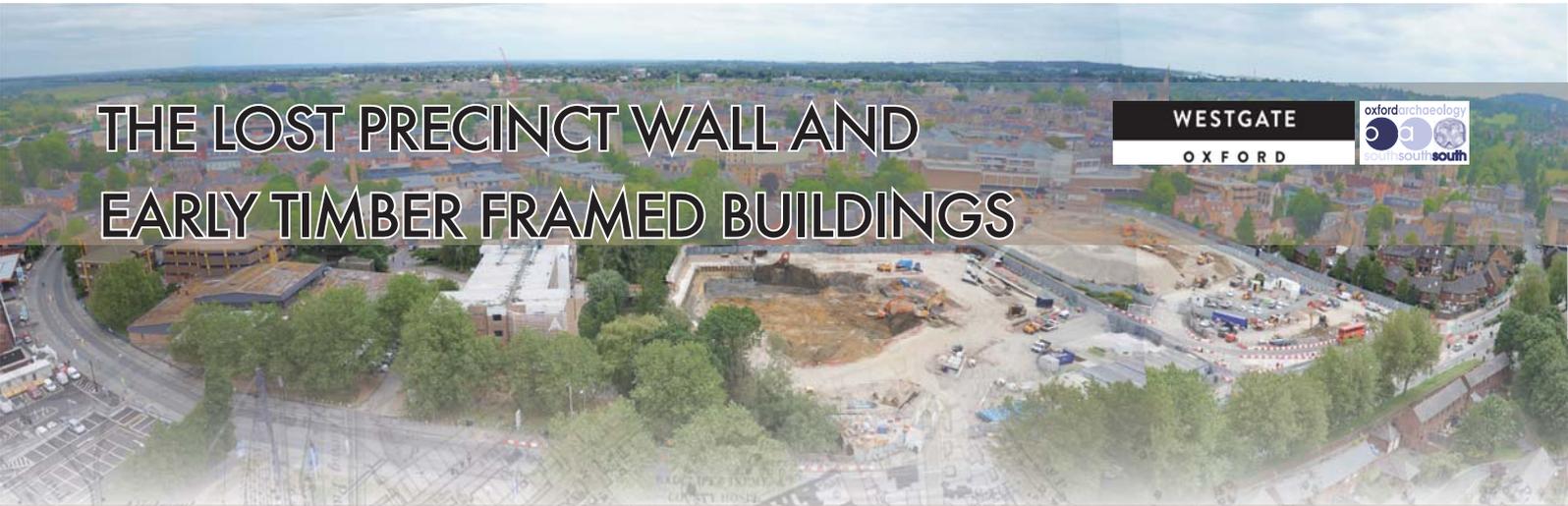


THE LOST PRECINCT WALL AND EARLY TIMBER FRAMED BUILDINGS



Canal wall and Westgate



In 1244, Henry III granted the Oxford Greyfriars permission to remove a section of the town's southern defensive wall in order to build their new church, extend their precinct southwards into recently acquired land, and construct a major new set of buildings, on condition that:

River precinct wall



"a wall crenellated like the rest of the wall of the town be made round said habitation, beginning from the west side of the Watergate [now Littlegate Street] and

extending southwards to the Thames [the northernmost channel later called the Trill Mill Stream], thence stretching westwards along the bank [of that stream]... then turning northwards to where it may join the old wall of the town.."

Because of misunderstood references to the town wall in later historical documents, scholars for many years held the view that this wall had never been constructed. However, recent excavations have proved categorically that in fact this is exactly what the friars did build.

Surrounding the complex of friary buildings, and separating them from their gardens, known as Paradise (now Paradise Square), was a massive stone foundation measuring up to 1.8m wide. In places along the Trill Mill Stream it survived to 2m high and was made from beautifully worked limestone ashlar blockwork, possibly forming a quay for small boats.

To the north, where the natural ground level rises, the foundations were built upon natural



gravel deposits. However, to the south the new precinct extended into an area of ground that was part of the Thames floodplain. In this area the gravel is much deeper and overlain with soft alluvial silts, which meant that a stable stone foundation had to rest upon timber piles (posts driven into the ground until they reach the gravel).

Over 1,000 timber piles have been recovered from under the southern stretch of the precinct wall. These were perfectly preserved by the waterlogged conditions owing to the level of the water table in the valley floor. Many of the piles were made by simply cutting a point into branches of beech and elm trees. However, about 500 piles were made from oak timbers reused from the demolition and dismantling of earlier timber framed buildings. These structural timbers reveal the craftsmanship and skill of the medieval carpenters, who worked with axe, saw, auger and guage.



Timber wall supports



Octagonal timber columns, possibly from a rood screen

The collection includes elements that made up the walls, roofs and floors of buildings pre-dating 1244. Three octagonal posts possibly formed a screen (rood screen) separating chancel from

nave in the Greyfriars' earliest church. These timbers represent the most tangible evidence for the buildings that people lived and worked in 800-900 years ago. They are earlier than any known surviving medieval timberwork in the city, such as the 13th century roof of the Chapter House at Christ Church Cathedral.

