

Saxon and medieval settlement in Barking town centre

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Summary

An archaeological evaluation and subsequent mitigation by Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd in 2007 were part of the Barking town centre regeneration programme (Fig 1a). Commissioned by Mills Whipp Partnership on behalf of Urban Catalyst, they then undertook several phases of archaeological investigations. These works were completed between 2004 and 2007.

In-situ Saxon and medieval remains were identified. Six sherds of pottery dating from the 5th to 9th centuries were recovered from a pit which represented the earliest undisturbed archaeology. Early medieval structural remains and pitting respected the orientation of the present-day Ripple Road.

This part of the secular settlement east of the known focus of the medieval Abbey has received little attention in previous archaeological work in the area. Structures of early medieval date, fronting a predecessor to Ripple Road, a thoroughfare which is present on the

1846 copy of the Barking Tithe map, were on an orientation respecting its alignment. Likewise, they followed a boundary which ran at right angles to Ripple Road. These remains indicate that Barking's secular settlement from the Saxon to the medieval period extended into this area of Barking. Subsequent to the medieval period, the area returned to open land until the late 19th/early 20th century.

Introduction

The site consisted of a block of land bounded by Axe Street to the south, Clockhouse Avenue to the north-west and Ripple Road to the north-east and covering approximately 1.6ha (Fig 1b). Prior to the archaeological works, a cemetery clearance company had removed burials from within the former grounds of the Park Hall Meeting House of the Plymouth Brethren, located off Axe Street. Historical cartographic and documentary evidence confirmed that its 19th-century burial ground lay to the north of the meeting house.

The preliminary investigations were undertaken in March 2004¹ involving the monitoring of seven trial pits, four boreholes and three cone penetration tests (Fig 1b). The majority of the interventions confirmed considerable truncation of the underlying archaeological sequence as a result of proximity to the library foundations to the west. Intact archaeological deposits were indicated on the north-east and south-west sides of the site. One trial pit over the location of the cemetery clearance works or a quarry pit uncovered disarticulated human bone.

The second archaeological intervention was in 2005.² This comprised the excavation of test pits targeted on pile, pile cap and service trench locations across the southern part of the site (Fig 1b). These demonstrated that areas to the south and west of the library had been truncated down to natural gravels and the north and east sides of the site to be covered with an untruncated horizon of natural brickearth. A robbed wall



Fig 1a (above): site location and Fig 1b (right): the trench locations

feature in the south-east of the site was interpreted as the boundary wall of the church associated with the Plymouth Brethren.

Six evaluation trenches were excavated across the north part of the site in 2007 (Fig 1b).³ These were located within proposed building footprints and revealed a similar sequence of stratigraphy as previous works, with natural brickearth deposits seen to seal gravels. In places, an untruncated subsoil containing medieval pottery was confirmed overlying this sequence. A north-south aligned series of features comprising a ditch, pits, postholes and stakeholes were identified as belonging to the medieval period. Large-scale truncation into natural gravels was observed along the western side of the site, probably as a result of the construction of a public bath house. Two further excavation trenches were positioned towards the north of the site to clarify the results of the earlier evaluation trenches.

Pottery dated to between the 5th

and 9th centuries as well as daub was found in a pit constituting the only certain undisturbed Saxon occupational evidence from the site (Fig 2). Rectangular post-built structures dating to the 11th and 12th centuries with associated pits were found aligned with Ripple Road to the north (Fig 3). Occupation of the site declined in the 13th and 14th centuries, with the archaeological features observed suggesting that the area at this time became dominated by agricultural activities rather than settlement. A ditch cut at right angles to Ripple Road suggests it continued in use at this time (Fig 4). Following decline of the settlement resulting from the impact of flooding and plague, the post-medieval archaeological evidence indicates its continued use for agriculture.

Saxon remains

A pit or possible terminus of a ditch was seen cutting natural brickearth in the north-west side of evaluation Trench 13 (Fig 2).⁴ No dateable finds came from

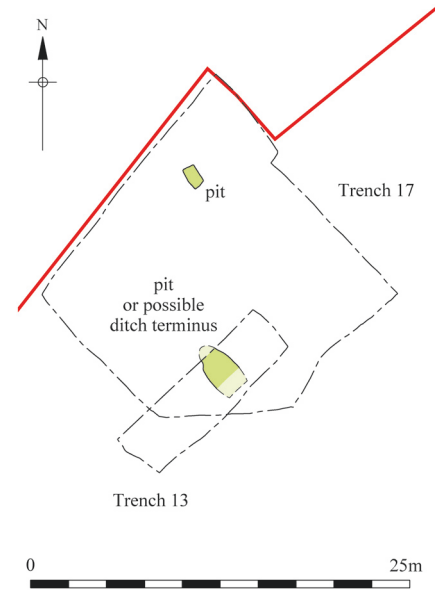
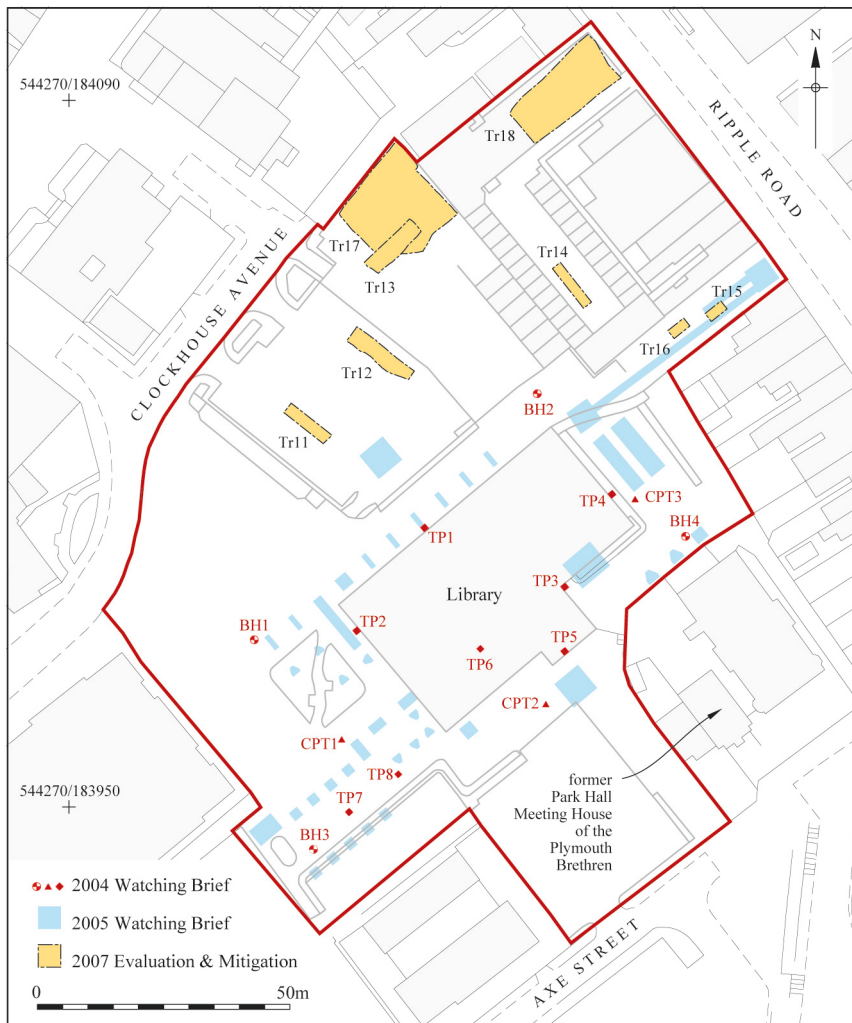


Fig 2: Phase 2: Saxon activity

this feature. Its position in the stratigraphic sequence was comparable to that of the dated pit excavated in the mitigation phase of works in Trench 17 (Figs 2 & 3).⁵ On the north side of this area, pit [1149] truncated the natural brickearth horizon overlying natural terrace gravels. It measured 1.51m north to south by 0.88m east to west and was 0.23m deep at 7.33m OD. From its fill, fragments of daub and pottery dating to the 5th to 9th centuries were recovered. This comprised Chaff-tempered Ware dating from AD 400–750 from a jar with an internal carbonised deposit; Mixed Sand, Flint and Grit Ware dating from AD 400–600+; Ipswich-type Ware dating from AD 730–850 and an unidentified Sand-tempered Ware sherd dating from AD 400–800. A deposition date of AD 730–800 appears likely.

Medieval remains

Medieval remains were seen in evaluation Trench 12 (Figs 3 & 4).⁶ A large circular pit cut a thick layer of subsoil, with its fill containing animal bone, burnt flint, fired clay, fragments of quernstone and pottery dated to the 12th to 13th centuries. Another pit was observed in the west-facing section of the trench, which contained burnt flint. These features were sealed by a plough soil with post-medieval ceramics. To the north of Trench 12, evaluation Trench 13 revealed more cut features, including a north-south-aligned ditch. This was flanked on both sides by post and stakeholes (Fig 3). A pit was



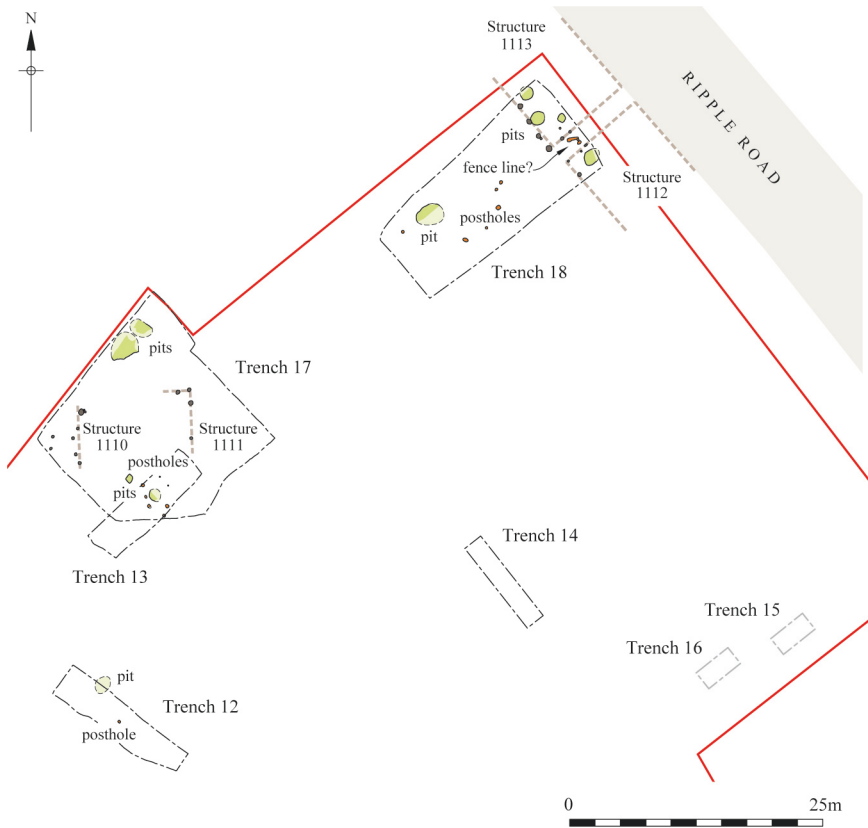


Fig 3: Phase 3a: 11th–12th-century activity

truncated by the ditch. No dating evidence was found in these features, but they have been attributed to the medieval period because of their position within the stratigraphic sequence. They were sealed by post-medieval dump layers.

Further evidence for the medieval sequence was revealed in Trench 17. This⁷ was an extension to evaluation Trench 13 to its north-east and north-west measuring 17m by 19m. Natural brickearth here was overlain by a subsoil with pottery dating to the 11th and early 13th centuries. Two parallel lines of postholes cut this horizon constituting structure [1110], extending 5.51m north–south by 2.72m east–west. Pottery from the 11th to early 13th centuries came from the fill of one of these postholes.

To the immediate east of structure [1110] was another arrangement of postholes representing structure [1111]. This was adjacent and on a parallel north–south alignment measuring 5.08m north–south by 1.46m east–west (Fig 3). Pottery from one of its postholes dated to the 12th and early 13th centuries. In addition, pottery from the fills of pits between these structures pertains to the 11th to 13th centuries and includes ceramic building material

in use from the 12th century. A potential third structure was indicated by two postholes to the north of the area. Postholes seen in the evaluation represent components of these

structures. Trench 18, which was also part of the mitigation works, was situated on the north-east side of the site. Structure [1113] uncovered here was on a north-west to south-east alignment and included a right-angled turn at its southern end. It measured 5.60m long by 3.08m wide.

Three pits within the structure were likely internal storage features. Building material from the 12th century was recovered from the fill of one of these, as were chicken and goose bones. The structure’s alignment respects that of Ripple Road and suggests this thoroughfare remained in use in the early medieval period. Likewise, structure [1112] positioned south-east of [1113] followed the orientation of Ripple Road. Comprising four postholes, it measured 2.62m by 2.00m.

A pit within the interior of this structure lacked any dating evidence, but it is suggested that the structure is contemporary with the others fronting the road. Postholes between the two buildings have been interpreted as representing a fence line or property boundary dividing the two, with additional postholes and pits to their rear seen as further land divisions or smaller outbuildings (Fig 3).

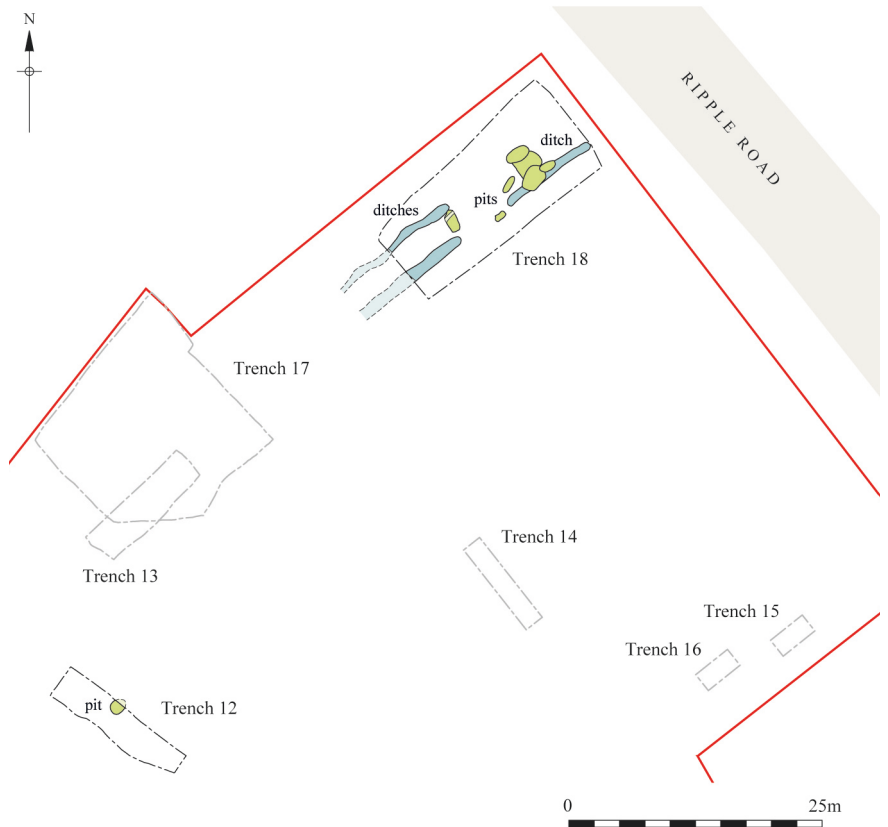


Fig 4: Phase 3b: 13th–14th-century activity

The 13th and 14th centuries saw the frontage of Ripple Road divided by the excavation of a ditch at right angles to the road. This did not stay open for long and became truncated by intercutting pits from the same period. Structures [1112] and [1113] became obsolete and the area became dominated by pits with animal bone and pottery in their fills (Fig 4). Apart from a pit containing 13th-century pottery, burnt stone and animal bone in evaluation Trench 12, there was no further evidence to suggest that the south-western part of the site continued to be occupied.

Post-medieval remains

The alignment of Ripple Road continued to be respected in the 15th and 16th centuries, as is clear from the ditches running parallel and at right angles to it (Fig 5). Cutting these ditches were several pits containing later medieval pottery and building material. Ripple Road is present on both the 1653 Fenshawe map (Fig 6) as well as the pre-1846 Barking Tithe map. Both plans confirm that the site had been open ground at the time these were surveyed, with it being part of a piece of ground titled Cordale on the Fenshawe plan. This refers to a personal name, which in the form of Cordall was not uncommon in the London region at the time.

The post-medieval period features comprised quarry pits and plough soils containing residual material including Saxon pottery, medieval building material, pottery and lithics from the earlier periods of activity in the area. Dump layers from the 19th and 20th centuries in turn sealed by concrete completed the sequence.

Discussion and conclusions

The earliest remains observed, although limited to one or possibly two pits, likely resulting from the extensive later truncation of the site, suggest settlement activity was present in an area distant from the previously known locations of Saxon occupation in the Barking area.⁸ The likely deposition date of the pottery assemblage suggests an 8th-century timing for this early occupation. This is indicative of an extensive secular late Middle Saxon community adjacent to the Abbey complex with a predecessor of Ripple Road forming part of the early layout of the settlement.⁹

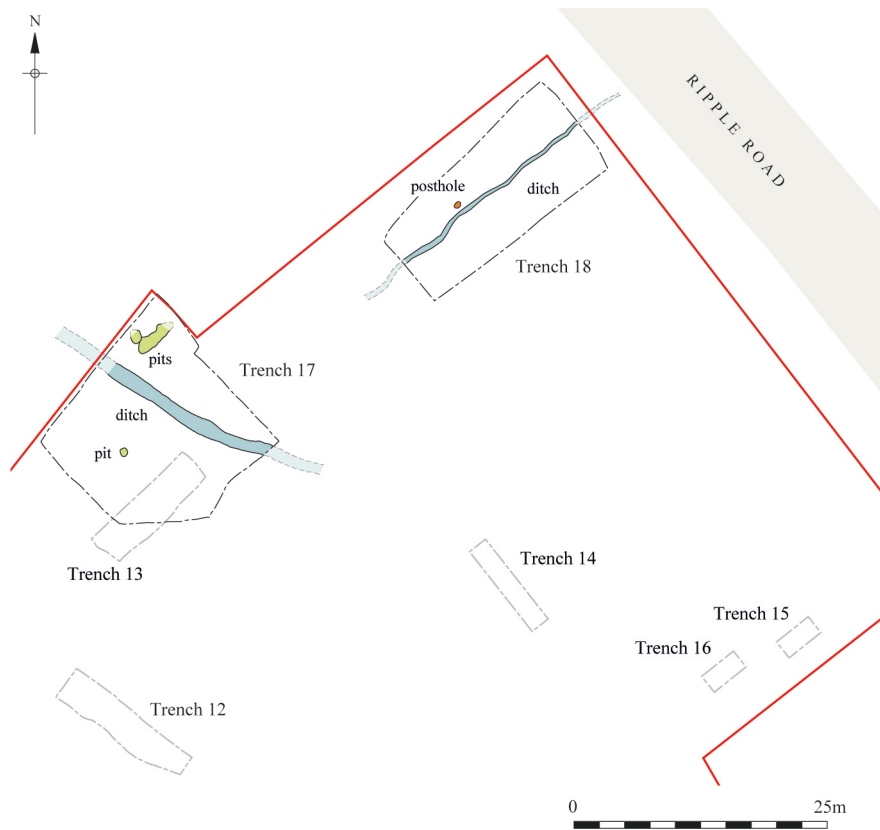


Fig 5: Phase 4: 15th–16th-century activity

This pit, used for waste disposal, is markedly different from the high-status timber structures seen to the west representing the location of the Saxon Abbey.¹⁰ The cut features mirror similar elements of later Saxon settlement date identified at London Road, at Axe Street, at the former Magistrates Court and along North Street/George Street.¹¹ Pits and occasional postholes constituted the commonest features identified, with evidence for tangible structural remains for this period across this part of Barking's Saxon activity area being very limited.

The documented sacking of the early abbey by the Danes in AD 870¹² appears to have resulted in its re-siting; it being established as a Benedictine Convent in the 10th century. No evidence for the contemporary destruction of the secular settlement has been uncovered on any of the sites which were occupied at this time. The importance of the new Abbey was highlighted by William the Conqueror's residence there following the battle of Hastings.¹³ The secular settlement on land to the east of the Abbey from the late Middle Saxon period is confirmed by the dating of features identified across this area, at London Road, the

former Magistrates Court at Axe Street and along North Street/George Street.¹⁴ The suggested presence of early versions of North Street and Ripple Road would require one or two east–west roads connecting the two north–south-aligned thoroughfares.

The Fanshawe and Tithe maps suggest the most likely candidates to have been what are now East Street and Axe Street. Excavations along Axe Street identified occasional late Saxon pitting, supporting possible later Saxon roadside occupation here. It was likely that Axe Street linked up with Westbury Manor (f. 1321), the moat of which may have been found during works in 1991 at St. Erkenwald Road.¹⁵

The early medieval town layout would no doubt have been completed with a roadway leading from the town quay to North Street and the settlement's market sited along the southern end of North Street.

The high point of archaeological activity along Ripple Road fell sometime between 1270 and 1400. Evidence for structural remains declines late in the 13th and 14th centuries – domestic-waste filled pits and a boundary ditch at right angles to the road indicate that the main

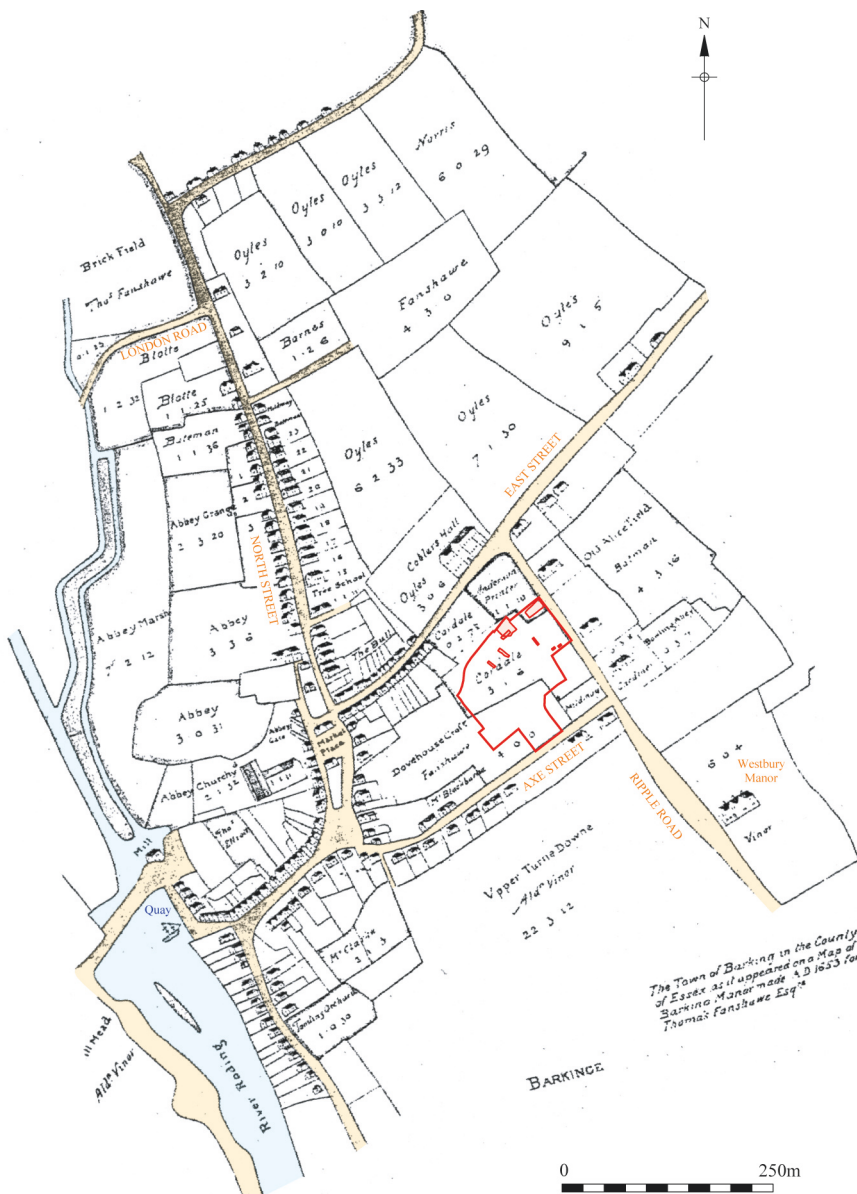


Fig 6: Fenshawe map of 1653 with site location indicated

road continued to be respected with activity alongside it.

For the early medieval period, urban growth beyond the precinct walls of monastic houses appears common in towns with religious precincts;¹⁶ examples include Bury St Edmunds, Durham, Hartlepool, Peterborough and Whitby. This is typically seen outside the abbey gates with market places being lined with burgage plots and can be recognised in such towns' modern urban topography. As recorded in the Domesday Survey, Barking Abbey and its associated settlement at this time was sizeable with 143 villagers, 100 smallholders, six slaves, two mills and a fishery.

Undoubtedly, the Black Death pandemic of 1348 took its toll on the medieval community, as observed in

the decline in settlement activity reflected in the archaeological record. Along the tidal river downstream of London, storms allied to a high and growing tidal range caused repeated breaches of the river walls. Recurrent flooding affected the lands of the Abbess of Barking, and other breaches occurred near Rotherhithe and in the stretch of the Thames between Woolwich and Greenwich.

Much of the land remained subject to flooding for the remainder of the 15th century, resulting in loss of livelihood to tenants and loss of revenue to the lord of the manor. Abandoning attempts to defend some marshlands may, however, have been a sensible response to an increased inundation threat in a century of depressed agricultural prices and

rising labour costs. However, even submerged land was capable of generating some income for lords and tenants. For example, there was rich fishing in Barking during the 1380s on the grounds that were under water when a breach in the river wall was left unrepaired. The sprats that were caught here were used as pig-feed.

Overall indications are that there was no wholesale abandonment of the marshland around the Thames estuary, but climatic deterioration linked to the 'Little Ice Age', particularly the increasing frequency and severity of storms, made it increasingly difficult and uneconomic to defend the more vulnerable stretches of coast during the period 1250–1450.¹⁷

The Barking fishing fleet, once said to be one of the biggest in Britain,¹⁸ dominated Barking's industry in the post-medieval period following the dissolution of the medieval abbey in c. 1539. The archaeological and documentary evidence confirm that the area of the site comprised agricultural lands prior to urban expansion in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Shane Maher for his fieldwork supervision and to the field-staff for their efforts under sometimes trying conditions.

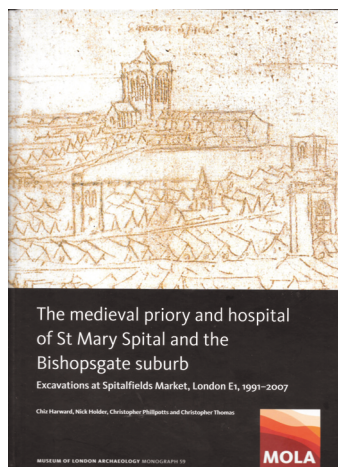
We are indebted to Mills Whipp Projects and Nigel Rose Management (Ardmore Group) and Redrow Group Services for their support and Mr David Divers of GLAAS for his oversight.

We wish to thank Lisa Lonsdale for her logistics support, Nathalie Barratt for surveying work, Hayley Baxter for the illustrations and Peter Moore for his management of the project.

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The medieval priory and hospital of St Mary Spital and the Bishopsgate suburb: Excavations at Spitalfields Market, London, E1, 1991–2007



**Chiz Harward, Nick Holder,
Christopher Phillpotts &
Christopher Thomas**

MOLA Monograph 59

2019

xx + 315 pages, CD-ROM,
hardback

245 figures (many colour), 41
tables, bibliography and index

ISBN 978-1907586484

£32

Reviewed by John Clark

This is the third of three recent volumes on Spitalfields and the medieval hospital of St Mary Spital, a huge site excavated by MOLA over many years – although in terms of the numbering of MOLA Monographs, it is the first of the three. An osteological study of the medieval burials was published in 2012, and an account of the post-medieval urban development of the area followed in 2015. The new volume summarises and reappraises not only the osteological work, but also the earlier excavations, chiefly on the church and main buildings of the medieval hospital, which were originally published as the very first monograph in the MOLA series (1997). The wait has been worthwhile.

The Augustinian priory and hospital of St Mary without Bishopsgate was founded in 1197, its precinct later expanded to include the area of a pre-existing extra-parochial burial ground, which continued in use. More than 10,500 burials

were excavated, including many from mass graves, as well as a cemetery chapel, erected in the 14th century. The monastic gardens grew medicinal herbs, and finds from the area of a new infirmary built in the 14th century include distilling and pharmaceutical equipment – the hospital could provide more than just spiritual care for its inmates. To the south of the precinct, suburban development took place alongside the main road out of Bishopsgate, and the whole area was redeveloped after the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

The first chapters of the book integrate evidence from documentary sources with the period-by-period account of the archaeology. In chapter 4, Nick Holder and others consider themes such as the hospital's architecture (Mark Samuel), its water supply (Chiz Harward), medical treatment and the distilling apparatus (Lucy Whittingham and Jacqui Pearce), and medicinal plants (including the opium poppy) (Anne Davies).

For the subject of burial, Nick Holder draws on the earlier published osteological research – demography, diseases – but also discusses the geography of the cemetery, grave goods, and commemoration. He considers the relationship of the mass graves to recorded 'catastrophic events' such as the famines of the 1250s and 1310s and the Black Death – and the possible numbers of Londoners who may have died and been buried in this one cemetery during each of these events (perhaps as many as 6% of the population in 1252). Chapter 5 provides the usual 'specialist appendices' on finds – whose significance has already been drawn on to inform the earlier chapters.

St Mary Spital is to date, as stated on the volume's back cover, 'by far the most intensively investigated medieval hospital in Britain'. This MOLA Monograph is a major contribution to our knowledge of medieval hospitals and of the lives, and deaths, of their patients; it does the site and its excavators full justice.

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