

# The Medieval Nunnery at Clerkenwell

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HALF A mile to the north-west of the City Wall a low tongue of land rises above the stream of the Fleet. From this gravel still flows a spring, one of many natural rills which once fed the river.

Here beneath No. 16 Farringdon Road, we can still (with a member of the Islington Library Services) stand beside the *fons clericorum*, the Clerks Well, at the side of which the parish clerks of London used to perform their famous miracle plays in the 14th and, it seems, even in the 12th century.

The well in a post-medieval reconstruction was discovered and carefully preserved in a special basement chamber in 1924 and a careful historical and archaeological report was promptly published.<sup>1</sup> The site is an obvious candidate for a Roman extramural cemetery, perhaps with an early Christian church in sub-Roman times, surviving as a medieval sacred place as Martin Biddle has suggested on other sites.<sup>2</sup> Another candidate on the same bank a mile further up the Fleet is Old St. Pancras Church, where reputed Roman finds and an early structure cry out for careful study of this, the legendary mother church of St. Paul's Cathedral.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside the "Spring of the Clerks" in c. 1145 a Breton knight of the Bishops of London, Jordan, son of Ralph or Jordan Briset, gave 10 acres to found a nunnery, and shortly after also gave an adjoining site to the Hospitallers, the Knights of St. John; this became the English headquarters of the Knights.

The Nunnery was soon well-established and popular with the daughters of City merchants. Although there were only 15 or 16 nuns in the 14th century and 11 in the 16th century, we must remember that they formed the centre of a sizable community with their servants, chaplains, guests and boarders. They may have run a girls school and there were many tenants in the outer precincts.

The Nunnery was moderately prosperous and almost depressingly respectable throughout its uneventful history, which has been recently discussed in detail.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of scandals, most of the docu-

mentary evidence concerns property, chiefly in London, Cambridgeshire, Dorset, Essex and Kent; the Cartulary, into which all the title deeds were copied, has been meticulously published.<sup>5</sup> The nuns invested steadily in City and suburban properties with cash from selling off distant country properties in a dozen counties, with dowries of nuns and with legacies from Londoners. A study of the Cartulary shows that medieval London was a wider-spread and more complex organism than we tend to imagine.

The ring of monastic houses inside and outside the City's walls are one element, still little enough known to judge from recent destruction and damage.<sup>6</sup> The suburbs, straggling a mile in all directions and even stretching two miles to Westminster, the "Nation's Capital" were another; the suburban estates up to four and five miles from the City walls have always been a real part of London. One small example is the Clerkenwell Nuns' property of Muswell Hill given by the Bishop of London in c. 1155, which remained an outlying part of Clerkenwell Parish until the 19th century.

The buildings of the Nunnery were thoroughly studied in 1939, using drawings, water-colours and early printed maps.<sup>7</sup> It was clear that the Nunnery precinct lay between Clerkenwell Green and Bowling Green Lane and stretched from Farringdon Road on the west to St. James Walk on the east.

The medieval church was about twice the size of the present church of 1788-1972. The cloister-buildings lay immediately north of the church and the south cloister-walk (fig 2) survived intact until the rebuilding of the church in 1788. The East Range, the Chapter House and Dormitory had been pulled down by the 17th century, but the North Range, the Nuns' Dining Hall and the West Range, probably the Prioress' Lodging were later incorporated in to the Duke of Newcastle's great house which was later replaced by a handsome terrace of six houses in 1793. Only the Latrines, massive and stone-built, survived into the 19th century.,

1. *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 11 (1925) 67-84.  
2. *The Future of London's Past* (1973) 16.  
3. Revd. J. C. Rendell, *St. Pancras Old Church Restoration Fund Appeal* (1925), and later church guides.  
4. *Victoria County History—Middlesex* 1 (1969) 170-174.  
5. *Royal Hist Soc—Camden Third Series* 71 (1949) (Ed. W. O. Hassall.)

6. Not only has development by the G.L.C. recently obliterated the entire site of the small nunnery at Bromley—Chaucer's "Stratford att Bowe" but severe unrecorded damage has been done on the sites of Holywell Priory, the Knights of St. John and Westminster Abbey.  
7. *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 14 (1969) 234. 282.

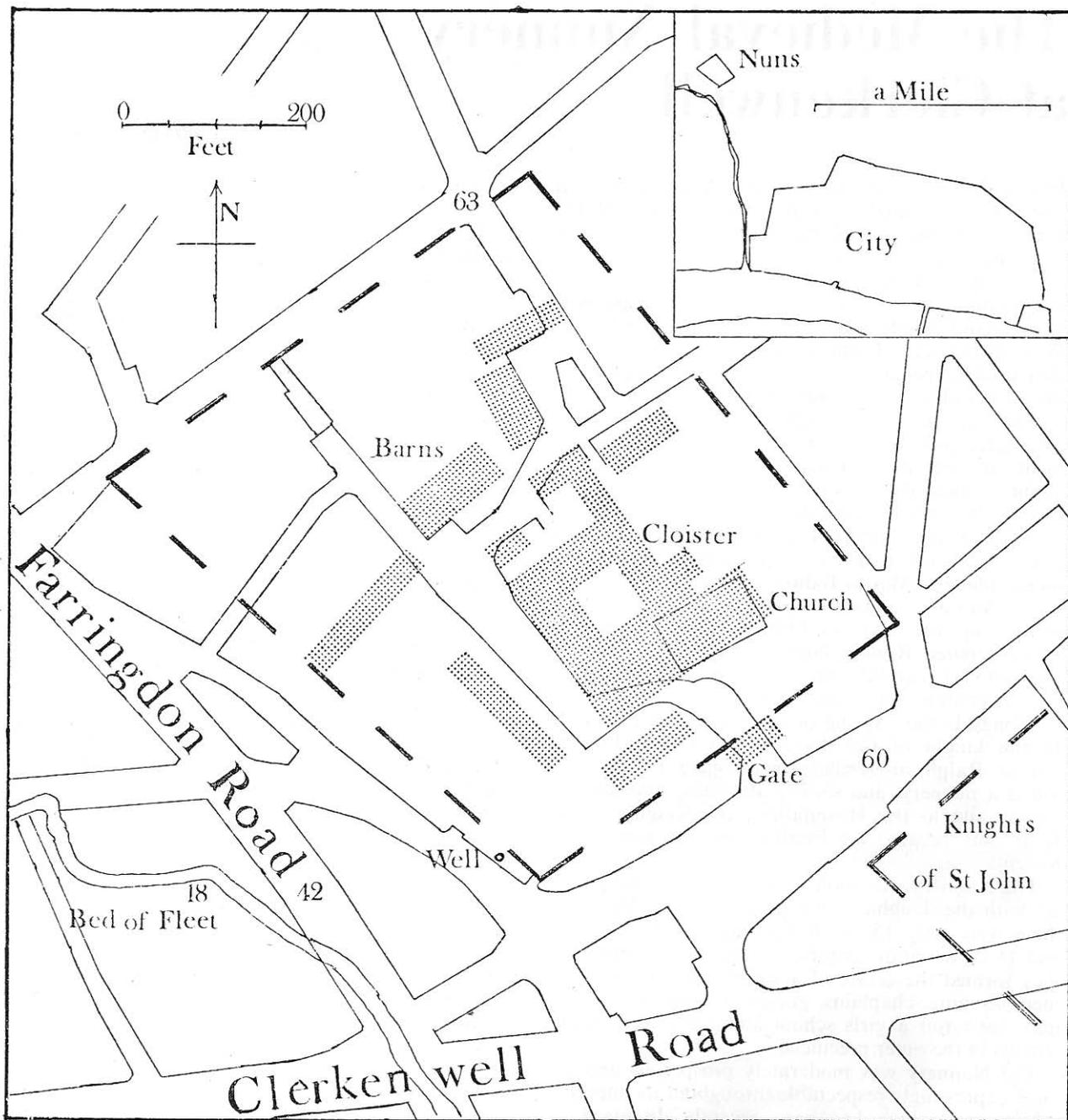


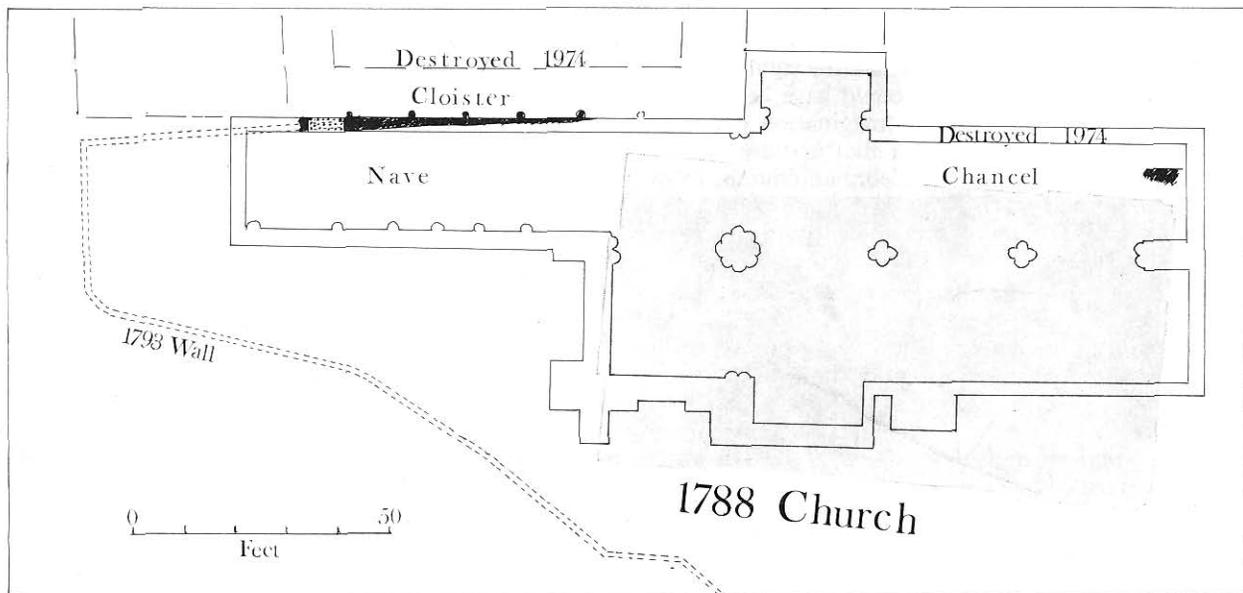
Fig. 1. The Precinct of Clerkenwell Nunnery with the medieval buildings stippled: the location of the Church and Cloister are reasonably certain, while the other building from the 17th century lay-out.

incongruously known as the Nun's Hall.

A long-planned scheme for a Public Open Space across the site of the cloister-buildings was put in hand at the beginning of 1974. Incredibly in the middle of London on a well-known medieval site

frequently written up by historians, no archaeologist got wind of the scheme and no council official thought of the potential of the site, despite eight years of planning and discussion.

I happened across the site on a Sunday morning in



**Fig. 2.** The medieval Church of the Nunnery showing the features discovered and those destroyed without record in 1974. The walls in outline are plotted from the architects' plan of the 1780's.

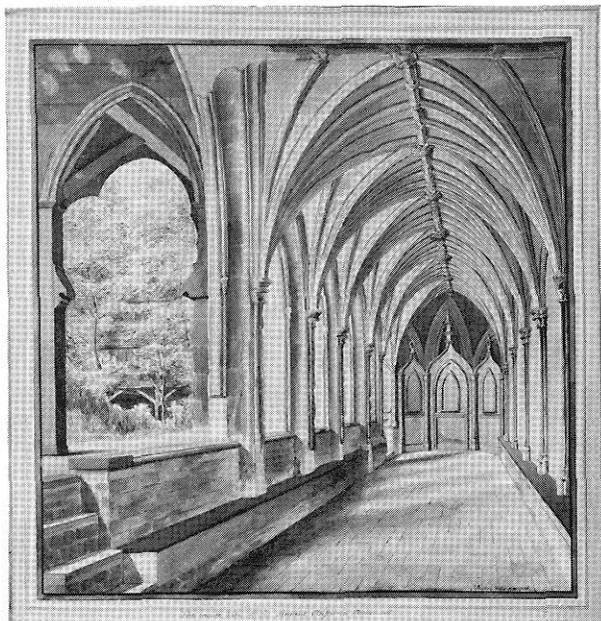
March 1974 exploring the district with my two-year-old son and saw the heart-breaking sight of stumps of stone walls, and piles of rubble where a powerful digging machine had rooted out the east wall of the medieval church, and human bones galore. Over the following few weeks I salvaged what details I could and later members of the South-

wark Archaeological Excavation Committee made some further records.

What has been rescued and partly exposed is the north wall of the nave of the church. This wall served as the south wall of the south cloister-walk, and the cloister side of it is shown as the right-hand wall in the 1786 watercolour (fig. 3). The north door of the church, level with the artist, is also now exposed with its Tudor brick blocking. The cloister-floor and the wall-bench were briefly sounded, but the future ground level will be five feet above the medieval floor, only leaving visible short lengths of the elegant late 13th century triple shafts.

The left hand wall in the 1786 watercolour opening onto the cloister garden was grubbed out without record in the first few weeks of 1974 for a deep drain. This drain also took out the whole of the north and east walls of the Nunnery Chancel which lay just outside the walls of the Georgian church. I was only able to record the stumps of a few walls leading from these, partly by observation and partly by hearsay from the builders' labourers, but at least the footings of the Nuns' Dormitory were more satisfactorily observed in another drain trench.

Also recorded were the brick paths of the 17th century gardens of the Dukes of Newcastle. It was tragic to think that the whole garden-layout, shown in 17th and 18th century maps, could have been recovered at a fraction of the cost of the elaborate council scheme. The actual clearance work, with a



**Fig. 3.** The south cloister-walk in 1786.  
(Photo: Society of Antiquaries)

small excavator and a couple of labourers would have been the simplest of operations.

Almost more heart-breaking than the sight of devastation is the thought of what could have been done, if there had been the slightest imagination or initiative from the authorities or, for that matter, London archaeological bodies. A fine Georgian church, 15 or 20 Georgian and early Victorian houses and the walls and foundations of a medieval nunnery could have formed a wonderful historical complex.

But now the church is locked, the houses are mostly derelict and some have actually collapsed, the foundations have been rooted up for drains, all in a pathetic attempt to improve the situation. In such circumstances it does not really help that the site is now a scheduled Ancient Monument within a conservation area, so thoroughly have neglect, inefficiency and inner city stresses done their work.

On the bright side is the discovery that a good deal of evidence can still be tracked down. A manuscript plan of the medieval church, dating from c. 1785, turned up in the vestry. Another plan of Clerkenwell Green and part of the Close in 1762 is in the Middlesex Record Office. The minute book of the Vestry Committee for rebuilding the church came to light in Finsbury Library. A plaque in the church crypt about the lowering of levels in 1912 give some useful information. All these sources had escaped the intensive scrutiny of previous workers and there must be more.

What of the Dukes of Newcastle who lived so grandly in the cloister buildings? There must be some records of their tenure, which will throw light on earlier phases. And there must be other plans and leases of other parts of the Close from which we can work out more than we do now know about the layout of the medieval outbuildings, the barns and brewhouses, the drains and the infirmary.

Beyond the Close we can probably trace the source of the nuns' water supply to Sadlers' Wells Theatre half a mile to the north. The enterprising Mr. Sadler digging for gravel in his garden in the 1860's, found what can only be a medieval water conduit from the Nunnery (to judge from the medieval map of the Charterhouse supply) and this led to him setting up the Wells and the pleasure gardens.

We should then turn finally to the future of the Nunnery site itself. The Public Open Space is nearing completion with bright red brick ramps, great expanses of concrete paving and play areas. This single project has cost a borough more than has been spent on field archaeology from all sources in the whole of Greater London — for a few hundred residents.

Amongst the harsh textures of brick and concrete

we shall be able to see a narrow line of crumbling medieval stonework, the final compromise and, in my eyes, a really rather ridiculous solution. Beyond that there seems to be two alternatives. The easy way out is to write the whole precinct off and reckon that instead we can study other nunneries in other places, as indeed we can. But this attitude, viewing the place simply as a site, as just another example, will tend to allow the erosion to continue. The Georgian houses will finally collapse and the council will ultimately rebuild them as the sort of flats with concrete gables and jazzy aluminium detailing, which such bodies think suitable for conservation areas, and the Georgian church will become even more isolated in a concrete wasteland.

The harder way is to take the district as a whole; to plan and publish the houses before they disintegrate; to excavate all parts of the Close whenever they come free because it is bound to contribute to understanding of the whole, whether we find a Roman mausoleum, a medieval brew-house or a Georgian cess pit; to borrow the church crypt for a historical study base, or a satellite museum or an architectural study centre; to set up a local housing trust to rehabilitate the derelict houses; to scheme on a political front and manage to work in the educational authorities, the social workers, the historic buildings people, and become (rather more) part of the fabric of society.

Substantial parts of the Nunnery lie beyond the Public Open Space. Just to the north the north end of the Nuns' Dormitory, the Dining Hall and the Latrines lie beneath a depressing wasteland of modern sheds, workshops and yards, all of which have long been scheduled for clearance for school extension and some of which actually belong to the Inner London Education Authority, though no one is very sure exactly how much. The school, however, has been closed and the zoning is in limbo. Also in this zone the Monastic Kitchens probably lie beneath a fine, but derelict row of weavers' cottages.

Just to the south across the road is another derelict area, long scheduled for extension of the Public Open Space which serves as a handy car park for the council engineers. This must cover the line of the precinct wall and of the Pensioners Lodgings or Guest-houses or School-rooms, and should reward excavation. As an isolated operation, there is not much to be said for it, but it would play a valuable part in the comprehensive study of the medieval Nunnery and of Clerkenwell Close in later days. The great Georgian crypt of the church can provide an ideal setting for a display, perhaps as a satellite to the new Museum of London, and for a study centre.