

1.3 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In this section of the Conservation Plan we review the historical development of the site once occupied by Merton Priory, using the evidence provided above (Sections 1.1 and 1.2), in order to establish the intrinsic interests of the site.

The *topography and geology* suggest no particular reason why this place should have been chosen for settlement at an early date, as the land was low-lying and is likely to have been very waterlogged.

By the twelfth century, however, when the Priory was first established here, it is likely to have been reasonably well-drained and the River Wandle, known for the purity of its water which was much appreciated for the later industrial processes carried out here, would have provided for the needs of the local community.

Prehistoric

The only evidence for early occupation in the area was found on higher ground some distance to the east and indicates settlement in the Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age periods. It is unlikely that this would have extended down into the valley bottom.

Roman

The first real use of the site later occupied by Merton Priory was during the early years of the *Roman* occupation, when the Roman road, otherwise known as *Stane Street*, from London to Chichester was built across the site in the middle of the first century AD.

The road appears to have crossed the River Wandle at or close to the later Merton Bridge and the ditches and residual Romano-British material found on the site of Merton Priory may suggest some modest settlement in the locality of the crossing of the river and possibly associated with this were the burials found to the south near Phipps Bridge.

No further evidence has been found to support the suggestion that a Roman *mansion* or posting station existed in the area, but it may have been on the higher ground a short distance away to the south-west.

Saxon

The small number of residual Saxon objects found during excavations at Merton Priory are a bit of a mystery as they appear to include some fairly early pottery. It can only be assumed that there was an early settlement in the near vicinity, perhaps associated with the former Roman road which would doubtless have still been usable immediately after the withdrawal of Roman support in 410AD.

No evidence has been found to date to suggest that the site later occupied by Merton Priory was previously occupied by anything other than the Roman road, which has been found under the north transept and the nave of the Priory church.

Merton Priory

The history of Merton Priory is well-documented and the site has been extensively, but not fully, excavated using modern techniques.

It is believed that an Augustinian priory was first established in the vicinity in 1114 and the most favoured site, for what were probably a group of temporary buildings of timber, was in the vicinity of the present parish church of St Mary the Virgin, Merton Park, which is believed to include some twelfth century fabric.

The Priory was then moved to the present site in 1117. No evidence has been found for the first buildings but archaeological excavations, supported by the documentary evidence, have recorded a long sequence of building, alteration and extension, from a major reconstruction in *circa* 1170 through to the Dissolution in 1538.

The layout adopted for Merton Priory was a relatively traditional one, with the principal monastic buildings lying to the south of the church, and with an exceptionally large infirmary complex to the south-east, perhaps reflecting the role of the canons of St Augustine in serving the well-being of lay people and the local community.

It is believed that there may have been a guest house for lay visitors, perhaps including the king, to the west of the main monastic complex. We have tentatively suggested that the stretch of walling on Station Road may be all that survives of a separate lay precinct which contained not only the guest house but a chapel which both survived into the nineteenth century.

Merton Priory had a large watermill for grinding corn to the south of the main monastic complex, and also a series of fishponds to supplement the diet of the canons to the south-east of the infirmary.

The Priory clearly became very important early in its life and Thomas Becket, who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162, was educated here in the late 1120s.

A major programme of building, perhaps instigated by the collapse of the tower of the Priory church in 1222, saw the rebuilding of not only the church, but also the construction of the monastic complex to the south of it. These works appear to emphasise the important role of Merton Priory and in 1236 a very significant meeting of the Council of Barons took place here, at which the *Statutes of Merton* were promulgated. This, and other important meetings to take place at the Priory, is likely to have taken place in the chapter house.

The importance of Merton Priory is also emphasised by the number of royal visits by Henry III, who sometimes stayed for up to a week at a time, and had private chambers here. One of the reasons for the royal visits was that, being only seven miles from London, Merton made a convenient staging-post at the start or end of a royal progress.

Other important national events held at Merton Priory were a Royal Council in January 1255 and a Convocation of the Church in 1258.

Merton Priory provided a collection point for taxes and royal aid to support wars in the fourteenth century, but by the end of the century the Priory church was in a state of disrepair and the monastic buildings were repaired and extended.

The Dissolution

At and shortly after the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in 1538 the monastic buildings were mostly demolished and much of the fabric was re-used in other buildings. Only the guest house, the lay chapel, and sections of the precinct walls appear to have survived, and Parliamentary troops were garrisoned here in 1648.

The remains of the guest house and chapel have since been demolished.

Merton Abbey Mills

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the site formerly occupied by Merton Priory developed as an industrial centre, with a series of water-based and water-powered works centred on the River Wandle, which was straightened to serve them in the late seventeenth century. It continued to function as an industrial centre well into the twentieth century.

Of these various activities and sites perhaps the most important are the calico-printing works, of which the first one was created in 1724, which continued to operate through into the nineteenth century as Littler's Merton Abbey print works and from 1904 to 1972 as Liberty & Co of which there are some surviving buildings, and the works of William Morris, founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and its successors from 1881 until 1940 which has now been built over.

Research and Education

The history of Merton Priory and Merton Abbey Mills are relatively well documented and the site of the Priory and of the William Morris works have been extensively excavated using modern techniques, during which a very wide range of evidence for structures, food and diet, medicine, and death and burial has been recorded. The forthcoming publication of the results of the past investigations by the Museum of London Archaeology Service will present the results of these works, although it is understood that these will only deal with discoveries down to a certain date and may not include the post-medieval material.

However, there are parts of the site which have not previously been investigated and these need to be protected so that they can be fully investigated as opportunities arise.

Of particular significance is the fact that there is a high water table on the site and this preserves materials, such as wood, pollen and seeds, which often do not survive on dry sites.

Although there are only limited remains of the structures associated with Merton Priory *in situ* and visible on the site, there appears to be potential for the further exposure of structures, particularly the remains of the Priory church, and there is a wealth of documentary evidence and a considerable number of both large and small objects which are available as a resource for education of people of all ages.

The remains of Merton Abbey Mills, on the other hand, are quite extensive.

The surviving buildings and buried remains at Merton Abbey Mills have barely been investigated and there is scope for further research here, as opportunities arise, but the site of the William Morris works has been redeveloped although it was investigated by the Museum of London Archaeology Service before these works had taken place.

However, although the site of the William Morris works has been lost there is a wealth of information and material relating to and produced by Morris and other members of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and its offshoot in America, located either in public and private buildings or in museums, such as at Morris's country house Kelmscott Manor, Lechlade, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Merton Place

Although located about 200 metres west of the Priory precinct, Merton Place, rebuilt in about 1748 and demolished by 1823, was home to Admiral Lord Nelson, Emma Hamilton, and their daughter from 1801-1805, and it is where Nelson was living immediately prior to the battle of Trafalgar in which he died.

1.4 ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

In this section of the Conservation Plan we assess the broader significance of the site once occupied by Merton Priory.

Merton Priory was situated on land crossed by the Roman road 'Stane Street' and there is evidence of Saxon occupation prior to the establishment of the Priory, in the early twelfth century.

Stane Street was the Roman road from London to Chichester, built in the first century AD, and the area may have been of some significance as being close to the point, later known as Merton Bridge, where the road crossed the River Wandle.

Recent excavations on the site have revealed limited evidence of prehistoric occupation, in the form of a number of struck flints provisionally dated to the Bronze Age.

The Priory was built on land in the valley bottom, which would probably have had to be drained to accommodate the monastic buildings enclosed within the precinct wall.

Merton Priory

Origins of Monastic Houses

Early monasteries originated in Egypt, as places where wandering hermits gathered. They usually lived alone but met in a common chapel.

By the fifth century AD the monastic movement had spread to Ireland, where St Patrick, the son of a Roman official, set out to convert the Irish to Christianity. The Irish monks spread Christianity to Cornwall, Wales, and Scotland. St Ninian established a monastery at Whithorn in Scotland sometime before 400AD and he was followed by St Columba, at Iona, and St Aidan, who founded a monastery at Lindisfarne in Northumbria.

The big change in the early monasticism came with the establishment of the Benedictine rule in about 529AD. The vision of St Benedict was of a community of people living and working in prayer and isolation from the outside world. The Benedictine Rule was brought to the British Isles with St Augustine, when he landed in Kent in 597AD.

Over the next thousand years a wide variety of orders of monks and nuns established communities throughout the British Isles. The orders differed mainly in the details of their religious observation and how strictly they applied their rules.

The major orders that established monastic settlements in Britain were the Benedictines, Cistercians, Cluniacs, Augustinians, Premonstratensians, and the Carthusians.

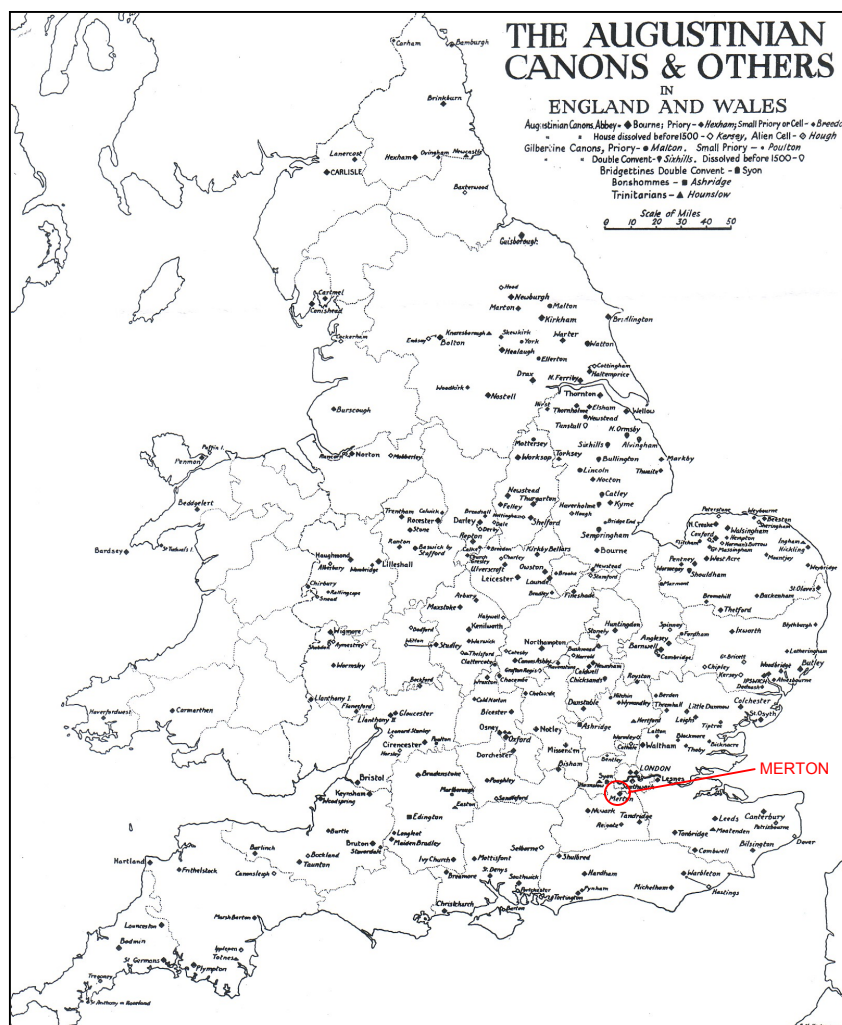
Monasteries were most numerous in Britain during the early fourteenth century, but the Black Death in 1348 dealt the monasteries a major blow, decimating the number of monks and nuns, and most of them never recovered.

The standard work on medieval religious house is the volume of that name that was first compiled by David Knowles and Richard Hadcock and published in 1953, but it has since been revised and re-published (Knowles & Hadcock 1971). This describes the origins and development of religious life in Britain (Knowles & Hadcock 1971 : 8-47) and then describes all the religious orders and lists their houses that are either known or believed to have existed (Knowles & Hadcock 1971 : 52-461).

Augustinian Houses

The rule of the order of St Augustine, of regular canons, appears to have been first adopted in England at Colchester in circa 1100AD and certainly before 1106 (Dickinson 1950).

Knowles & Hadcock list some 260 Augustinian houses which existed in England and Wales, but the actual numbers of houses in use and canons serving in them varied through time (Knowles & Hadcock 1971 : 137-182). The smallest number of Augustinian houses was 34 in 1100 and there were 93 in 1154. The largest number was 208 in 1422 and 1500.



The locations of Augustinian monastic houses in England and Wales (after Knowles and Hadcock 1971)

The number of canons or religious brethren in Augustinian houses is estimated at 583 in 1100AD, 1428 in 1154AD, and 2701 in 1216AD.

There were only five Augustinian houses founded in Surrey, which at this time included that part of London which was south of the Thames, and these were at Merton, Newark, Reigate, Southwark, and Tandridge.

John Schofield of the Museum of London, who is also a member of the Merton Priory Trust, has kindly contributed the following comment.

Merton Priory was linked to Holy Trinity Priory, Aldgate, in the City of London, which had been founded a few years before in 1107 or 1108. A recent report has reconstructed the plan of Holy Trinity Priory from excavations and other evidence (*Schofield and Lea 2005*). This report summarises what we know of the many priories and abbeys in the immediate London area, but not Merton. We are waiting for the major report on Merton to do this. In the meantime, we can say that Merton was a large Augustinian house, with royal connections, and it was probably one of the finest in England. In due course, these monastic houses in the London area, which functioned as the leading edge of exciting architecture in the Middle Ages in Britain, should be compared with each other and the recent archaeological campaigns on them evaluated.

The Dissolution

When Henry VIII broke with Rome in the 1530s the wealthier monastic houses were one of his first targets. A few of the abbey and priory churches near large centres of population survived the Dissolution of the monasteries in the period 1536-1540, as cathedrals or parish churches, but those that were isolated, such as here at Merton, were demolished.

Henry VIII sold the monastic lands cheaply to a new class of gentry who benefited from the sales.

Monastic Plan

The origins of the monastic plan, typified at Merton, are obscure. To an extent they were inward looking with the intention of seclusion but they exhibit general characteristics of the courtyard structures of much Mediterranean architecture.

Central to the monastic plan was the cloister, from the Latin *claustrum* - a shut-in place, which was often, as at Merton, on the south side of the church. All the buildings normally used by the inhabitants opened off the cloister, in particular the church, chapter house for meetings of the community, the dormitory, and the refectory, and this was also the case at Merton. The chapter house at Merton was relatively large and it was this which provided the Priory with a conference facility that brought business and, presumably, income to the property and particularly the royal council. Usually at a slight distance was the infirmary, as at Merton where this was attached and to the south-east of the other buildings, and the abbot or prior's lodging which has yet to be identified at Merton.

Monasteries were usually located near a river or stream, as at Merton, which was diverted to serve drinking fountains, the kitchen and, in the case of Merton, the fishponds, before reaching the wash houses and latrines. All these facilities and some agricultural land were enclosed by a precinct wall which would have been entered by a gatehouse and these could be quite substantial structures.

Within the complex there were often facilities and accommodation for guest or lay visitors and at Merton there appears to have been a guest house and a chapel for this purpose.

It is evident, therefore, that Merton Priory was not unique. It was one of 260 Augustinian houses built during the middle ages, one of 5 built in what was then Surrey, and conformed to a standard plan, but with a relatively large infirmary complex.

However, Merton Priory was relatively important on a regional and national scale. It was the place where Thomas Becket and Walter of Merton were educated; it was the place from where many canons were sent out to serve in and lead other communities; it was popular with Henry III who stayed there on numerous occasions; and it was the place where a number of important gatherings were held and these included the Council of Barons which approved a series of significant legal codes known as the *Statutes of Merton*.

Merton Priory is relatively well documented and the site has been extensively excavated using modern techniques, so much is known about its layout, alterations and additions made to the buildings during its lifetime, and the lifestyle and burial of the canons who occupied it.

Apart from fragments of precinct wall, there are no standing remains of Merton Priory *in situ*, but there is a former doorway from the Priory which has been re-located at the parish church at Merton Park. The footings of the chapter house are visible in the visitor centre and other remains survive below buildings and car parking areas. There is also a wide range of objects which have been recovered from the site and these include stone coffins, fragments of decorated stonework, painted window glass, pottery and wooden vessels, and overall there is a great deal of evidence available to tell and illustrate the story of Merton Priory. There are also areas which have yet to be investigated.

Merton Abbey Mills

The story of Merton's early industrial history is an important one, as it began in the late seventeenth century, long before industrial production on a comparable scale evolved elsewhere in the country, and developed over several centuries before finally ceasing in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Elements of this industry activity survive to tell the story both on the ground and in archival sources and museums.

Of particular significance amongst these were the origins and development of calico- and silk-printing in Britain, which commenced here as early as 1667 at about which time the River Wandle was diverted and managed to provide a regular source of clean water for processing and power.

The first calico-printing works, established in 1724, continued to operate right through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, notably under the control of Edmund Littler, expanding its operations to print on both silk and other fabrics, eventually being acquired by the fashionable Regent Street shop of Arthur Liberty & Co in 1904 which continued to operate here until 1972. The diverted and managed course of the River Wandle still runs through the site where there are two surviving early buildings and a number of others added by Littler's and Liberty's in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The design studios and works operated by William Morris and his successors no longer exist, but they are well-documented; their former site has been extensively excavated using modern techniques; and there are many examples of the work of both Morris and other members of the Arts and Crafts Movement surviving in buildings and in private and public collections.

Whilst Kelmscott House, Morris's surviving home in London from 1878 to 1896 and now the headquarters of the William Morris Society, and Kelmscott Manor, Morris's surviving summer home at Lechlade in Gloucestershire, are still closely associated with his works and those of the Arts and Crafts Movement in general, it was here at Merton that most of the designs were produced and many pieces of art were made.

The remains of Merton Priory and Merton Abbey Mills are of special significance to local people and society in general as a place where Thomas Becket was educated; where important decisions affecting the nation were made; where early industrial development originated; and where the Arts and Crafts Movement had its origins.

Merton Place

Although not located on the site formerly occupied by Merton Priory, Merton Place adds significance to the area being the home of Admiral Lord Nelson immediately prior to his death at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

1.4.1 Statement of Significance

The site occupied by the remains of Merton Priory and Merton Abbey Mills is of outstanding significance :

- as containing the remains of the Merton Priory which are a Scheduled Ancient Monument and Grade II Listed buildings;
- as a place which was frequently visited by the kings of England;
- as including the remains of the chapter house of Merton Priory, unusual in its size and form, which was the location for some nationally-important meetings and where the first comprehensive statute since the Great Charter (Magna Carta) – a landmark in English law-making, was agreed in 1236;
- as a centre of former religion and learning where Thomas Becket and Walter of Merton were educated;
- as having played a leading role in the creation of the Arts and Craft Movement, developed by William Morris, and pursued locally by Edmund Littler and Arthur Liberty;
- as being close to the home of Admiral Lord Nelson immediately prior to his death at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.
- as containing the remains of the Roman road known as *Stane Street*;
- as an early example of water-powered industrial development, particularly fabric printing;
- as containing a number of significant industrial buildings, two of which are Grade II Listed buildings, and all of which are contained within a Designated Conservation Area;
- as a resource for research into a wide range of subjects, including medieval history and archaeology, industrial technology, and the history of art and design;
- as containing part of a wildlife corridor;
- as a source for education of people of all ages on a very broad range of subjects;
- as a resource for tourism; and
- as a resource for inspiration, particularly art and design.

1.4.2 Assessment of individual elements

The Conservation Plan has already broken the remains of Merton Priory and Merton Abbey Mills down into a number of constituent elements, some surviving above ground; others buried beneath ground level; and a few which have been destroyed. These have already been described (see above Section 1.2) and the descriptions set out for each one an assessment of its significance under the following headings :

- its history;
- an assessment of its fabric;
- its significance;
- its status in statutory terms; and
- management issues deriving from its condition and uses.

In view of the very wide nature and dates of the remains of Merton Priory and Merton Abbey Mills, it is difficult, if not impossible, to prioritise their individual significance. Under certain circumstances one might suggest that older or original elements are more significant than later or added ones, but this would tend to undervalue the elements which represent change through time.

It is proposed, therefore, to include here some general comments relating to the five headings noted above and included in the descriptions as an assessment of significance of individual elements.

History

The elements covered in the Conservation Plan range in date from Prehistoric finds and the Roman road, through to the Priory established at the beginning of the twelfth century through to the Dissolution in 1538; the industrial activities from the late seventeenth century through to the twentieth century; and an appraisal of the visitor centre erected in the late 1980s.

Of these elements the most significant are, perhaps, the 'sense of place' provided not only by the site and remains of Merton Priory and the artefacts associated with it, where some important meetings were held and important decisions made, but also the early industrial activities and craft works that took place at Merton Abbey Mills and at the works of William Morris.

However, the current situation of the remains of Merton priory and Merton Abbey Mills detract substantially from the history of the site.

Fabric

The intention here is to deal not with condition, as this is covered in the condition audit (see Appendix), but more with completeness and quality.

The only remains of Merton Priory which are presently visible are the footings of the chapter house and fragments of the precinct wall, some of which appear to have been either rebuilt or replaced in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. However, it is understood that substantial elements survive below existing buildings and ground

surfaces, some of which have previously been investigated but some have not.

The elements above ground level need to be conserved and it is noted that the remains of the chapter house and parts of the precinct wall to the north-east and south of the principal monastic buildings are in need of attention, whereas repairs were being undertaken to the wall to the west along Station Road.

The elements which are believed to survive below ground level, and these include not only parts of Merton Priory but also earlier structures at Merton Abbey Mills, need to be protected from unavoidable damage so that they can be properly investigated and recorded as the opportunities arise.

In the long-term opportunities may also occur to conserve and display features which are presently buried, and a pro-active approach is, perhaps, desirable to make this possible.

Significance

The comments applied here generally relate to the value of the element in terms of its history and form.

Elements which are particularly indicative of the form and historical development of Merton Priory and Merton Abbey Mills can, perhaps, be highlighted as being more significant than those that are not, as they help the student and visitor to read the history of the site in the fabric. This will be particularly relevant, for example, in the standing structures and in the architectural fragments from the Priory which are preserved in the visitor centre.

The surviving industrial buildings contain a number of elements which can be considered to be significant pieces of work, such as the unique nineteenth century waterwheel in the Wheelhouse and the early example of steel-frame construction in the 1929 Shop, both at Merton Abbey Mills.

Status

The principal buildings and the fishponds of Merton Priory are included in the area which was designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (LO151) in 1984, before large scale redevelopment and archaeological excavation took place, and the entire site contained within the precinct wall is included within an Archaeological Priority Zone identified in the Unitary Development Plan. In light of the later excavations it would be pertinent to suggest that the Scheduled area might be reviewed and might, perhaps, be extended to include what is believed to be the site of the Priory guest house as well as Merton Abbey Mills.

The two oldest structures at Merton Abbey Mills are Grade II Listed buildings, the Colour House and the Wheelhouse, and they both appear to be in good condition (see above Section 1.2.2 – 201 and 202). The remainder of the industrial buildings at Merton Abbey Mills are later in date and appear to be protected by virtue of their inclusion within a Designated Conservation Area.

Two sections of wall, which are both believed to include remains of or be on the site of the monastic precinct walls, are also Grade II Listed buildings (see above Section 1.2.1 –101 and 102). As noted above, one of them (102a-k) is currently (December 2005) being restored whilst the other one (101a-f) is contained in dense undergrowth and its condition has not been ascertained.

Management Issues

The individual assessments contained within the descriptions have drawn attention to places where there appears to be scope for further research, investigation, restoration, or interpretation.