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IN SEARCH OF THE PIED FRIARS OF NORWICH: RECENT FIELDWORK

by Andy Shelley and Robert Smith

This paper summarises recent work undertaken close by the likely 13th-century location of the Pied Friars in Norwich. A building survey by Robert Smith and an archaeological watching brief by Andy Shelley targeted Raven Yard (Fig. 1), which is situated behind No. 70 King Street (TG 62340 30841). This is the property to the north of a yard marked on the 1885 Ordnance Survey plan as 'Pied Friar's College, (Site Of)'.

Little is known of the Norwich Pied Friars (the Friars of Blessed Mary or St Mary de Areno). The Friary was founded c. 1253; its existence was recorded by Blomefield (1806, 96) who placed the house of *Fratus de Pica* at the north-east corner of St Peter Parmentergate churchyard. The inferior mendicant orders were suppressed by the Council of Lyons (1274: Southern 1970, 329), and the house of the Norwich Pied Friars is thought to have been closed by c. 1307 (Messent 1934). The order amalgamated with the Franciscans and the house passed to the Hospital of Beck in Billingford, Norfolk, whose master, according to Blomefield, made it his city house. Thereafter it was used as a college for the Chantry of St Peter, which housed 24 priests.

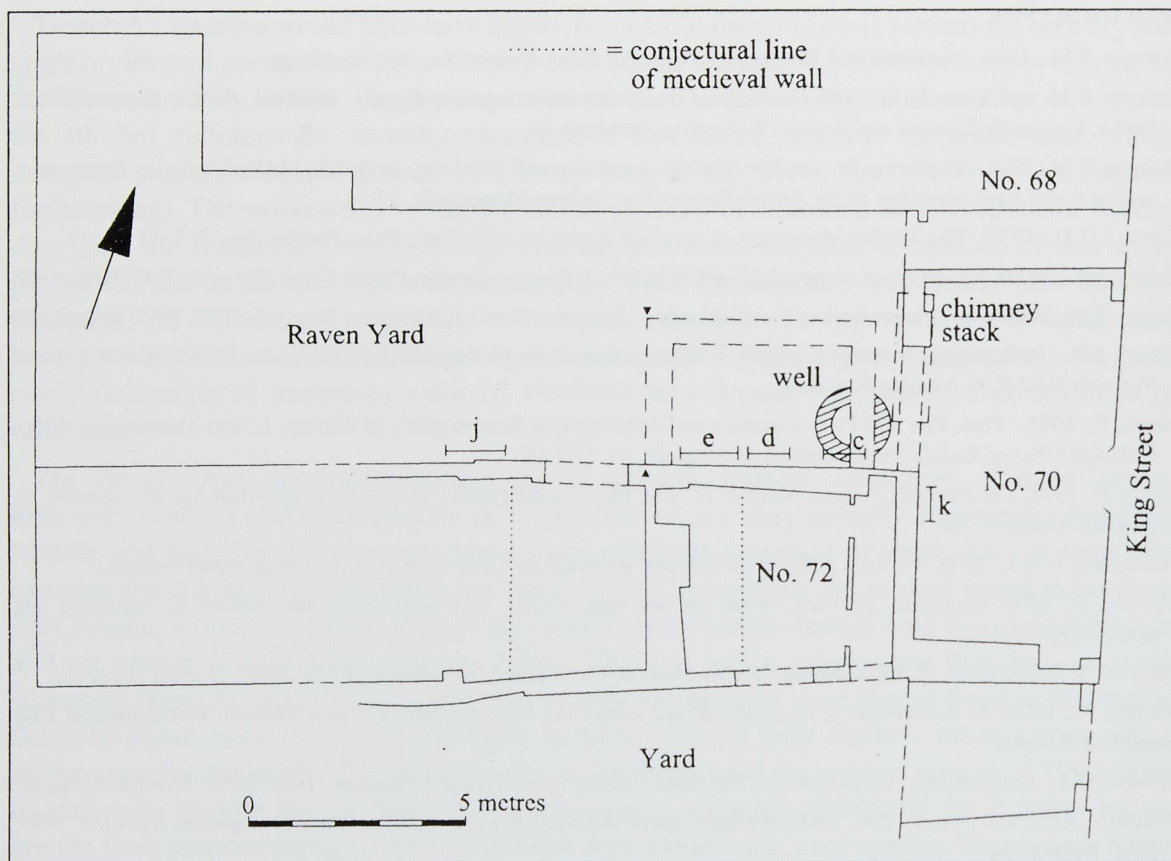


Fig. 1 Nos 70 and 72 King Street, showing position of excavation trenches and location of architectural details

Any search for the house of the Pied Friars must therefore start at the north-east corner of St Peters' churchyard, in the area of two yards which are rare survivors of a type once common in Norwich (Fig. 1). The northernmost (Raven Yard) would appear to date from the 15th or 16th centuries, the southernmost (that marked as the Friary site on the 1885 plan) from the 19th century.

The later yard has received little attention from archaeologists. It is lined on its north side by four buildings. From east to west these comprise the south gable of No. 70 King Street, principally late 16th-century in date; a 17th-century cottage (No. 72); a 19th-century industrial building with semi-circular headed windows, which incorporates in its southern elevation a wall displaying 17th-century features; and the south elevation of an early 19th-century cottage.

Entry to Raven Yard is gained through a narrow passage beside No. 70. The yard is bounded to the north by a late 16th-century range (No. 68) and to the west by a building which may have its origins in the 15th century. The north elevations of the buildings in the 19th-century yard complete the circuit.

The building survey

The north elevation of No. 72 King Street contains a number of blocked openings which do not correspond to the present organisation of the interior space. This suggests the wall is earlier than *c.* 1600, the probable date of the extant building. These openings are shown on Fig. 2 and are described on page 678.

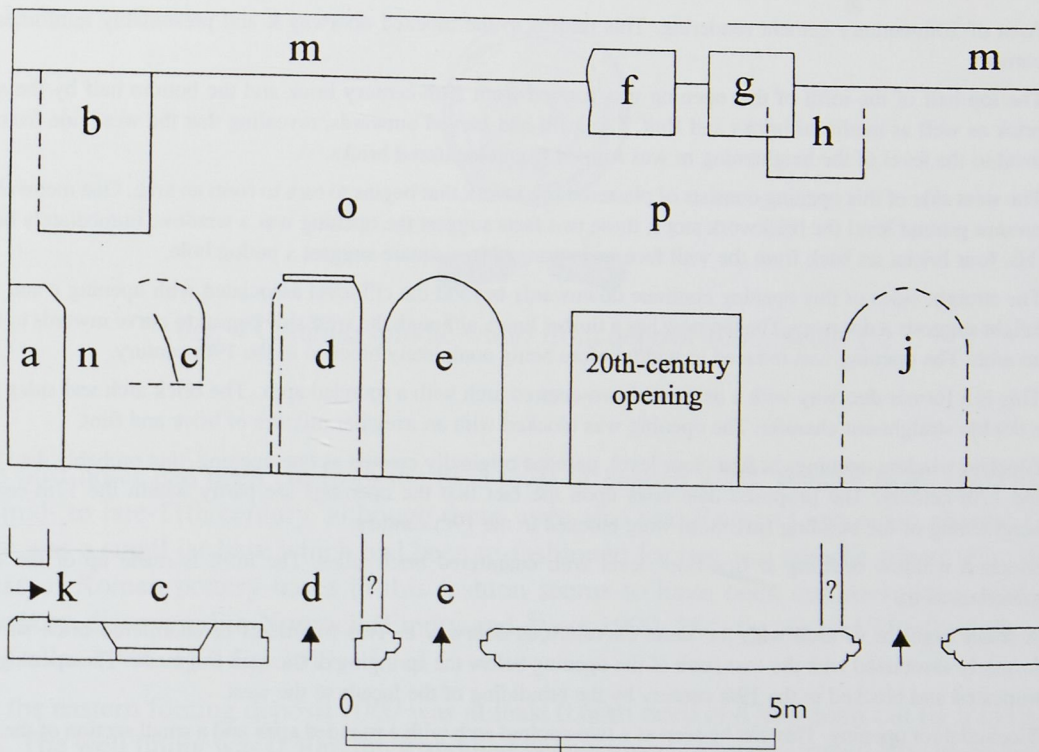


Fig. 2 North-facing elevation of No. 72 and conjectural ground floor plan. Scale 1:100

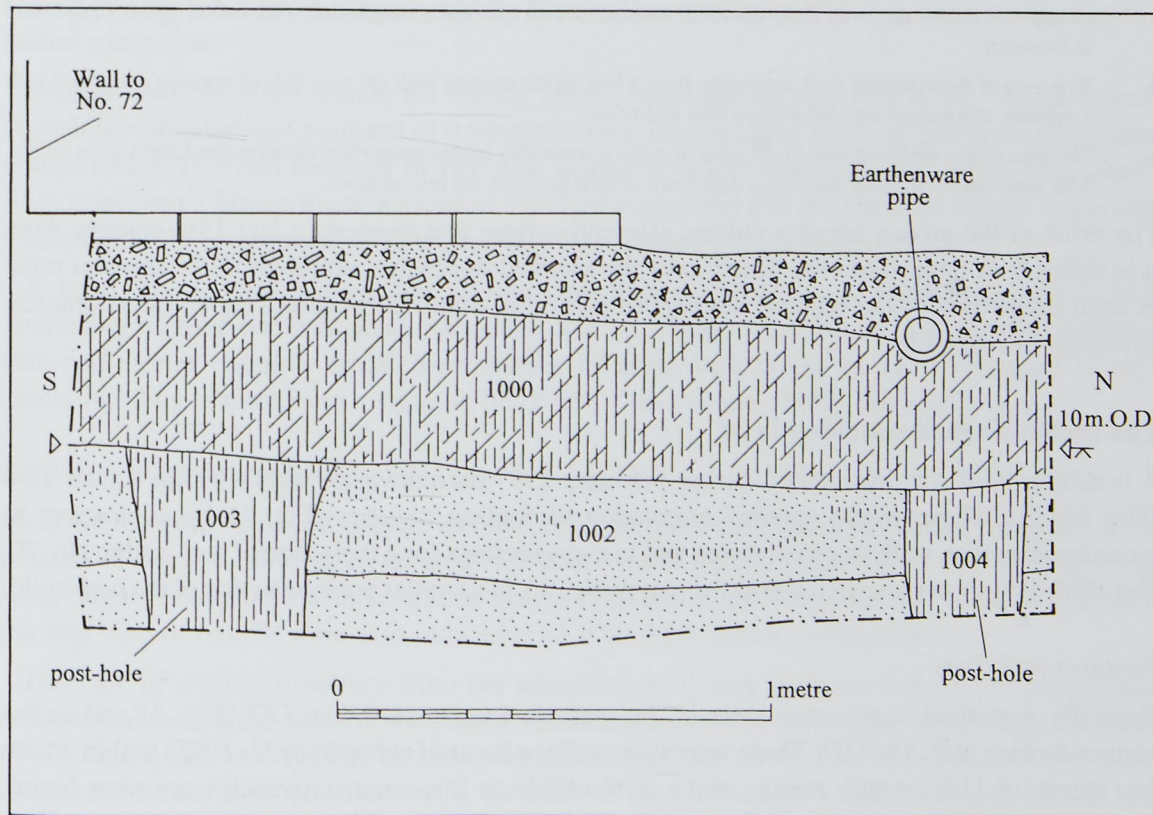


Fig. 3 East-facing elevation of excavation trench

- a. Area of 20th-century cement rendering. This returns to the blocked doorway **k** and presumably reinforces the corner.
- b. The top half of the infill of this opening was formed from 19th-century brick and the bottom half by the same brick as well as medieval bricks and flint. The infill had moved outwards, revealing that the west side from cill level to the level of the heightening **m** was formed from chamfered bricks.
- c. The west side of this opening consists of plastered brickwork that begins to turn to form an arch. One metre above present ground level the brickwork stops; these two facts suggest the opening was a window. Immediately below this, four bricks set back from the wall face and arranged in a square suggest a putlog hole.
- d. The straight sides of this opening continue downwards beyond the cill level associated with opening **c** and their height suggests a doorway. The top now has a timber lintel, although the west side begins to curve inwards to form an arch. The opening was reduced in width before being completely blocked in the 19th century.
- e. This is a former doorway with a depressed two-centred arch with a rounded apex. The brick arch and sides have a double straight-cut chamfer. The opening was blocked with an irregular mixture of brick and flint.
- f., g. Blocked window openings at first-floor level, perhaps originally created as one opening, that probably date from the 17th century. The proposed date rests upon the fact that the openings are partly within the 17th-century heightening of the building (**m**). Both were blocked in the 19th century.
- h. Blocked window opening at first-floor level with chamfered brick sides. The infill is made up of the same materials as **m**.
- j. A small segment of arch with the same curvature as doorway **e**. Two fragments of chamfered brick survive, formerly associated with the east jamb of the opening below the springing of the arch fragment. The opening was truncated and blocked in the 19th century by the rebuilding of the façade to the west.
- k. Blocked door opening. This can be seen as a two-centred arch with a rounded apex and a small section of the west jamb above the floor level.
- m. The medieval wall was heightened with a coursed mixture of flint and brick that supports the wall plate of No. 72.
- n. Area of 19th-century brickwork which blocked an opening from within No. 72. This may have been one of a pair of opposed doorways away from the stack associated with the typical single-cell, 17th-century plan form found in Norwich.
- o. This area of the medieval wall, extending from a line approximating with the west side of opening **e**, is faced with a mixture of knapped and unknapped flint and brick.
- p. The area of the medieval wall to the right of **o** has a noticeably higher proportion of unknapped flints in its facing. This does not necessarily indicate a difference in date between the two sections.

The brick of the arches are of a colour, size and texture that suggests a late 15th-century date. It is difficult to understand the function of the blocked doorways, although this statement must be seen in the light of the relative shortage of surviving small 15th-century (or earlier) domestic buildings in Norwich.

The archaeological watching brief

A watching brief was maintained during February 1997 on renovation works within Raven Yard (Site 26452). These works entailed excavation of footing trenches (Fig. 1) by contractors to accommodate new walls to an extension and to carry footings for a replacement rear wall to No. 70. The 1885 plan shows an extension to the rear of No. 70, in a similar position to that of the new build.

Features and finds

Naturally-deposited sands were seen in the western footing at 9.70m OD (Fig. 3) and in the eastern footing at 9.20m OD. These were covered by a layer of subsoil (1002, 1005) within which two sherds of 11th-century pottery and a third of 8th- or 9th-century Ipswich ware were found. This was sealed by a layer of compacted brown loam and clay, 1000, which contained occasional lumps of chalk and charcoal. This material continued beneath the north wall of No. 72.

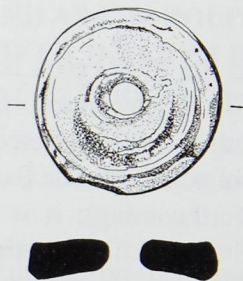


Fig. 4 Ceramic spindle whorl from deposit 1000, Scale 1:2

Two post-holes had been cut from the base level of deposit 1000. Pottery from 1000 dated to the mid- to late-11th century, although there were also two Roman Grey ware sherds. One of these was a small jar base which had been re-fashioned for use as a spindle whorl (Fig. 4). The re-use of Roman pottery bases in this fashion seems to have been commonplace, and others have been discovered in Norwich (Emery and Ayers 1999, 284, fig. 6) and Thetford (Rogerson and Dallas 1984, 117, fig. 152).

In the eastern footing deposit 1000 was at least 0.60m deep and had been cut by a cylindrical well. The well lining was 0.40m thick and had been formed from uncoursed lifts of poured flint and a hard cream-coloured mortar. Occasional bricks were employed in this construction, most often in the internal face of the well which was of a good quality. The well had been constructed against the footings for the north wall of No. 72 and had been backfilled recently with a loose mix of mortar, ash, loam and brick rubble. This had been sealed with a thin concrete floor to the earlier extension.

Natural sands were not seen in the footing for the reconstructed rear wall of No. 70: the lowest deposit investigated was a subsoil of 0.50m thickness, consisting of bands of soft brown loam and orange sands. This had been cut by two pits, neither of which was bottomed during excavation. Both contained a brown loam; a sherd of Thetford-type pottery in the northern feature suggested a Late Saxon or early medieval date, as did several sherds in the southern pit fill.

A layer of material sealing the northern pit had been cut by a vertically-sided feature containing mottled bands of sand, loam, charcoal and chalk. This proved to be the footing for a flint-and-mortar chimney stack. Surrounding its base were layers of ash containing mortar, chalk, building material and a ceramic lid of late 17th-century Staffordshire slipware.

Archaeological conclusions

Most of the soils exposed appear to have been formed from the 11th century onward by a process of organic build-up in an area which may have been a yard behind buildings fronting King Street. The spindle whorl suggests nearby craft activities. Two possible refuse pits beneath the rear wall of No. 70 were also indicative of 10th–12th century settlement.

The lack of medieval pottery from the watching brief may indicate that the area remained undisturbed during the years of the Pied Friars occupation. The well in the south-eastern corner of the courtyard was typical of those which littered the backyards of medieval and post-medieval Norwich. Its construction is difficult to date, although its position against blocked doorway **n** suggests it either post-dated the 19th-century blocking or pre-dated the 17th-century doorway.

Discussion

This recent fieldwork has not located the Pied Friars house. It has, however, indicated that settlement here had begun by the mid-late 11th century. Indeed the sherd of Ipswich ware may suggest earlier settlement, although caution must be exercised in this interpretation. The site lies near the foot of a steep hill, at the top of which Middle Saxon activity was identified during the Castle Mall excavations (Shepherd forthcoming); it is possible that the subsoil may have originated there rather than on King Street. Similar caution must be exercised in regard to the Roman pottery, especially since one of the two sherds was probably re-used in the 11th century. Although an increasing number of Roman finds have been discovered in excavations along King Street (Shelley forthcoming) their number remains small, and they may indicate little other than Saxon traffic in re-used materials from nearby *Venta Icenorum*.

Although No. 72 King Street cannot be directly associated with the Pied Friars it seems likely that its 17th-century rebuild incorporated elements of Beck College. Certainly Beck College was still in existence in the late 15th century (ultimately being suppressed by 1556) and the architecture described here would as easily befit an ecclesiastical college as a building associated with domestic use.

Finally, the late medieval doorways in the north wall of No. 72 suggest that the area of Raven Yard was open space during the lifetime of the College. The archaeological evidence concurs, since there appears to have been no building in the small area investigated between the 11th and 19th centuries. If this area was a yard or garden to the College it is possible that the well discovered in fact related to it.

May 2001

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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