

Reversing the Dissolution: reconstructing London's medieval monasteries

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SUMMARY

The Museum of London Archaeology Service is currently working on eight monographs relating to medieval monasteries of the London region. This paper gives a broad summary of some of the ways in which the history and archaeology of these monuments is being unlocked, and presents a few of the more interesting discoveries along the way.

INTRODUCTION

The Dissolution of the Monasteries was an event that radically altered London's medieval skyline and changed the shape of its suburbs. Between the years of 1532 and 1540, the Greater London area lost more than 30 major medieval monastic institutions and a similar number of hospitals. Their churches torn down, many were converted into noblemen's mansions, although some vanished utterly as their stone was quarried and used elsewhere.

Archaeological investigation of ruined monasteries is an age-old pursuit, dating back at least as far as the publication of W. Dugdale's *Monasticon Anglicanum* in 1655. Later, 19th-century editions, of this seminal gazetteer of English monastic sites are liberally decorated with engravings of bare, ruined choirs and picturesque remnants of great cloisters. With a few exceptions however, London's monasteries have escaped the wall-chasing attentions of the likes of Harold Brakspear, William St John Hope, and Alfred Clapham, by the virtue of the fact that their sites lay, inaccessible, under later residential and industrial developments. Refine-

ment of modern urban archaeological techniques coinciding with surges in redevelopment of properties at a number of former monastic sites since the 70s has resulted in new understanding of their form and function.

The Museum of London Archaeology Service is currently undertaking an extensive research and publication programme on eight major religious houses in the Greater London area, aided by English Heritage. These are: the Augustinian priory and hospital of St Mary Spital (Thomas *et al* 1997) (Fig 1, 30); the headquarters of the Knights Hospitaller at St John Clerkenwell (Sloane & Malcolm in prep) (Fig 1, 26); the Augustinian nunnery of St Mary Clerkenwell (Sloane in prep) (Fig 1, 27); the Augustinian priory of Holy Trinity in the City (Schofield & Lea in prep) (Fig 1, 21); the Cluniac priory of St Saviour Bermondsey (Steele in prep) (Fig 1, 28); the Cistercian abbey of St Mary Graces at East Smithfield (Grainger *et al* in prep) (Fig 1, 24); and, further out from the City, the Augustinian priory of St Mary Merton in Surrey (Miller & Saxby in prep) and the Cistercian abbey of St Mary Stratford Langthorne (Barber & Chew in prep). Other, less extensive publications are intended for the Carthusian London Charterhouse (Barber & Thomas in prep) (Fig 1, 6), and Westminster Abbey (Thomas & Cowie in prep).

The purpose of this review is to illustrate some of the methods used in divining the purpose, character, development and appearance of these lost institutions as well as reporting on some of the more exciting discoveries that have been

made during the research programme. Three case studies will be examined: St Mary Spital, St John Clerkenwell, and St Mary Clerkenwell.

ST MARY SPITAL

St Mary Spital was founded some time around 1197 by Walter Brown, a fairly well-off Londoner, and his wife Roisia. After nearly 40 years as a small road-side hospital catering for the needs of sick and poor unmarried mothers and mothers-to-be, it was refounded on a much grander scale. In the later medieval period it was furnished with a cloister, and the original infirmary hall became part of a naveless church; a new two-storey infirmary was constructed adjacent.

Excavations on the site were first undertaken by Frank Cottrell in the 30s; it wasn't until the 80s that the Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology (North) (DGLA) carried out further, extensive works.

The archaeological evidence for the principal buildings was in some cases superb: walls stood to over 1m high above the medieval floor level, and preserved internal and external features such as pier bases and arcade responds (Fig 17). It was therefore possible to reconstruct most of the plan of the new hospital – a T-shaped structure with a chapel to the east of a large north-south hall (Fig 18). This is, of course, the most common form of archaeological reconstruction. The finds recovered from the hospital buildings, yards and gardens allowed a second type of reconstruction to be attempted: that of the patients' way of life. Two particular finds groups stand out in this regard; a large bunch of perhaps 40 copper keys, and a selection of over 20 wooden bowls and platters. The keys, of early-mid 13th-century date, are thought to have been used for patient's personal lockers, a feature recorded in medieval documents relating to the Hôtel Dieu in Paris, and other hospital sites. The bowls, recovered from a communal cesspit at the north end of the hospital buildings, showed signs of having been used – visible knife cuts in the wood, and staining from the foods they once contained. It is likely that many of these bowls were actually brought to the patients' beds by the lay sisters that served the sick.

A way in which the nature and circumstances of the hospital inmates can be reconstructed is from the study of the human remains from the hospital cemetery. In fact there were at least

three cemeteries at St Mary Spital, each separated in time. The second cemetery, used from c.1235 to 1290, was effectively completely excavated, so we can be fairly certain that the average burial rate was about four per year over about 50 years. What was quite surprising was that less than half of those buried were women (the hospital had been founded specifically for them). Instead, the majority appear to have been young men. This is a mystery which currently cannot adequately be explained. However, it may be that the lure of work in the burgeoning City of London was drawing many young men to the area from the countryside: perhaps it was the least fortunate of these that ended their days in the charity of St Mary Spital.

Such strands of evidence for form, function and development can, when carefully combined, permit quite sophisticated reconstructions. Fig 19 shows a hypothetical view of the overall appearance of the hospital on the eve of the Dissolution.

ST JOHN CLERKENWELL

Our second case study is that of the Hospitaller priory of St John at Clerkenwell. It was founded in 1144 by a Norman knight, Jordan de Bricet, on fields to the north-west of the city. The priory is a particularly fascinating one on account of it being the only priory of this particular order in England, Scotland and Wales. The order, an international military one, was divided into priories (roughly one per country). These were then subdivided into commanderies or preceptories. St John Clerkenwell was the headquarters for all the English preceptories. It was also highly unusual in that its church possessed a round nave until about 1280 (Fig 20). The priory's development after this date owes much more to that of noblemen's or episcopal palaces than to the more 'normal' conventual monastery. The priory is also highly unusual in London for the quantity of its surviving above-ground remains: the church chancel (including part of the round nave and crypt dating to c.1150), and the principal gatehouse (1504) are both well-preserved.

The first excavations took place within the precincts in the 1870s. The churchwarden, H.W. Fincham, recorded much detail about the church at the turn of the century. However, full-scale excavations only began in 1986, again carried



Fig 17. View of octagonal arcade respond at the northern end of the great infirmary hall at St Mary Spital (MoLAS)

out by DGLA, and continued by the Museum of London Archaeology Service.

This particular priory demonstrates additional methods of reconstruction. The first is our ability to reconstruct important parts of the superstructure of some of the priory buildings, through examination of ex-situ architectural stonework.

A number of superb pieces of late 12th-century polychrome arcade capital were recovered in 1900 during refurbishment works on the church. Until analytical work began on them, and the church plan itself, it was not certain where they originated in the priory. However, a chance survival in the existing (and extensively remodelled) church of the bases of the original 12th-century arcade respond piers allowed Dr Mark Samuel, the architectural specialist with the Museum of London's Specialist Services, to complete a full geometric reconstruction of the capital fragments (Fig 21). As we have both the plan of the church and the form of the capitals, the potential now exists to reconstruct the entire arcading for the church as it would have appeared when Patriarch Heraclius of Jerusalem consecrated the building in 1185.

A similar form of reconstruction and analysis was employed to consider an assemblage of some 80 fragments of early 16th-century terracotta brick fragments. They were decorated with neo-classical motifs including dolphins and cherubs, and show the influence of the Continental Renaissance architectural style. They were employed by secular noblemen between 1520 and 1530 on some of the country's finer mansions and palaces of this date. Comparison between the St John examples and those at the great (unfinished) palace of Layer Marney (Essex), dated to 1523–4, proved that the very same moulds had been used to provide window elements for both establishments (Fig 22).

The priory of St John also permitted reconstruction of elements of the diet of the knights (or their guests). This came in the form of animal bone from a number of pits in the precinct. One pit, located near to the probable site of the kitchens and dating to between 1180 and 1270, contained a noteworthy assemblage including the leg bones from at least 16 small birds, possibly larks. In addition, remains of fish included thornback ray and conger eel, both

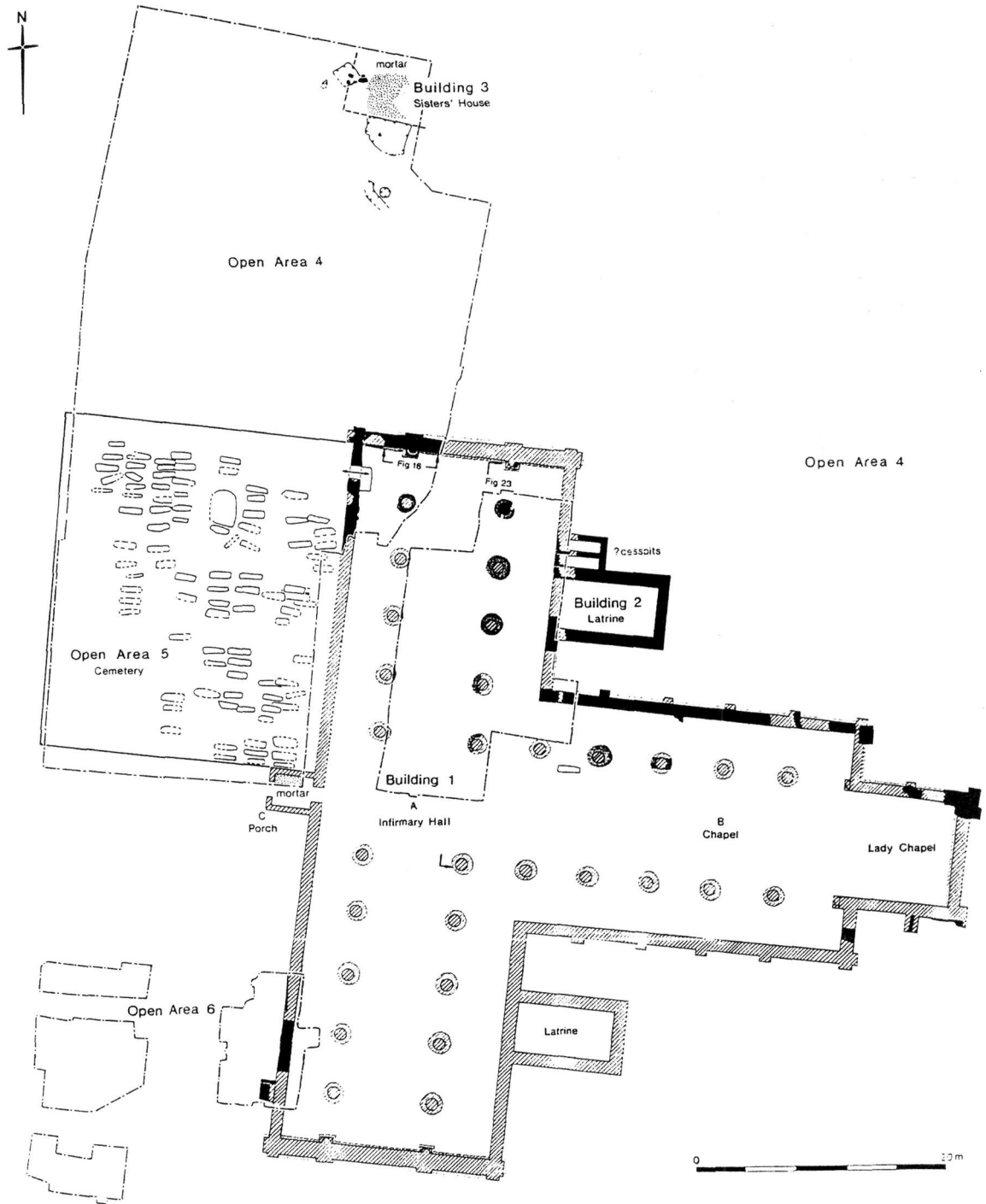


Fig 18. The plan of the hospital of St Mary Spital in the mid 13th century (Reproduced from Thomas et al 1997)

high-status commodities in the Middle Ages. It is possible that this pit contained the refuse from a single meal.

Further animal remains located in pits at the south end of the priory were indicative of crafts such as slaughtering and horn-working, demon-

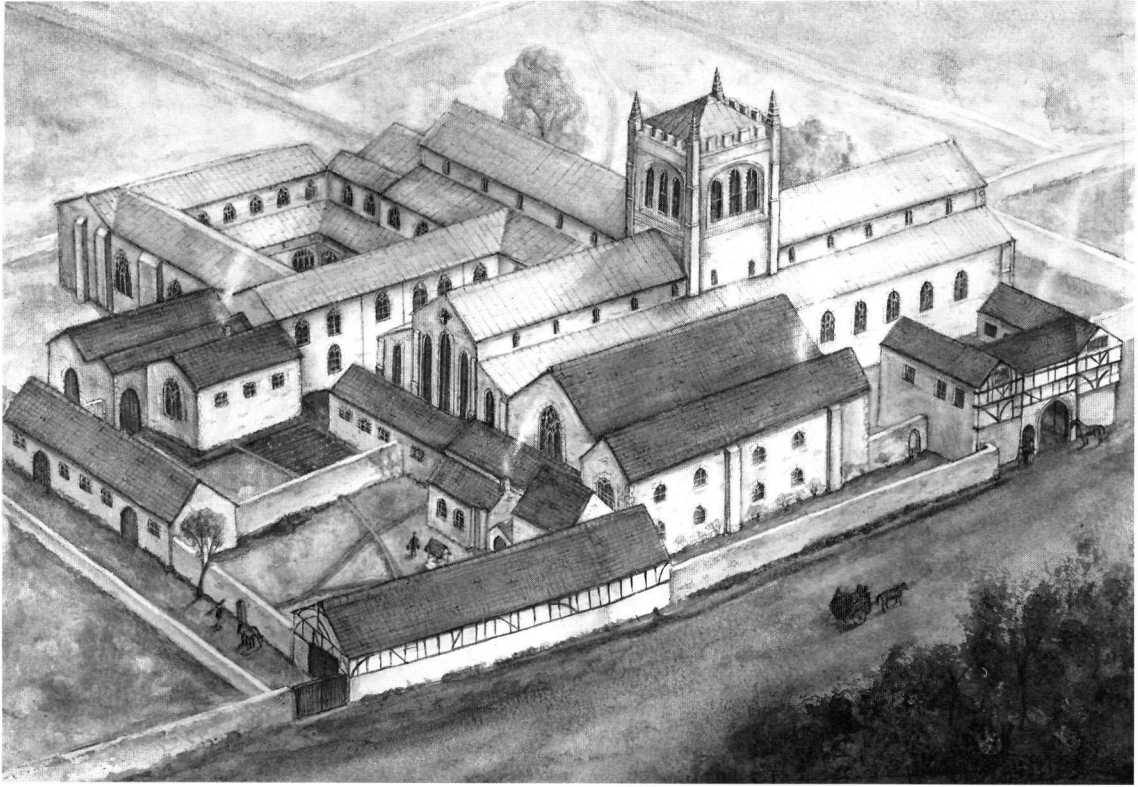


Fig 19. *Reproduction of a water-colour showing a hypothetical view of St Mary Spital in c.1500 (MoLAS Kikar Singh)*

strating that the community made use of its proximity to the great livestock market at Smithfield. One pit contained over 70kg of cattle skull fragments.

The use of historical records to aid in the reconstruction of the priory precincts was especially successful in the case of St John Clerkenwell. Tony Dyson's analysis of the Lease Books of the priory from c.1480 to 1540, and the Ministers' Accounts from 1541 to 1545 demonstrated that the outer precinct, the area south of St John's Gate and extending eastward from Turnmill Street through to St John Street was an unusual enclave at this time (Fig 23).

In particular, a number of important tenements have been identified along St John's Lane. These were, almost without exception, leased from the priory itself by its own officials. Rents ranged between 2 marks (26s 8d) and £5 yearly. Most of the officers appear to have been those responsible for administering the priory's finances. They had titles such as the Receiver of Rents, the Bailiff of Eagle, and the Priory Auditor. Around the edges of the precinct lay

other tenements held by those with surnames suggestive of their occupations: le Pavour (a tiler?), Sadler, Miller and others.

ST MARY CLERKENWELL

St Mary Clerkenwell was founded at the same time as St John Clerkenwell, for Augustinian nuns. It was located directly adjacent to the site of the eponymous 'Clerks Well', the site of religious plays and popular entertainments throughout the Middle Ages. For the first 40–50 years it seems likely that the majority of the buildings were of wood: at least two large post-built structures have been identified so far. Then, in 1190–1200, it had sufficient income to finance a renovation of the church and claustral ranges: the kitchen was rebuilt in stone and a large guest-hall provided running northward from the east range. This rebuilding may have been occasioned by the grant of the tithes of the manor of Clerkenwell in 1176, and the formation of a new parish served by the nunnery church.

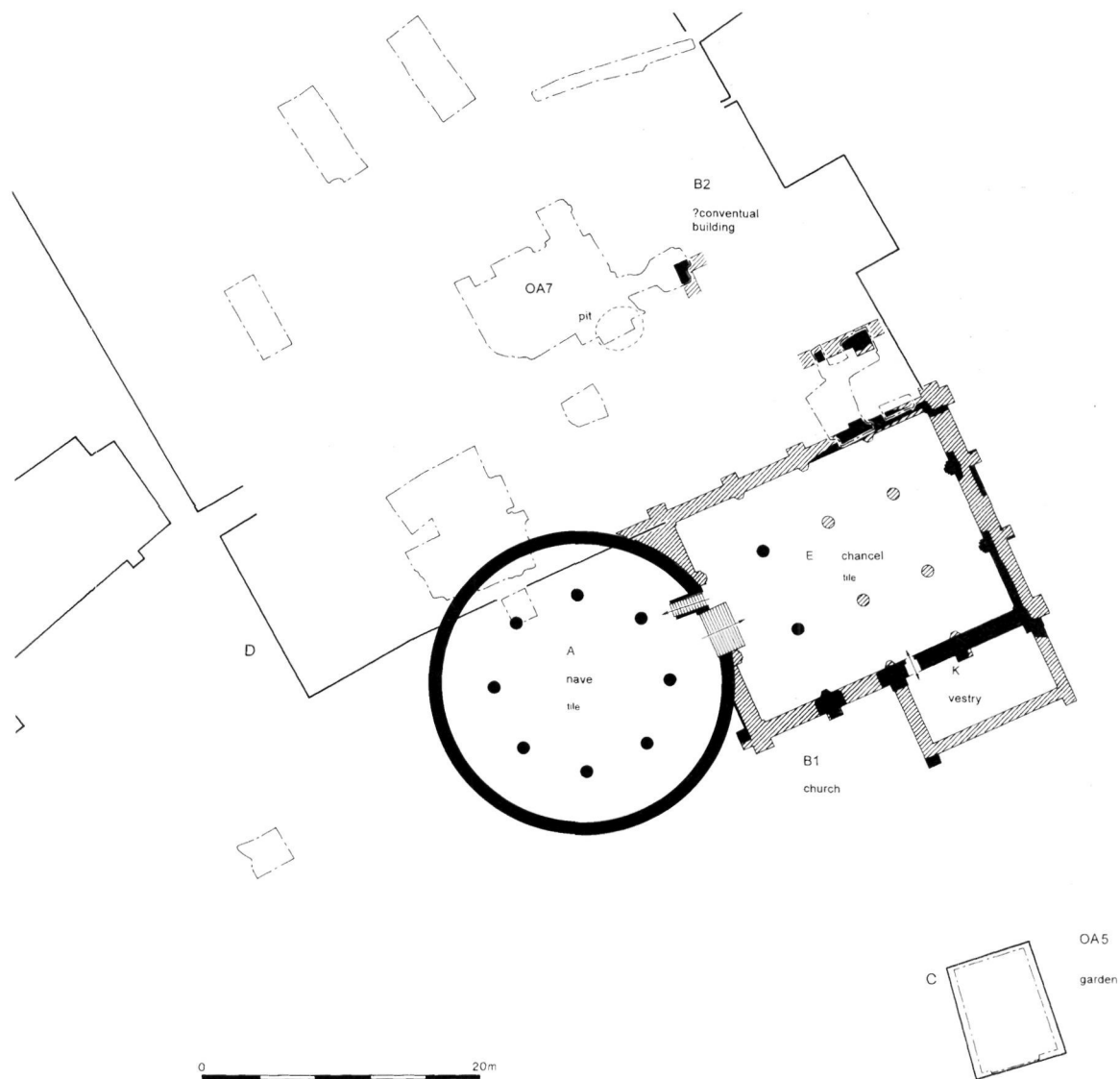


Fig 20. Plan of the church of St John Clerkenwell in c.1185, showing the round nave and aisled chancel (Reproduced from Sloane & Malcolm in prep)

While the old church was pulled down in the 1790s, the current church, St James, still serves the parish.

The priory suffered poverty from the end of the 13th century to perhaps as late as the mid 15th century. In the early 16th century it had a revival of fortune, and was able to invest in a major refurbishment of the cloister.

Archaeological work on the nunnery prior to the mid 70s was very limited indeed, but the

demolition of the old church was witnessed, and recorded, by a number of antiquarians as well as the architect for the new church. Our current understanding of the nunnery stems from a series of excavations conducted by DGLA and MoLAS between 1984 and 1995.

St Mary Clerkenwell is mentioned in this summary because it shows the potential for using antiquarian records to aid in reconstruction of buildings for which little archaeological evidence

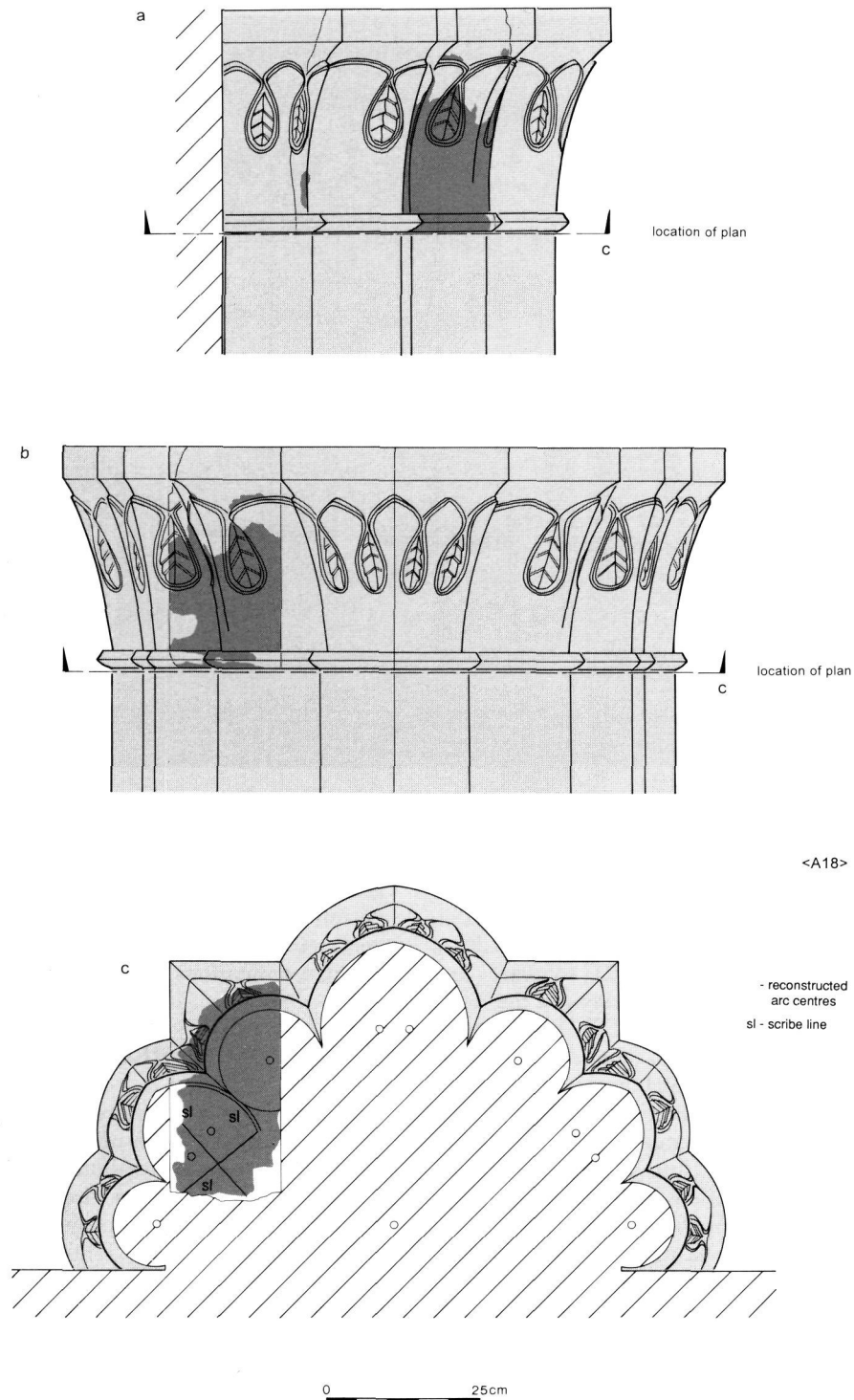


Fig 21. Reconstruction drawing of the arcade capital from the church of St John Clerkenwell (drawing by Mark Samuel from Sloane & Malcolm in prep)



Fig 22. View of a gatehouse window at Layer Marney, Essex, showing the use of early 16th-century terracotta decoration (Photo by Gordon Malcolm)

survives. The architect's measured plan of the old church, made in the 1790s, survives in the London Metropolitan Archives (formerly the GLRO). This was digitised using CAD software and linked to the sole surviving fragment of the north nave wall by field survey. The architectural specialist was then able to consider the large number of antiquarian etchings and aquatints made during the demolition of the church, and scale up the various features depicted. These could then be 'bolted' into the plan evidence, resulting in a three-dimensional computer image of the church as it probably appeared on the eve of the Dissolution (Fig 24). The cloister too could be 'rebuilt' from a combination of archaeological plan evidence, architectural stonework and further antiquarian drawings. The church owes its rather asymmetrical appearance partly to the fact that it had to function both as nunnery chapel and parish church.

Such opportunities to reconstruct whole buildings are unfortunately rare, because the combination of circumstances permitting them are

generally absent. When they do occur, they permit archaeologists to imagine (with some confidence) how the building might have behaved in three dimensions.

FORTHCOMING RESEARCH

This has been a necessarily truncated view of the findings from the three principal case studies. It would be incomplete without a summary of just a few of the results from the other monasteries in the monastic research project.

Excavations at Holy Trinity priory (founded 1107), situated next to Aldgate have been combined with research on the very detailed ground plans made by Symonds in the late 16th century. This has permitted Richard Lea to create a marvellous three-dimensional drawing of the monastery buildings before and after the Dissolution. This provides a very clear picture of how even the church could be adapted for private, secular use.

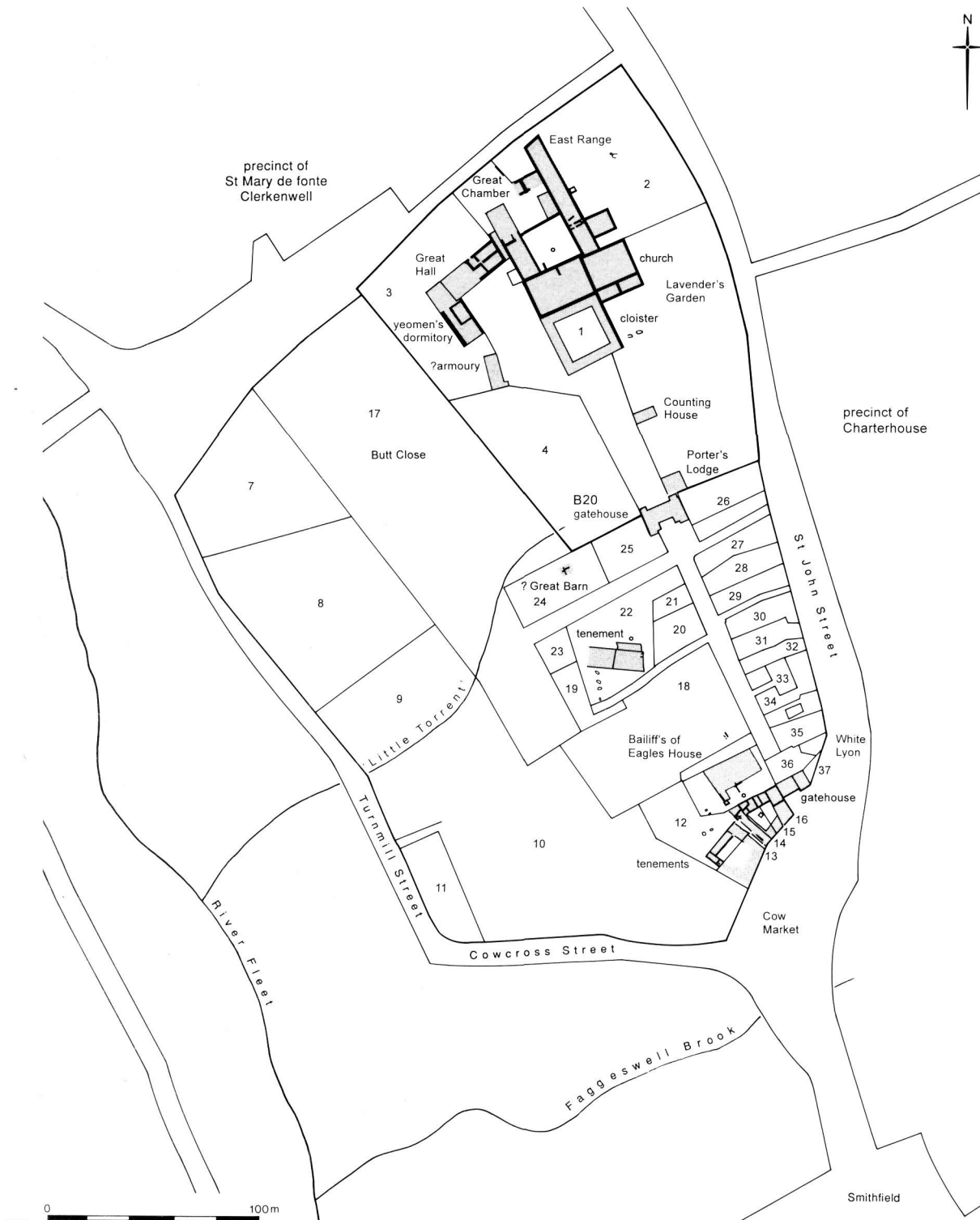


Fig 23. Reconstruction of the precincts of St John Clerkenwell from documentary records, showing buildings identified archaeologically superimposed (reproduced from Sloane & Malcolm in prep)

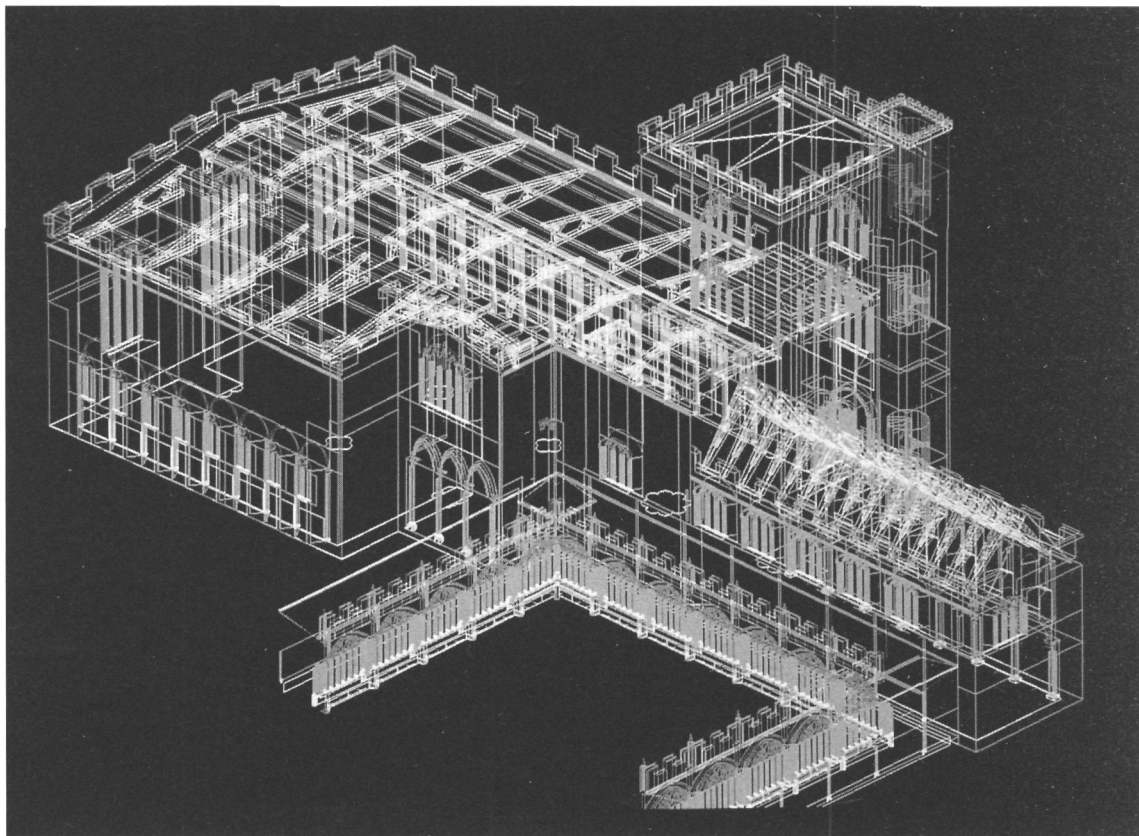


Fig 24. Three-dimensional 'wire-frame' reconstruction of the church of St Mary Clerkenwell (prepared by Mark Samuel and Josephine Brown of MoLAS, reproduced from Sloane in prep)

At the Cluniac priory of St Saviour Bermondsey (founded in the 1080s) the monks appear to have adapted an existing chapel, perhaps built by William the Conqueror on his own royal manor. They also seem to have been keen on hygiene: a *lavatorium* was sited in the cloister, while a cistern attached to a small chamber near the latrine block may have functioned as a bath-house.

Cistercian St Mary Graces in East Smithfield (founded in 1350) also made use of a pre-existing building, in this case, the chapel built on the site of the Black Death cemetery. The abbey is unusual in that it compares more favourably with the great friaries than with a Cistercian design.

St Mary Merton in Surrey (founded in 1117) appears to demonstrate the change from communal to private lifestyles in the later Middle Ages: the infirmary hall became subdivided into small chambers, and there is emerging evidence that the infirmary cloister passage may have been

similarly partitioned. Botanical remains recovered from near a slipway and in the infirmary suggest that black mustard seeds were being brought onto the infirmary site, perhaps to be prepared as curatives.

London's other Cistercian abbey, St Mary Stratford Langthorne (founded 1135), lay just over the River Lea. While the site was heavily truncated, the plan of the east arm of the church can be reconstructed, and shows that out in the marshy borders of the Lea, a particularly splendid and great church once graced the skyline.

It is hoped that the publication of the results of this programme, proposed over the next three years, will promote further research and enjoyment of London's lost monasteries.

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