

ORPINGTON AND DISTRICT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

THE PRIORY GARDENS, ORPINGTON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

Adrian Green



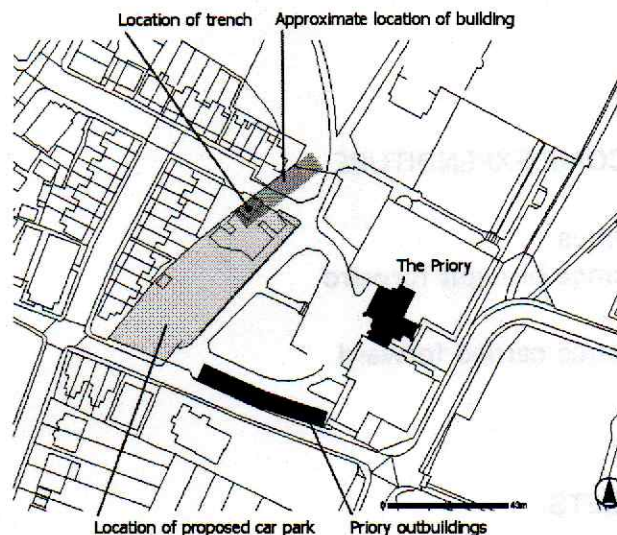
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Introduction

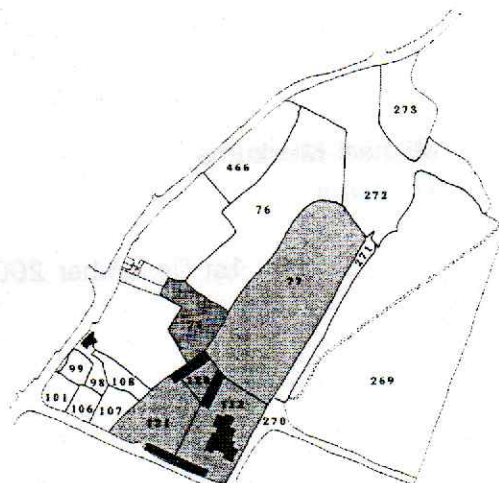
Bromley Museum Service commissioned ODAS to undertake an excavation in the Priory Gardens, Orpington, in August 2006. The investigation was of an area that is likely to be redeveloped by the London Borough of Bromley as an extension to the public car park. The area lies to the west of the grade II* listed medieval Priory and to the north west of the post medieval Priory outbuildings along Church Hill. The area also sits within an area of archaeological significance as specified in the Unitary Development Plan for the London Borough of Bromley (see fig 1).



1. Site Map

The aim of the excavation was to explore an archaeologically sensitive area that will be inaccessible after the construction of the car park. It is known from the 1840 Tithe Map of Orpington (see figs 1 and 2) that a building used to stand in the area – across the entrance from Aynscombe Angle into the gardens. This building was possibly a barn or storage building associated with the Priory when it was a manor or private house. Potentially there could also be archaeology in the area dating from prehistoric times to the 20th century. The underlying drift geology is brickearth.

To locate the remains of the building a resistivity survey was undertaken across the site of the proposed car park in May 2006. This was followed up with a two-day excavation of a trench against the western boundary wall of the Priory Gardens (centred on TQ 4652 6657) over the weekend of 5th – 6th August 2006.



2. 1840 Tithe Map

Historical and Archaeological Background

The history of the Priory goes back to 1032 when Eadsy, Chaplain to King Canute, donated some land in Orpington to the Priory of Christ Church, Canterbury. The location of the Anglo-Saxon buildings that formed the core of this estate have not been located, but it is assumed that they stood somewhere near to the location of the Priory and All Saints Church (the latter has Anglo Saxon origins). The core of the Priory probably dates back to the 13th century – we know that rector of Orpington Hugh de Mortimer held a court in his hall in Orpington in 1270 and that substantial rebuilding work was undertaken in the late 13th century. Further changes were made in the late 14th, 15th and 17th centuries as the building evolved to take on the character that it has today.

The Priory was Orpington's manor house, it was never home to a religious community as the name implies. The Priory of Christ Church used the building to manage its land in Orpington, using the profit from the estate to support the Priory at Canterbury. The building was also home to the rector of Orpington and a resting place for people travelling between London and Canterbury or the south coast. During the Reformation the Church lost most of its land in Orpington, but kept the Priory which it eventually leased and then sold in the 19th century. Notable residents/owners include the Honourable Richard Spencer, leading barrister Herbert Broom and Victorian solicitor and embezzler Benjamin Green-Lake. The 'Priory' name was given to the building in the 1840s as a reference to its medieval past. Later in the 19th century other changes were made as part of a 'mini' gothic revival – windows were replaced and a gallery was put over the stairs in the main hall. The last private owners of the Priory were the Hughes family who created the formal Italianate gardens to the north of the building. Orpington Urban District Council bought the building in the 1940s, they 'restored' the Priory in 1959/60 and built the library over part of the service wing. The museum was opened in 1965.

Despite the archaeological and historical significance of the Priory there has been little archaeological work undertaken in or around the building. Philip Street undertook a detailed architectural and photographic survey in the 1930s (Street 1934). Work has also been undertaken by former museum curator Marie Bowen on the Bedells' rolls – historic records relating to the manor farm surviving at Canterbury Cathedral (Bowen 2002). Finally there was a summary of the history of the gardens produced by the council's Landscape Development Section (1992) and a Conservation Plan for the Priory published in 2001. However there is still much work to be done to pull all of this information into a coherent whole.

It is clear from the evidence above that in medieval times the Priory was part of an agricultural complex and would have been surrounded by farm buildings. The whole area was called the 'curia' (meaning courtyard) and perhaps the area of the modern car park would have been the central courtyard. The medieval Bedells' rolls list many of these ancillary buildings such as the stables, barns, stores, cowshed, pigsty, hen house and dovecot.

The Priory outbuildings along Church Hill were also part of the complex, although possibly built in the 17th century. This building and others no longer standing today are mentioned in the Glebe Terrier, a document dating back to 1634. The original Terrier is missing, our only copy surviving in a 19th century guide to the Priory printed by previous owner Benjamin Green-Lake (Anon 1887).

The Terrier provides us with some useful clues to the setting of the building and it is worth quoting in full:

Imprimis: One fair house with a large hall, one great Parlour, one little Parlour, one little Buttery, and one Cellar on the north side of the said House: one Mill-house, one Brew-house, one Kitchen with one Larder thereunto adjoining, one long Entry, two Cellars and one Milk-house thereunto belonging on the south, one green Court before the Hall, one Garden with apple trees on it to the north, one Codline Orchard and one Garden Plot thereunto belonging on the south, being altogether by estimation one acre and a-half, be they more or less, within the yards thereunto belonging.

Item: One Wood-house with a Hen-house over it; one stable with a Hayloft over it; one Gate and a Gate loft over it; one Stable on the west side of the said Gate with a Hayloft over that; one Hay Barn adjoining to the said Stable with a Hogstye at the end thereof.

Item: One fair Barn with a Cart-house at the end of it, one Pigeon House, and one Barn with a Garner thereunto belonging at the south end thereof adjoining to the said green Court.

Item: One Meadow, containing three acres, adjoining to the Garden on the south and on the east against the highway leading to St Mary Cray, and on the west and north against the lands of Sir Percivall Hart, Knight.

Item: One Meadow, containing five acres, called 'Mill Mead', abutting against the land of the said Sir Percivall Hart on the south, north and east, and on the lands of Henry Lord Stanhope on the west.

The outbuildings along Church Hill are described in the second paragraph. The 'fair Barn' mentioned in the third paragraph, no longer survives, but may have stood close to the Priory in the formal gardens. The two meadows roughly equate with the area of the modern informal gardens stretching north towards the ponds.

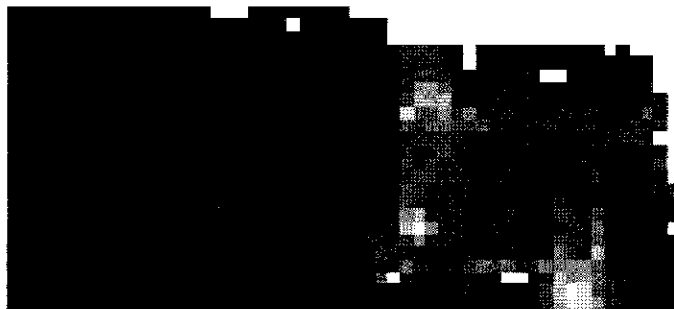
The high red brick walls standing within the formal gardens and the lower wall adjacent to the car park are another historic part of the gardens, originally dating back to the late 17th or early 18th century. The section to the north of the building could have been an enclosed garden, perhaps containing an 'apple orchard' like that mentioned in the Terrier. The wall opposite the entrance to the Priory includes the remains of an ornamental gateway.

Finally, the 1840 Tithe Map of Orpington (fig 2) gives a tantalising glimpse of other buildings that once stood around the Priory. This is the only direct evidence we have for the building we were seeking in the excavation. According to the 1840 Tithe Map the Priory itself (plot 122) was leased from the Church by a Nathaniel Ogle, but the outbuilding in question (along with another) was leased separately by a John Michell (plot 120). Most of these outbuildings were pulled down by the time the earliest Ordnance Survey map of Orpington was produced in 1860 (see fig 3). This map shows that the land in front of the Priory had been landscaped by this stage, incorporating a sweeping driveway leading from Church Hill. A cottage was added to the western end of the Church Hill outbuildings in 1865.

Resistivity Survey

A resistivity survey of the area of the proposed car park was undertaken by ODAS on May 1st. A rectangular grid 53m x 24m was laid out across the site and readings were taken at 1m intervals (i.e. every 1 m square).

The results were inconclusive, showing little evidence for buried features (see fig 4). The lighter areas indicate areas of high resistance and hence potential buried features - those lighter areas on the plot corresponding with a small private car park at the northern end of the site. No evidence for the 1840 Tithe Map building or ground disturbance caused by the Thames Water storm drain (see above).



4. *The Resistivity Survey (north is towards the top right)*

The Excavation by Alan Hart

Despite the negative results of the survey it was decided to proceed with the excavation. The main trench was located adjoining the western boundary brick wall of the Priory gardens (see fig 1). This wall appeared to correspond with the western edge of the building marked on the 1840 Tithe Map. It was centred 5.20m from the SW metal gatepost of the Aynscombe Angle entrance. It was 2m wide, 3.94m long on its southern edge and 3.58m long on its northern edge. A secondary test pit was also located against the wall, 18.40m to the SW.

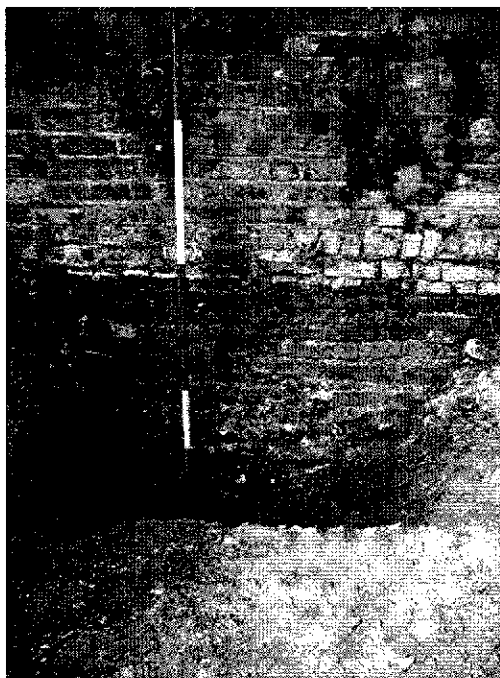
The upper deposits were loose, sandy, and laden with flint and brick rubble. They were removed with mattock, shovel or trowel. The *ca.*1.4m nearest the wall contained much brick, mainly used whole bricks. Other included rubbish suggested a date of deposition of approximately 1950. This debris may have been associated with the reconstruction of the boundary wall, whose upper material would be compatible with such a date.

The deposits in the remainder of the trench consisted of loose rubbly sandy soil containing flints and much modern rubbish. These deposits may have been associated with the construction of the private car park with which the trench was contiguous.

The modern deposits described above were from 37 cm to 42 cm deep relative to the top of the boundary concrete kerb. Below this level lay disturbed brickearth. This was removed by trowel to the extent that time permitted. Near the wall, it was completely removed to reveal what was very probably the top of the natural deposits *in situ*, namely brickearth with patches of abraded flints. The level of the natural was 76 cm to 81 cm below the top of the adjacent concrete kerb and coincided approximately with the lowest footings of the wall.



5. *Excavation in progre*



6. *Section showing wall foundations*

Further from the wall, excavation was up to 64 cm below kerb level, still in the disturbed brickearth. No features were observed in the disturbed brickearth (see figs 5 and 6).

It was noted that the below-ground courses of the wall, and the presumably associated used bricks in the brickearth near the wall, suggested a date possibly of about 1750. Thus the wall was built around that date but dismantled to below ground level and rebuilt on the original footings around 1950. The wall on the other side of the Aynscombe Angle entrance is generally very similar to this original *ca.*1750 wall (and must originally have been continuous with it) but shows evidence of extensive repairs of perhaps around 1900.

The *ca.*1950 wall runs right up to the Church Hill boundary. However, the building being sought in this excavation did not, so a test pit (*ca.* 1 m x 0.5 m) was dug against the wall footings 18.40 m SW of the main trench. As expected, the footings here were found to be of the same build as the wall they supported. The position of the footings discontinuity remains to be identified. It would be expected to correspond with the end of the building if, as must be probable, the *ca.*1750 footings observed formed part of the rear wall of the building being sought in this excavation.

Finds

The majority of the finds recovered were bricks and tile – presumably the remains of the building we were seeking. There were also large quantities of 19th – early 20th century pottery and glass – mainly domestic rubbish from the surrounding buildings, including the Priory. There were few finds of note except for the following:

1. A rim sherd from a flanged-rim bowl or jar. Flint-tempered grey fabric. Possibly around 13th or 14th century.
2. Heavily eroded jug handle, brown-surfaced grey fabric, clear glaze, well-sorted quartz temper. Possibly around 15th century.

3. An early 20th century apple tree label for 'Thomas Rivers'. This type was named after Victorian nurseryman and fruit breeder Thomas Rivers. It was introduced as Rivers' Codlin in 1894 – renamed Thomas Rivers in 1897. It is perhaps a suggestion that this type was grown in the gardens.
4. A complete early milk bottle from the Moorfield Farm Dairy in Orpington. The proprietor is marked as J A Rayner who was the owner in the 1930s.

As noted above mesolithic flints have previously been found in the Priory Gardens, but none were found on this occasion.

Conclusions

The excavation uncovered the foundations of the western wall of the Priory Gardens. No other archaeological features were found. It is suggested that the foundations of the wall were built in about 1750 and that they were originally the foundations of the building that we were seeking. It would be useful to see if the corner of the building could be located, but given the disturbed nature of the ground in the area it is unlikely that this or any *in situ* internal features such as floors or partitions survive. It is possible that the museum will undertake further excavations in the immediate area, or elsewhere in the gardens next summer.

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