

EXCAVATIONS AT CHRIST CHURCH, NEWGATE STREET, 1973

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HISTORICAL OUTLINE:

The parish church of Christ Church, Newgate, stands on the site of the choir of the great church of the Franciscans (the Grey Friars).¹ It was originally founded *c.* 1240 in the form of a small chapel, and probably occupied the area which subsequently became the chapel of All Hallows in the fourteenth-century church (Fig. 3). Work began on the conventual church in 1306 and was finally completed in 1350. During this period many gifts of materials and money were made. A notable benefactress was Queen Margaret, the second wife of Edward I, who financed the building of the choir and is recorded to have donated a pavement of Purbeck marble. The burial place of Queen Margaret occupied a position before the High Altar of the Medieval church.²

GREYFRIARS. 1973.

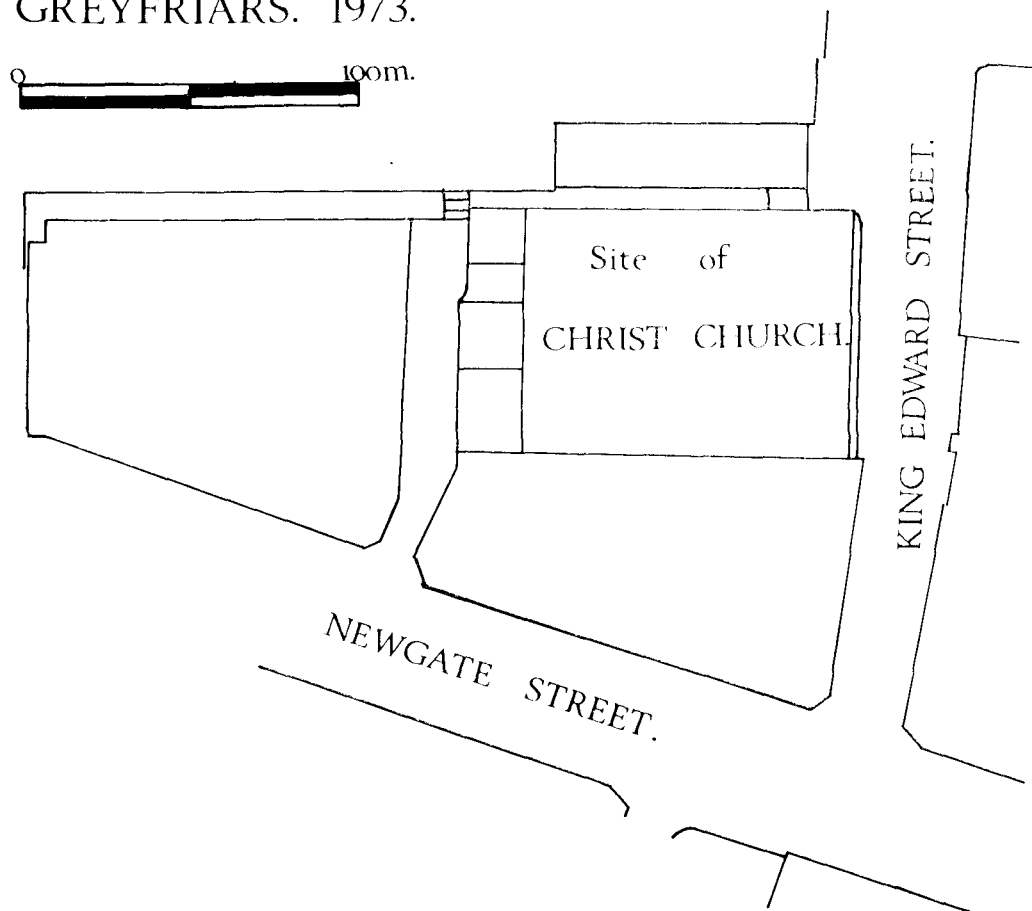


Fig. 1. Greyfriars; Site Plan

After the Dissolution the convent was surrendered on 12th November 1538, and the ornaments and goods were made over to the King's use. The church was shut up and used as a storhouse.³ In 1546 the east end of the church was re-opened as a parish church incorporating the two small parishes of St. Nicholas in the Shambles and St. Ewens, Newgate Market. In the same year the monuments were sold for the sum of £50. The Greyfriars Chronicle relates that "all the tombs, great stones were pulled up and sold".⁴

The east end of the great church continued its life as a parish church until the Great Fire of 1666. Although the roof of the church and much of its interior were destroyed by the fire, a considerable amount of the fabric of the Medieval church escaped with little or no damage. W. G. Bell tells us that even some of the stained glass windows remained intact and suggests contemporary opinion felt that the church should have been restored.⁵

In 1687 Wren commenced to rebuild the east end, using the foundations and pillar bases of the Medieval church. The new building was not completed until 1704.⁶ In December 1940 the church was severely damaged by fire during the blitz.

The Corporation of London purchased the site in 1962, and the church remained as a shell with the walls standing to their full height. Early in 1973 the Department of the Environment approved a plan to demolish the east, and part of the south walls to facilitate road improvements. The interior of the church is to be turned into a public garden, and the remaining walls repaired and consolidated.

SUMMARY:

An area to the east end of the Wren church was excavated for the Guildhall Museum in June, 1973, prior to the road improvements. The excavation was confined to the area directly threatened (Fig. 2), and was restricted to a depth of 2 m., which was to be the maximum depth of the new road foundations and services. The north and south aisles were found to contain large brick-built burial vaults, some over 3 m. deep. Because of the disturbance caused by these vaults it was decided to concentrate archaeological investigation in the area surrounding the High Altar.

Prior to excavation, contemporary reports suggested that the floors of the Medieval and Wren churches occupied the same level. However, excavation proved that there was a difference of 2 m. between the two floor levels. Below the earlier floor was found a uniform deposit of apparently thirteenth century material which pre-dated the construction of the church. The homogenous nature of this deposit suggested that the area may have been used as a rubbish dump over a considerable period.

Only two structural features were observed which were conclusively earlier than the Medieval church, although it must be remembered that the restriction of 2 m. in the depth of the excavation was barely sufficient to clear the make-up of the seventeenth century rebuild.

A portion of the original Medieval east wall and three of the original pillar bases were found, together with an interesting trench-built arch foundation situated along the line of the south aisle (Fig. 4). If a similar structure existed along the line of the north aisle it would have been destroyed by later vault construction.

The Medieval deposits pre-dating the church were found below the 2 m. depth restriction and were not excavated but observed in the sides of the deeper burials.

THE EXCAVATION:

The visible grave flags at the east end of the church were recorded⁷ and moved west out of the area of excavation, and the area reduced to the floor level of the pre-1666 church.

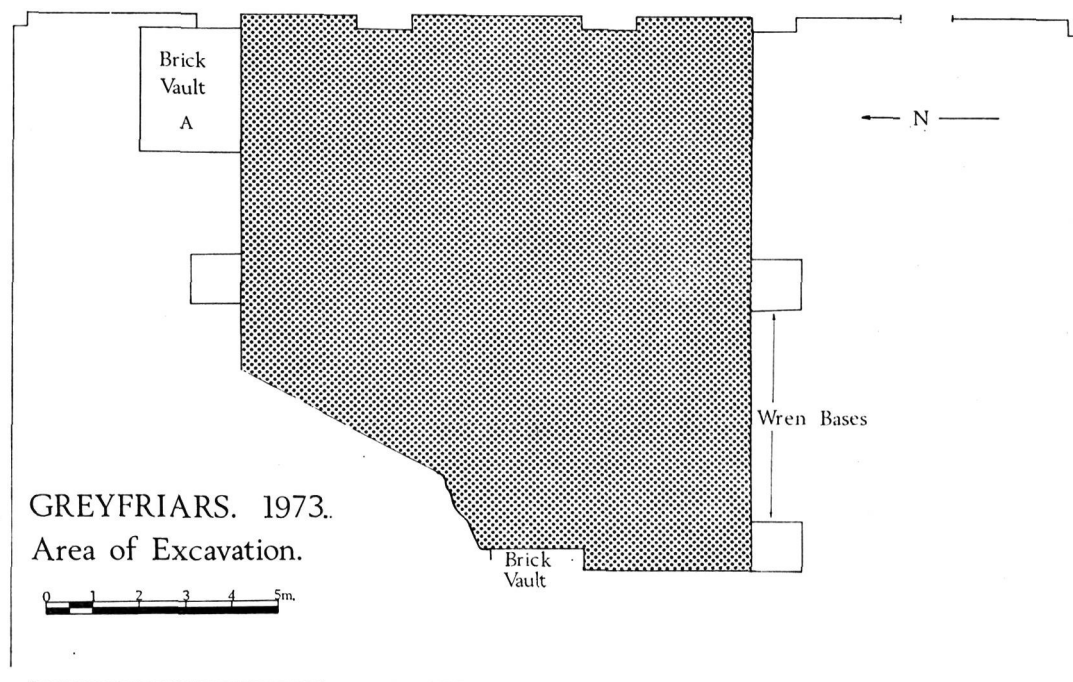


Fig. 2. Greyfriars; area of excavation

Most of the original deposits laid down by Wren had been disturbed by the intrusion of later burials. Only against the east wall and against one of the pillar bases did pockets of this material survive from the level of the pre-Fire church to the present day.

The dump of material used to raise the floor to its present height after the Great Fire consisted mainly of debris derived from the demolition of the Medieval structure, but included fragments of worked stone dating up to and including the seventeenth century. All the Medieval tile fragments published here were retrieved from this deposit. Together with the infill of the graves the bulk of material excavated produced finds which were unstratified.

The removal of this level exposed three of the square bases of the Wren pillars which had been constructed from re-used masonry around a mortar and rubble core. It also became apparent that these bases had been sited upon the foundations of the original octagonal Medieval columns (Figs. 4 and 6). When this level was removed against the face of the seventeenth century east wall two distinct builds could be seen below the modern floor level. Firstly, starting just below, and extending to a depth of over 1 m. was the foundation wall of the Wren church built of large well-faced re-used blocks. An interesting feature of this wall is that two shallow internal buttresses which are visible below and to either side of the east window were not carried upwards above the seventeenth century floor level (Fig. 5). The most likely explanation is that this portion of wall was built partly to retain the greater quantity of the immense amount of debris left over from the demolition of the Greyfriars church, perhaps before any clear design for the rebuild had been formulated.⁸ The fact that the rubble was spread before major construction work was begun is illustrated by the seventeenth century pillar base which cuts through the debris shown in Section 1.

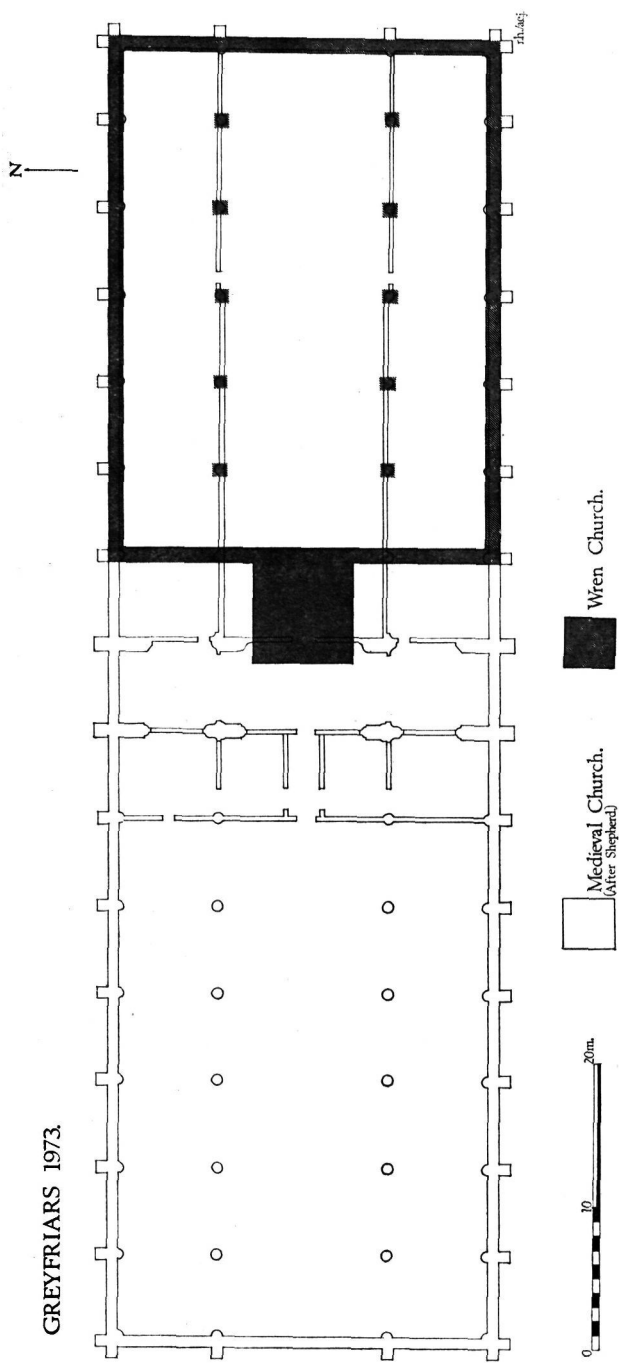


Fig. 3. Greyfriars; Wren's Christchurch and the Medieval church

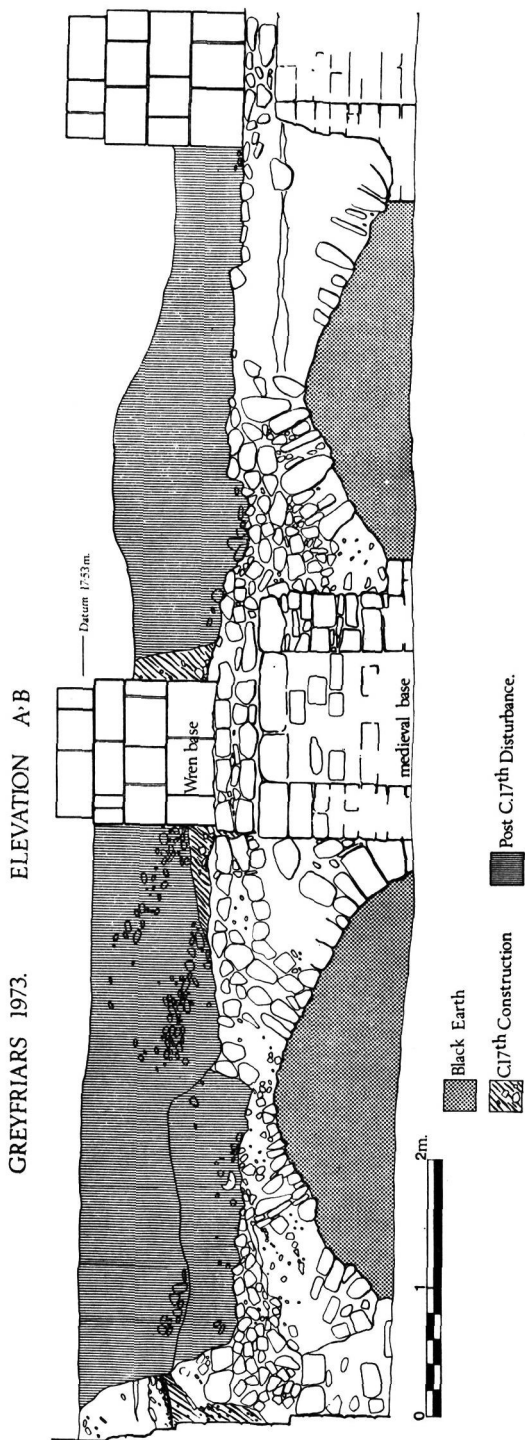


Fig. 4. Greyfriars; elevation A-B

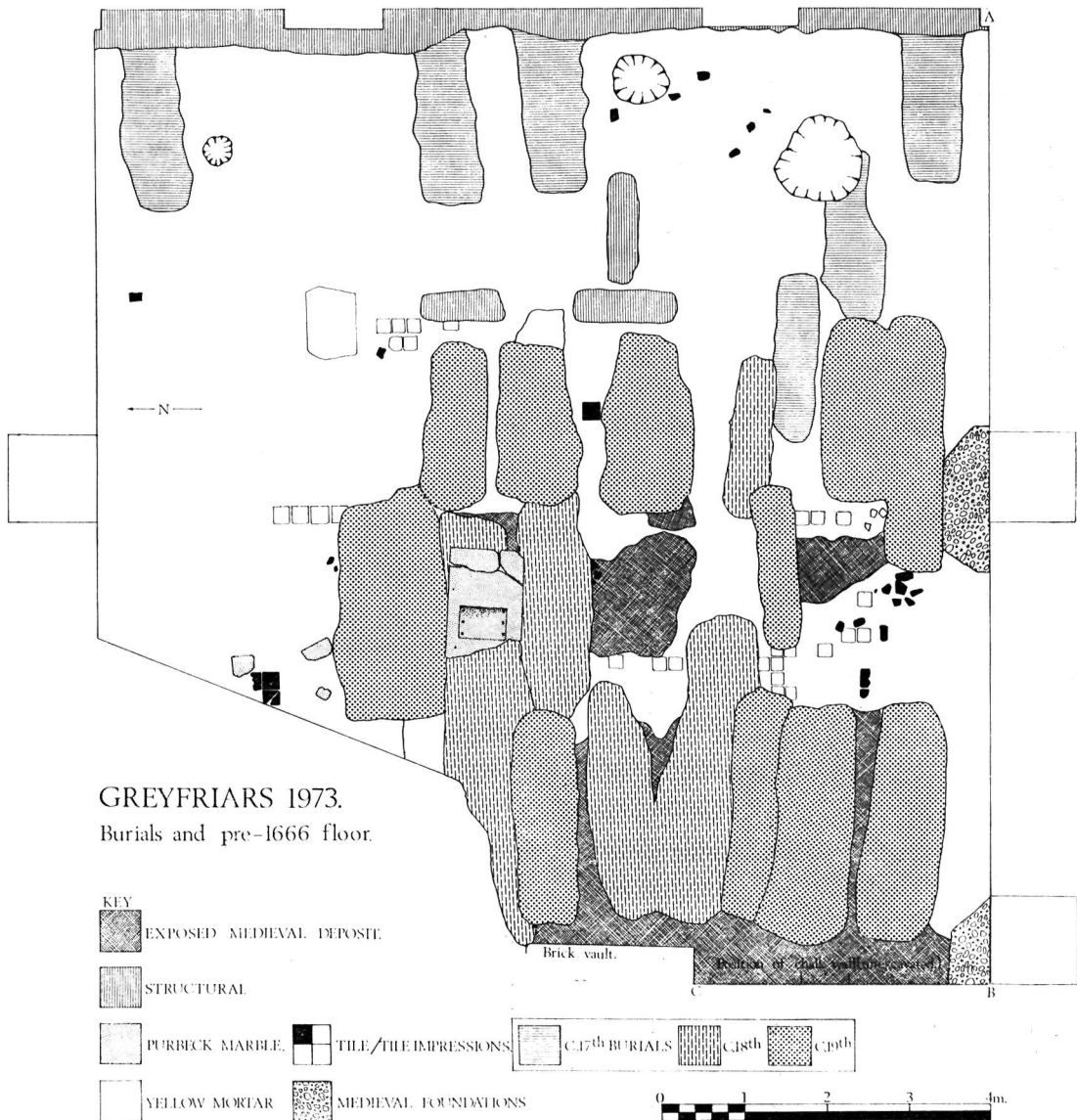


Fig. 5. Greyfriars; burials and pre-1666 floor

Immediately below Wren's foundation wall a small part of the original Medieval foundations were revealed, consisting of relatively small faced ragstone blocks and apparently extending to a great depth (only a narrow cut was visible, the wall being built tight into its foundation trench. The observation of the foundations at depth comes from the removal of graves dug up to the edge of the wall).

Between the first two Medieval pillar bases of the south aisle a trench-built arched wall was found (Fig. 4). This structure was not constructed at the same time as the pillar bases but was inserted between the completed foundations, perhaps to carry the original chapel

screens. This could have been incorporated within the fourteenth century build, or have been a later addition. Arched built foundations are not uncommon in Medieval London churches.⁹ The Medieval pillar foundation had been dug to a depth of over 2.5 m. (observed in a grave cut alongside).

Below the post-Fire dump a uniform level of coarse yellow mortar was found. This level also included the platform of the pre-Fire altar, on which survived two grave slabs of mid-seventeenth century date. To the west of the altar the mortar bore the impressions of floor tiles, and larger, presumably Purbeck slabs. One group of four plain red tiles remained in position. This mortar level, together with its floor tiles and grave slabs, represented the floor of Christchurch at the time of the Great Fire. Some areas of burning and small amounts of charcoal were observed. The uppermost level of mortar produced a Charles I Rose farthing dated 1635-40. It appears, therefore, that this level had been inserted not long before the Fire and may account for the cut for the mortar levels shown in Section 1.

GREYFRIARS 1973.

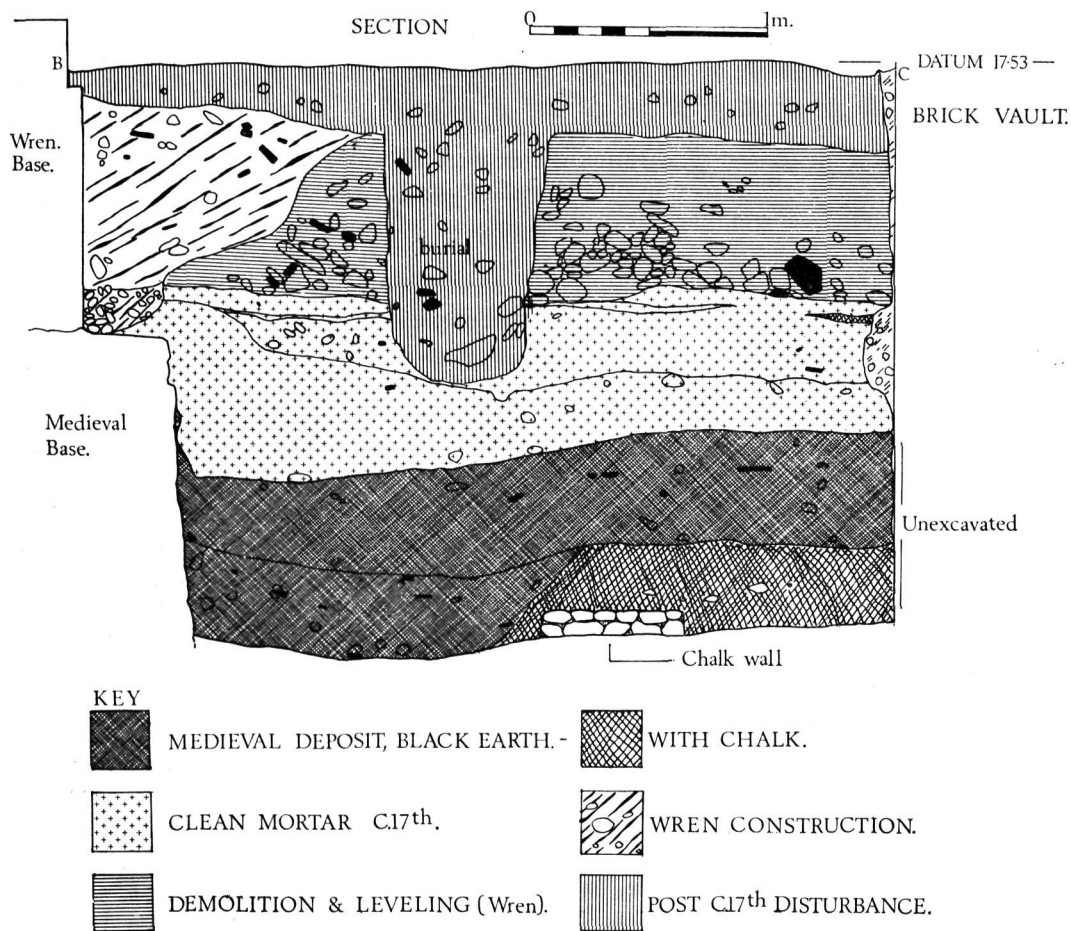


Fig. 6. Greyfriars; section through deposits B-C

Only in one corner of the excavated area, against the second pillar of the south aisle, did a continuous undisturbed stratigraphic record of the church survive (Fig. 6). This is interpreted as follows: firstly, a black, homogeneous deposit of earth and rubbish, predating the church construction and therefore dating *c.* 1300 or earlier (excluding the site of the 1240 chapel which was not within the area of excavation). Through this level the original east wall and pillar bases were seen to have been constructed.

Secondly, a level of thick, clean mortar directly overlying the black earth, but founded *below* the level from which the pillar bases had been cut. This is apparent from the black "tide mark" against the side of the pillar base foundations, the top of which must represent the original level of the black earth at the time of the construction of the bases. Some time after their construction a quantity of earth (or an original floor) was removed in order to insert the deposit of clean mortar. The clean mortar level can also be seen to partly overlie the bases before being cut through for the Wren foundations. The deposits above the mortar simply represent the previously mentioned seventeenth century levelling.

THE PRE-CHURCH DEPOSITS:

Before moving on to a discussion of the Medieval church, a brief mention should be made of the unexcavated features which were seen to exist below the threatened 2 m. depth.

Only two actual structural features were observed in the sections cut by the deepest burials. Both consisted of the remains of chalk and mortar walls, most probably belonging to the same structure. The first was found running on a north-south axis directly below the second foundation arch (Fig. 4). This section of wall running southwards beyond the area of excavation was constructed of roughly-faced chalk blocks set in a deep yellow mortar, with a thickness of almost 0.5 m. The second section of wall, built in the same manner was found on an east-west alignment in the west end of a nineteenth century burial (Fig. 5). This wall had an associated destruction level tailing north across one of the pre-church levels. The walls appear to have accumulated a heavy deposit of material (the rubbish levels) against both faces, and were probably demolished immediately prior to the construction of the Medieval church. It seems unlikely, however, that at the time of their demolition, they formed part of a contemporary structure. The foundation depth of neither of the walls was established but both appear to have been faced to a depth of at least 1.5 m., suggesting a build-up of rubbish to at least this height over a wide area.

Inspection of the sides of the deeper burials (some almost 2 m. below the mortar floor) confirmed a massive accumulation of material apparently of thirteenth century date, together with other mixed Medieval and Roman sherds. It would appear, therefore, that not only rubbish but earth bearing earlier material had been dumped on the site in this period.

In order to confirm the uniform nature of this material and to attempt to establish the full depth of archaeological deposits, the opportunity was taken to remove the base from one of the deeper brick-built vaults in the north aisle (brick vault A, Fig. 2), which was already over 3 m. below the Wren church floor. The inside area of the vault measured only 2.5 x 2 m. and proved difficult to excavate. The "dump" of Medieval deposit was found, however, to continue to a depth of 4 m. below the mortar floor level of the pre-Fire church. Below the rubbish level a light-brown brickearth with oyster shell, charcoal and pottery indicated the beginning of the Roman deposits, which were not excavated.

Only a few sherds of mixed Roman and Medieval pottery were recovered from the deposits below the vault. There appeared to be no transition between the Medieval and the

top of the Roman levels, and certainly no structures, but the restrictions of such a small area means that this information can only serve as a guide to future work in the vicinity.

DISCUSSION:

The archaeological problems of the Church of the Greyfriars are twofold. Firstly, the extensive disturbance caused by burials within the church, together with that caused by the Wren rebuilding, have removed important junctions between surviving deposits and existing masonry; burials had almost invariably been dug alongside the pillar bases at archaeologically crucial spots, leaving small pockets of material isolated from contemporary structures.

The second problem is not so tangible, but nevertheless equally frustrating. There is no shortage of documentary evidence for the church, but its literal interpretation has often led to misconceptions about the structure. The most obvious being, perhaps, the identification of the slabs laid on the twentieth century floor as those donated by Queen Margaret in *c.* 1410, and the ensuing assumption that this was in fact the Medieval floor.¹⁰

Another problem arising from the literal interpretation of the documentary evidence concerns the positions of the royal burials within the Medieval church. A list of burials¹¹ which recorded only the monuments visible in the early sixteenth century had been used by E. B. S. Shepherd to produce a plan of the burials within the Great Church.¹² The earliest plan dates to 1617,¹³ (after the monuments had all been demolished) and is at best only a representation of the Grey Friars' Church. None of the burials found within the vicinity of the high altar actually agreed with the published plan and the only grave situated in the centre of the aisle before the High Altar produced two early nineteenth century lead coffins.

The term "before the altar" in relation to the Medieval burials must, therefore, be taken to mean simply on an east-west axis. It is interesting to note that Birch,¹⁴ working from the same two sources as are available today (the 1616 survey and the Cotton MS), produces a different arrangement for the burials, moving those in the aisle a whole bay westwards by the introduction of a retro altar across the first two pillars. Of the two arrangements, the plan presented by Shepherd is preferable, and is the one cited by G. H. Cook in a more recent work.¹⁵

It is still possible that Queen Margaret was buried immediately before the High Altar of the Medieval church, perhaps in a coffin whose lid formed the ledger stone. Such a structure would have been easy to remove, possibly at the time of the Dissolution, and little trace would have been left. Any signs of such a grave would have been obliterated by the subsequent deeper burials within the Wren church. The general absence of Medieval burials within the first two bays of the choir agrees well with Shepherd's interpretation. The two which he does place within this area would not have been likely to have survived later disturbance.

In reality, the documentary sources tell us very little either about the actual structure of the Greyfriars' Church or its internal layout. What we are told is undoubtedly explicit historical fact; that the persons listed in the register were buried in the Medieval church is beyond dispute, that Queen Margaret donated a pavement and that the Conventual church was built on the site of the original thirteenth century chapel can also be accepted. The problems arise from our interpretation of the evidence and its application to the modern structure. The shell of the Wren Christchurch occupied the site of and incorporates the foundations of, the east end of the Franciscan church; there the similarities end. The survival of a seventeenth century floor almost 2 m. below the modern floor level illustrates the final and positive disruption in the history of the Medieval structure.

The life of the Greyfriars' Church, from its final completion *c.* 1350 to its destruction after the Great Fire was not uneventful. Between 1538 and 1546 the church was shut up and used as a storehouse, until it was finally re-opened as a parish church, by which time it had been thoroughly rifled and its fine monuments dispersed. Also at this date many of the internal screens were demolished. In 1628 a gallery was added so that by the time of the Fire much of the original internal Medieval fabric would have been already destroyed.

Archaeologically the excavation has shown that within the structure the Medieval deposits pre-dating the church survive almost intact (apart from intrusive burials). The potential worth of this material dated by the building of the church need not be stressed, and the accumulative depth of deposits suggests also that the area in proximity to Christchurch is worth further investigation, even below the deeper basements and cellars of buildings due for re-development.

NOTES

- ¹ E. B. S. Shepherd, "History of the Church of the Franciscans", *Archaeol. J.*, 59 (1902), 238-87.
- ² The Register of the Greyfriars of London Cotton MS (after E. B. S. Shepherd "The Church of the Greyfriars", *Archaeol. J.*, 59 (1902), opposite 238).
- ³ Sir G. Buck, *Third Universitie* (1615), Chap. 34.
- ⁴ *Monumenta Franciscana* ii, 215. See also Stowe, *Survey of London*, Vol. I, 322.
- ⁵ W. G. Bell, *The Great Fire of London* (1920).
- ⁶ For a description of the inside of the Wren Church. See *Trans. of St. Paul's Ecclesiological Society* 8 (1911-15). Also Royal Com. Hist. Mon., *London (The City)*, Vol. IV (1929), 104-107.
- ⁷ A list of the recorded burials is lodged with the excavation records to be held in the new Museum of London.
- ⁸ Approximately 15,000 cu. metres of rubble must have been disposed of by Wren in this way.
- ⁹ W. F. Grimes, "The Church of St. Bride, Fleet Street", *The Excavation of Roman and Medieval London* (1968), 207, and Pl. 95. See also F. C. Eeles, "Discoveries during the demolition of St. Michael Bassishaw", *Trans. London and Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.*, N.S. 2, Pt. I (1910), 164-78.
- ¹⁰ Royal Com. Hist. Mon., *London (The City)*, Vol. IV (1929), 104.
- ¹¹ Cotton M.S., *op. cit.*, Note 2.
- ¹² E. B. S. Shepherd, *op. cit.*, esp. illustration opposite p. 248.
- ¹³ J. E. Price, "On Recent Discoveries in Newgate Street", *Trans. London and Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.*, 5 (1881) 420. This includes the 1617 map, also a note on the Medieval external buttress of the Greyfriars Church revealed during building work in 1874.
- ¹⁴ J. H. Birch, "The Franciscan Monatories of the Greyfriars Newgate", *Newberry House Magazine* (1884), 207-19.
- ¹⁵ G. H. Cook, *English Monasteries in the Middle Ages* (1953).

THE WORKED STONE (Figs. 7 and 8)

BY J. W. S. LITTEN

No.	Type of Stone	Description	Date
1	Derby Alabaster (white)	Scroll work. Portion of a decorative border of a sepulchral monument	English; first quarter of seventeenth century
2	Derby Alabaster (white)	Portion of a border of an inscription panel of a sepulchral monument	English; first or second quarter of seventeenth century
3	Derby Alabaster (white)	Portion of a lace neck ruff from an effigy, but more probably a kneeling figure, of a sepulchral monument	English; first or second quarter of the seventeenth century
4	Derby Alabaster	Portion of border of a sepulchral monument. Gesso on the two innermost orders	English; last quarter sixteenth century, or first quarter of seventeenth century

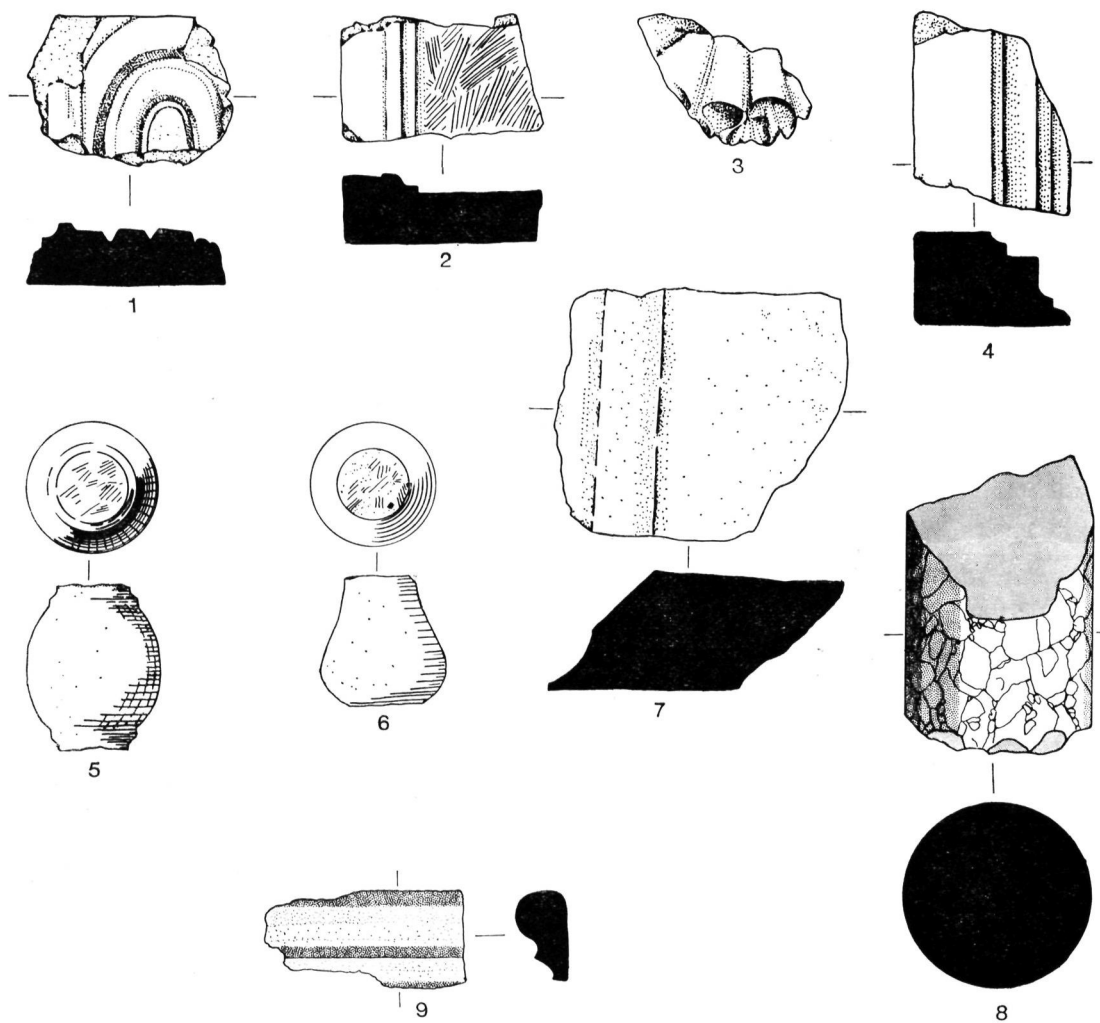


Fig. 7. Greyfriars; worked stone 1-9 ($\frac{1}{4}$)

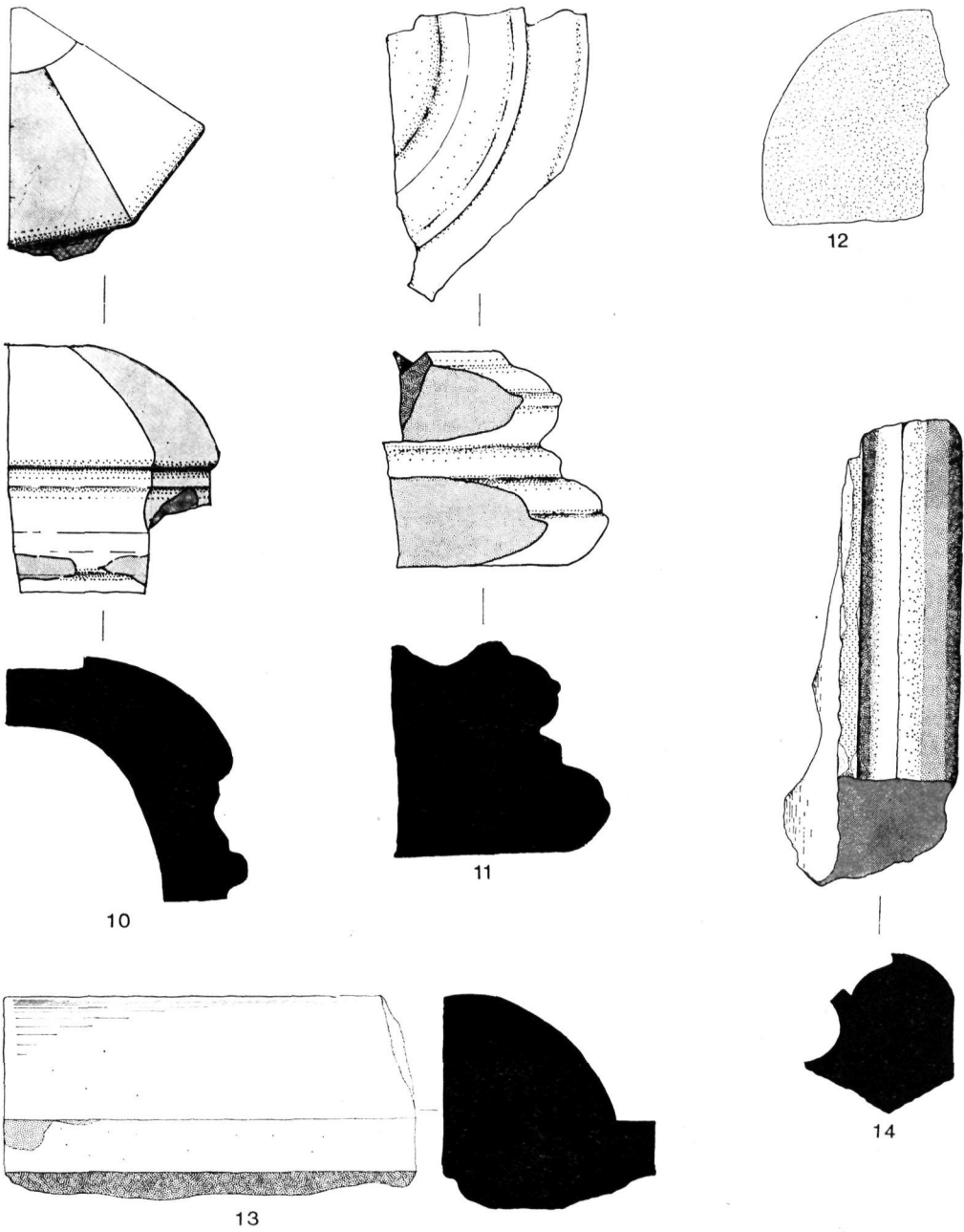


Fig. 8. Greyfriars; worked stone 10-14 ($\frac{1}{2}$)

No.	Type of Stone	Description	Date
5	Grey Marble	Baluster shaft of a small sepulchral monument	English; second quarter of seven-teenth century
6	Ditto. (two fragments)	Ditto. (Certainly from the same monument as 5)	Ditto.
7	Sandstone?	Facing of a column?	English; late four-teenth/early fifteenth century
8	Unidentified	Column flanking a sepulchral monument	English; last quarter of sixteenth/first quarter of seventeenth century
9	Belgian Black Marble —touchstone	Portion of an inscription border of a sepulchral monument	English; last quarter of sixteenth/first quarter of seventeenth century
10	Marble (white)	Portion of a four-sided pendant corbel of a sepulchral monument	English; second quarter of seventeenth century
11	Purbeck Marble?	Base of a capital shaft. Of six orders. (Roughly quarter of total circumference)	English; second half of fourteenth (Conceivably a little earlier—first half of fourteenth century)
12	Purbeck Marble	Portion of a capital shaft. (Roughly quarter of total circumference)	English; second half fourteenth century. Possibly couples with previous entry
13	Unidentified	Probably a shaft and return for a window. At the outer extremities of the window where it meets the wall	English; first half of fifteenth century
14	Clunch Stone	Portion of a fitting rather than of the structural fabric; possibly of a Pulpitum or Reredos. Painted in yellow; overpainted in red on the two external mouldings	English; fourteenth century. The paint contemporary, the red possibly later, yet not after second quarter of sixteenth century (<i>i.e.</i> 1540 Dissolution)

DECORATED FLOOR-TILES (Fig. 9)

BY LAURENCE KEEN

A small group of tiles was recovered from levels associated with Wren's rebuilding of the church: five groups are represented among the 37 fragments submitted for examination.

- I. (Fig. 9, 1 and 2). The 20 fragments of No. 1 are all about 25 mm. thick with a slight bevel. The design is inlaid and where the inlay has fallen out the depression is about 1 mm. thick. A similar tile from this site is located in Taunton Museum, Somerset, and is recorded by J. B. Ward-Perkins.¹ The same design is recorded among tiles from Chertsey Abbey, Surrey.² The tiles at Chertsey belong to the second half of the thirteenth century. The use of the same design for tiles to floor the early thirteenth century chancel of the Greyfriars demonstrates that the block was still being used then. The design seems to have



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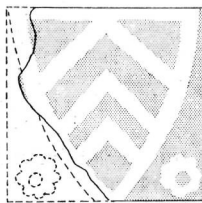
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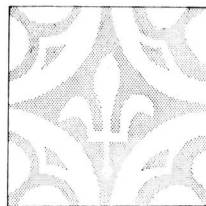
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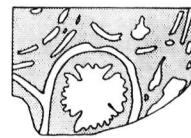
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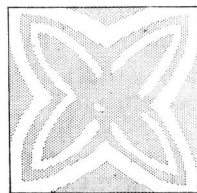
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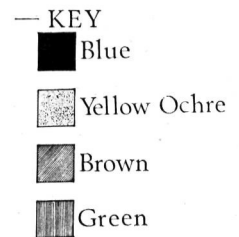


Fig. 9. Greyfriars; decorated floor tiles Nos. 1-9; two-colour Medieval tiles. No. 10, seventeenth-century Dutch polychrome ($\frac{1}{4}$)



Greyfriars; view from west showing area of excavation and east end of the Wren church

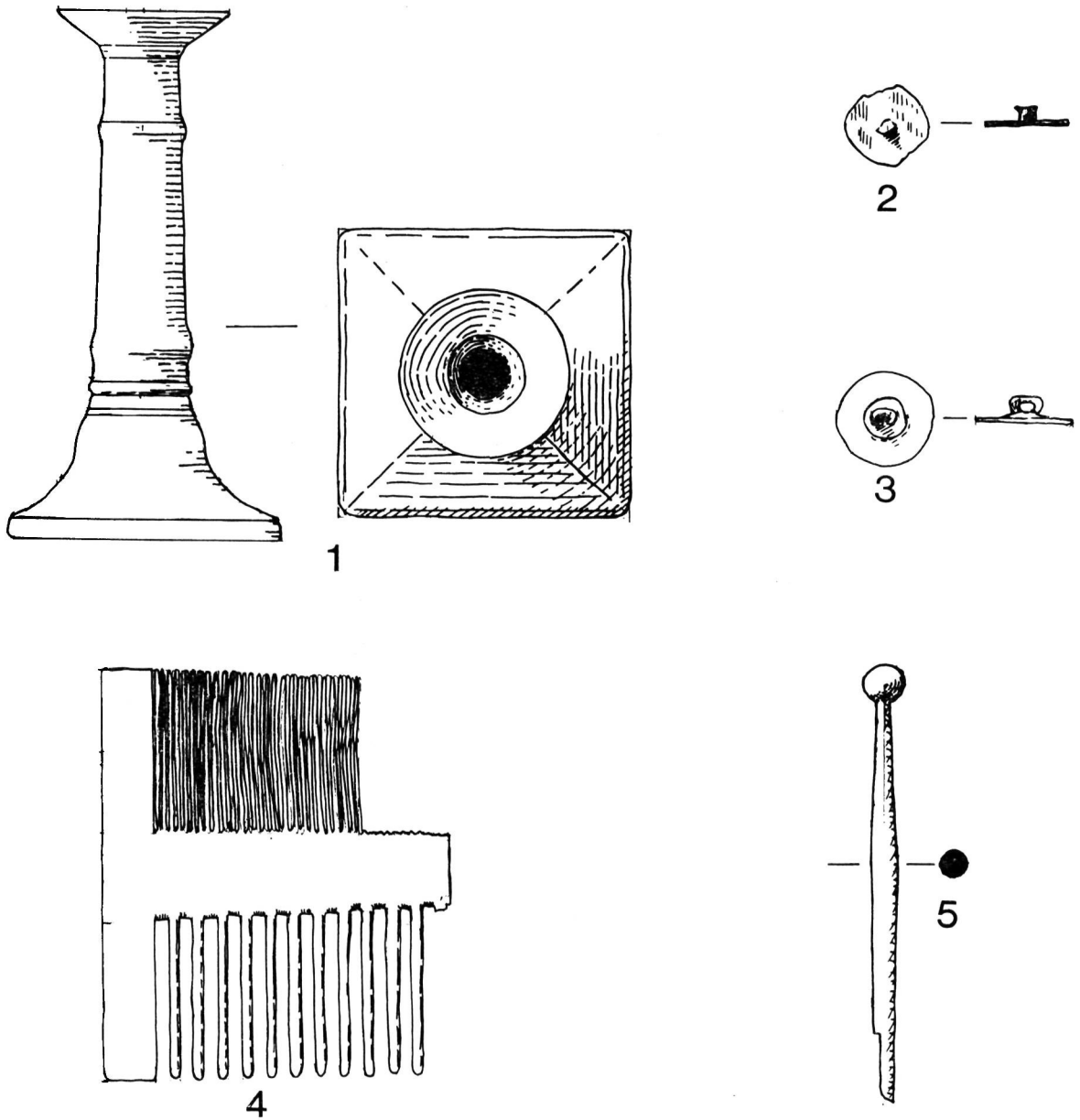


Fig. 10. Greyfriars; small finds, all (1/1) except No. 1 ($\frac{1}{2}$)

formed the basis for at least one other smaller block which was used for tiles in Hampshire.³ There was only one piece of No. 2 and the design is too worn to identify with certainty; it would seem to belong to the Chertsey series too.

- II. No. 3. Five fragments 23–25 mm. thick. The design is two-colour but the white clay does not fill the depressions entirely. No. 4 a slightly smaller variety of the same design about 16 cm. square, which may have been the model for No. 3 since the inlay is better. One piece only.
No. 5. Three pieces about 22 mm. thick with poor inlay.
The design No. 3 is already recorded from London, Wilson Street,⁴ and from Hyde Abbey, Winchester. The group is probably fourteenth century in date.
- III. No. 6. Two fragments only. Similar examples are in the Guildhall Museum collections (Acc. No. 6870); the provenance is the City of London. The tiles probably belong to the "Westminster" series.⁵
- IV. Nos. 7 8 and 9. One fragment of each design. The tiles vary in thickness between 15 and 22 mm. The designs are printed and belong to the Penn series. No. 7 is already recorded from London, from Penn, Buckinghamshire, where the tile was probably made, Missenden, Whitchurch and Saunderton.⁶ Nos. 8 and 9 are too worn to identify with certainty; fourteenth century.
- V. No. 10. Polychrome seventeenth century Dutch tile, 18 mm. thick with buff-coloured fabric. This tile was sealed by Wren's building, so has a useful *terminus antequem* of 1704 (see p. 221).

NOTES

¹ London Museum, *Medieval Catalogue* (London, 1954), 234, Fig. 83, 81.

² British Museum, Rutland Collection Nos. 8178–83. I am grateful to Mrs. Elizabeth Eames who kindly provided details of the Chertsey tiles.

³ Selbourne and the Broadway, Winchester. G. E. C. Knapp, "The Medieval paving tiles of the Alton area of N.E. Hampshire", *Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club*, XVIII (1954), 308, No. 58; and J. B. Ward-Perkins, "Medieval tiles found beneath the Broadway, Winchester, 1937", *ibid.*, XIV (1940), 42, Fig. 5.

⁴ *Medieval Catalogue*, 246, No. 61.

⁵ For a recent discussion, see Laurence Keen, "Medieval floor-tiles of the "Westminster" tiler at Bengoe, Hertfordshire", *Hertfordshire Archaeology*, III (1973), 90–93.

⁶ *Medieval Catalogue*, 239, No. 18; and C. Höhler, "Medieval paving-tiles in Buckinghamshire", *Records of Buckinghamshire*, XIV (1942), 108, P. 48.

THE SMALL FINDS (Fig. 10)

1. Brass candlestick, worn thin at base by polishing, the shaft is attached to the base by one large rivet. From the fill of a late eighteenth century grave.
2. Bronze fastener, single small rivet, from seventeenth century rubble levelling.
3. Bronze button, small eyelet no decoration, from seventeenth century rubble levelling.
4. Bone comb, from seventeenth century rubble levelling.
5. Bone pin, from backfill of eighteenth century grave—probably Roman.

THE COINS

BY RALPH MERRIFIELD

1. Nuremberg jeton of Hans Schultes. 1550–74. From seventeenth century levelling.
2. Nuremberg jeton of Hans Krauwinkel. 1586–1635. From seventeenth century levelling.
3. Fragmentary Nuremberg jeton by one of the Laufer family. Seventeenth century. From seventeenth century levelling.
4. Charles I Rose Farthing Token—type 1d. (First part of period of issue, *i.e.* c. 1635–40). From mortar floor below seventeenth century levelling.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the City Engineer's Department for their active interest in the excavation; also to St. Marys Demolition, who were engaged to remove the east wall of the Wren Church and contributed workmen to assist in the removal of modern brick and concrete.

Special thanks are due to Julian S. Litten and Laurence Keen for the specialist stone and tile reports, and to Ralph Merrifield of the Guildhall Museum for the coin report; also John Clark for his assistance with the documents.

The Editors and the Author are extremely grateful to both the Department of the Environment and the Corporation of London for grants towards the cost of publishing this paper