

Fig. 1: (A) location map of site showing (B) Phase Three of infirmary hall and other buildings, and approximate location of church.

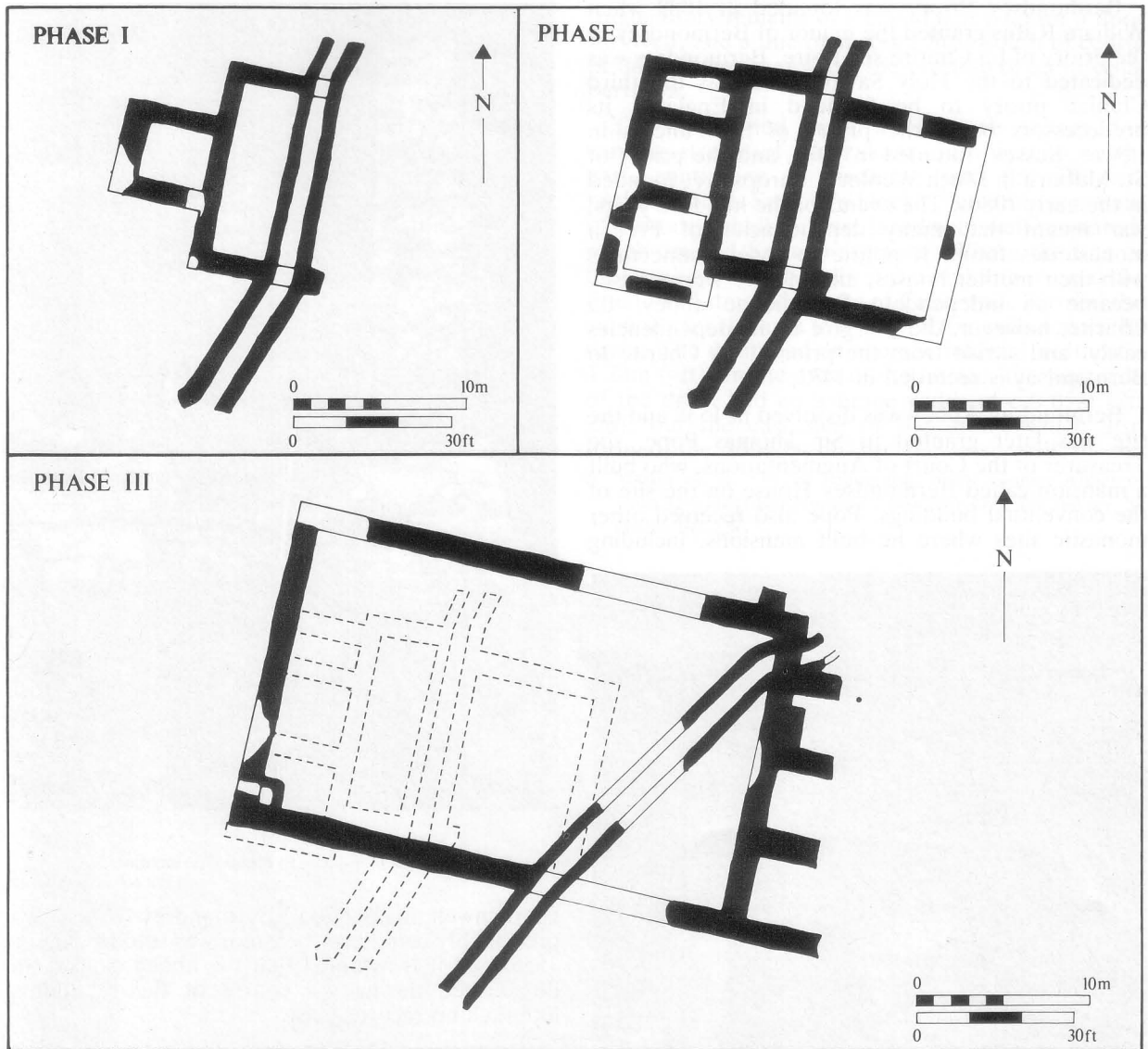


Fig. 2: The three phases of construction of the infirmary hall.

The Infirmary of Bermondsey Priory

DAVID BEARD

IN SPRING 1984 the Department of Greater London Archaeology of the Museum of London began excavations on a large redevelopment site at Long Walk, S.E.1. (Fig. 1). The site belongs to Southwark Council, who intend to use it for housing. It lies to the south of the church of the Cluniac priory of Bermondsey, the position of which is now shown

by the line of Abbey Street. The area available for excavation includes part of the south and the east conventual ranges, the infirmary, and probably part of the monks' cemetery. Excavation has been made possible by grant from the GLC and HBMC, and work is expected to continue until at least the end of 1986.

Bermondsey Priory was founded in 1089 when William Rufus granted the manor of Bermondsey to the priory of La Charité-sur-Loire. Bermondsey was dedicated to the Holy Saviour and was the third Cluniac priory to be founded in England, its predecessors being the priory of St. Pancras in Lewes, Sussex, founded in 1077, and the priory of St. Milburh in Much Wenlock, Shropshire, founded in the early 1080s. The events of the hundred years' war meant that many dependencies of French monasteries found it politic to sever connections with their mother houses, and in 1399 Bermondsey became an independent Benedictine abbey. La Charité, however, did not give up its dependencies easily, and a visit from the prior of La Charité to Bermondsey is recorded in 1432.

Bermondsey Abbey was dissolved in 1538 and the site was later granted to Sir Thomas Pope, the Treasurer of the Court of Augmentations, who built a mansion called Bermondsey House on the site of the conventual buildings. Pope also received other monastic sites where he built mansions, including

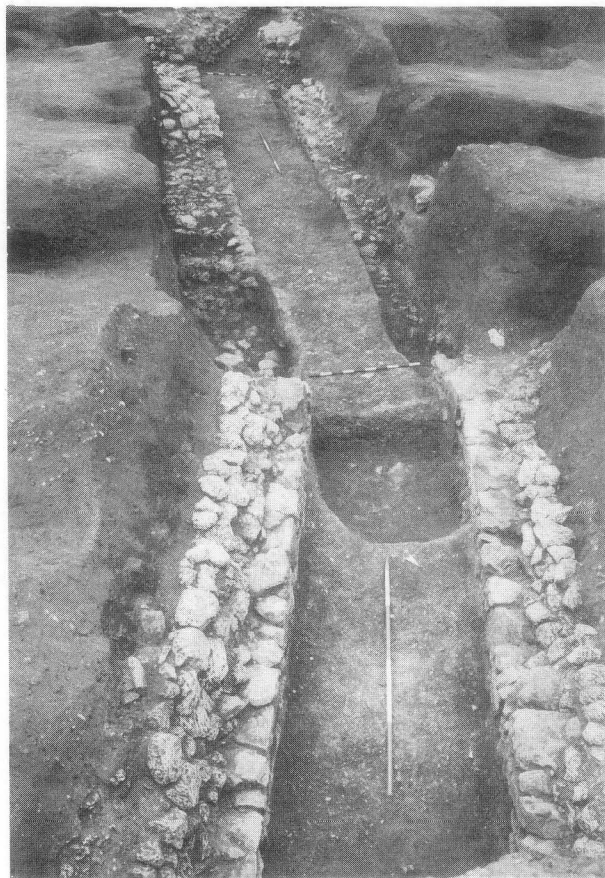


Fig. 3: Phase One infirmary latrine and drain.
(Photo: Eric Norton)

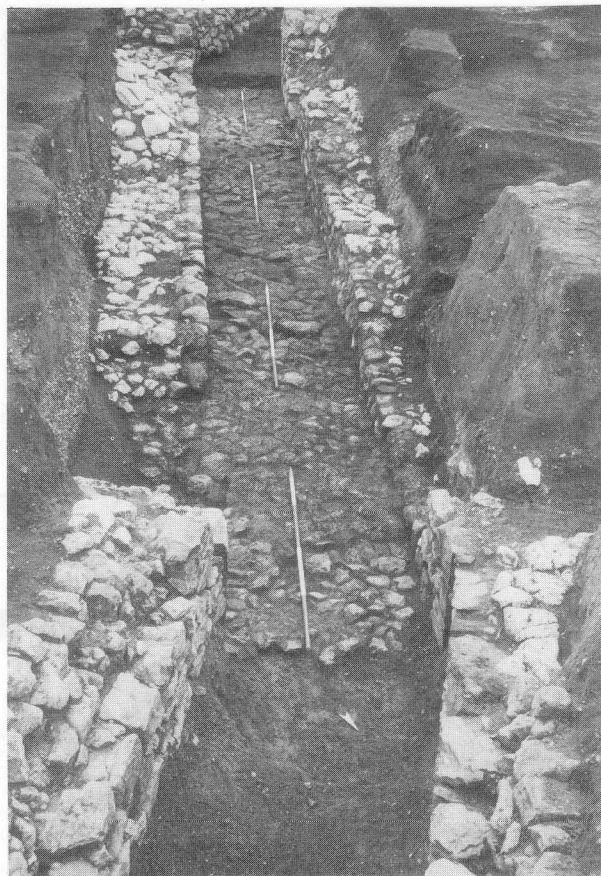


Fig. 4: stone base to Phase One latrine.
(Photo: Eric Norton)

Clerkenwell in London. Bermondsey House was presumably completed before it was sold by Pope in 1555, and it is assumed that the abbey church was demolished during the course of the rebuilding, although no records exist.

Bermondsey House survived in a ruinous condition until the early 19th century when extensive drawings were made of it by John Chessell Buckler shortly before its demolition. Buckler also made a plan¹ of such walls belonging to the abbey church and the conventual buildings as he could locate. It was this plan that enabled D. Corbett in 1956 and W. F. Grimes in 1962 to accurately position trenches over the east end of the north transept and the north side of the chancel of the church².

The present excavations started in the south eastern part of the site, on what, from its relation to the position of the church, was expected to be the site of the priory infirmary. There are three phases of building in this area, although the first and second are probably stages of construction within a single

scheme; the third phase represents complete demolition of the earlier structures and total rebuilding.

Phase one (late 11th/early 12th century)

The original structures comprise a rectangular building *c* 11m × 6m (36ft × 19ft 6in) with a small, almost square room to the west and a stone-lined drain serving an internal latrine on the east side of the building (Fig. 2). The structures had been subject to medieval demolition and stone-robbing: only the lower parts of the drain lining remained *in situ*, and the walls of the building survived only as foundations. These wall foundations were *c* 1m (3ft 3in) wide and were built of alternate layers of rammed gravel and chalk blocks. In all phases the builders showed great concern to ensure that foundations rested securely on the natural gravel, so that they are considerably deeper where earlier features had been encountered. Within the building

1. British Museum Add. Mss. 24432A/238

2. Grimes, W. F. *The Excavation of Roman and Medieval London* (1968) 210-7.

fragmentary remains of a gravel make-up for a floor survived, and a line of stakes a little south of centre of the building may show the position of an internal partition.

The stone-lined drain would have conveyed a running stream of water from south-west to north-east, continuing to discharge into the Thames, probably at St. Saviour's Dock³. The drain was built of mortared chalk rubble, faced with well-mortared, rough-dressed Kentish ragstone. Where the line of the north and south walls of the building crossed the drain, well-dressed blocks of Caen stone formed the supports for the arch that carried the walls across the drain. The drain had an average internal width of *c* 1.20m (4ft). In the area of the latrine, the west side of the drain had an average width of *c* 0.65m (2ft 2in), but the east side of the drain, which also formed the foundation for the east wall of the

3. Martin, A. R. 'On the Topography of the Cluniac Abbey of Saint Saviour at Bermondsey' *Journ Brit Arch Soc* 2nd ser. 32 (1926) 192-228.



Fig. 5: fragment of sculpture, probably 11th century.

(Photo: Trevor Hurst)



Fig. 6: east end of Phase Three infirmary wall.

(Photo: David Beard)

building, was more massive, being *c* 0.90m (3ft) wide (Fig. 3). To the north and the south of the building the floor of the drain consisted of the natural gravel. Within the area of the latrine the construction cut was *c* 0.40m (1ft 4in) deeper and here the drain had been paved with slabs of ragstone (Fig. 0). The level had then been raised to the height of the gravel floor to the north and south by *c* 0.30m (1ft) of redeposited gravel. This would appear to be a preventative measure to stop the running stream undermining the eastern foundation of the building.

In the area of the building, and overlying the gravel floor, were several complete, or near complete pots lying where they had broken when they were discarded in the latrine. Samples from the bottom of the drain were taken from three areas: south (upstream) of the latrine; within the latrine; and north (downstream) of the latrine⁴. The samples from the south end of the drain produced negative results, but those from within the latrine and those from north of the building contained quantities of

maw worm eggs (*Ascaris Lumbricoides*), confirming the theory that human sewage was entering the drain from within the building.

Phase two (12th century)

Sometime after the construction of phase one and before the end of the 12th century the original building was extended both to the east and to the west by the addition of two rectangular rooms. The western one measured *c* 12m × 6m (39ft × 19ft 6in) and the eastern *c* 11m × 8m (36ft × 26ft). These additional walls are not perpendicular to the existing building and they would appear to be aligned on structures lying to the west, between the infirmary and the priory dorter. These walls had also been subject to medieval demolition and robbing, and existed only as gravel and chalk foundations.

From a feature cut by the north wall of the eastern extension came a fragment of sculpture (Fig. 5). The fragment is *c* 0.36m × 0.27m (14in × 10½in) and carved in oolitic limestone. The sculpture is very

worn and shows a large central figure holding a book, a standing group of figures to the right and three lower (kneeling?) figures to the left. The left side of the fragment is bounded by a wide raised bar and part of a curving bar remains above the figures. The sculpture is probably 11th century in date⁵, and the scene may represent the raising of Lazarus⁶. The presence of this fragment in 12th century construction levels may indicate renovation of an ecclesiastical building elsewhere on site at this time.

Phase three (late 12th century)

In the late 12th century a total rebuilding of the infirmary took place. The walls of the original buildings were demolished to foundation level, and the drain was destroyed and robbed of much of its ragstone lining. Substantial stone foundations were constructed within the drain where the north and south walls of the phase three infirmary hall crossed its line and the remainder was backfilled. The new building consisted of a large rectangular hall c 28m ×

16m (92ft × 52ft 6in), with four small rooms to its east (Fig. 6). The plan of this building is very similar to the infirmary hall at the priory of St. Pancras, Lewes⁷.

The foundations for the new hall had an average width of c 1.3m (4ft 3in). At the east end of the hall they had been nearly completely robbed in the post-medieval period, and in some cases survived only as robber trenches. Where the foundations did survive they consisted of chalk blocks bonded with clay. The foundation of the west wall of phase two was retained for the foundation of the west wall of the new building, and in part was considerably reinforced with well-mortared ragstone rubble. In the south-west corner of the hall was a stone-lined cesspit which may be a secondary construction.

A new stone-lined drain was constructed which crosses under the south wall of the hall and runs across to the room at the north-east corner of the building. There are indications that the drain changes its course as it enters this room, possibly to run parallel to the walls. This may mean that it is the latrine, although further excavation is required as the remainder of the room lies in the unexcavated northern half of the site.

Later history of the site

The infirmary hall and the drain were demolished in the 16th century to make way for the gardens of Bermondsey House. In the demolition debris of the drain was a figure of Christ, probably from a crucifix (Fig. 7). The figure, which is c 0.15m (6in) high and made of pressed bronze, was gilded and had red

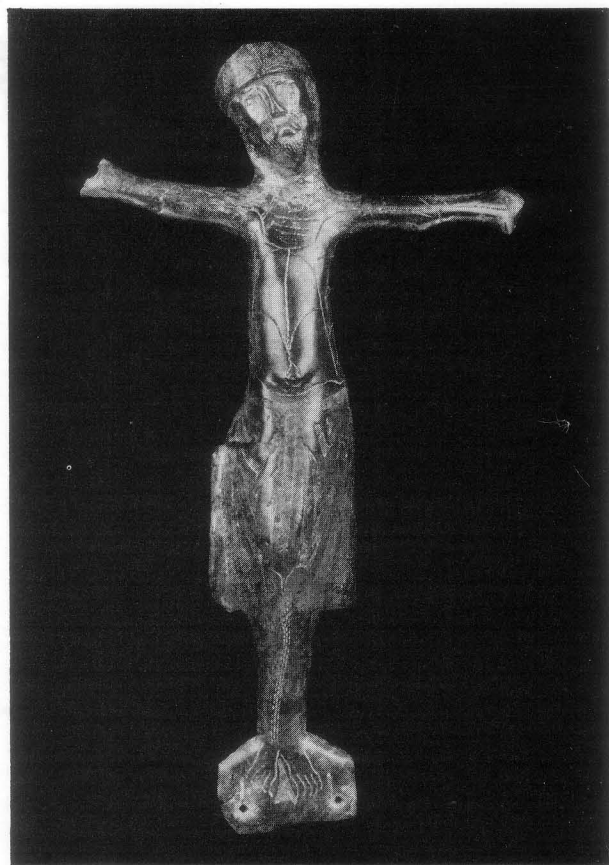


Fig. 7: early 13th century figure from a crucifix.

(Photo: Trevor Hurst)

enamelled panels to represent the clothing. It is probably early 13th century in date and is likely to be of local manufacture⁸.

Future work on the site will include the completion of the excavation of the buildings between the infirmary and the dormer, and the excavation of the southern part of the dormer and the eastern part of the frater. In the late spring of 1986 the area between the infirmary and the priory church will be cleared to enable examination of the monastic cemetery.

Acknowledgements

My thanks are due to the staff of the D.G.L.A. and the volunteers who have worked on the excavations, and to Stephen Humphrey of the John Harvard Library for providing information on the documentary history of Bermondsey.

7. St. John Hope, W. H. 'The Cluniac Priory of St. Pancras at Lewes' *Sussex Archaeol Collect* 49 (1906) 66-88.

8. John Cherry *pers. comm.*

4. These samples were analysed by Clare de Rouffignac.

5. George Zarnecki *pers. comm.*

6. Richard Morris *pers. comm.*