

RECENT WORK ON THE SITE OF MERTON PRIORY

With some 14 years' experience of excavating in Merton, mostly on the priory site, Dave Saxby of the Museum of London Archaeological Service was supremely qualified to address us on this subject on Saturday 21st April. Our usual meeting room at the Snuff Mill Environmental Centre was packed with members and visitors, eager to learn all they could of this our most important archaeological site.

Dave led us first through the various phases of excavation during his time at the site, beginning with the main excavation of the priory church and chapter house, between 1986 and 1990. Further excavations followed on the Christchurch Road site, and on the William Morris site and Mill Road. Then, last year, the former Furnitureland site was excavated, prior to redevelopment. Recently, work has been taking place on the car park/car boot sale area, as part of the application for planning permission for the proposed development there.

This most recent work has been more concerned with topographical information rather than more familiar archaeological activity. A radar search combined with a bore-hole survey has yielded good results, identifying gravel deposits and areas of naturally high and low ground. This has enabled the experts to predict the original courses of the river Wandle, which in pre-medieval times flowed along the route now known as Bennett's Ditch. Evidence has also been found of various millponds. Not surprisingly, the high ground was selected for Roman Stane Street and for the priory church.

The 1997 work on the Christchurch Road site also found prehistoric river channels in the 12 evaluation trenches, but in two of the trenches the line of Stane Street was identified. This has enabled the alignment of the road to be defined more precisely. The bandstand at Merton Abbey Mills lies directly on the line of the Roman road.

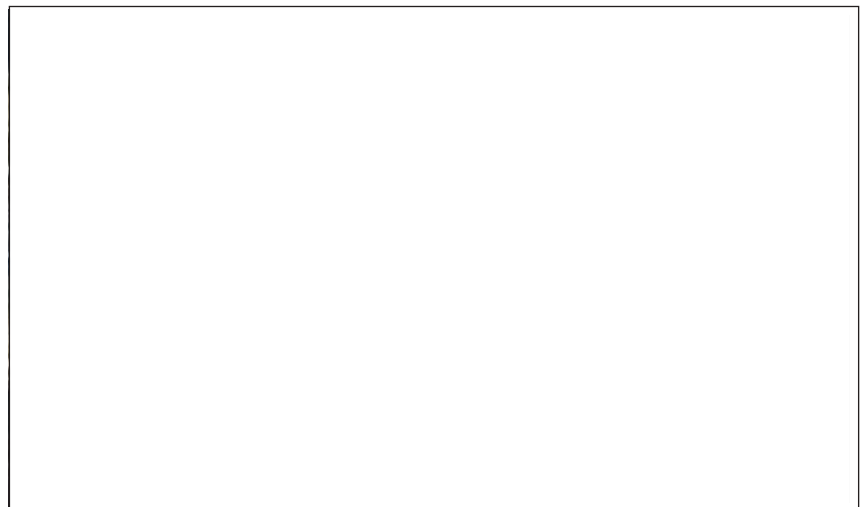
Two phases of Stane Street have been established. The first was around AD50, when the road was some 12 metres wide between two ditches. The road was generally constructed of local river gravels and sands over the original gravel surface, though occasionally chalk from the Downs was also used.

Towards the end of the 2nd century the road was recut and resurfaced, and this road surface survived quite well under the factories, a metre and a half below the present ground level. This second phase was wider, up to 16 metres. Approaching the ford there was evidence of two banks each side of the 14 metre road, suggesting the presence of pedestrian walkways. This ford was presumably the Bradenford of the Saxon charter of AD967. Some 30 coins from the 2nd to 4th centuries were found here, together with a few brooches.

This section of Stane Street had gone out of use by Saxon times, probably because of the flooding of the area, for which there is considerable evidence. Some 10th-century Saxon ivory brooches and metalwork have been found elsewhere on the site, possibly in the vicinity of the Saxon mill. The precinct wall cut across the old line of the road, but the earliest datable medieval activity was around 1200/1250, when a major phase of development at the priory necessitated the recutting of ditches and river.

In 1992 the northern section of the William Morris site was excavated. Old photographs record the weatherboarded buildings of Halfhide and Son, dating from around 1752, and offcuts of weatherboard were found in a backfilled ditch, together with paintbrushes, still caked with whitewash, and various pots, marked with initials. The foundations of other 16th- and 17th-century buildings were found, which had reused Reigate stone from priory buildings. Oak trestles from around the 16th century may have been part of a bridge. A cesspit from the Morris period included wine bottles, some still containing wine.

Last year the former Furnitureland site was excavated. Perhaps better known to older residents as the Palais, this had been the site of the gatehouse to the priory. An early ditch, running east-west may be Roman, and some fire-cracked flint is of prehistoric date. A narrow evaluation trench picked up evidence of a structure which, when opened up, proved to be a late-medieval tile kiln. It was well-built, some 7 metres wide, and had been truncated by the later cellar walls of the gatehouse and later buildings.



Cleaning the kiln structure - photo courtesy of Dave Saxby, MoLAS

There were three furnace chambers, originally arched, built onto an earlier structure. The construction used Roman tile and brick as well as Reigate stone from a 12th-century phase of the priory, similar in style to the arch now rebuilt in St Mary's churchyard.

Some over-fired roof tiles were also incorporated in the structure. These were of the style prevalent around 1480, a period of further building work at Merton Priory, when church, infirmary and reredorter were buttressed. The kiln was probably rebuilt to produce roofing tiles for this phase. The underlying kiln structure was 11 metres by 1 metre, with an area behind for fuel and rake-out deposits. Very little debris survived from this phase, though a 'Westminster' tile suggests it may have dated from the 13th century. Below the kiln structure were found lines of stakeholes, possibly from a forming shed, where the unbaked tiles had been formed. This was the only area of clay within the precinct, with deposits of brick-earth overlying London Clay.

Photographs from the early years of the 20th century show the house known as Abbey Gatehouse, with twin towers each side of a central structure. The excavation revealed the chalk foundation wall of part of the medieval building, which post-dated the second phase of the tile kiln, and was probably 15th-century. However, much of the building is now under the road, which is considerably wider than heretofore. The excavated remains may belong to a 15th-century rear extension to the main building. The building was further extended, to east and west, in the 18th century.

The full report on the excavations is in its final stages, and may well be ready for publication later in the year. It will be the biggest MoLAS publication to date, of around 200,000 words. It will include earlier work on the site, including that of our first President, Colonel Bidder in the 1920s and of our present President, Scott McCracken in the 1970s.

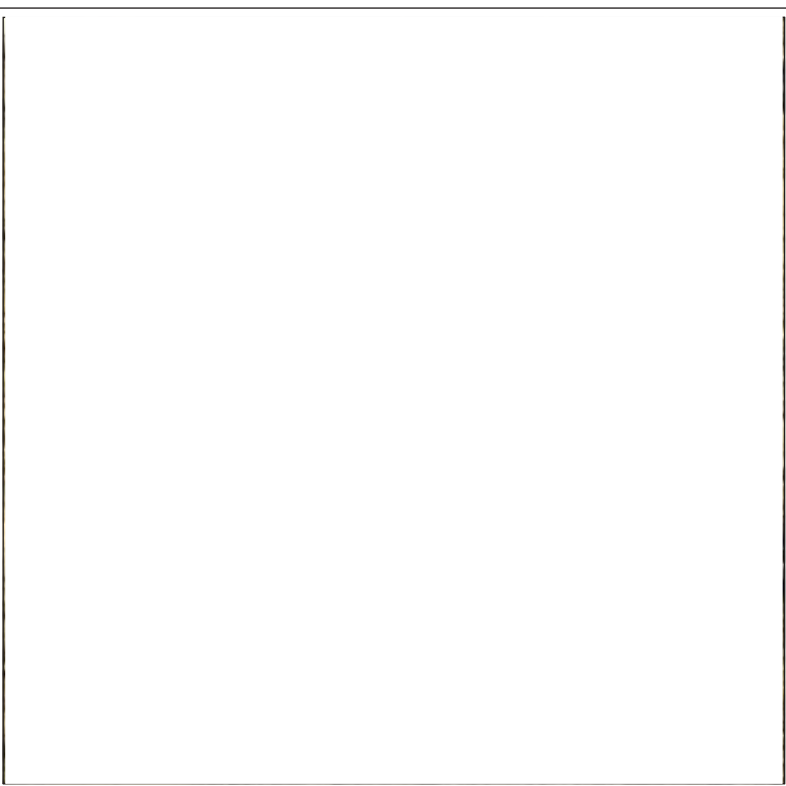
The publication has taken several years to prepare, two to three years' work being required just to evaluate the human bones found on the site. Some 700 human skeletons were uncovered, and these have been examined for age, gender, burial patterns and disease. Many suffered from the disease now known as DISH, from eating too much fatty food. One discovery was of a leather and cloth hernia belt, only the second to be found in the UK. 20,000 fragments of animal bone were found, the largest quantity of any site. A mid-12th century food preparation area was uncovered beneath the infirmary hall, itself dating from the 1220s. Here were found trellises (for vines?), ditches, planting pits, fruit stones (apple, grape, etc. though fruit is not found on the site after the 12th century), hatched chicken and goose eggs, as well as ladles, pots, etc. Evidence was also found for timber and daub structures.

In the hearths of the infirmary kitchen, the burnt ash deposits included seeds from both fruit and grain, and remains of conger eel, dolphin, oyster, herring, dove and red deer.

We eagerly await publication of this mammoth report, though it was disturbing to learn that our own expert on Merton Priory, our Chairman Lionel Green, has not been consulted on the historical details. Hopefully this will not result in the wholesale repetition of the many unfounded myths that have attached themselves to Merton Priory over the years, as was the case with the interim report.

We thank Dave Saxby, not only for his presentation to the Society, but for all the work he has put in over the years to reveal more of our rich historical heritage.

Peter Hopkins



The 'Gatehouse' looking east. In the foreground is one of the 18th-century brick extensions. The chalk medieval walls are in the centre of the picture (just in front and to the right of the brick drains). Courtesy Dave Saxby; MoLAS.