

# Barking - Investigating the Abbey

Excavations at Abbey Retail Park, Abbey Road, Barking

## Historical excavations

Archaeologists and antiquarians have been excavating at Barking from the early 18th century, but unfortunately we have no reliable plans of the earliest discoveries here.

## Sir Alfred Clapham's investigation

The former Abbey site was bought by Barking Urban District in 1910 for use as a recreation ground. The discovery of the abbey's main sewer prompted an ambitious excavation by Sir Alfred Clapham in 1911. His efforts allowed the lines of the main walls of the medieval abbey to be traced out, despite the thoroughness with which they had been destroyed in the 16th century. Except for the Curfew Tower, the remains visible in the Abbey grounds today include some original foundations but mostly were laid out in 1911, following those original lines discovered by Clapham. There was, however, no sign of the earlier (Saxon) abbey, and the full area occupied by the abbey's grounds ('precinct') was not established.

## Barking 1980

More recently, in the 1980s, archaeologists did discover significant evidence for the Saxon period, to the west of the abbey site, between it and the river Roding, and although it is not certain this was within the abbey precinct, it is possible, since it is likely that the abbey would have had access to the river. A kiln, dated to within 50 years either side of AD925, was being used to produce glass, and finds from these excavations included rare millefiore glass, gold thread, a gold ring, a bronze manicure set, decorated bone combs and equipment for spinning and weaving cloth. There was a watermill for grinding corn. There was more to life in the abbey than prayer and fasting. While we might have expected to find that the monks and nuns made their own clothing, or baked their own bread, it might seem more surprising to find evidence for 'industrial' processes, such as glass-making and metal-working. However, excavations at other monasteries, including Bede's own at Jarrow, have shown that this was not uncommon. Jarrow had a workshop turning out coloured glass in the 9th century. It is less clear if the Abbey simply provided workshop facilities for visiting lay craftsmen, or the monks themselves were doing this kind of work. People with all kinds of skills from their previous lives might chose to enter a monastery or nunnery, and the community might well have made use of those skills.



The 1985 excavations on the site of the current investigations



The excavation site in 1894, 16 years before Clapham's investigations. A.B. Bamford

Most of the early buildings of the Abbey were made of wood, although there were also at least some with stone foundations. The earliest church seems to have been a simple two-roomed wooden structure. This was replaced in stone by the 12th century.

## Modern methods

Another excavation in the 1990s revealed more of the Saxon layout of Barking, along the banks of the river Roding: again we cannot be sure if this was within the abbey precinct or not but it seems likely. Finds there included the timber piles used to stabilize the banks of the river, dating between AD685–775. These excavations suggest that there was a river landing stage here in the 8th or 9th centuries, perhaps a trading post, and certainly iron working - not something usually associated with nuns, but we must remember at this date there would still have been monks living and working here as well. There is also evidence for an apparent break in the pottery supply to the site, a hint that there may have been a severe disruption, in the late 9th century - maybe the Viking raid was not a myth! The site seems to have become more prone to flooding in the 12th and 13th centuries, and required remodelling - the river channel was deliberately backfilled and the landing stage was abandoned, and by the 14th century, the area of the excavation had been abandoned.

While the earlier excavators were interested almost exclusively in tracing the outlines of the buildings, modern excavation techniques allow the recovery of much more evidence. The work in the 1990s allowed us a glimpse into the late Saxon and early medieval inhabitants' diet, in this case, including some foods that archaeologists rarely discover - such as celery, water cress and asparagus, a clear sign of a vegetable garden. They had plenty of bread wheat, so bread or porridge would have been a staple part of the diet. We know that they ate beef regularly (and kept live cows that would have supplied milk as well), kept chickens for meat and eggs, had bacon and pork occasionally, but mutton only rarely. Fish bones were rare, but this is because they are small and delicate and so do not survive as well as more robust mammal bones: the few that were recovered indicate that cod and plaice. But no chips, of course, as the potato had not yet been introduced!