

Excavations at Christchurch Greyfriars, 1976

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IN OCTOBER 1976 THE EXCAVATION by London Transport of a temporary shaft to aid work in St. Paul's Underground station gave the Museum of London's Department of Urban Archaeology the opportunity to test, with the assistance of Lilley-Waddington Ltd., for the survival, within the 5m (16½ft) square confines of the shaft in the south aisle of the Wren (and previously the friary) church, of any 'pre-Conventual' church, Franciscan, or other buildings.

A year after their arrival in England in 1224 the Friars Minor, or Greyfriars, were given land in Stinking Lane (now King Edward Street) (Fig. 3) upon which in 1229 they built their first church. During the next century they were to receive numerous grants of land recorded only in brief abstracts, which make it clear that by the early 14th century they were already in possession of much of the land, between Newgate Street and the City wall, to the west of King Edward Street, and also of a considerable area to the east which was to become the Friary garden. This area is currently being excavated as the last phase of the GPO Newgate Street excavation. The immediate spur for the rebuilding of the Conventual Church was the gift by Queen Margaret in 1301-2 of land and houses in St. Nicholas' parish,

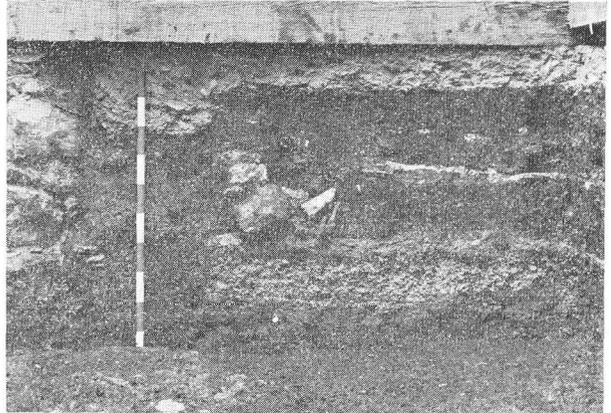


Fig. 2: North facing view of section, showing the build-up of floors related to the "pre-Conventual Church" buildings; especially visible is the drain of the latest building. On the left stands a column base which divided the South Aisle from the Choir; all of which is superposed by the build-up for the Church of the Friars Minor.

(Photo: Trevor Hurst)

worth 60 marks a year, and which seems to have provided the main site of the choir¹. The site of the south aisle, however, might provide evidence either of the 'pre-Conventual Church' Franciscan activity (see below) or of buildings in existence at the time of the grants².

Early Medieval Buildings

Traces of five buildings were discovered. The earliest was a single L-shaped foundation, cut into a 5m (16½ft) deposit of homogeneous dark earth formed by the intercutting of cess and rubbish pits. This pitting activity, according to pottery evidence, went on until at least the first half of the 13th century.

The second building was the only one for which a substantial plan survived (Fig. 1). It consisted of

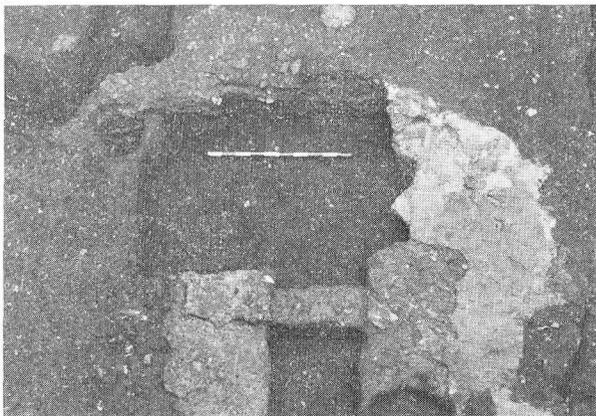


Fig. 1: South facing view of the plan of the second early medieval building, with the brick-earthen sill beam cross-sectioned. The earlier L-shaped foundation trench is visible in the top left-hand corner, having been cut by the outer wall foundation of the Conventual Church, at the top of our photograph.

(Photo: Trevor Hurst)

- 1 C. L. Kingsford, *The Greyfriars of London* (1915), based on what survives of the register of benefactions, gives the best account of the site and early development of the friary.
- 2 The lower part of the shaft also produced evidence of Roman occupation similar in general to that found at the south end of the GPO Newgate Street site, some 50m (55 yards) to the south-east, and along the Roman Newgate Street.

a single north-south brick-earth sill foundation c. 0.25m (10in) high simply deposited on to the contemporary ground level, with associated floor surfaces built up around it. The remaining three buildings were only recorded in the sides of the shaft, and consisted of thin floor levels of crushed greensand, chalk

or sandy mortar, their build-ups and associated shallow post holes or slots. An exception was the latest which contained in addition a drain consisting of a U-shaped trench c. 0.4m (16in) wide and 0.2m (8in) deep. This, lined with broken roofing tiles and filled with large fragments of chalk and

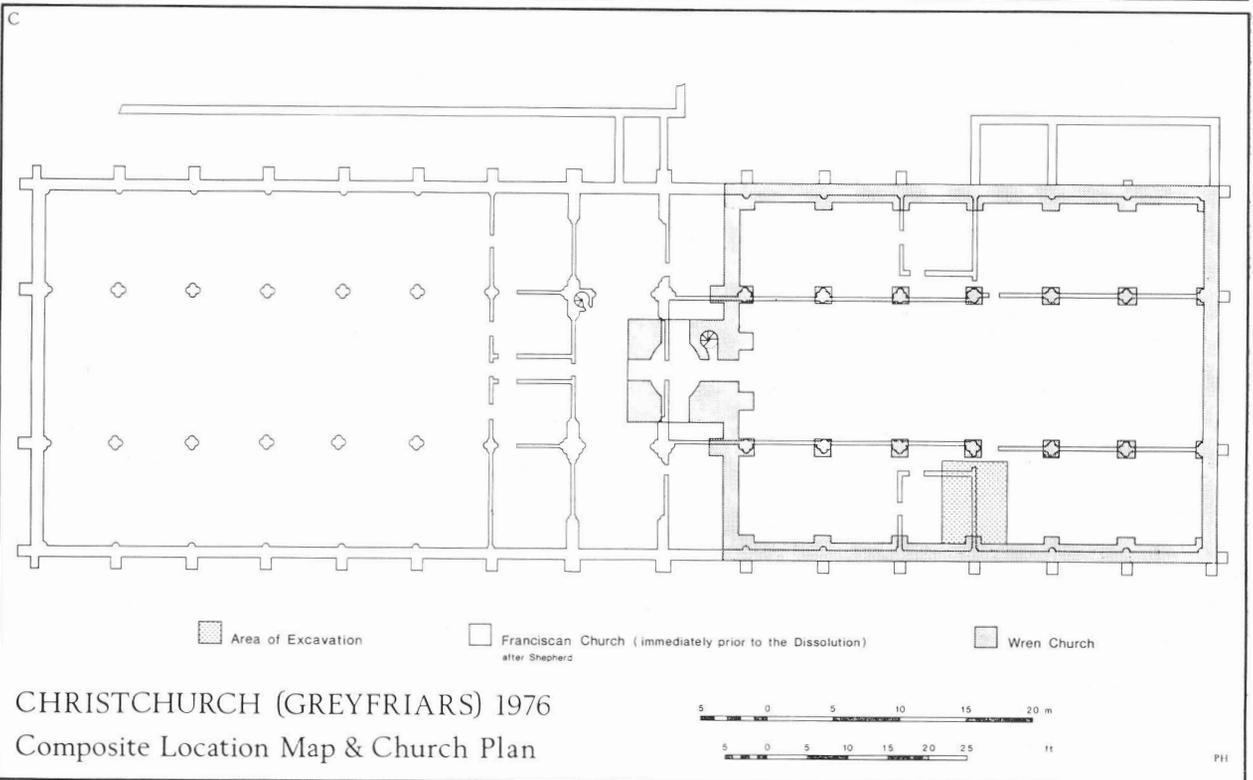
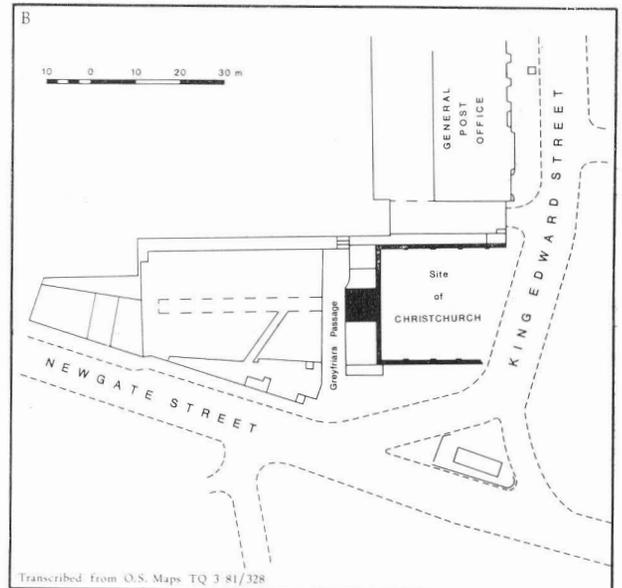
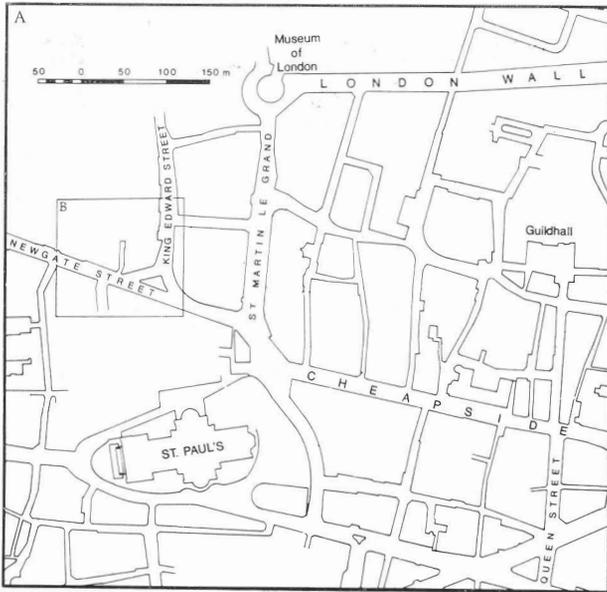
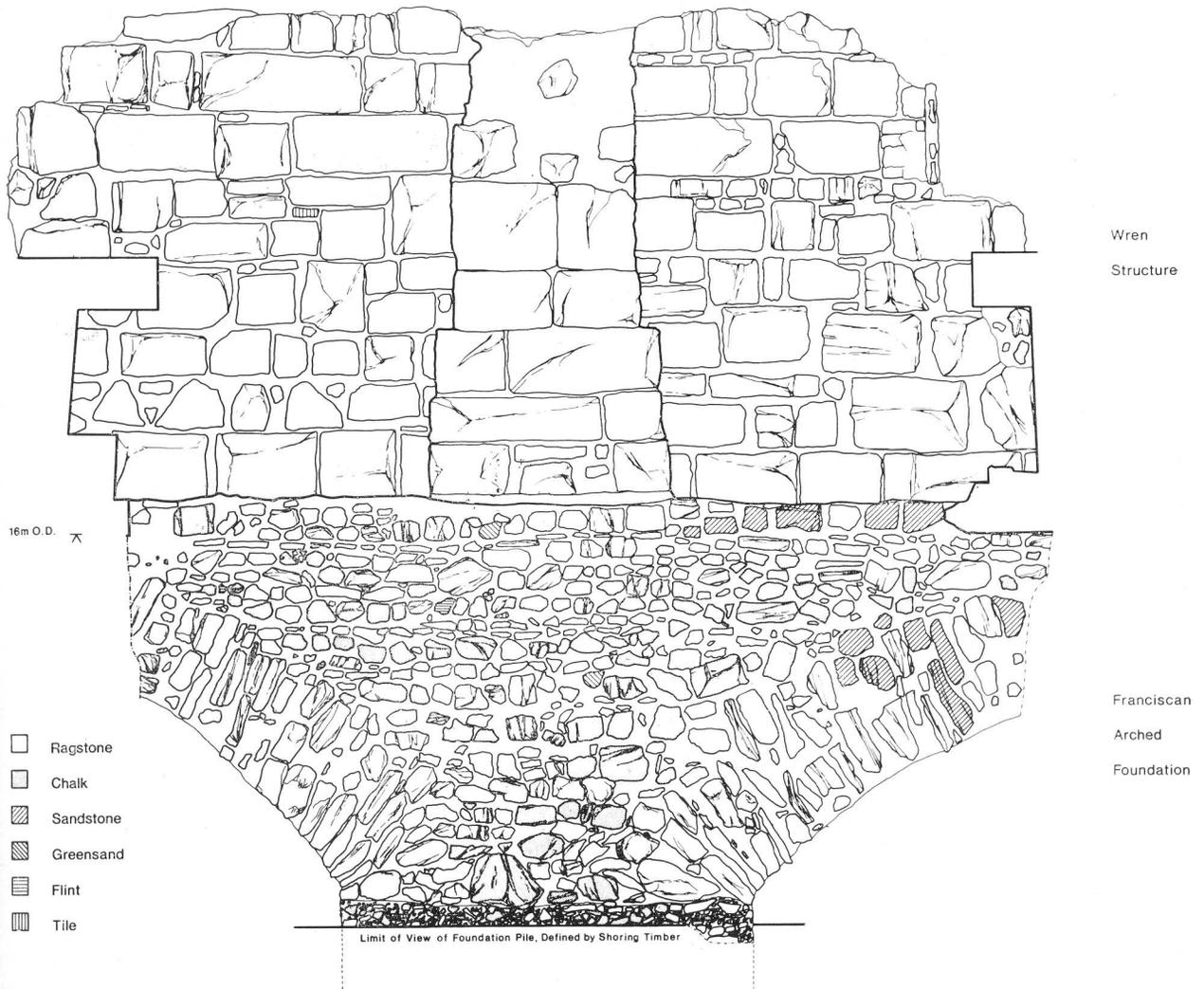


Fig. 3



CHRISTCHURCH (GREYFRIARS) 1976 Church Foundations and Superstructure

Fig. 4

sandstone (Fig. 2), supported the contemporary floor, whilst leaving an area of uncompacted soil beneath it to act as drainage.

Despite the brevity of the deeds relating to the gifts of lands awarded to the Friars Minor, it seems that the plot covered by the area of excavation was

3 C. L. Kingsford, *op. cit.*, especially p.32.

4 E. B. S. Shepherd, "History of the Church of the Franciscans", *Arch. J.* 59 (1902).

not donated until either 1301-2 by Dionosia de Munchensi, 1303, or 1305-6³, the latter being the final donation of land within the immediate vicinity of the Church. As the subsequent record of burial dates within the Southern aisle indicates that the earliest was in 1341⁴; a period of at least 35 years is unrecorded, for the immediate area under investigation, within which the possibility of the building of temporary homes or store houses cannot be dismissed.

The four later buildings were all of simple con-

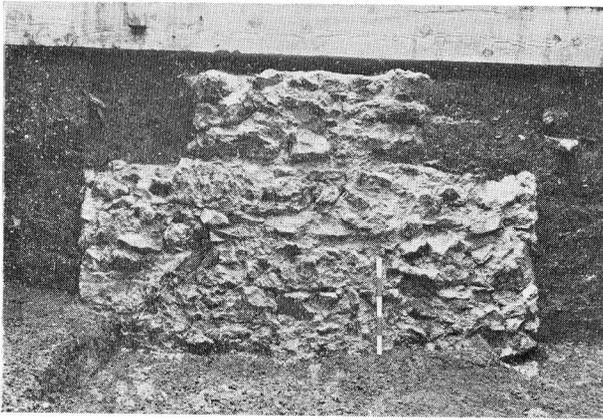


Fig. 5: North facing view of the elevation of the column base which divided the South Aisle from the Choir, showing the change in construction from a square plan to an octagonal.

(Photo: Trevor Hurst)

struction. It is known that the Franciscans were not fond of spending what little money they had on personal comforts⁵, but as it is difficult to believe that so many superimposed buildings would have been constructed during the aforementioned period of time, it cannot be certain that all, or indeed any of them, were of Franciscan origin; they could have been built before the piecemeal grants were made to the convent. Present work on the north end of the GPO site, across King Edward Street to the east, indicates that Stinking Lane was well built up with houses, dating to late 13th century, similar in character to the second building. These were associated with either the Newgate meat market, or, more probably the Goldsmiths, immediately prior to the razing of that area for the Greyfriars garden; possibly indicating that the final three buildings in the shaft are of "Franciscan" origin, because of their intrinsic structural differences.

The Conventual Church of the Greyfriars

The southern wall of the church, which formed the south side of the shaft excavation⁶, was con-

5 J. R. H. Moorman, *The Franciscans in England* (1974) 16.

6 The exterior face of this portion of the south wall was exposed in 1874; J. E. Price, "On recent discoveries in Newgate Street", *Trans. L.A.M.A.S.* 5 (1881) 420.

7 T. Johnson's, "Excavations at Christ Church, Newgate Street, 1973", *Trans. L.A.M.A.S.* 25 (1974) 223.

8 In T. Johnson, *op. cit.*, although 'there was a difference of 2m (6ft 7in) between the two floor levels' (p.221), only 1m (3ft 3in) of difference is illustrated (p.225).

9 The latest date on the lead coffins, which were removed during the cutting of the trench, was 1803.

structed on an arched foundation (Fig. 4). Evenly spaced trench-built piers about 2.3m (7½ft) in diameter supported springer stones for the arches with voussoirs of up to three blocks of Kentish ragstone, the voussoir-band being around 0.7m (27½in) thick. Five metres (16½ft) directly to the north of the south wall lay the base for one of the free-standing columns which demarcated the Chapels of the south aisle from the Choir (Fig. 5). This was also trench built⁷ and was square, 2.4m (8ft) across, except for the top c. 2m (6½ft) which was octagonal.

The difference between this, and the arch built column bases found in 1973, along the same alignment immediately to the east, by T. Johnson's excavation of the east end of the Choir, shows an important change in construction techniques, which cannot be fully assessed until more of the bases dividing the Choir from the Chapels of St. Francis and of the Apostles, along the Southern aisle, are recorded.

Associated with the column base was the build-up of fawn sand in preparation for the medieval floor-surface, which had been cut away by Wren during his rebuilding after the Great Fire.

The Wren Church

From 1546 the choir of the Conventual Church served as a parish church, and was rebuilt on the medieval foundations by Christopher Wren in 1704. This wall, of massive ashlar Kentish rag blocks with occasional fragments of roof tile in a creamy white mortar (Fig. 7), was laid upon the existing foundations, though at a level lower than that of the medieval floor, and the new internal floor surface was raised by about 1m⁸ (3ft 3in) (Fig. 4).

Probably in the early 19th century⁹ a trench approximately 4m (13ft) wide was cut from east to

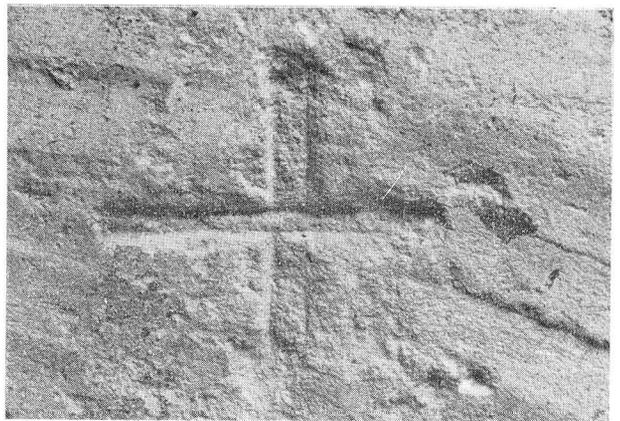


Fig. 6: Mason's mark and tool marks on the interior face of the outer wall of the Wren Church of Christ Church.

(Photo: John Bailey)



Fig. 7: South facing view of the exterior church superstructure of the Wren building, overlying the Conventual Church foundation.

(Photo: John Bailey)

west along the middle of the south aisle in order to construct piers, perhaps for the gallery known to have been directly above. This may have been required because of subsidence caused by frequent interment of wooden coffins which subsequently decomposed.

Graves

The digging of this late trench removed many coffins and decomposed skeletal remains interred in the Wren, and possibly the medieval, church. These were redeposited on the bottom of the trench prior to backfilling. The only skeletons which were associated with undisturbed coffins were a single burial in the east baulk in a timber coffin, of which only the skull was visible, and nine damaged lead coffins which had traces of timber surrounds decorated with iron studs. Six had lead inscription plates which recorded the name, age, and date of death; the earliest being 1770 and the latest 1803. One had two such plates, and another had the inscription in lettering 50mm (2in) high attached to the lid. Most of the skeletons still retained hair, flesh or a

shroud.

Beneath the disturbance caused by the trench lay five individual oblong cuts, perhaps graves, aligned east-west. Two contained nothing more than a horizontal timber resting on the bottom and another contained a presumably disturbed skull. The fourth contained two decayed timber coffins, both with male skeletons, but the first with a damaged skull and the second with no skull at all. The final cut also contained a decayed timber coffin with a male skeleton and a number of bones from another person of unidentifiable sex.

Clearly these grave cuts, if such they all were, may well have been disturbed wholly or in part, but this could not be definitely determined due to the homogeneous nature of their fills.

It is possible that these lower graves were associated with the medieval church. Unfortunately the plan of graves in the Conventual Church proposed by E. B. S. Shepherd in 1902¹⁰ does not accord with

10 E. B. S. Shepherd, *op. cit.*

the positions of those found in the present excavation, and when positions do coincide, the sex of the person buried is different from his description¹¹. Throughout the excavation Shepherd's plan and his conclusions were found to be extremely unreliable, and any future user of his work must use it cautiously¹².

Conclusions

The construction of the Conventual Church was seen to be much more complicated than was origin-

11 E. B. S. Shepherd, *op. cit.*, opposite p.241. Although the number of burials was correct, their positioning was incorrect, due mainly to the Northern and Southern walls not being drawn to their true width (see

ally believed; and some hypothesis is possible relating to the early medieval buildings (see p.330); but the excavation of the shaft was a key-hole exercise, and no firm conclusions about its findings may be drawn until further work is done in the area: Gradually, from such small exercises, information may be built up about the development along Stinking Lane, the arrival and building work of the Greyfriars, and the re-use of the medieval foundations by Wren, a pattern confirmed in many other City churches.

Fig. 13).

12 See also J. H. Birch, "The Franciscan monasteries of the Greyfriars, Newgate", *Newberry House Magazine* (1884) 207-19.

Shire Archaeology

IN RECENT ISSUES we have reviewed two books in the Shire Archaeology series, *Medieval Pottery in Britain* (Vol. 3, No. 11) and *Anglo-Saxon Pottery* (this issue). As the limitations of space prevent us from reviewing the rest of the series within a reasonable time, we are drawing the readers' attention to them all in this short note. All the books in the series are short monographs written by experts for the student and non-specialist. They are large format paperbacks, mostly of 64 pages (some are slightly shorter), priced at £1.25 to £1.50, and are well illustrated with both plates and line figures. The titles now available are: *Barrows in England and Wales* by Leslie V. Grinsell, *Prehistoric Stone Circles* by Aubrey Burl, *Roman Roads* by Richard W. Bagshawe, *Roman Villas* by David E. Johnston, *Prehistoric Pottery* by Nancy G. Langmaid, *Pottery in Roman Britain* by Vivien Swan, *Anglo-Saxon Pottery* by David H. Kennett, *Medieval Pottery in Britain* by Jeremy Haslam and *Bronze Age Metal-*

work in England and Wales by Nancy G. Langmaid. *Pottery in Roman Britain* is a second edition (revised): the first edition was reviewed by Chris Green in Vol. 3, No. 3 (Summer 1977). An extra eight pages allow for discussion of a number of sources including two of special interest to London archaeologists: Brockley Hill and Upchurch.

The quality is bound to vary in a series like this: as a rule of thumb, the better-known the author the better the book. Nevertheless, the series as a whole provides a useful introduction to a wide range of topics, and would make a useful addition to a local society's library. Individual readers will probably want to buy only those titles in which they have a special interest.

A stock list of these and other publications can be obtained from Shire Publications Ltd., Cromwell House, Church Street, Princes Risborough, Aylesbury, Bucks, HP17 9AJ.

CLIVE ORTON

Letters

CIVIL WAR DEFENCES

READERS who found David Sturdy's article on London's Civil War Defences (Vol. 2, No. 13) of interest may like to know of a map in the British Museum collection.

It is in the Kings Topographical Collection XX 1-55. The Plan XX 16 is a plan of the city as fortified 1642-1643 signed G. Vertue 1738. The following was written on it 1745:—

"The works profiled in red can still be traced. 2, White-chapel mount, 6, a laystall, 10, a laystall. Still in being 8, 9, No. 11 complete to this day in the Duke of Bedford's Gardens. Here were mounted 15 pieces of cannon. 20, still in being on the right hand side as one goes into Vauxhall Gardens. 21, still in being the Dog and Duck, a footnote says. Copyd from Wenceslaus Hollar's Map of England in

6 sheets and traced from the remains and Footsteps of the Works by Cromwell Mortimer M.D., Secretary of the Royal Soc."

I hope this may help solve some of the problems discussed by David Sturdy.

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Tottenham, N.17

David Sturdy tells me that this map is already known. He did not mention it specifically in his article because it is given as a reference in one of his references. Nevertheless, much work remains to be done, both in the field and in documentary research, and David Sturdy would like to hear from anyone interested in helping in this work. His address is 54 Hawley Road, N.W.1.—Ed.