

Fig. 1: map showing the position of the Priory in relation to the walled City of medieval London.

# Recent excavations at St. John's Priory, in Cowcross Street, EC1

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## Introduction

The Cowcross Street excavation by the Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology, conducted between June and September 1989, was located within a development about 100m (330ft) north of Smithfield market, in the parish of St Sepulchre-without-Newgate (Figs. 1 and 2). It was

bounded by Eagle Court, St John's Lane, Peter's Lane and Cowcross Street, and was thought to be inside the precinct of St John's Priory.

The priory was the chief house of the Order of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem in England. Founded in the 12th century, it was a mustering point for the

Crusades, and its importance was such that, in its heyday, it was regarded as the third richest religious house in England.

Previous observations and investigations, since the 1880s, had revealed the remains of structures belonging to the priory's monastic complex in the north-east corner of the precinct, but almost nothing was known about the southern end. The redevelopment of the Cowcross Street site afforded the Museum the opportunity to investigate an area thought to be in the vicinity of the precinct boundary, immediately south-west of the probable entrance to the priory.

### Pre-priory phase

Owing to the limited time available for investigation many of the strata relating to activity before the foundation of the priory were left unexcavated and so lost in the ensuing redevelopment. However, an area at the west end of the site was investigated, revealing a number of irregular cuts in the natural. Their silty sand fills, with no significant domestic rubbish content, suggest that they were the result of the quarrying of the natural sand and gravels. The pottery in the fills dates to 1150-1350, indicating that the quarries were filled after the foundation of the priory, but before the erection of the structures apparently associated with the construction of the medieval buildings in this area of the precinct.

A few of the pits were rectilinear with vertical sides and rounded corners. These pits contained fragments of human inhumations, articulated but in a very corroded state. As a result of the acidity of the gravel the total quantity of human bone amounted to less than a complete skeleton, although six graves were excavated, in three of which no bone survived.

The graves contained pottery dated to the late 13th or early 14th century, and were found in an area that was not previously regarded as a cemetery: the nearest known was the present-day St John's Gardens over 60m (200ft) to the north-west. It may be that the cemetery once extended into the Cowcross site, but that this area went out of use when the eastern part was built upon and the western part given over to gardens.

### The medieval buildings (Figs. 3, 4)

The excavation produced much evidence for medieval occupation to the south of the main priory buildings. From the structural evidence collected it has been possible to distinguish at least three construction phases which illustrate the development of the buildings on the site until their eventual decline in the late 14th or early 15th century. The buildings within these phases have been numbered for reference and are shown on Fig. 3.

The medieval buildings which survived had been constructed with footings of chalk blocks laid in coarse mortar. The superstructures had been built of dressed chalk blocks, with ragstone facing for the outside walls. In addition many greensand fragments, some with relief moulding, were recovered: only two pieces were *in situ*, the remainder being re-used in later foundations.

There were some indications that prior to construction in stone there may have been an earlier wooden structure. Remains of carbonised beams were recorded under building 4 and to the south of building 2. Insufficient time was available for a complete investigation, and later truncation had removed most of the stratigraphic evidence. The dating evidence from the features was inconclusive, leaving open the possibility that the wooden remains merely represent scaffolding from the stone construction.

The stone-built remains may have been contemporary with other wooden structures for which no evidence has survived; indeed the chalk-founded buildings probably slowly replaced them as the wealth of the Order grew.

The first stone building, numbers 1 and 2, was constructed on an alignment parallel to St John's Lane and 20m (66ft) to the west. It consisted of a room 5.5m (18ft) by at least 14m (46ft), internally subdivided by an east-west partition that formed part of the same construction. At the northern end of the building a small square structure was excavated, building 6, which at one time may have been attached to building 1. This structure had been severely truncated and all its fills removed: its lowest chalk course survived, so it was not clear whether it had been used as a cess-pit or a small storeroom – although its dimensions were similar to those of stone-lined cess-pits elsewhere on the site. The original function of buildings 1 and 2 must also remain speculative since in a later phase the eastern wall had been demolished and rebuilt on a slightly different alignment – converging with the western wall to the south. The western wall had been partly repaired and an extension added at the southern end, only 2.0m (6½ft) of which had survived. This would seem to indicate that the original building was 14.0m (46ft) long though the east-west return had not survived. As the only substantial stone building present at this date, it must have been built for a particular purpose: documentary sources indicate that the Bailiff of Eagle, one of the four Grand Crosses of England, had a house on St John's Lane<sup>1</sup>. No other Knights are specifically referred to as having had houses in the area but there was provision made in the rules of the Order for land and timber to be made available for Knights who

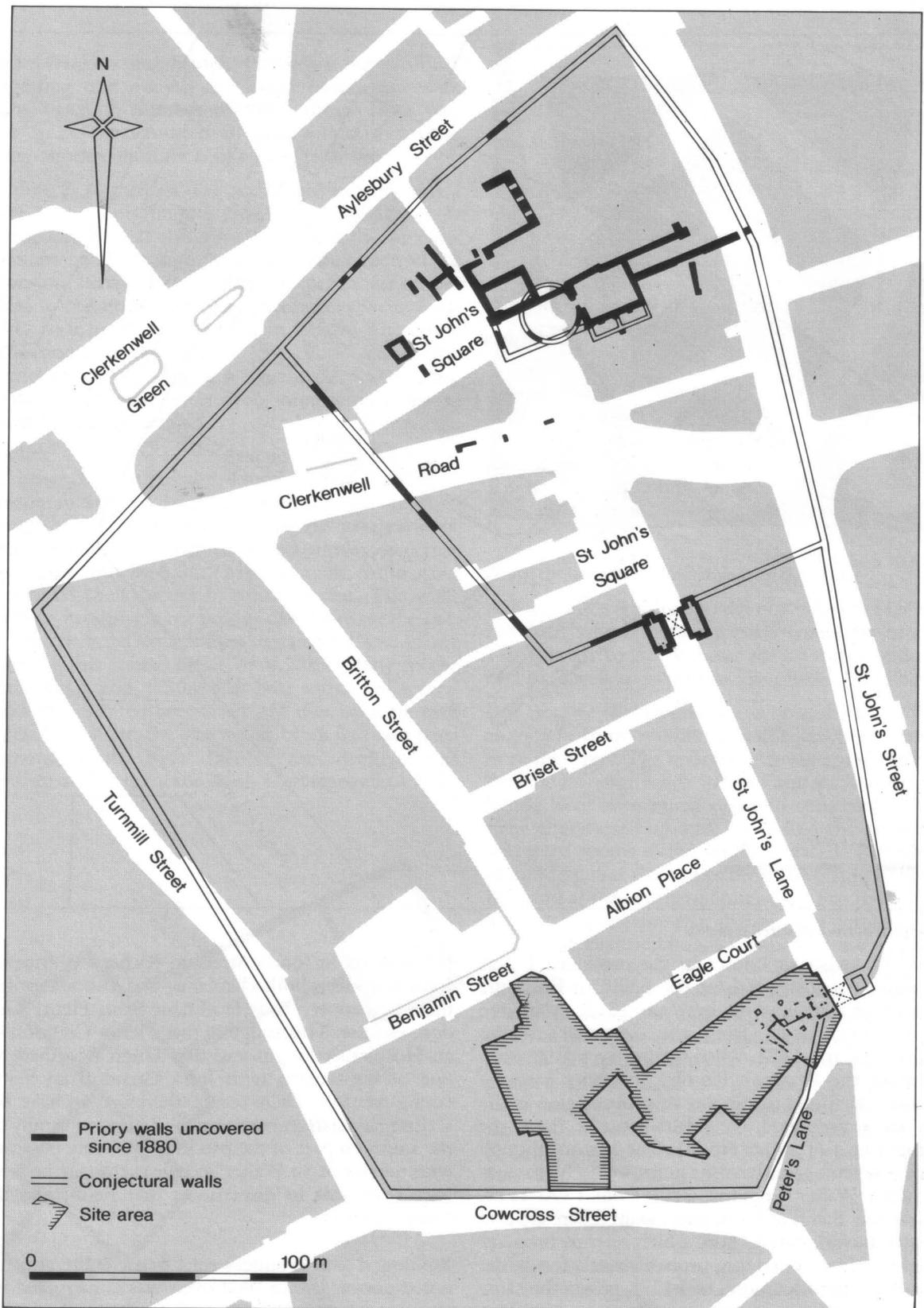


Fig. 2: site location map, showing outline of Priory precinct remains uncovered since 1880.

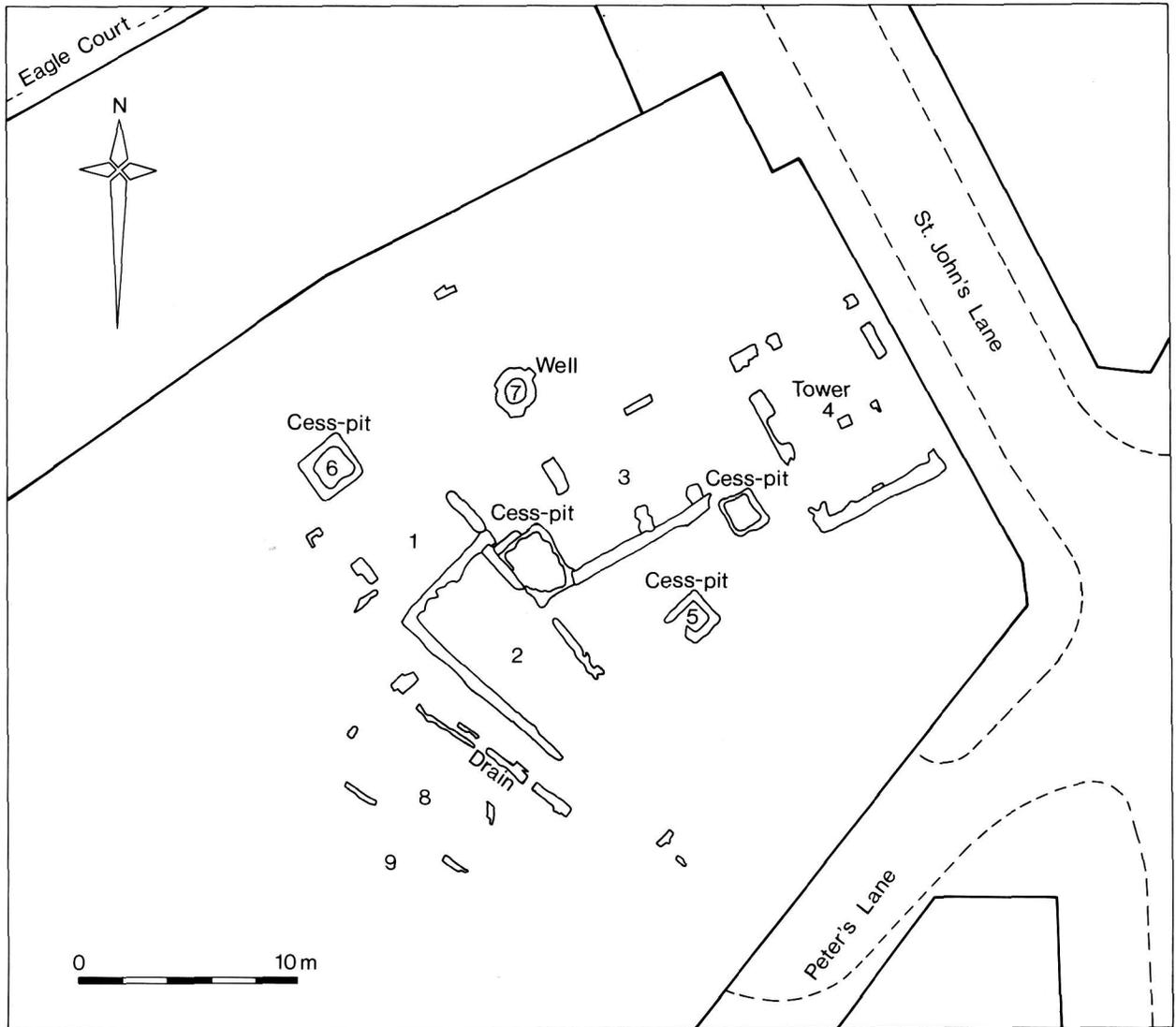


Fig. 3: plan of the excavated remains.

wished to construct houses in the precinct<sup>2</sup>. If this building was constructed for the Bailiff of Eagle the date can be narrowed to between 1312, when the Commandery passed from the Templars to the Hospitallers, and 1381, when the priory was destroyed during the Peasant's Revolt. A further piece of evidence was found to support this supposition in the form of a decorated, late 14th-century floor tile bearing a coat-of-arms (Fig. 5). The blazon, though simple – argent, two chevrons gules – closely matches that of Sir Walter Grendon, Prior from 1396-1417, and possibly Bailiff of Eagle previously. There are also two indentures<sup>3</sup>, dated 1405, which refer to property owned by Henry Grendon, probably a relation of the Prior. A further indenture, of 1407<sup>4</sup>, grants the same

property on St John's Street to Richard Wyxton and John Grendon, both chaplains, and also states again that the property was feoffment from Henry Grendon, esquire. This suggests that Henry Grendon was an Hospitaller knight and that Hugh Brymham was one of his tenants with John Grendon an heir or young relation. There seems, therefore, to have been a close association between the Grendon family and the southern part of the precinct, probably beginning with the rise of Sir Walter and the patronage he would have been able to dispense as first Bailiff and then Prior.

Building 1 and 2 underwent extensive alterations, as noted above: later a tiled oven was constructed near

1. *History of the County of Middlesex* Vol. 1 (1969) 198.  
2. *Ibid.*

3. Cotton MS. Claudius E vi.  
4. *Ibid.*

where German quernstone fragments were found, suggesting that milling and bread production were taking place. A number of 14th-century floor tiles were found re-deposited in pits within the room giving another indication of a change in use.

Building 3, to the east of 1 and 2, was initially only a single wall connecting building 2 with building 4. It is probable that at this time it formed the precinct boundary wall though after a further period of expansion between two and four penthouses were added to the north side. The penthouses were 4.0m (13ft) wide and c 6.5m (21ft) in length. The crude occupation surfaces and a clay floor inside the penthouses do not suggest a specific purpose but the buildings have tentatively been interpreted as store-rooms serving building 2.

Building 4 survived in the ground better than any of the other structures: the southern wall had been incorporated into a later basement and still stood to a height of 1.7m (5ft 7in), albeit below ground level. Together the walls formed a rectangular structure 9.0m (29ft 6in) by 6.5m (21ft) robustly constructed from faced chalk blocks in a fine mortar. The walls had been extensively robbed, as elsewhere on the site, but the construction trenches remained. Close to the centre of this room, offset by 0.25m (10in) to the south, was a pad, 0.50m (1ft 8in) square, of several pieces of mortared greensand and tiles on a tile and mortar bed. A smaller greensand block had also been mortared to the inner face of the southern wall opposite and at the same level. Unfortunately a brick

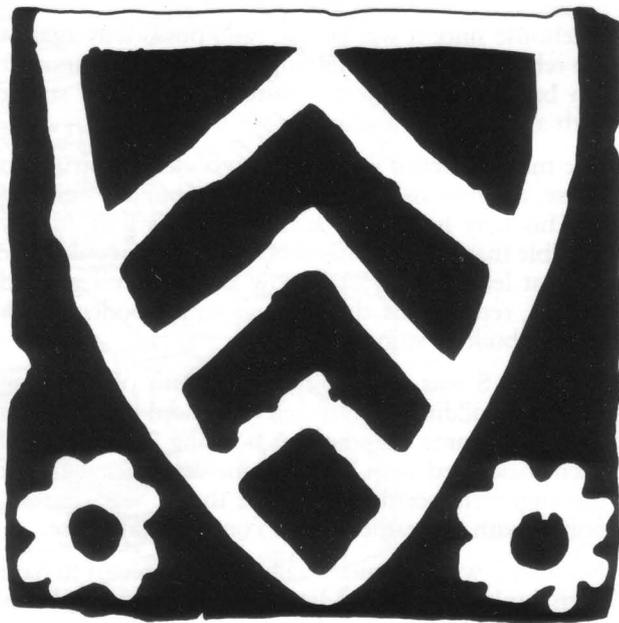


Fig. 5: the late 14th-century decorated floor tile.

wall and a sewer trench to the north had truncated the positions where matching pads would be expected. They appear to be the bases for a vaulted undercroft of a type well known from Hospitaller buildings<sup>5</sup>.

It is notable that building 4 is on a slightly different alignment from building 1 and 2 which was set back from the street. The reason for this seems to have been that the frontage on St John's Lane was important: it would have been much easier to construct it on the same alignment as 1 and 2 avoiding the necessity of odd-sized rooms to the north of wall 3. The position of building 4 at the end of the Lane facing Smithfield Bars and at the southern limit of the precinct all point to the interpretation that this was the entrance to the priory and that building 4 was part of the gatehouse. The substantial walls and solid construction seem out of place for a single-storey structure at the entrance to one of the wealthiest monastic houses in the country<sup>6</sup>. None of the above-ground features survived but it was probably of two storeys with a roof-top walk-way and parapet. The presence of a gatehouse is supported by documentary evidence which places the gate 96 ells to the north of Smithfield Bars, a position that matches building 4 remarkably well<sup>7</sup>. Further sources<sup>8</sup> suggest that the gate was similar to the 1504 Docwra

5. 'Leland on the Perceptory of Melchbourne (Beds.)' *Trans St. Paul's Ecclesiastical Soc* 7 (1911-15) 42.

6. £2384 including Commanderies in 1535. Knowles and Hadcock *Medieval Religious Houses in England and Wales*.

7. G. Malcolm *Phase I Cowcross Redevelopment Evaluation Project* (1989).

8. W. J. Pinks *History of Clerkenwell* (1880) 217.

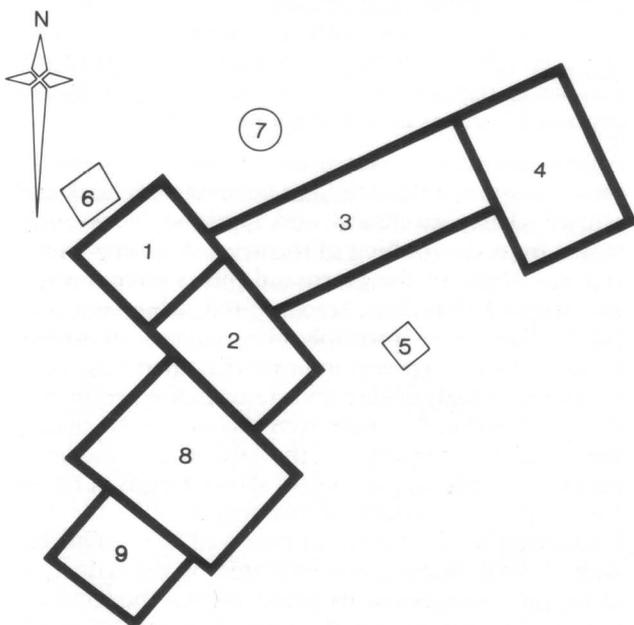


Fig. 4: diagrammatic plan of the main construction phase.

gatehouse since it was able to hold out briefly against the rebels in 1381. If building 4 was a tower, another can be postulated on the eastern side of the street, with a connecting parapet.

The main evidence for an early wooden construction phase, as previously noted, was found under building 4. This may have been scaffolding but it is equally possible that the carbonised beams, which would have been at least 1.5m (5ft) below the medieval ground surface, represented the footings to a wooden tower later re-built in stone.

Structure 5 was a cess-pit to the south of the main range of buildings, constructed of faced chalk blocks and on the same alignment as building 2. The pit had been back-filled with animal bone at a later date but the alignment seems to indicate that it was contemporary with the earliest stone construction phase.

Number 7 was a circular chalk well that seems to have been built in an ascending spiral. It too probably relates to an early stone phase because of the similarity of construction. A large house would need a water supply possibly obtained from this well.

Building 8 was added to the west side of building 2 after the partial reconstruction and extension to the south of building 2. The interior of building 8 had been severely truncated by basements with only a later drain and several gravelled paths alongside building 2, which pre-date building 8, surviving. The most unusual feature of this building was an apsidal bulge in the western wall; whether this was some sort of buttressing or a architectural feature was not clear.

Building 9 had been completely robbed out after demolition so very little can be said with certainty about it. One notable feature was its relative level in the ground: although there was a slope across the site from east to west building 9 seemed to be at least

half-sunken indicating that it was some sort of basement or that after its initial construction the interior was further reduced.

### Pre-Dissolution phase (Fig. 6)

It appears that many of the medieval buildings had been allowed to fall into disrepair before the Dissolution. Though a few may have been maintained it is difficult to determine whether they were occupied or merely used for storage. A drain servicing the medieval building 8 was removed and replaced with one constructed of re-used masonry lined with roof tiles. This improvement appears to have occurred around 1500 though an associated rough rubble surface and the ruinous condition of the building's walls suggest that structure 8 had ceased to exist by this date and that this area became some kind of a courtyard.

Elsewhere, particularly in building 3, evidence of repair in red Tudor brick to partition walls, and the insertion of a small brick-lined feature, 11, filled with charcoal and ash, presumably an ash-pit associated with a hearth further to the east which did not survive, suggest some use in this period. The partition walls were accompanied by deposits of occupation debris which date to c 1450-1500. The continued use of the chalk-lined pit 5 and well (7), established in the medieval period, also indicates that at least some of the buildings were still occupied. Although not completely excavated, the well was found to contain 17th-century infill, and it seems likely that it was in use in the 16th century. The square chalk-lined pit contained a substantial amount of animal bone in a slightly humic matrix. Although these contents have not been fully examined as yet they appear to be the butchered remains of approximately 10-15 horses deposited perhaps as a final fill in a cess-pit.

A new cess-pit was created to the east of structure 3. On excavation, it was found to be lined with brick and re-used chalk, greensand and ragstone blocks, obtained from the robbing of medieval structures in the vicinity. Many of the greensand pieces were worked and some of these bore traces of red, white and blue paint. They were probably the remains of ornate window mouldings and indicate that there had been buildings of high quality and status in the precinct; it is even possible that they were derived from one of the structures present on the site in the medieval period. The pit's upper courses showed signs of repair with a greater amount of masonry rubble, tile and brick being used. This repair may well have coincided with its final cleaning out indicated by the reduction of the pit's base, below its lining, during the scouring process. The pit contained a total of ten fills of which the lower were rich in human waste. Above, the fills

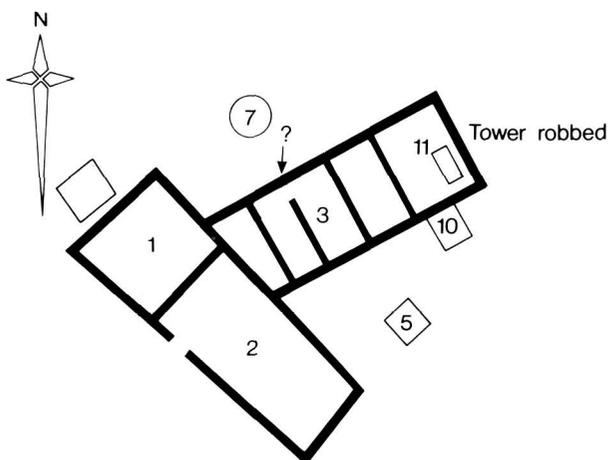


Fig. 6: diagrammatic plan of the pre-Dissolution phase.



Fig. 7: Agas' map of the area with householders' names.  
 1. Rob Tirwitt, 2. Will Aprice, 3. Will Arrowsmythe, 4. George Benson,  
 5. Nick Ryshetton, 6. John Fox, 7. Olive Overton, later Will Rygge.

included a greater rubble and rubbish-rich content; probably denoting the structures' abandonment as a cess-pit and its subsequent infilling dated, from pottery, to around 1600. In addition the pit yielded a large amount of animal bone of various types, which taken together with the evidence from pit 5 indicates that there was a significant amount of butchering going on in this part of the site.

To the west of the structures their occupants continued to dig rubbish pits into the gardens. Only the lower portions of these survived truncation by garden activity which appears to have continued into the 17th and 18th centuries. The pit fills contained largely domestic waste including bone, charcoal, metal objects, pottery and humic deposits generally dating between 1500 and 1600.

### Post-Dissolution period

The dissolution of the priory, in 1540, was followed

by a phase of construction in Tudor brick (Fig. 3). The most significant remains were of a well-preserved cellar in the north-west corner of the main area of excavation. Measuring some 4m × 5.5m (13 ft × 18ft) and approximately 1.7m (5ft 7in) deep, the basement had been cut into the natural gravel. The structure was obviously part of a larger building as it bore indications of ground level walls, since truncated, extending from its south-west corner. To the north more of the ground level walls survived as did a later tiled floor which extended beyond the edge of excavation: this was dated to the 17th century. The basement was probably the central construction of this Tudor building and seems to have been used for storage, with a doorway and traces of a wooden stair in its east wall and several candle niches and light wells in the others. The floor was composed of a layer of orange clay over two thin deposits of silty clay and ash, which were laid directly on top of the natural

gravel, probably to combat rising damp. It may also have had a tiled surface which was robbed prior to the basement being filled with domestic rubbish and fire waste, apparently in the 18th century.

The trial trenches in the south-west corner of the site revealed a Tudor brick-lined cess-pit and well, suggesting the presence of other Tudor buildings nearby, perhaps along the Cowcross Street frontage.

By this time the complex of medieval buildings was in ruins. Their walls appear to have been dismantled, in most cases at or near ground level, with substantial spreads of chalk rubble derived from their subsequent natural disintegration covering the remains. A small brick-lined cess-pit, approximately 1.0m (3ft 3in) square, had been constructed amongst these ruins, either cutting through a wall footing of building 2 or being inserted into a gap, left by a robbed-out doorway. The western-most room of building 3 appears to have been lined with re-used chalk blocks and rubble and converted into a large cess-pit approximately 2.0m × 3.0m (6ft 7in × 9ft 10in).

Evidence of further robbing of the medieval chalk walls, including a large east-west cut marking the removal of the greater part of the northern wall of building 3, was found across the site. Large rubble deposits overlying floor surfaces excavated at the east end of the site were the result of the dismantling of the north and west walls of building 4, of which very little was left by this time.

The archaeological evidence is well supported by historical references to this area of the precinct. Following its dissolution in 1540, which necessitated a special act of Parliament<sup>9</sup> (such was its power and privilege even at this late date), the whole priory came under possession of the Crown.

Henry VIII used some of the buildings in the inner precinct as a storehouse for his hunting and campaigning equipment<sup>10</sup>. An indenture<sup>11</sup> records the purchase, by a Rob Tyrwitt in 1542, of '... a tenement called the Baily of the Eagle House with appertanances and two gardens adjacent to the said messuage, situate and being between the lane called St John's Lane on the east and a garden in the tenure of Will Aprice, Gent, on the west and tenements in the several tenures of Will Arrowsmythe, George Benson, Nick Ryssetton and John Fox on the south and a garden in the tenure of Olive Overton, widow on the north now leased to Will Rygge ...' This illustrates that the area had been divided into

tenement plots, and it is possible to reconstruct them on the 1550 Agas map of London (Fig. 7).

Indeed, the Agas map gives a good indication of the site with new brick constructions lining the St John's Lane and Cowcross Street frontages and the division of the gardens behind into square plots. This may explain the fragmentary lines of brick and masonry rubble as the last traces of garden plot boundaries.

While the priory was briefly returned to the Knights of St John under Queen Mary, only to be dissolved finally by Elizabeth I, this episode was confined to the inner precinct with the remnants of its monastic complex. The division of the outer precinct and the establishment of tenancy, together with the fact that that it never had an ecclesiastical role, put it beyond the reach of the revived Order.

### Later post-medieval period

According to documentary sources the area in general went into decline following the Tudor period<sup>12</sup>. This seems to coincide with the expansion of the city outside the walls. The former outer precinct degenerated into slum tenement blocks; not only lining the Cowcross Street and St John's Lane frontages but swamping the gardens behind and establishing narrow passages, some of which survived until the present redevelopment. Their development can be traced on Rocque's map of 1747 and parish maps from 1823. Following a speech by Lord Shaftesbury to Parliament in 1861, the slums were gradually demolished and the area given over to warehousing, though housing persisted in Eagle Court, White Horse Alley and some of the smaller alleys formerly within the site. Records of the occupants of Cowcross St and their professions<sup>13</sup> give an insight into the changing character of the locality from housing to small-scale workshops to large warehouses associated with the food industry which grew around the Smithfield market. Indeed, the site excavated formerly accommodated a cheese warehouse and a bacon smokehouse.

### Acknowledgements

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12. *Op cit* fn 8; Thomas *History of Finsbury and Clerkenwell. Notes on the Housing Question in Finsbury* (1901).

13. Census of 1851; Electoral registers for the Borough of Finsbury 1876 & 1900.

9. *Ibid.*

10. J. Stow *The Survey of London* (1590) 394.

11. Indenture of 1542 from notebooks of H. W. Fincham.