THE ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF THE CHURCH OF ST MARY-AT-HILL, IN THE CITY OF LONDON

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SUMMARY

The 17th-century churches and cathedral of the City of London are a unique group of buildings. Before the construction of numerous large modern buildings the City skyline was dominated by the dome of St Paul's and a profusion of towers and slender spires. These were the product of a major building programme after the Great Fire of 1666. One of these churches, St Mary-at-Hill (TQ 3307 8076), was again damaged by fire in May 1988. This article describes architectural and archaeological work undertaken during the recent restoration programme.[1]

PREHISTORIC AND ROMANO-BRITISH ACTIVITY

Excavations within the eastern portion of the nave during 1990–91 in advance of floor replacement and piling revealed a sequence of human activity extending back to the first millennium BC.[2]

The earliest evidence of human activity on the site was a short length of a shallow U-shaped linear feature aligned east-west, containing a centrally placed post. This feature was dug into natural brickearth subsoil (top 12.08m OD); its function is uncertain but it may have been part of a field boundary or gully. The backfill of the feature contained sherds of post-Deverel Rimbury pottery of early first millennium BC date. Two nearby excavations have revealed gullies and a pit of similar date.[3] These discoveries and other finds further east on Tower Hill (Merriman 1987, 324), indicate the existence of an unrecorded prehistoric settlement somewhere along the south facing slope between the Monument and Tower Hill (see Fig 1 for find spots).

Initial Romano-British activity consisted of the deposition or dumping of brickearth and waste building materials (mortar and roof tile). Later, perhaps during the late first or second century AD a shallow ditch aligned north-south was dug. It probably served as a property boundary within the Roman city. The ditch was superseded by further dumping, then the construction of a fence and later by traces of several buildings, including a fragment of tessellated floor. Any later deposits had been removed by medieval and post-medieval activity within the church (Watson 1992).

THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

The existence of the church of St Mary-at-Hill is not documented until 1170–97 (Carlin & Belcher 1989, 89). The suffix 'at-Hill' describes the topographical position of the church on quite a steep slope, extending southwards to the Thames foreshore. This suffix distinguished the church from a dozen others dedicated to the Blessed Virgin (Cobb 1941–2, 27).

The 16th-century historian, John Stow, listed St Mary-at-Hill as one of the five parish churches within Billingsgate ward (Wheatley 1956, 435). Reconstruction of the pattern of medieval tenements within the parish of St Mary-at-Hill (Dyson 1989, 17), shows a series of properties extending down the slope to the quay at Billingsgate, an important harbour from the late
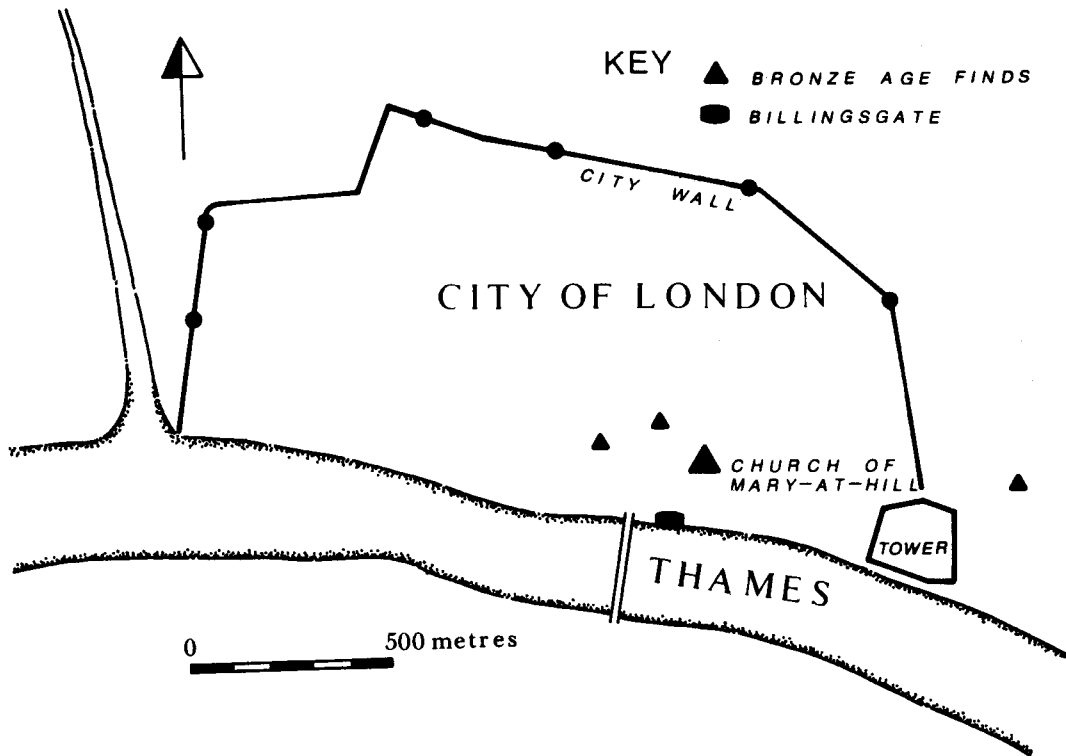
Fig 1.   Site location plan, showing Bronze Age finds

Anglo-Saxon period (see Fig 1). This parochial link with Billingsgate quay and the fairly central position of the church within the ward, suggests that it might have been the earliest foundation in the ward, perhaps even of late Anglo-Saxon date. The pattern of streets leading northwards from the foreshore, including St Mary-at-Hill, to the centre of the City are believed to date from the 10th or 11th century (Dyson 1992, 122–24).

Excavations within the church located three separate areas of post-Roman activity pre-dating the foundations of *circa* 13th–15th-century date (described below). First, there was a series of undated layers, representing soil build-up, below the nave.

Secondly, part of a truncated construction trench for a north-south rubble foundation was discovered below the chancel. The date of this feature is uncertain. It is not part of the medieval building, so might have been part of a secular building fronting onto the nearby street of St Mary-at-Hill.

Thirdly, four incomplete, truncated, supine burials were discovered under the foundations of the south transept. Two graves were lined with

crushed chalk and a third with a mixture of wood ash and crushed chalk. The date of these burials is uncertain; from their east-west orientation and location within the City walls, they are obviously Christian (post AD 600). Chalk lined graves are found in both Roman and medieval cemeteries. The base of the graves lay at a depth of 1.85 to 2.13m below the threshold of the blocked 14th-century door in the south wall (described below). The average depth of an untruncated medieval grave is about one metre, so the depth of these graves below the approximate floor level of the medieval church suggests that they are likely to be part of an earlier extra-mural cemetery, perhaps associated with an unlocated pre-13th-century church. A small church could have been situated on the site of the large 18th century vault under the western part of the nave. It was quite common for urban churches to expand in several directions from a small original building, also to encroach on the surrounding burial ground. The raising of the ground level during the medieval period may be due to terracing of the slope to create a level building plot.

THE PLAN OF THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH—DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

From the churchwardens' accounts of 1420–1559 a great deal of information on the layout of the 16th-century church can be obtained. It consisted of a nave with a clerestory, north and south aisles, probably incorporating earlier transepts/chapels referred to as 'cross-aisles', plus a chancel, referred to as the 'choir', and a west tower with a steeple. The church possessed four chapels: St Stephen's (on the north side of the church and in existence by 1413); St Katherine's (adjoining the chancel); St Ann's and St Christopher's. Internal fittings such as pews and the rood loft (rebuilt 1496–8) are also described in the accounts (Littlehales 1905, lxi).

Construction of the north aisle commenced in 1487 and work on the south aisle is mentioned in an agreement of 1500–01 with the Abbots of Waltham (Littlehales 1905, 142, 240).[4] It is possible that part of the new south aisle might have been only a western extension of the existing south aisle along the southern side of the tower, over a small cemetery (discussed below). It is probable that the tower was rebuilt at the same time (Wheatley 1956, 188). Rebuilding probably finished during 1503–04, when the church was reconsecrated (Littlehales 1905, 250). Enlarging the church involved the destruction of some earlier features, for instance in 1496–97 when a 14th century tomb was discovered during the construction of a new foundation 'within the church' (Littlehales, 1905, lxi–lxv; Wheatley, 1956, 187).

On the north side of the church was the 'great churchyard', part of which remains as open space today. There was another smaller cemetery on the south side of the church, known as 'the pardon churchyard', which had gone out of use by 1676. The closing of 'the little churchyard by the Abbot's Kitchen' is mentioned in 1495–96, which implies the existence of a cemetery on the south-west side of the church (Littlehales 1905, xli, 273, 291). Burials also took place within the church. In 1523 a scale of fees was drawn up for burial within the church, the most expensive places were St Stephen's or St Katherine's chapels, costing 16s 8d. The cheapest the nave at 8s 4d. Burial in the 'pardon churchyard' cost 2s 8d (Littlehales 1905, xlix 319, 323). This scale shows that the very explicit hierarchy of grave location seen in cathedrals and major churches, existed also in parochial London churches (Harding 1992, 131).

THE PLAN OF THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH—ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Excavations within the present church have revealed extensive evidence of its medieval precursor. This consisted of truncated foundations below the existing floor level. On stylistic grounds all these foundations are of *circa* 13th–15th century date; more precise dating is not possible.[5] Due to the small size of the trenches (for new foundations) and the varying depth of post-medieval disturbance, the complete plan of the medieval church was not uncovered (see Fig 2).

Traces of the medieval tower were located below the existing tower. Along the line of the two columns separating the present nave from the north aisle, fragments of a foundation aligned east-west were discovered (see Fig 2). This masonry appears to have formed a continuous wall line. A slight change of alignment towards the east end may mark the position of the choir or chancel.

The north wall of the chancel was well preserved below the altar. A tiny fragment of a peg tile levelling course with traces of stonework above (top 13.71m OD) may mark the start of the above ground masonry. The medieval foundations extended eastwards under the Wren period east wall, suggesting that the medieval east wall was on a different alignment. Another foundation extended northwards from the chancel wall, it probably marks the eastern end of the first phase of the north aisle or part of an earlier transept, possibly St Stephen's chapel (see Fig 2).

The line of the medieval east wall of the church is uncertain, it was probably on a slightly more easterly alignment than the present wall. The only evidence of the pre-Wren period east wall was a length of truncated masonry aligned north-south, incorporated into a 17th-century burial vault.[6]

Along the line of the two columns separating the present nave from the south aisle were three oval blocks of truncated masonry, interpreted as pier bases for the south arcade of the medieval nave. Within one trench, two separate overlapping foundations were located. The western (and later) of the two may represent blocking of an arch within the arcade or simply an alteration to the arcading (see Fig 2).
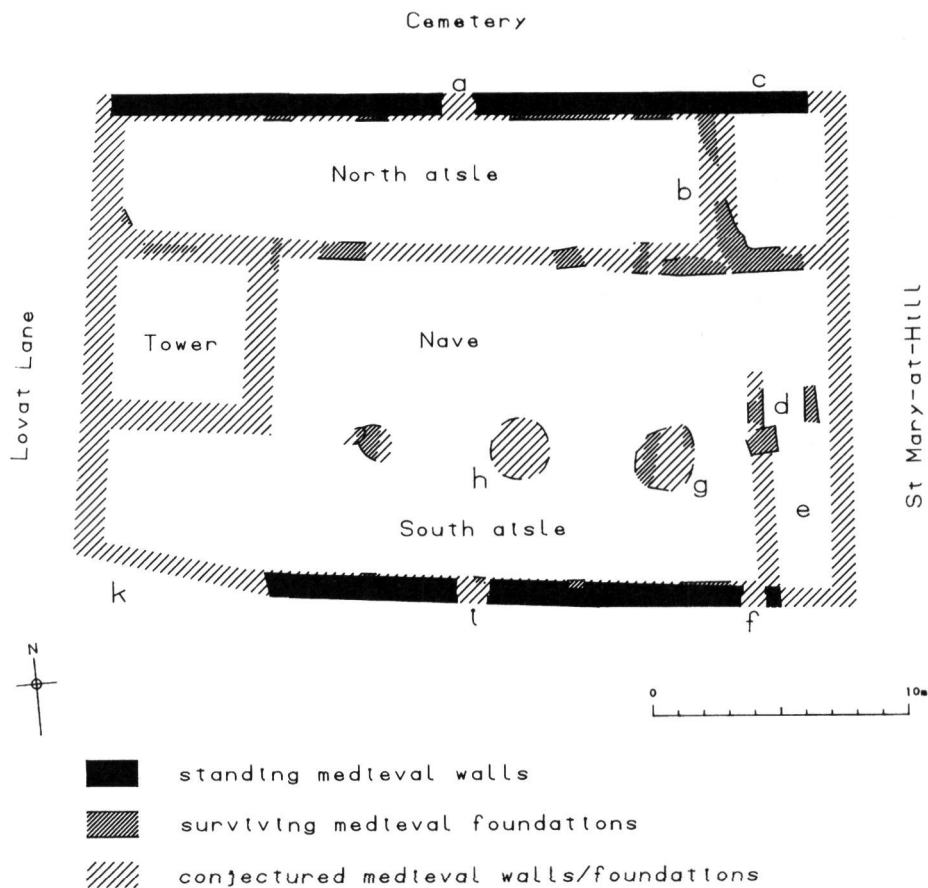
Cemetery

Fig 2.   Plan of the pre-Great Fire church, based on archaeological and architectural evidence
KEY: (a) north door (b) possible remains of north transept or east wall of pre-1487 north aisle (c) rebuilt portion of north aisle (d) burial vault (e) burial vault (f) door (g) possible south transept (h) postulated position of pier base (i) south door (k) site of the Abbot's of Waltham Inn kitchen and possible cemetery

The south arcade of the chancel (there was no sign of a solid wall) consisted of a single rectangular pier base, containing reused ashlar and moulded blocks. On the north side of this pier base was a substantial foundation interpreted as the west wall of a medieval burial vault. Abutting the south side of the pier base was a fragment of an internal wall foundation aligned north-south, which formed an integral part of the foundations of the present south wall (Watson 1992). This may have been part of the south transept or part of St Katherine's chapel.

THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH—STANDING MASONRY

Removal of the render from the exterior of the north wall of the church in 1984 revealed the heads of two infilled 16th-century windows (Lea 1985; 1985–6). Further work in 1991 revealed fragments of another two infilled windows and evidence for a third (see Fig 3). A survey of the interior of the church in 1991, after the removal of the timber panelling revealed a blocked door and offset foundations.[7] This masonry is interpreted as the early 16th-century north aisle. There was no sign of vaulting, implying the existence of a sloping timber roof between the north wall and the clerestory. It appears that this north aisle did not run the full length of the church, but was extended to do so during the 16th or early 17th century.

There are problems in interpreting the masonry at the eastern end of the north aisle. There is a length of foundation which may represent the eastern wall of the north aisle or
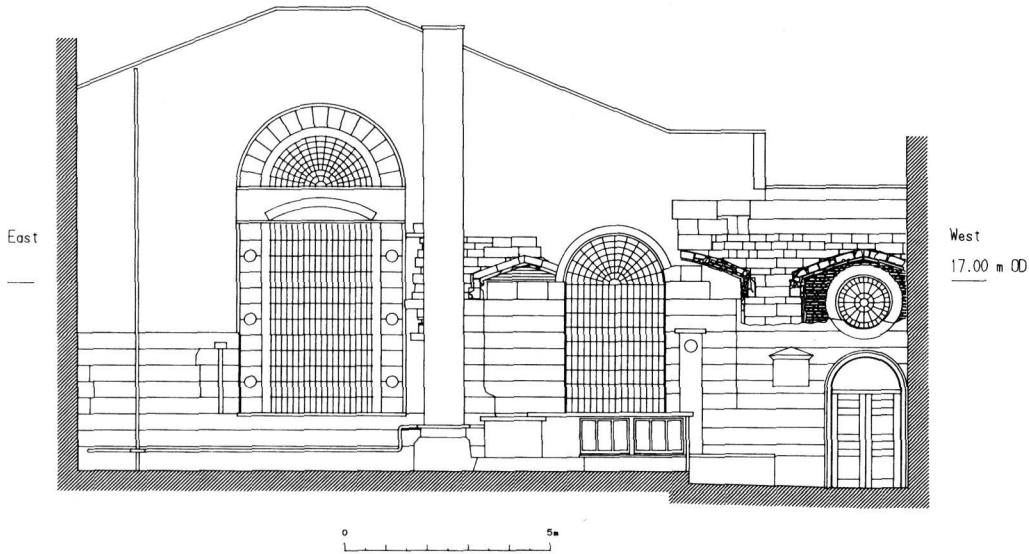
Fig 3.   The external elevation of the north wall of the church, showing features of all periods

part of the northern transept (see Fig 2). The northern end of these foundations serve as a foundation for one side of a brick relieving arch built as part of the standing masonry of the eastern end of the north aisle. It appears that the standing masonry of the north wall is of two phases, the western portion being the earlier of the two. Along the butt joint or junction between the two phases was the western side of a cut-back Purbeck or Petworth marble funerary monument of *circa* 1500, possibly part of an Easter sepulchre. The rest of this monument was apparently removed during the rebuilding of the wall between *circa* 1504 and 1666 (Lea 1992). One structural problem in the interpretation of the north wall is that the eastern end of the wall represents a party wall with No 7 St Mary-at-Hill. In 1826 James Savage, who directed the 19th Century alterations (see below), found it to be bulging and he recommended that it was rebuilt.[8]

No sign of the pier bases for the arcading of the north aisle were found. However, any shallow foundations added to the north wall of the nave could have been destroyed by post-medieval activity.

Internal survey of the south wall of the church in 1991 revealed extensive survival of medieval fabric. This 14th–15th-century masonry appears to be all one build and is interpreted as the external wall of the south aisle (see Fig 2).[9] This date suggests that the work in *circa* 1500 may

have been limited to extending the aisle westwards along the southern side of the tower—which may have been rebuilt about this date (discussed above). Within the south wall was a centrally placed door and the remains of another doorway of 14th-century date adjoining the west side of the internal wall foundation.[10] Below floor level along the eastern end of the south wall were the voussoirs forming the south gable of a medieval burial vault (see Fig 2). Above the vault would have been a small room, perhaps a vestry, sacristy or chapel. A small recess in the south wall appears to be a funerary monument. The eastern-most 2.04m of the south wall was rebuilt (above floor level) during the 1670s (Lea, 1992).

THE GREAT FIRE AND THE REBUILDING OF THE CHURCH

The Great Fire of September 1666 destroyed or seriously damaged 86 of the 107 City parish churches, plus the cathedral. The church of St Mary-at-Hill was gutted by fire, but most of the masonry survived. The cathedral and 51 of the churches, including St Mary-at-Hill, were rebuilt under the direction of Sir Christopher Wren, Surveyor General (1669–1718). Only 24 of these churches survive today.[11]

Rebuilding the cathedral and the numerous churches was obviously expensive and the Rebuilding Act of 1670 levied a tax on coal

imports to London to raise money for it. This Act also united a number of parishes, including St Andrew Hubbard and St Mary-at-Hill, which were to share one rebuilt church. The rebuilding of St Mary-at-Hill began in 1670. The church may have been selected for immediate rebuilding because of the determination of the parishioners. Between 1670 and 1673 they advanced £2,500 towards the cost of rebuilding—the money was later refunded from the coal tax.[12]

The contract for the rebuilding of the east wall of the church is dated the 1st November 1670; the work was finished during 1674 at a cost of £3,756 17s 3d or £3,980 12s 3d if the cost of the work undertaken by the parish in 1668–69 is included.[13] Current restoration work to the east wall has revealed the original design of the central Venetian window (bricked up in 1767), with a round arched mullion in its head originally elaborated with carving, probably swags, above the side windows and below the central window. It also appears that the pediment was originally broken, but that the semi-circular window set within it is a later insertion by Savage. The tower and the west wall of the church were retained during the rebuilding, also the north and south walls of the church, but these were heightened.

Wren's rebuilding of St Mary-at-Hill has often been cited as an example of a conventional use of the Greek cross plan (Cobb 1941–2, 71). However, this view requires some qualification, given the recent discoveries. The main body of the church has an irregular, almost square, plan with centrally placed doors in the north and south walls. Four columns were placed on the lines of the earlier arcades (see Fig 4). Matching responds formed part of the new east wall and a further pair were set against the east face of the tower. Although the placing of the columns created nine equal sized bays, suggesting a Greek cross arrangement, the absence of matching responds on the north and south walls, combined with the medieval fenestration must, to some degree, have preserved the three-aisled character of the interior space. Nor was the roof fully developed as one might expect in a church with a Greek cross plan. In place of tunnel vaults with a dome at the intersection, Wren used coved flat ceilings with a circular lantern, set above a squat dome. Above the four corner bays the ceiling would have been flat. The cantilevered cornice and the higher coved ceilings used in the cross-aisles must have given some emphasis to the

Greek cross but the whole must have appeared much flatter than it did following Savage's reworking in 1826–27.

The present box pews, panelling and pulpit date from Savage's rebuilding, but have been much altered. The present reredos is of early 18th century date with later additions. The pulpit and other fittings have additional carvings of 1848–49 by William Gibbs Rogers (RCHM 1929, 17).

A large burial vault was constructed within the southern part of the church during 1670–74. It consisted of a three chambered vault (see Fig 4). To the north of it were two small vaults—one of which may have been built by Rector Edward Lake (1682–1704). Below the altar was another vault which may have been the burial place of Rector John Brand (died 1806). The vault in the north aisle was the burial place of the Woods family and probably dates from the late 17th century. The large vault under the western part of the nave dates from circa 1715.

REBUILDING THE TOWER

The tower was patched up and reroofed after the Great Fire, in 1694–95 further repairs were made to it and a new lantern added. However, the tower was in poor condition by the late 18th century. In 1787–88 it was rebuilt in brick by George Gwilt. At the same time the medieval north and south doors were blocked and new doors created at the western end of the church, which was also rebuilt (see Fig 4).

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In 1826–27, under the direction of James Savage, the church was extensively altered. The entire roof structure was replaced by two intersecting barrel vaults forming a fully developed Greek cross with a large central dome and a new lantern. To match the existing responds on the east and west walls, copies were added to the north and south wall to emphasise the symmetry of the cross aisle. Fitted around the new responds were four large, round headed, cast-iron framed windows replacing the remaining Perpendicular windows in the north and south walls. Further repairs and alterations were carried out in 1848–49. The 1988 fire destroyed the Savage roof, but a survey of the charred remains before
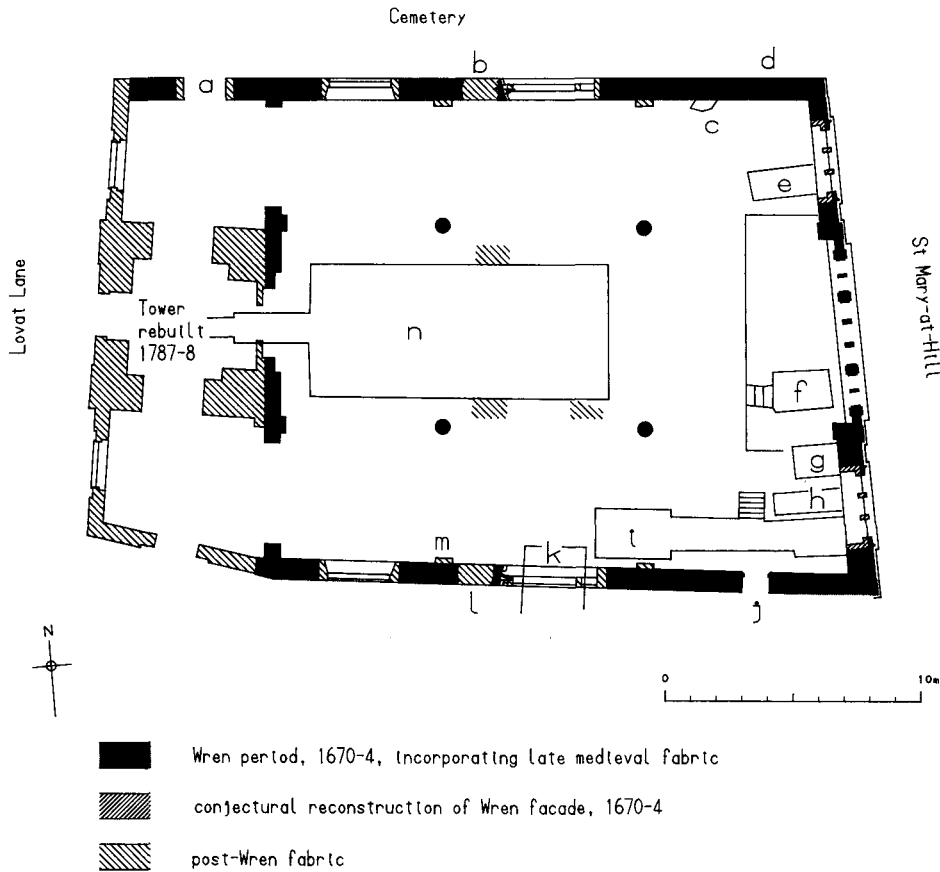
Cemetery

Tower
rebuilt
1787-8

Lovat Lane

St Mary-at-Hill

N

0   10m

■ Wren period, 1670-4, incorporating late medieval fabric

▨ conjectural reconstruction of Wren facade, 1670-4

▧ post-Wren fabric

Fig 4. Plan of the Wren church, showing later additions
KEY: (a) north door added 1787-8 (b) medieval door blocked 1787 (c) cut back monument (d) 16th–17th century rebuild of eastern end of north wall (e) 17th century burial vault (f) burial vault below altar (g) burial vault (h) burial vault (i) three-chambered burial vault 1670–74 (j) door to vestry (k) 19th-century boiler house (l) medieval door blocked 1787 (m) one of the four 1820s responds (n) burial vault *circa* 1715

demolition allowed the roof structure to be reconstructed during 1991 (Lea 1989).

In 1846 the cemetery on the north side of the church was closed.[14] In 1859 the large burial vault under the nave was sealed. During 1892–94 the church was closed and some 3,000 bodies were exhumed from the vaults and other graves within the church (Besant 1910, 270).

Dunwoodie of the Museum of London for recording the excavations.

NOTES

[1] The church was restored 1990–92 under the direction of John Barnes, architect, of the Conservation Practice. Documentary research was carried out by Paul Jeffery. Architectural recording in 1988 and 1991 was undertaken by Richard Lea of English Heritage, London Division and the archaeological work in 1989 and 1990–91 was supervised by Bruce Watson of the Department of Urban Archaeology of the Museum of London. Archive records on the site are held by the Museum of London (site codes MAH84; SMY88) and English Heritage London Region.

[2] Water used to extinguish the fire in 1988 caused some internal subsidence. A new reinforced concrete

floor, supported by a network of mini-piles and ground beams was inserted during 1991.

[3] St Martin Orgar churchyard (see Excavation Roundup 1987 in *London Archaeol* 1988, 5, no 14, 358). 55–58 Gracechurch Street (see Excavation Roundup 1991, *London Archaeol* 1991 6, no 10, 274).

[4] On the south side of the church from *circa* 1177–1201 stood the London Inn of the Abbots of Waltham Abbey (Gadd 1983). In *circa* 1500 the site of the Abbot's kitchen was acquired by the parish of St Mary-at-Hill for part of the south aisle (Littlehales 1905, 240).

[5] Due to archaeological disturbance caused by the exhumation of the burials within the church during 1892–94, there was no associated stratigraphy to provide dates for these foundations. On stylistic grounds this type of masonry (trench-built chalk rubble, bonded by yellow/brown sand/lime mortar) is of *circa* 13th- mid 16th-century date.

[6] This masonry was constructed of Reigate rubble and bonded by a pale grey sandy mortar.

[7] The internal face of this wall was constructed of chalk and ragstone rubble, plus reused ashlar and a few bricks ($2 \times 4 \times 9$ inch), bonded by yellow/brown mortar.

[8] GL MS 1240/3, 2nd March 1826.

[9] It was of very similar construction to the north wall (see note 7), except for the absence of bricks and off-set foundations.

[10] Most of this door had been destroyed by the insertion of the present vestry door.

[11] This figure does not include St Mary Aldermanbury rebuilt in Fulton, Missouri, USA. In addition six towers remain: St Alban, Wood Street; St Augstine, Old Change; Christ Church, Newgate; St Mary Somerset; St Olave Jewry and St Dunstan-in-the-East.

[12] CLRO MS 222.11.

[13] GL MS 25539, 25540 and 25542.

[14] A tablet on the exterior north wall of the church commemorates the closure of the cemetery on 21st June 1846.

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