



Fig. 1: View of the site, looking south, showing a wall of the cellar exposed in a contractor's excavation.

# A late medieval cellar and the archaeology of Streatham

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SINCE LATE 1977 the Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee has been carrying out archaeological work in Lambeth. The Committee is funded by the local authorities, the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission, the GLC, and by private donations. The investigations are carried out on its behalf by staff of the Museum of London's Department of Greater Archaeology (DGLA). Throughout the Borough of Lambeth, we have completed twenty excavations, and deposits exposed during building work have been observed on over a hundred redevelopment sites.

The first part of this article describes the results of site watching during the recent building work at St. Mary's Convent, Tooting Bec Gardens, SW16. The second part discusses what is known about the archaeology of Streatham.

## A late medieval cellar in Streatham

In May 1983 A. Roberts & Co. began the construction of extensions to the existing Convent buildings (Fig. 1). This site was of interest because it lay within the historic centre of Streatham (Fig. 2). Roman coins and a small bronze figure of Hercules

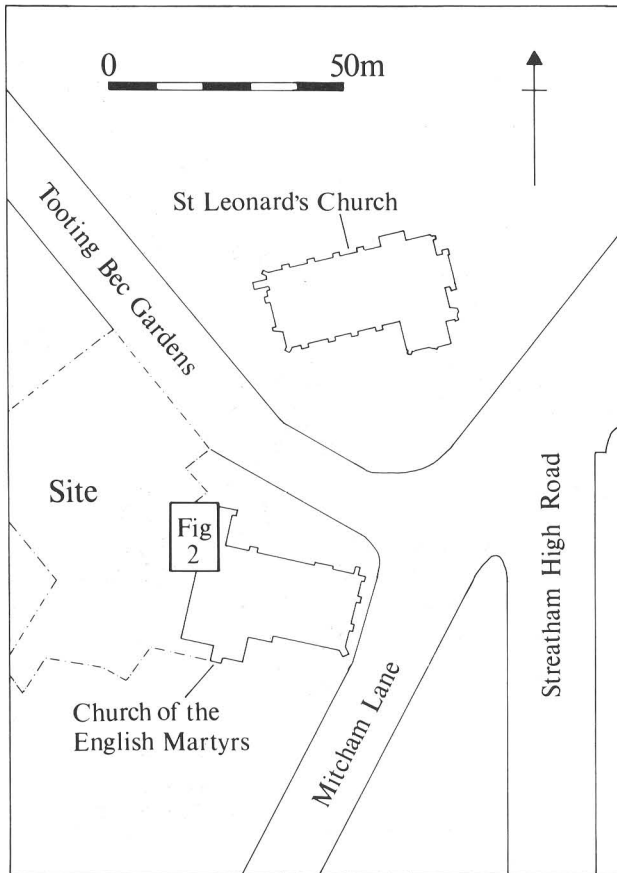


Fig. 2: Site location.

had been found nearby. The Convent lay opposite St. Leonard's Church, first recorded in the late 13th century and which may stand on the site of a chapel mentioned in Domesday Book (AD 1086). The DGLA had therefore obtained permission to carry out site watching, to record any archaeological deposits exposed in the foundation trenches.

The contractors excavated several long narrow trenches, to a depth of up to 2m (6½ft). The clay sub-soil on the site was overlain by up to a metre (3ft) of garden earths and layers of brick rubble. The cellar was discovered when one of its walls was cut through by the contractor's excavation for the lift shaft (Fig. 3). Subsequently, the other three walls of the rectangular structure were exposed in foundation trenches.

The cellar measured about 5.5 by 3.6m (18 by 12ft) internally. It had been dug at least a metre into the natural clay, but its full original depth is unknown, as modern disturbances had removed the contemporaneous ground surfaces. Because of this

destruction the layout of the rest of the building is also unknown.

The walls were made of flint, chalk, greenstone and tile, laid in yellow sandy mortar, and were from 0.35 to 0.6m (14 to 24in) wide. They had been built in irregular courses, and were faced internally with squared blocks. Modern brick foundations had been cut into the cellar, but in places its walls survived to a maximum height of 1.4m (4½ft).

In the the north corner of the cellar was an entrance formed by a straight sided gap in the walls, 1.3m (4ft) wide, over a low stone sill. On either side of the sill were shallow oval depressions in the mortar floor-base (Fig. 3). The entrance may have been provided for a wooden staircase with the sill at its base, and the two depressions may have held timber-door jambs or supports for the stairs or hand-rails. However, as no wood survived, these arrangements can only be surmised.

The floor, of tiles, had been laid over a mortar base. Most of the tiles had been removed, presumably for re-use elsewhere, when the cellar went out of use. They had left square impressions in the surface of the floor-base, measuring about 165mm (6½in) across, indicating the tiles had been about that size. However, six fragments of glazed tile survived in their original position close to the north-east wall (Fig. 3). These were about 28mm (1.1in) thick, but no complete edges survived. Their fabric was fairly coarse and fully oxidised. Four fragments were glazed a greenish black, one a light brown and one a mid yellow. Tiles of a comparable size with similar glazes are known to have been imported from the Netherlands, and it is possible that the Streatham fragments also were imports from there. They probably date from the late 15th century, but could be of early 16th century date.

The date of the tiles suggests that the cellar was probably built in the late 15th century. When it went out of use, most of the tiles were removed, and the walls were partly demolished. The cellar was then filled with dumps of grey and yellow clays, but these layers contained no finds which would indicate when it had been abandoned.

### The archaeology of Streatham

Our knowledge of the early history of Streatham is limited, in part because few archaeological excavations have been carried out, and because documentary evidence for the Roman and medieval periods is scarce. Following the discovery of the medieval cellar described above, it seems appropriate to review what is known about the area.

Occasional finds of prehistoric flint tools have been made in the area, but there is no evidence of

any pre-Roman occupation. Following the Roman invasion in AD 43, a network of roads was built. One of these is known as the "London-Brighton Way" and is thought to lie under the modern A23, the Streatham High Road. A few Roman items have been found in and near St. Leonard's Churchyard. Roman pottery was recovered when a pipe-trench was dug across Tooting Graveney Common in 1982, and a Roman coin is reputed to have been found thereabouts recently. However, despite these finds, it will not be until a building or features, such as ditches or pits, are found that we can be confident that a Roman settlement existed in the area.

No Saxon material has yet been reported from Streatham, but the place name, meaning "settlement on the straight road", implies that a Saxon community existed there. The name is recorded on three Saxon charters, for AD 727, 933 and 1062, which granted or confirmed the rights of Chertsey Abbey to land at Streatham and elsewhere. However, these charters must be used with caution as they are described as 'spurious' by scholars.

A small village with a chapel is attested in Domesday Book (AD 1086): the chapel may have stood on the site of St. Leonard's Church, which is first recorded in the late 13th century. The manor house was built in 1394 and stood on the corner of Streatham Common North and the High Road. The cellar described above was part of a building of the medieval village.

It is clear that the village was small at the time of the earliest Parish Registers for Streatham, which date to 1538. The later history of the settlement is described in Graham Gower's *A Brief History of Streatham* (Streatham Society Local History Booklet No. 1, 1980).

Detailed information about the origins, appearance, and historical development of the ancient Streatham settlement can only be provided by further archaeological excavations.

#### Acknowledgements

Alain Didinal Associates and A. Roberts (Building) Ltd. provided access to the site, and special

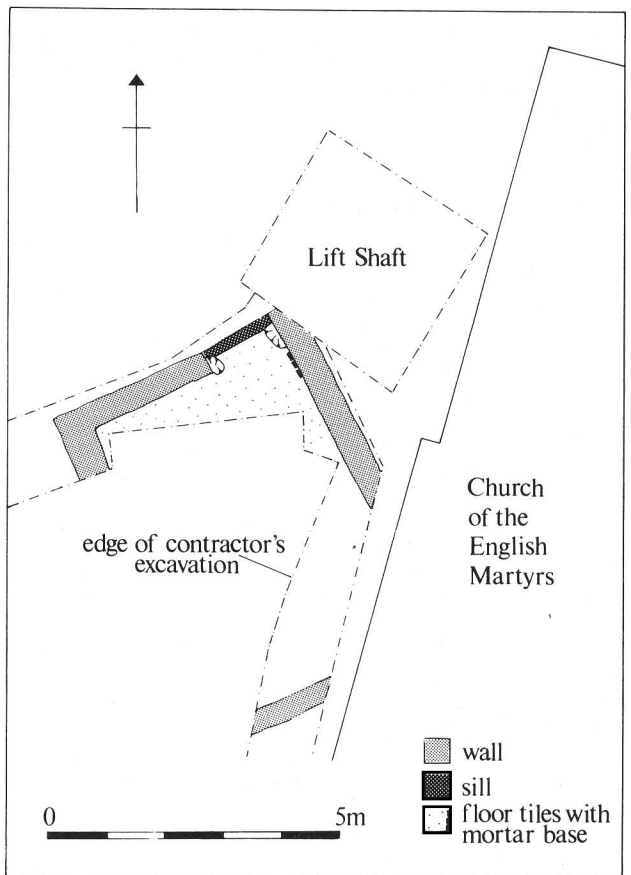


Fig. 3: The cellar.

thanks are due to the site agent, Bill Hollamby, for much help and co-operation. Carrie Bowden, Gary Harding, Peter Hinton and the writer carried out the work on site. John Dillon drew Figs. 2 and 3. Elizabeth Eames examined the tiles and kindly provided the information about them. Laura Schaaf and Peter Hinton assisted with the preparation of the article.

## Local Societies – amendments

THE FIRST SET of amendments to the new list of local societies published in Vol. 4, No. 15 (Summer 1984) 403-4 is as follows:

**Orpington and District Archaeological Society,**

Sec. Mrs. H. Shave, 35 Masfield View, Orpington, BR6 8PH.

**Pinner Local History Society,** Sec. Ken Kirkman, 35 Albany Drive, HA5 3RL.