



Fig. 1: schematic plan of the north-western tail of Streatham parish, showing the area of Tooting Bec village and the location of the water features, the moated site and the planned village. Based upon early Ordnance Survey maps of Tooting and the Streatham Parish Tithe Map. (1) the moated site of Bente; (2) planned village; (3) Manor House and water features. (Author)

Early Tooting Bec and its reputed priory

Graham Gower

Introduction

An integral part of the London Borough of Wandsworth is Tooting, a place not heralded with a grand history, but nevertheless a history which extends to the Saxon period.¹ Unfortunately, little is known of the origins and early history of this place which, unlike her close neighbour Mitcham, does not have the benefit of known Roman and early Saxon settlement. Therefore, it is not until the Norman Conquest that we obtain our first glimpses of Tooting as a settlement place.

History has seen the development of two places with the name Tooting, sharing a common boundary. This stems from the early Saxon period, which saw settlement occurring alongside Roman Stane Street and by the River Graveney, a tributary of the River Wandle. By the time of the Domesday Survey, we find a number of individual settlements carrying the name Tooting spread across the area. By the early Middle Ages, these settlements had coalesced into two distinct places: Tooting Graveney and

Tooting Bec, which by modern times have become known as Lower Tooting and Upper Tooting. Whilst these two places have existed side by side for centuries, they have nevertheless developed their own histories and identities.

For Tooting Graveney, it was her development as a small agricultural parish. This was centred on the church of St. Nicholas, owned at the time of the survey by Chertsey Abbey, which before demolition in 1834 was noted for its round Saxon tower, which had an inclusion of Roman tile in the fabric, and for the moat which surrounded this small Saxon church.² With Tooting Bec, it was becoming the principal village and manor of Streatham parish, and the social and economic centre of the parish until the 17th century.

It was through another abbey that one of the Tooting estates acquired the name Bec. This came from the great Benedictine Abbey of Bec-Hellouin in Normandy, France, when, following the Norman Conquest, Richard of Tonbridge gave one of the Tooting

estates to this abbey. On acquisition, a small monastic cell was established to administer the new estate and the adjoining estate of Streatham, which they had also acquired from Richard.³ From later evidence, we can assume that the monks' likely place of settlement was on the southern edge of the embryonic village of Tooting Bec, where one of the manor houses for Tooting Bec is believed to have stood. The large manor of Tooting Bec was to have a chequered history, seeing a number of ownerships, which included Merton Priory and Eton College, before falling into secular hands following the reformation. Ultimately, the manor became part of the Duke of Bedford's London land holdings, and was gradually broken up during the 17th and 18th centuries and finally dissolved in 1888.

Village planning

Although history is silent regarding the early development of the village and the manor of Tooting Bec, we are nevertheless aware of historic activity



Fig. 2: the King's Head, Upper Tooting Road, originally an alehouse built in 1621 and rebuilt in 1896. The alehouse marked the southern end of Tooting Bec village. Beyond can be seen some of the 18th-century properties built upon the planned medieval building plots. These plots are still discernible in the present townscape along this part of the road. Postcard view dating to c. 1905. (Author's collection)

taking place, which by appearance has the suggestion of monastic origin. This can be appreciated when looking at the early maps of Tooting Bec, where we see evidence of village planning and a complex of water features, which indicate historic water management (Fig. 1). Looking at village planning first, we can see from map evidence a series of property boundaries lying at the northern end of Tooting Bec Road, and situated between Trinity and Ansell Roads.⁴ Here, we can see the long rectangular property boundaries, with their narrow frontages and accompanying back lane, which are characteristic of those seen in medieval town plans.⁵ Although we cannot be definite about the origin of these planned properties, it is possible that such planning was the work of monks from Bec Abbey, and part of their estate development and perhaps a response to the rise in population experienced before the arrival of the Black Death.

Evidence of medieval activity along this stretch of Upper Tooting Road was uncovered in 2000, when a site was excavated next to the King's Head Public House (Figs. 2 and 3). The archaeology revealed a series of medieval ditches, along with finds of pottery and roof tiles, which gave a date of AD 1270–1350.⁶ Of particular interest was the assemblage of animal bones, consisting of cattle, sheep and

fig. This indicates butchery and consumption, and points to the nearness of a butcher's shop. Interestingly, this excavation may have verified the historical record, for the Tooting Bec manor court rolls tell us of a certain Thomas Botcher of Tooting Bec, who, in 1417, was fined the sum of sixpence for charging too much for his meat.⁷ Looking across to the



Fig. 3: the King's Head Public house today. The new property adjoining was where Pre-Construct Archaeology undertook excavations in 2000. (Author)

opposite side of Upper Tooting Road, early map evidence shows a more informal and less structured pattern of field and property boundaries, suggesting that occupation here may predate the planned plots opposite. This is suggested further by the way the Streatham parish boundary marks out this area as it makes its way towards the Wandle valley. The concentration of properties at the northern end of Upper Tooting Road represented the medieval village of Tooting Bec, sited on elevated ground and by the cross-road leading to the communities at Streatham, Wandsworth and Clapham.

Fishponds and moats

Returning to the early maps of Tooting Bec, the most striking features to be observed are the lakes and fishponds which pattern much of the southern end of the village. Until suburban development of the late 19th century, these features dominated the local landscape, and today are remembered by the naming of Fishponds Road, Upper Tooting. Before suburban development took place, this area suffered from poor drainage, due to a number of springs and watercourses found in the area. To manage the problem water features were created, which by the mid-18th century had

became part of a decorative landscape associated with a number of gentrified properties. One in particular was a large brick mansion, known during the 19th century as the Manor House, which stood just within the boundary of Tooting Bec (Fig. 4). In the extensive grounds of this house lay a number of large water features of various shape and size, referred to in the historical records as either canals or fishponds. In the 1790s, they are described as being part of a large pleasure ground in which *'the canals and cascades are plentifully supplied with water'*⁸ (Fig. 5). The age and origin of these water features is uncertain, although a reference to the Orchard and Mote Mead in 1720, and associated with the above property, suggests some antiquity.⁹ Although uncertainty prevails about the history of these features, they may have an origin in the medieval period, being the work of the monks from Bec Abbey in an endeavour to control a local drainage problem. However, such endeavours may be attributed to the monks from Merton Priory, which stood some two kilometres south of Tooting Bec village. From 1394 to 1422, this priory leased the manor from Bec Abbey, and with their experience in controlling and modifying the nearby River Wandle for the benefit of their priory, they would have been well equipped to manage a water drainage problem at Tooting.

Nonetheless, we are probably on more certain grounds with monastic involvement in the early history of Tooting Bec with the existence of a moated site, referred to as Le Bente in the manor court rolls for 1506. This property lay on the southern edge of the village and close to the above-mentioned water features. Unfortunately, we find only tantalising glimpses of this site in the manor court rolls, where we see it as a place of some importance, being a capital messuage with gardens, orchard, stables, dovecote and a granary. Also associated with this place, and lending further weight to the importance of the property, is the mention of archery butts, a vineyard and a field named the Chapel Close, which in all signal the likelihood of the property being of manor house status.¹⁰

Fortunately, we learn a little more about this moated property in 1571,



Fig. 4: The Manor House, Upper Tooting, in the grounds of which lay the ornamental water features, which survived until suburban development of the 1890s. Photo taken c. 1880s. (Author's collection)

when the current occupier, Richard Brook, sought licence from the lord of the manor to modernise the house, which at the time, was known as Bente. The licence allowed Brook to *'pull down and dygge up the stone wall at the end of the said moate'* and to use the material to repair some buildings and to fill in part of the moat.¹¹ With the breaking up of the manor in later years, references to the house disappear until the late 18th century, when we find the medieval property had been demolished and replaced by a *'genteel modern building'*. But the rebuild did not erase the history of the site, for in 1790, when the new house was described, it was noted as being *'anciently surrounded by a mote, part of which is still remaining, and is said to have been a place of some antiquity'*.¹²

A Priory or Chapel?

The association of the Chapel Close with this moated property implies the existence of a chapel building of some sort, the memory of which had faded over time.¹³ A chapel as such would

find its origins during the time when the monks were in residence, and survive until their departure during the 14th century. The memory of such a place has done much to excite the imagination of some historians, who have embroidered local history with romantic notions of a Priory existing on the Tooting Bec estate, with a dramatic tale of its destruction by fire due to the actions of a careless monk.¹⁴ Yet the idea among historians of a religious building, or Priory, being somewhere at Tooting Bec, has floated across the pages of history. We have for example Stow in his Survey of London referring to the *'Priorie of Totingbecke'*, Tanner to a priory of Black Monks who settled at Tooting, and Dugdale repeating similarly in his voluminous work.¹⁵ The assumption by historians that there had been a Priory at Tooting Bec rested on the terminology used in medieval documents, which suggested such a place existed. For instance, in 1251, the term *'Prior of Tooting'* was used, and during the period, 1462 to 1485, Tooting Bec was described as a *'priory*



Fig. 5: One of the few photographs showing the water features in the grounds of the Manor House. Photo taken c. 1880s. (Author's collection)

or manor'. This uncertainty was due to the ecclesiastical status of the manor and whether it was considered to be a distinct alien priory, or belonging to the Priory of Ogbourne in Wiltshire, the chief cell of Bec Abbey in England.

However, history does not show that a priory as such stood at Tooting Bec. The existence of a small monastic chapel, sited by the manor house, is probably the foundation for such a tradition, and encouraged by the use of the term 'priory' in the historical record. Further light is shown on the matter in a document dated 1322, the year in which the Abbey of Bec finally

relinquished control over their Tooting and Streatham estates. In this particular document, we read that Bec Abbey claimed they had a chapel at Tooting. Furthermore, they also held the right to compel their tenants to come to their 'chapel at Tooting' for the feast of the Purification and to light candles there. In addition, they claimed a pension of 20 shillings from their church at Streatham, presently the parish church of St. Leonard's.¹⁶ Evidently, there appears to have been a Chapel of some kind at Tooting Bec, perhaps not a stand-alone building but sited within the walls of the manor house.

When the monks departed from Tooting Bec in 1323, the manorial estate was leased to William Rouse, a bailiff, who had previously been engaged in business dealing with the Abbot of Bec. His place of residence at Tooting Bec became known as the 'Rousplace'. Interestingly, a reference in the manor court rolls to this property in 1406 required the current owner to maintain the ditch encircling the property. Perhaps we can suggest the ditch alludes to a moat of some kind, enclosing a property of some status. If this be the case, it was probably the manor house and the likely predecessor to the later property known as Bente.

Conclusion

Documentary evidence shows that Tooting Bec as a place has more history than is commonly known. The complex of water features, the moated site of Bente, the existence of what appears to be a planned village, plus the references to a chapel, hint of a history yet to be fully explored, not only by the historian, but also by the archaeologist.

Graham Gower is a former archivist at the London Borough of Lambeth Archives Department. His interest in archaeology began in the 1950s, and he has taken part in many archaeological excavations in London and the surrounding area before developing an interest in local history. His interests encompass early settlement patterns, medieval growth and suburban development in Lambeth and the adjoining areas. He is the author of many local history publications and articles, including, with Kieron Tyler, 'Lambeth unearthed, An archaeological history of Lambeth'.

1. Victoria County History. Surrey Vol. IV. *Tooting and Streatham*.

2. The moat was partly filled from rubble taken during demolition of the old church.

3. Domesday Survey records a Chapel at Streatham held by Bec Abbey. Before the conquest Chertsey Abbey held the Streatham and Tooting estates.

4. 'A Plan of the Manor of Tooting Bec in the parish of Streatham' (1729). Ref. E/BER/S/E5/3/1. London Metropolitan Archives (LMA); Streatham Parish Tithe Map 1840; Ordnance Survey. Tooting. Sheet VII.12, 1877 and Sheet CXXXIV 1894-96.

5. Backe Lane 1590. Ref. E/BER/S/TII/A2/18. (LMA). Present Glenburnie Road, Upper Tooting.

6. J. Leary and K. Sabel 'Archaeological Excavation at 76-80 Upper Tooting Road, London Borough of

Wandsworth' *Wandsworth Historian* no. 74 (2001).

7. G.L. Gomme *Court Rolls of Tooting Bec Manor* London County Council (1909).

8. J.E. Edwards. *Companion from London to Brighthelmstone* c. 1786, pub. 1790. London Borough of Lambeth Archives Department (LAD). The water features extended from the south side of the house to the playing field in Fishponds Road. The house stood by Broadwater Road facing Upper Tooting Road.

9. Map of the estate of Percival Lewis 1767. Ref. 25/1767/MF. (LAD).

10. Tooting Bec Manor Court Rolls (TBMCR). Ref. M95/BEC/36 (LMA). Also REQ2.121/47. PRO. Broke versus Lyvesy.

11. TBMCR M95/BEC/38 (LMA).

12. *Op. cit* fn. 8. A configuration of field boundaries

which surround the house, seen on early OS maps of Tooting, suggest the line of the moat. The house stood facing Upper Tooting Road between present Hebdon and Ansell Roads. Known during the 19th century as Park House, later as Park Holme.

13. Land called the Chapelcroft mentioned in 1483. TBMCR M95/BEC/32 (LMA).

14. Dom Anselm Hughes 'The Manor of Tooting Bec and its Reputed Priory' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 59 (1962) 1-14.

15. John Stow *A Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster*, 'The parish church of Alhallows, Barking'. 1598; Manning and Bray, *History of Surrey*, iii. 382-3; Dugdale, *Monasticon*, vi. 1053; See also British History on Line 'Streatham. Priory of Tooting Bec'.

16. M. Morgan *The English Lands of the Abbey of Bec* (1962).