bone' in *op cit* fn 1, 143.
14. *Op cit* fn 2, 5; *op cit* fn 4.
15. A. Davis 'The plant remains' in *op cit* fn 1, 128-29.
16. *Op cit* fn 1, 9-10.
17. J. Pearce 'The medieval and later pottery' in *op cit* fn 1, 75.