

Discoveries at Waltham Abbey, Essex: Ecclesiastical and Secular

The [Waltham Abbey Historical Society](#) was founded during the first year of the Queen's reign and has since discovered much of local and national importance. Most significant were the three pre-Conquest churches revealed when excavating inside the present Norman church. The first timber building probably dates to the time of Bishop Mellitus; the finding of a book clasp depicting the fish of Christ and the eagle of John the Evangelist, and the radiocarbon dating of a burial, support an early 7th-century date.



Waltham book clasp

The second was a stone church constructed c.790 with a central nave and side chambers. It was the church to which Tovi, Canute's standard bearer, brought the Holy Cross, a life-sized stone crucifix, in c.1030. When excavating to the north of the present church we interpreted walls of turf as being Tovi's hunting lodge; this was reinforced when later we found that a nearby area had been stripped of its turf. The third pre-Conquest church was built by Harold Godwinson, Earl of Wessex, later King, c.1053-1060 for his secular college. It had a continuous transept with a small eastern apse for the seat of the dean of the college.

We have discovered features of the succeeding Norman and then the Augustinian abbey buildings. A lead bulla of Pope Alexander III, from a document to permit the change to the Augustinians, was found resting on the cloister foundations as if put there intentionally. Of the monastic period we have excavated buildings of Waltham Grange, the home farm, including the forge (which we conserved for public display) the great barn, the stable block, a haybarn, two dovecotes and a dock on the Cornmill Stream. We also excavated a dock on Longpool at which abbey building stone would have been unloaded after transportation along the River Lea.

Undoubtedly our most wonderful discovery was of a mutilated statue of the Madonna dressed in c.1380 style, buried in Christian orientation, in what became a car park. Inside the church, behind a memorial of 1600, was discovered a piscina, also mutilated but later renovated. We interpret these two events as a local reaction to the 1536 publication of the Protestations of the Lower House of the Convocation of Canterbury.

A combination of archaeological and documentary research has similarly enhanced our understanding of the town landscape. Excavation in the centre of the Market Square found a building interpreted as the Moot Hall; built after 1250, mentioned in a 1456 document, and in use until it was replaced by the Market House about 1670/80. The Society persuaded the Town Council to mark the building lines when the market area was resurfaced. In Romeland the foundations of a screens-passage house were excavated. It was seen as the building possessed by Henry VIII, to which he is recorded "oft privately to retire for his pleasure". Another house yielded an almost complete Iznik plate in the internal cess-pit of a two-holed earth closet in the home of a 17th century London merchant.

At Nazeingbury, in the half hundred of Waltham, the discovery of 192 burials and two pre-Conquest churches, of what we called a double House of women and men religious, under an abbess, was surpassed by the recognition of a document of the reign of the East Saxon king Suebred, for a lady to set up a 'House of God' there. This was a circumstance probably never to be repeated. Osteological analysis showed an unusually aged population and high degree of disability, indicating a caring community. Especially interesting was the use of the 16.5 foot rod at such an early time. Very recent studies have suggested that carpenters divided this rod into 15 feet, and stonemasons into 18 feet. The figure of 16.5 being the mean of the two, was established as a compromise in the time of Richard I.

All this research is well recorded. We have published 14 excavation reports, 41 society booklets and projects, which together with magazine articles have averaged more than one publication a year. We are also proud of our role in engaging with the community, including establishing a local museum. When the building used for five years was threatened with demolition detailed examination showed it to have been constructed in the early 16th century. A successful campaign for Listed Building status followed, the town authority assumed responsibility and the museum has flourished for over 30 years.

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