1.1 UNDERSTANDING THE SITE

The purpose of this section of the Conservation Plan is to provide an account of the history of the various buildings and activities which have taken place on and adjacent to the site once occupied by Merton Priory and to describe the elements which survive today both above and below ground level.

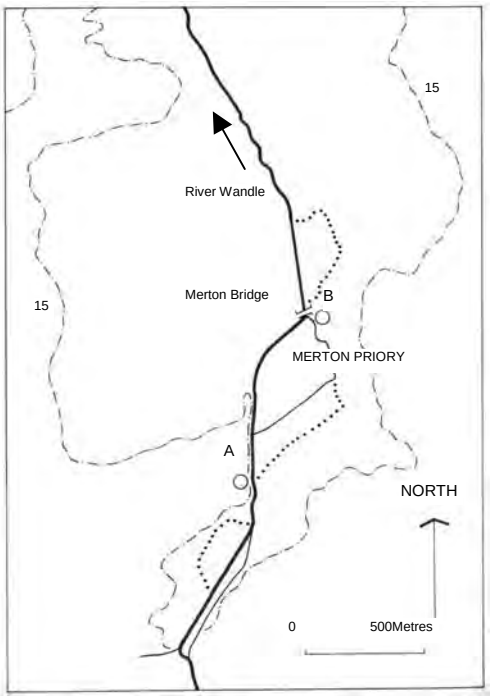
It is not intended that it should be a comprehensive and exhaustive study, but it is proposed that it should contain sufficient material to establish the significance of the various elements which the site comprises.

It is mostly based on published material and we are especially grateful to David Saxby and the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) for their considerable assistance during the production of the document and for permission to reproduce material from their publications.

1.1.1 Topography and Geology

The site lies within the flood plain of the River Wandle, about 5.5kilometres (3.3miles) from its confluence with the River Thames at Wandsworth.

The channels carrying surface water are likely to have varied naturally in their course across the floodplain through the passage of time and latterly the principal course has been straightened. Former courses may be represented by administrative boundaries on some of the older maps and plans.



Simplified topographical map, showing the site of Merton Priory; the principal courses of the River Wandle; abandoned courses of the river represented by administrative boundaries (shown dotted); and the 15-metre contour line.

The floodplain consists of a deposit of gravels, known as the 'Wandle' or 'Mitcham' gravels. These overlay the more general and older Thames floodplain deposits of the Taplow Terrace and are themselves sealed by later, local, alluvial deposits of fine clay silts. Auger core samples and a sondage, undertaken at The Nook south of the Priory site, have revealed river gravel, overlain by a sequence of alluvial silt, clay deposits and the alluvium (Site A on the topographical map).[1] A series of palaeo-channels associated with peat deposits, some of which carried fast-flowing water, were found in 1997 alongside the High Street, Colliers Wood, to the northwest of the Priory site (Site B).[2]

In the Prehistoric, Roman and pre-monastic medieval periods the river probably meandered through a wide river valley along a series of braided courses. Water channels are likely to have migrated during and after floods until, presumably, being contained by the construction of the monastery.

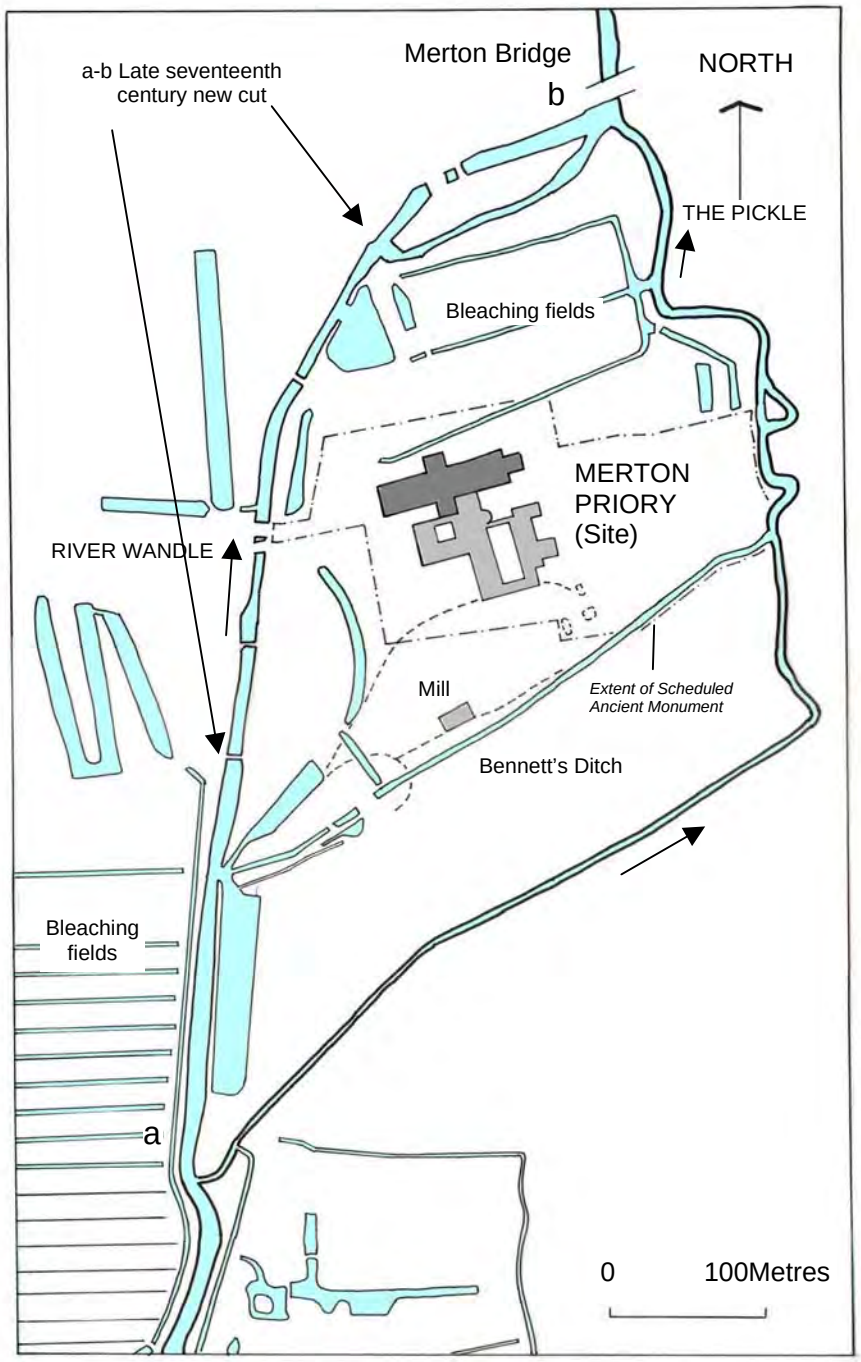
The existing watercourses will almost certainly have been modified to serve the medieval Priory and after the Dissolution they were modified again to serve the various industrial activities for which the area is well known, including Merton Abbey Mills. The medieval course is probably that represented in part by the parochial and former borough boundaries between Merton and Mitcham, to the east of Merton Priory, which follow the line of the meandering watercourse known as The Pickle. The site of the Priory was liable to flooding although some protection would have been afforded by the upstream wetlands. Two main courses survived through to the seventeenth century when the western course was straightened.

By 1865, when the surveys were undertaken for the first edition of the Ordnance Survey twenty five-inch plan, there was a network of watercourses and channels in the vicinity of the former Priory. The more direct course, carrying the main waters of the Wandle, is believed to have been a new cut created in the late seventeenth century. The water feature which formerly marked the east side of Merton Abbey Mills is likely to have been a remnant of one of the original abraded routes of the river.

Bennett's Ditch had been made to serve the mill of the same name while to the southwest of the Priory site and immediately to the north of it channels were created to serve the bleaching fields of the 1724 and 1752 Calico Works.

[1] Greater London Archaeological Sites and Monuments Record ML 076033; National Grid Reference TQ26366948.

[2] Greater London Archaeological Sites and Monuments Record ML 071555; National Grid Reference TQ26707014.



Simplified plan, showing the water features existing in 1871.

1.1.2 Archaeology

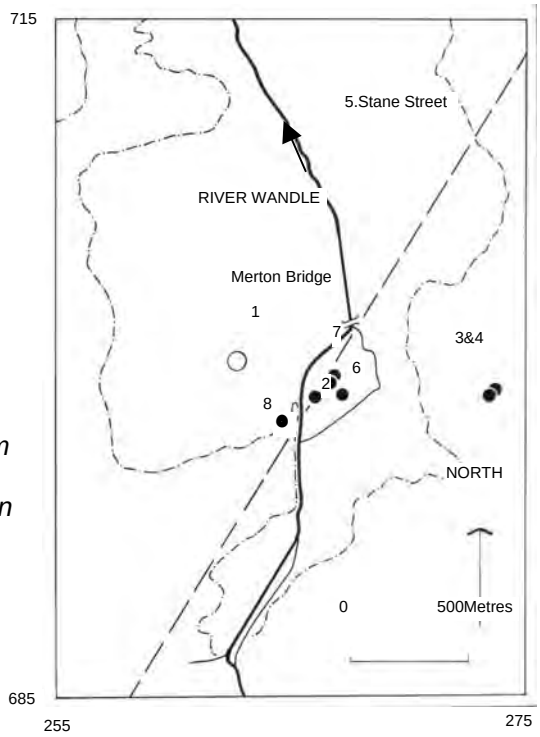
This section of the Conservation Plan deals with the archaeology of the area in the immediate vicinity prior to the construction of Merton Priory in the first part of the twelfth century AD.

The Greater London Archaeological Sites and Monuments Record (GLSMR), which is maintained on behalf of the London Borough of Merton by English Heritage, contains some 107 entries for the area of radius about 500 metres centred on the remains of the Chapter House of Merton Priory.[3]

Of these 20 relate to Listed buildings and only 12 relate to features or finds dating to the Prehistoric or Romano-British periods. In chronological order these are as follows.

Prehistoric

1. Handaxes
   The earliest finds from the vicinity of the Priory appear to be three handaxes found in the grounds of Merton Abbey near Nelson's house. The date and circumstances of discovery are not known. The handaxes probably date to the prehistoric period and most likely from the Palaeolithic, but could conceivably be Mesolithic or Neolithic in date. They are isolated finds, most likely the result of loss in antiquity and are unlikely to represent a settlement. Admiral Lord Nelson's house, where he lived with Emma Hamilton from 1801 until 1805, was Merton Place and this was located about 400 metres west of Merton Priory. The area was redeveloped mostly for terraced housing after the 1850s.[4]



Archaeological sites and finds from the vicinity of Merton Priory. The national grid co-ordinates are given to assist identification of the find spots.

[3] This is located at National Grid Reference (NGR) TQ 26526992. We are grateful to Barry Taylor and Steve Ellwood of the Greater London Archaeological Advisory Service for making this information available to us.

[4] GLSMR ML 0484; NGR TQ26087001.

2. Struck Flint
   About 45 pieces of struck flint have been found near Merton Priory. These are likely to have been the result of flint tool manufacture in the Mesolithic or Neolithic periods and are indicative of some form of short-term occupation of the valley floor.[5]

3. Neolithic and Bronze Age occupation
   Neolithic pottery associated with a later Bronze Age ditch and pit were found in 1989 at the King's College Sports Ground. These finds are likely to represent the earliest settled occupation in the vicinity of Merton Priory.[6]

4. Iron Age settlement
   Ditches associated with Iron Age pottery were found in1989 at the King's College Sports Ground and appear to represent part of a settlement enclosure. This would indicate continuous occupation represented by the earlier finds (Site 3).[7]

Roman and Romano-British

5. Roman Road – Stane Street
   The construction of the Roman Road from London to Chichester in the early years of the Roman occupation would have had a substantial impact on settlement in the area. The road is known to have passed across the site later occupied by the medieval Priory and excavations in 1997-1998 revealed parts of the road surface on either side of Priory Road, close to its junction with Merton High Street, and one roadside ditch.[8]

The surface of Stane Street, as revealed by excavations on the Priory site (after Saxby 2005 : 2).

[5] GLSMR ML 10712; National Grid Reference TQ 26466986.

[6] GLSMR ML 022506 and 021172; National Grid Reference TQ 27226987.

[7] GLSMR ML 022508; National Grid Reference TQ 27226987.

[8] GLSMR ML 071557, 071558 and 08958; National Grid reference TQ 26707014.

Stane Street crossed the River Wandle close to Merton Bridge and then passed across the site later occupied by the Priory on a projected line which passes under the north transept and the nave of the Priory church and then continues across the Merton Abbey Mills site.

Aerial photograph taken in the 1990s, showing the former location of Merton Priory (shown red) and the course of Stane Street.

6. Romano-British ditches
   Two ditches of possible Romano-British date were found during excavations of the infirmary cloister of the Priory between 1976 and 1990, as well as a considerable number of residual finds including Romano-British brick, tile, wall plaster, *opus signinum,* one coin, and two glass vessel fragments.[9]

7. There have also been discoveries of Romano-British pottery from the vicinity of Merton Priory.[10]

8. Fragments of Romano-British brick and tile were also found in November 2005 during the repair of the surviving section of precinct wall to the west of the Priory site.

Further away a Roman coin hoard was found during gravel extraction in 1922 near Lombard Road, to the southwest of the Priory site, along with pottery and a brooch.[11]

Excavations in 1965 near Phipps Bridge, about 900 metres south of the Priory site, revealed three burials, two ditches, and pottery dating to the late 1st or 2nd centuries.

[9] GLSMR ML 057231; National Grid Reference TQ 26566990.

[10] GLSMR ML 022516 and 08960; National Grid References TQ 26547036 and TQ 26526992.

[11] GLSMR ML 020656, 021182, 030652, and 030653.

On the basis of these various finds it has been suggested that some form of Romano-British settlement existed near Stane Street and that this may have developed around a *mansio* or posting station along the Roman road, either in the vicinity of Merton Priory or alternatively on the higher ground to the southwest in the vicinity of Lombard Road where the coins were found (*Margary 1948* : 78 and *Turner 1965*). The Priory site is about seven miles from the point where the Roman road would have crossed the Thames.

Anglo Saxon

There is little archaeological evidence for settlement in the vicinity of Merton Priory at this time.

The place-name *Meretun* can be traced as early as the seventh century AD, suggesting settlement in the area at that time but there are doubts as to whether this is actually a reference to this Merton. The name usually translated as either 'the farm by the pond' or alternatively as 'Maera's homestead'.

Inhumations in stone sarcophagi accompanied by spearheads are said to have been found at Station Road on the site of Merton Priory and at one time were thought to be associated with the Battle of Meretun between the Saxons and the Danes in AD 871.[12] However, it is now thought that the sarcophagi were almost certainly medieval, deriving from Merton Priory, and that the spears were not found with them. It is also now considered that the Battle of Meretun is most likely to have taken place at Merton near Reading and not Merton, Surrey.

However, some residual Saxon objects have been found during the excavations of Merton Priory and these include early chaff-tempered pottery and eight antler objects one of which is a very fine late Saxon double-sided comb and these may suggest an early settlement in the vicinity of the later Priory.

The late Saxon antler comb found beneath the later infirmary cloister (after Saxby 2005).

[12] GLSMR ML 030769.

In AD 967 a grant of land at Merton and Dulwich was made by King Edgar to Earl Aelfheah and his wife Elswita. This included a description of the boundary features and these appear to indicate that the estate and later parish of Merton changed little during the succeeding one thousand years, in that it has always been bounded on the east side by Mitcham and Tooting; on the south by Mitcham and Morden; on the north by Wimbledon; and on the west by Kingston and Malden.

Domesday Survey

Domesday lists Merton in 1086 as being held by King William (the Conqueror) and as having a church, two mills and land for 21 ploughs.

1.1.3 Merton Priory

The principal sources for the history and archaeology of Merton Priory are A. Heales' *The Records of Merton Priory,* published in 1898; H F Bidder and H F Westlake's *Excavations at Merton Priory,* published in 1926; M L Colker's *Latin texts* published in 1970; the two booklets published by the Museum of London Archaeology Service with the London Borough of Merton (*Bruce and Mason 1993* and *Saxby 2005*); a series of papers published on the internet by David Saxby; a series of interim reports pertaining to archaeological excavations, archaeological assessments, and watching briefs undertaken by MoLAS (see References and Bibliography) and, most recently, Lionel Green's *A Priory Revealed*, 2005.

These are shortly to be complemented and superceded by a full excavation report to be published in 2006 by the Museum of London Archaeology Service.

The following abbreviated accounts of the history and excavations of the Priory are based heavily on David Saxby's interim accounts.

History

The manor of Merton, which belonged to the Crown, was given by Henry I to Gilbert the Norman, Sheriff of Surrey. In December 1114 Gilbert established an Augustinian Priory at Merton, under Robert, sub-Prior of St Mary's Huntingdon, for a few Austin or Black canons that came from that place. The Black canons were so-named after their black outdoor cloaks. The first church is likely to have been of timber and was probably located in the western part of the manor, near to the site of the present parish church. Land was added which brought in an annual return of 60 shillings (*Colker 1970* : 241-70). Among its distinguished visitors were Queen Matilda, who had great affection for the place and who brought her son, William, to see it.

The canons of St Augustine were communities of priests living under a monastic rule, who spent some time in the local community looking after the spiritual well-being of lay people.

The rule of St Augustine had been first adopted in north-eastern France in the middle of the eleventh century and was based on a letter written by St Augustine of Hippo some six hundred years earlier. The document was brief and had to be expanded by borrowing from

the existing Benedictine Rule. The Austin canons lived by a rule which was demanding, but which fell short of the strictness and uniformity of other monastic orders. There was more freedom concerning food, drink and movement, and less stress on the need for isolation, which was so important to the Cistercian order.

This meant that the Augustinian Rule was particularly suited for adoption by communities serving Priories, collegiate churches, cathedrals and hospitals in both urban and rural settings.

The Augustinian rule was first adopted in England during the late eleventh century and spread rapidly. Five of the 260 Augustinian houses in England were located in Surrey – the most important of these being here at Merton and at Southwark.

Black-robed friars depicted in an early fifteenth century illustration (after Saxby 2005 : 3).

On 3rd May 1117 the canons at Merton at that time moved to a new site *'more suited to the quiet of religion and in many respects more convenient, which their founder secured for them'*. This new site was the one where the remains of the monastic church and buildings have been located by excavation, within an area covering about sixty acres on the banks of the Wandle.

In a Latin text concerning Gilbert, the founding of the new Priory is clearly mentioned:

'In time Robert saw the advantages of another site, but (was) timid about approaching Gilbert on this matter. But finally (he) discussed it directly, and both of them (were) soon seen, on foot or horseback, marking out space for the church, the circuit of the cemetery, deciding how water was to be drawn from its main body, and where the mill and vineyards were to be. Buildings were transported from the earlier settlement. A wooden chapel was constructed, and William Gifford, bishop of Winchester arrived to bless the cemetery' (*Colker 1970*).

The canons (now 17 in number) *'marched festively' into their new community. Gilbert brought bishops and nobles to see it and to instill affection for it. He sent grain, wine, meat, fish and cheeses and bought cloth for the brethren, whom he was often kissing and talking to'* (*ibid*).

Building work appears to have continued, for *'in the course of the following fifteen years* [*i.e.,* up to 1132] *the convent and edifices were peacefully constructed*' (*Heales 1898* : 3-4).

In 1121 Gilbert was granted the entire manor of Merton in consideration of one hundred pounds of silver and six marks of gold (*Dugdale 1830*). In the year of his death, 1125, Gilbert began a most beautiful and sturdy church at Merton but because it *'seemed too great for certain persons it was destroyed after his death, except for the front, where the sheriff had laid the first stone and the Prior had set the second' (ibid)*.

Thomas Becket, later Archbishop of Canterbury, was educated at Merton Priory in the late 1120s and the prestige and respect which Merton acquired during the first few decades of its existence can be seen in the note added in a margin of the original text of Matthew Paris's *Historia minor.* Referring to the election of Thomas Becket as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162, he wrote '*note that blessed Thomas took up the monk's habit from the pope, and among other things wore a black cowl, which is the dress of the canons of Merton*'.

This building work appears to have continued, for in 1131 *'Archbishop Corbeil was actively engaged in reconstructing the Priory in stone* (*Haines 1930*). This work seems to have been completed in 1136 (*Brayley 1841*).

Other building work continued on the site for at least another forty years, for in 1161 the Chapel of the infirmary was dedicated (*Heales 1898* : 21) and around 1175 an *'Important building was completed'*. This building is thought to have been the "Guest House", and is identified with the building which stood until 1914 on the western bank of the Wandle, fronting Station Road (*Green 1977* : 98). During demolition a Norman arch was found and was subsequently relocated within the grounds of the parish church of St. Mary the Virgin, Merton Park (*Johnston 1914*).

Coins of King John (c1205-1210- above left) and of Henry III (1216-1272 - above right), found during excavations of Merton Priory (after Saxby 2005).

During a great storm in 1222 the tower of the Priory Church was blown down, which must have instigated a further phase of building. (*Annals of Dunstable Priory*).

Dating evidence from the excavations by the Museum of London in 1986-1990 suggests that around 1230 to 1250 rebuilding of the church was carried out, along with the construction of a new infirmary and adjacent Reredorter. Other buildings were probably altered or rebuilt at this time.

One significant individual to be educated at Merton in the early thirteenth century was Walter of Merton. He was born in 1200; educated at Merton and Oxford; and in 1233 adopted the name Merton. He became Canon of St Paul's Cathedral in London in 1259 and founded Merton College, Oxford, in 1264. Between November 1272 and August 1274 he was regarded as one of the most powerful men in England. He was made Bishop of Rochester in 1274 and died in 1277.

This was a period when Merton Priory achieved national prominence, its main claim to fame being the place where a series of important meetings of national significance were held.

The Merton Priory seal of 1241, depicting the Virgin Mary under a representation of the Priory.

We are grateful to Dennis Turner, of the Merton Priory Trust, for the following contribution relating to the role of the Priory in hosting royal councils.

King John often stayed at Merton Priory and it was from here that John issued safe-conduct passes to enable the joint meeting to take place at Runnymede (MHS Bulletin 127 Sept 1998). However, no king of England stayed at the Priory more than his son, Henry Ill, who first came to Merton when only nine years old while the pope's legate, one Gualo, and the regent, William Marshall, brokered a deal with Louis the dauphin of France (*Surrey Archaeological Collections* **36** 1925 : 53).

From 1227 on Henry chose to maintain lodgings at the Priory. Rooms were also set aside for chancery so that governmental business could operate from Merton. We are told that Henry was glad to remove himself from the constraints of life at Westminster and would often spend Christmas and Easter at Merton. Later, after he was married, he seems to have preferred his palace at Guildford.

In January 1236, Henry married Eleanor of Provence. Shortly after their wedding, and the new queen's coronation at Westminster, the English barons drew Henry away from the influence of his French in-laws to hold a meeting of the Great Council. Westminster, the intended meeting place, was badly flooded and the king came - at short notice and together with the barons of the council with their entourages - to Merton, where they spent a week.

The outcome of the meeting was the first comprehensive statute or series of provisions since the Great Charter and a landmark in English law-making. The important Statute of Merton differed from

the Great Charter in circumstances and content. It was not a concession extorted from a reluctant king but a declaration on points of law suggested by experience. On one rather modern sounding matter raised in the discussions no agreement was reached because the barons and the king's advisers differed. The king claimed full jurisdiction over refugees and disturbers of the peace in private parks and fisheries, while the barons asserted their rights to imprison and deal with convicted offenders. A dispute of this sort, however, might arise at any time. In general, the Statute of Merton declared the law as informed common sense suggested. It gave more definite legal redress to widows; protected successful litigants against further dissension; and forbade the exaction from heirs of the interest on their father's debts during their minority.

Probably the best-remembered of the provisions, however, is the one that allowed the enclosure of common pasture by the lord where, but only where, the open land was more extensive than was required to meet the customary rights of the tenants (Powicke 1962 *The Thirteenth Century* : 69). Similar issues were raised in 1258 and led to the Statute of Marlborough nine years later and the legislation of Edward I marked a more elaborate stage in the same process of constant definition (legislation progressed slowly in the thirteenth century).

In January 1255, Henry Ill called a council meeting at Merton to discuss how to meet his expenses abroad. It was agreed that the king should tallage (tax) his demesne lands throughout England. London's charters excluded Londoners from paying tallage and they refused to pay. The mayor was summoned to Merton and the king demanded 3,000 marks (£2,000). The Londoners withdrew and returned saying that they were willing to grant 2000 marks as aid, but would not pay more (Powicke 1947 *King Henry III and Lord Edward* : 308).

A provincial council met at Merton in June 1258 and there the evils which oppressed the Church and the remedies required to deal with them were defined with more elaboration in the form of articles (*Powicke 1962*).

All this ecclesiastical, royal and governmental activity at Merton has implication about the way in which we should view the physical nature of the Priory. Members of the Great Council were the most important persons in the kingdom. Clearly the Chapter House at Merton was seen as a worthy chamber for holding the formal meetings but, not only did the King have his Chancery and household knights with him but, also, each baron would have been accompanied by advisers, knights, grooms and servants.

Thus the gatherings of 1236 and 1255 would have involved large numbers of people, all of whom had to be accommodated. Unfortunately, we have no evidence as to how this was achieved, but not only were there the sheer logistic problems, there would also have been delicate questions of protocol to be observed. In the case of the 1236 council, the problems had to be (and were) solved at short notice.

A further sign of the importance of Merton Priory is the way in which its Prior was summoned to attend early parliaments -

something that normally only happened to bishops and 'mitred abbots'. The Prior sat as a spiritual lord until 1327. Modern parliaments can be said to have begun with the council summoned by Simon de Montfort after the Battle of Lewes on behalf of the then captive king. The Prior of Merton was called to attend on twentieth Jan 1265 by a writ dated at Woodstock 24 Dec 1264 (*Heales 1898* : 142). He was summoned again by Edward I in 1300 (*Heales 1898* : 186). Another important assembly convened at Merton Priory at this time was a Convocation of the Church on the 6th June 1258, summoned by Archbishop Boniface.

During the middle of the thirteenth century further building work on the church is indicated for on 5 February 1253 Edward of Westminster was ordered to ensure that the silver image of Blessed Mary which had begun to be made for the use of the Prior and convent of Merton should be completed and delivered to them. Presumably the image was intended to adorn the conventual church, and it is notable that the following year Peter Chasepore, the Queen's treasurer, bequeathed to Merton a substantial sum to buy land for the support of a chantry at the Priory church.

For the first three quarters of the century at least, during the reign of Henry III, relations between Merton and the Crown were relatively relaxed and cordial. Since Queen Matilda, who had given the Priory so much moral and material support at the time of its foundation, King Henry was much the most fervent royal patron of religious orders, and he enjoyed a particularly close personal relationship with Merton.

Henry III had private chambers at Merton Priory, for in 1258 it is recorded that the *'King commands Master John, his mason, to cause to be repaired, and amended in such repair as was needed, the chimney of the king's chamber in the Priory of Merton, and his garderobe, and of the king's chancellor's chamber there: that the cost be charged to the king, and allotted to the outgoings of the works at Westminster'* (*Heales 1898* : 136).

Between his accession in 1217 and his death in 1272, Henry III stayed at Merton some 54 times, sometimes for a couple of days only but more often for one or two weeks. Most of these visits took place at the start or end of a royal progress, so that Merton, at a distance of only seven miles from London, evidently made a convenient royal staging-post, at least on more leisurely journeys. Much the most usual stopping place next to the west was Guildford, 16 miles away, and another frequent one was Kingston, only five miles away.

On 13 October 1344 Merton was selected to provide a suitable and strong house with free access for the use of the collectors for Surrey of the tenth and fifteenth granted by Parliament. This was probably a repeat of the arrangements in 1235, when the Priory was the collection point for the royal aid. On 8 April 1347 the Prior of Merton was 'invited' to contribute an aid for the war with France which had just broken out. At the end of the century, on 17 October 1397, the king acknowledged his obligation to repay to the Prior of Merton, among many other such creditors, a loan of £40.

Between 1346–49 royal sports were held at Merton Priory on the feast of Epiphany, presumably for the amusement of Edward III. The accounts of Great Wardrobe of King Edward III show there were supplied thirteen *visers* (masks) with heads of dragons, and thirteen with heads of men and ten *courtepies* (short cloaks) of black *bokeram* and twelve yards of English canvas of flax.

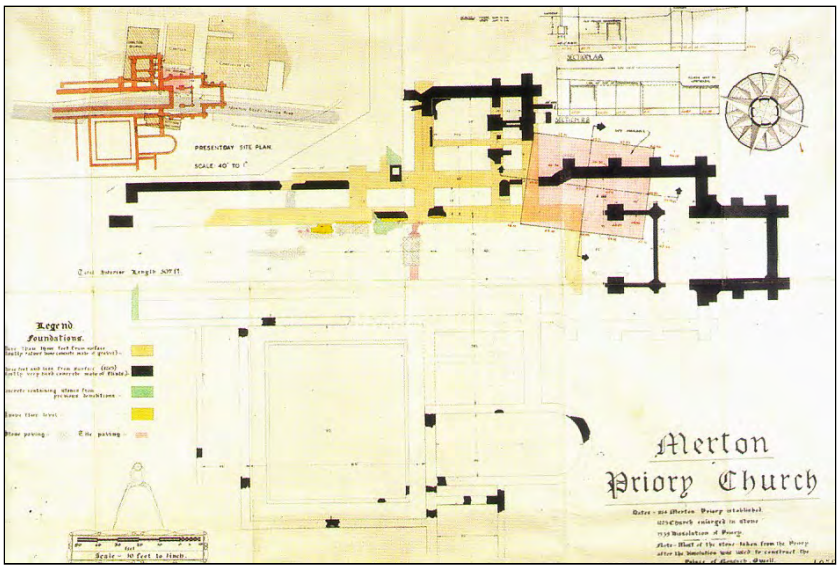
Documentary sources relating to the Priory church during this period are from the latter part of the fourteenth century. On 9 June 1382 Bishop Wykeham permitted the Prior and convent to have three altars consecrated or dedicated within their church by Bishop William of Nantes, together with two portative altars or altar tops.

It would appear that the church was in a state of disrepair by the end of the fourteenth century and between April fourteenth and 23rd in 1393 the Prior sent a certificate to the Bishop concerning the status of the house. This included a reference stating that the Chapel of the Blessed Mary existed in a truly decayed and ruinous state which according to the opinion of the masons and carpenters would require 240 marks to repair. Also that the nave of the church existed in a similar state of disrepair and would require 2000 marks for repairs. This request was presumably met as various repair programs were instigated at the close of the fourteenth century.

Excavations

The first excavations designed to establish the location and plan of the Priory were undertaken in the period 1921-1922 by Colonel H.F. Bidder and H F Westlake, and the results were published a few years later (*Bidder and Westlake 1926* : 255-272). The investigations were undertaken mostly on undeveloped land to the north of Station Road, with a small number of trenches excavated in the goods yard to the south.

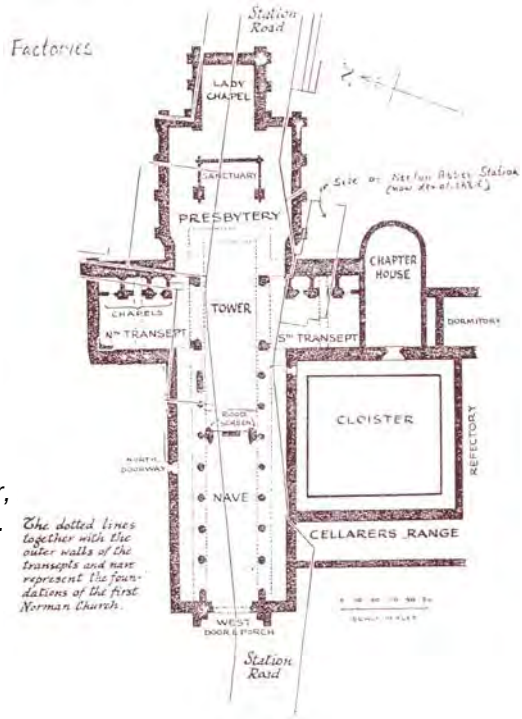
These excavations revealed the precise location and the basic ground plan of the Priory church and of parts of the chapter house to the south of it. Along with his plan of excavated features, Bidder published an interpretation plan of the layout of the monastic buildings attached to the south side of the Priory church.



Bidder and Westlake's plan the excavations and their proposed layout of some of the claustral buildings (after Bidder and Westlake 1926)

Photograph taken during Bidder and Westlake's excavations, showing part of the flooring within the north aisle of the church alongside Station Road (after Bruce and Mason 1993 : 5).

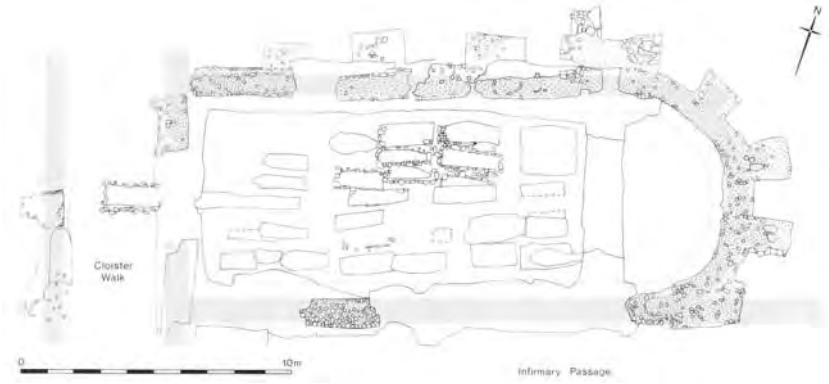
A copy of a plan from E.M. Jowett's 1951 book, *A History of Merton & Morden* (facing page 11), showing the principal elements revealed by Bidder and Westlake in relationship to Station Road and Merton Abbey Station, has been inserted in a copy of Heales' *The Records of Merton Priory* held in Morden Library (on page 31). This includes later annotations, for example, referring to Merton Abbey Station as 'now demolished'.



Annotated plan of Merton Priory, partly based on Bidder, copied from E.M.Jowett 1951.

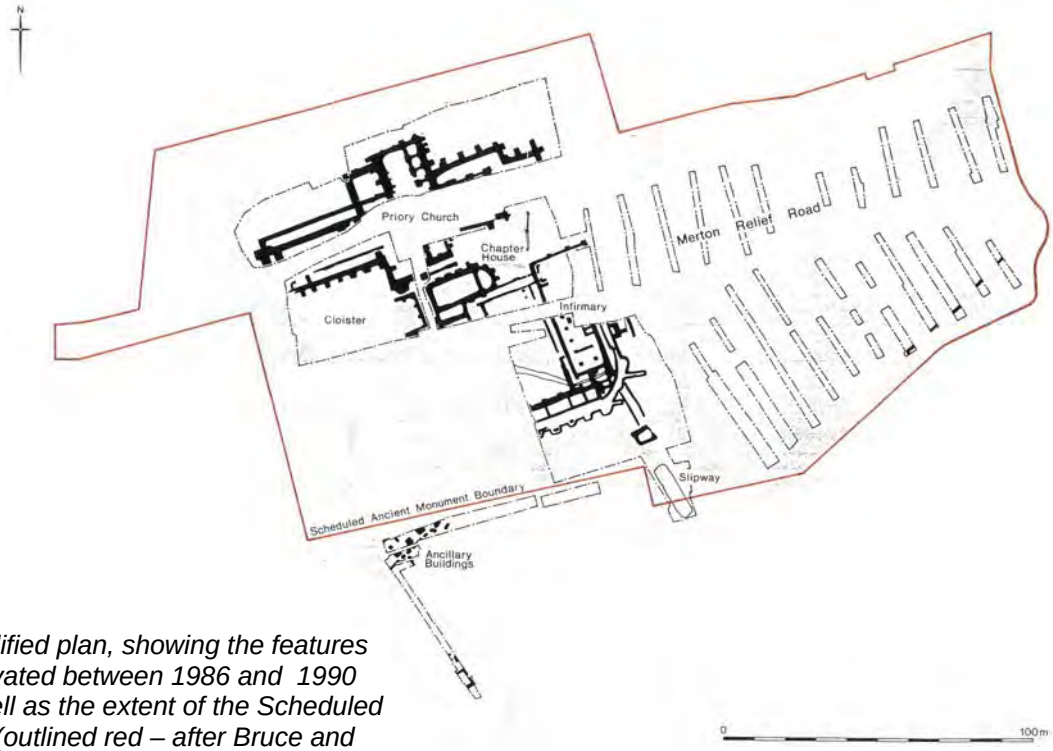
In 1962 and 1963 excavations by Dennis Turner uncovered a fourteenth century flint cobble track way to the west of the church (*Turner 1967 : 35-70).*

The full excavation of the chapter house and a small section of cloister walk took place between 1976 and 1978 and in 1983, under the direction of J. S. McCracken on behalf of the Surrey Archaeological Society, and this revealed two phases of construction.



Plan of the chapter house (after Bruce and Mason 1993 : 15).

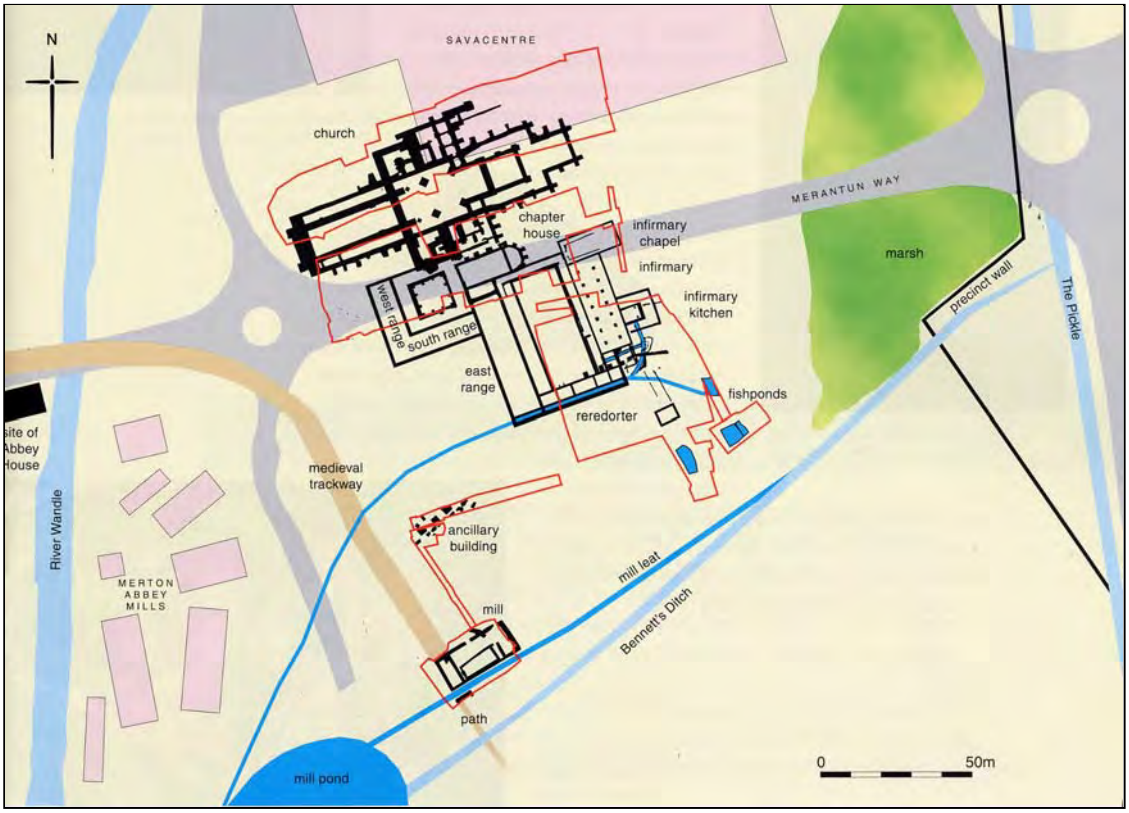
The most extensive excavations on the site of Merton Priory took place between 1986 and 1990 and were conducted by the Museum of London. These concentrated on the church, the lay cemetery to the north of the church, part of the cloister range, the canons' cemetery and the infirmary range.



Simplified plan, showing the features excavated between 1986 and 1990 as well as the extent of the Scheduled area (outlined red – after Bruce and Mason 1993 : 12-13).

The remains of the north side of the Priory church, as revealed by excavations in 1986-1990, looking west (after Saxby 2005 : 9).

Further excavations were conducted to the south in 2002 and 2003 by the Museum of London Archaeology Service [MoLAS] and these revealed the monastic and sixteenth century watermill, medieval fishponds, a medieval road and further monastic buildings.



Plan showing the excavated and conjectured medieval features, with the areas which have been subject to archaeological excavation outlined red (after Saxby 2005 : 5).

Archaeological excavation carried out by MoLAS on the site at Furniture Land, Merton High Street, SW19 was commissioned by GreenAcre South-east and comprised two trenches, one located in the north-eastern area, the second smaller trench further south. The site lies within the northern part of the Priory precinct. The excavation was carried out to explain the nature, extent and date of a roof tile kiln revealed within trench 2 and to reveal the full extent of the 'Gate House' (shown by cartographic evidence).

The earliest feature encountered during the excavation was a re-cut east-west aligned ditch which ran along the southern area of trench 7. This ditch may date to the medieval period and the only finds consisted of occasional pieces of residual prehistoric fire-cracked flint and ceramic building material.

In the centre of excavation trench 7 was a late fifteenth century tile kiln within an earlier structure, probably an open-ended forming shed for the manufacturing of the tiles. The tile kiln itself was constructed from re-used waste tiles from earlier kiln firings. The excavated part of the kiln comprised three furnace chambers and a horizontal flue placed to the rear of the kiln. After a number of firings, the kiln was rebuilt and this time included re-used twelfth century Reigate stone capitals from Merton Priory. The tiles may have been manufactured for a rebuilding/repair phase of Merton Priory.

Truncating the kiln were the chalk foundation walls for a small building measuring 7.20m wide (east to west). The southern, eastern and western extents of this building were located but it extended to the north, beyond the limits of excavation.

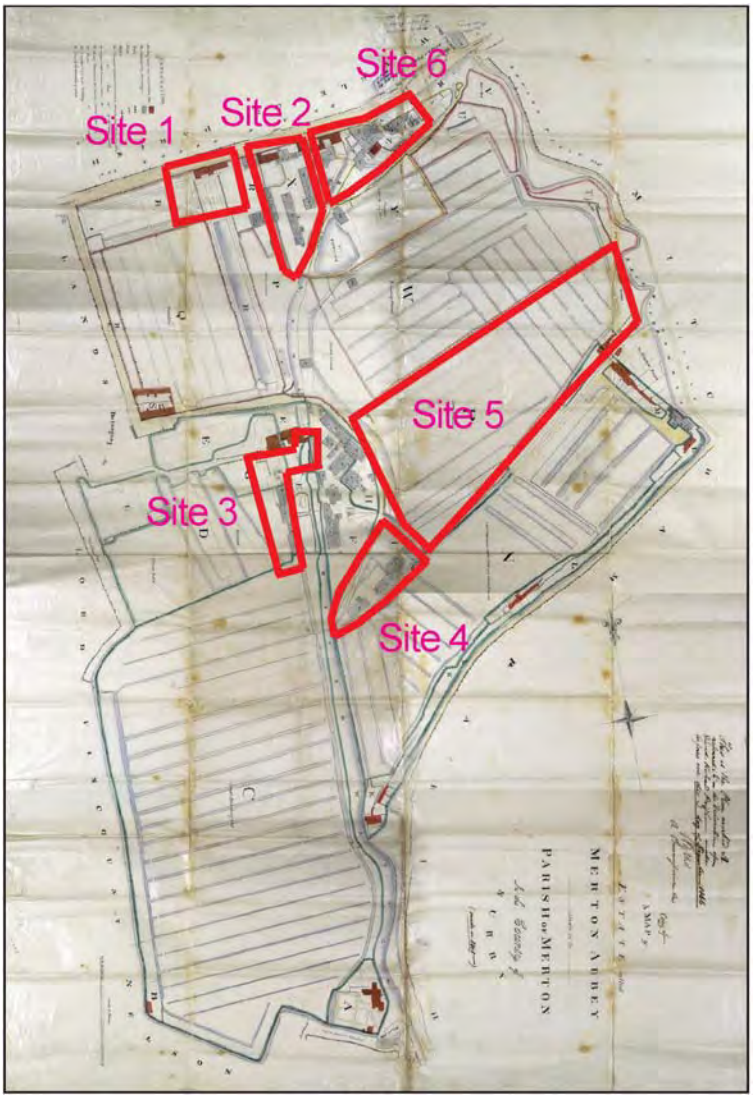
During the middle of the eighteenth century this late medieval building was enlarged with the addition of extensions to each end of the building. Historically, this building is referred to as 'Gate House' and stood until 1906 when it was finally pulled down and replaced with the Wimbledon and American Roller Skating Rink, afterwards by an airship and balloon factory. In 1922 it became the Wimbledon Palais de Danse.

During three days between 25th-27th September 2002 Channel 4's Time Team excavated the site of the former Liberty's works at Merton Abbey Mills. The purpose was to reveal a number of buildings and artefacts relating to the lost workshops of Liberty's works and the former owners, the Littler family, who were producing all of Liberty's fine cotton and silks from the 1890s.

Excavations were carried out within three trenches on either side of the River Wandle, and divers were brought in to search the river for artefacts and structures. Within one trench, located to the north of the existing Grade 2 listed "Wheel house", the walls of an earlier eighteenth century print building were found. The southern wall of the building was medieval in date and forms a monastic building associated with the Priory. A number of brick features were recorded including a possible water wheel gear pit, drains and a stove. A floor surface of crushed chalk was revealed along the western wall of the building which contained two parallel grooves cut into the surface. These have been interpreted as tracks for the dye trolley which would have run along the length of the printing tables.

Excavations on the west bank of the River Wandle revealed a number of posts and planks of weather-board from the printing sheds. Amongst the building rubble, a guide roller from a calico printing machine was recovered.

Finally, the Time Team recreated the lost art of hand block printing with the cutting of the print blocks, mixing of the dyes and the hand block printing of a length of silk. This took place inside the former Liberty's print building now used as a craft market.



Copy of an 1866 tracing of a map of 1805, annotated to show post-medieval sites. Site 1 revealed the 15thC tile kiln and the 18thC Gatehouse; Site 2 is the 1752 calico works and Wm. Morris' workshops; Site 3 is an 18thC print building; Site 4 is the c.1800 Bennett's Mill; Site 5 is the 18th-19thC calico ditches. Site 6 (not excavated) is the site of the copper mills.
(Reproduced by courtesy of Surrey History Service 3875)

As has already been noted, the full report on the excavations undertaken by the Museum of London and the Museum of London Archaeology Service is due to be published in 2006.

In addition to the extensive evidence for masonry structures, which has allowed for the detailed analysis of the phases of construction and reconstruction of the Priory church and the principal monastic buildings, a wide range of objects have been recovered, which include coins, other objects of stone, copper-alloy, lead, gold, and bone, as well as pieces of carved masonry and window glass. The relatively high water table and waterlogged conditions, for example in the remains of the medieval fishponds, have also led to the preservation of wooden structures and objects, including the remains of plank coffins and table vessels; objects of leather; and evidence of food and for diet, all of which are seldom recovered from dry archaeological sites.

Hence, although the masonry buildings have been reduced only to their footings, the site preserves a great deal of evidence for the lifestyle of its occupiers, often in the form of materials that seldom survive.

Interpretation

Using the evidence that survives on the ground today, along with that provided by documentary sources and the archaeology, it has been possible to establish a great deal of information about the origins, layout, and development of Merton Priory and its associated structures, as well as about the lifestyle of the people who lived there.

THE PRECINCT WALLS AND GATES

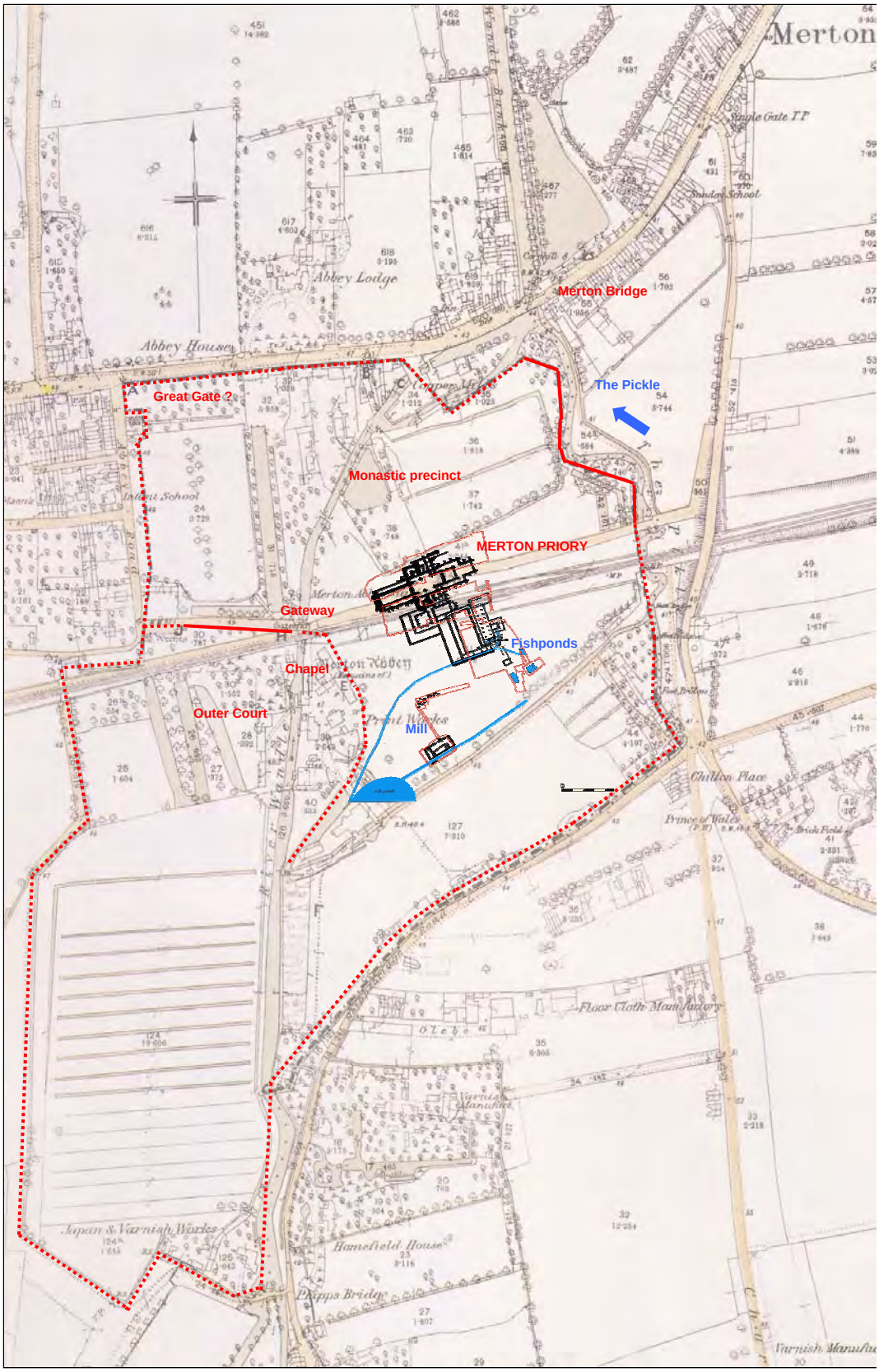
Several sections of precinct wall survive and part of the extent of the enclosed area has been postulated by Heales (*1898*) and others.

There are sections of wall surviving to the northeast corner of the site, near Merton Bridge and alongside what is believed to be an original section of the River Wandle, known here as The Pickle (for description see Section 1.2 - 101).

Heales postulated a circuit proceeding south along The Pickle and then south-westwards alongside a watercourse which ran parallel to Phipps Bridge Road, where traces of a boundary wall appear to have existed in the past.

An early twentieth century photograph recording part of the precinct wall which existed at that time, probably near Phipps Bridge Road (after Bruce and Mason 1993 : 7)).

The course of the Wandle has been altered north of this point and the alignment of the west side of the medieval precinct wall is not known, though it may have been preserved in part in the west boundary of the 1724 Calico Works (see below).



Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1871, overlaid by features associated with Merton Priory and the possible extent of its precinct walls.

Heales suggested an alignment for the north part of the west side passing close to what is now Abbey Road, as far as a presumed 'Great Gate' at the northwest corner of the enclosed area, with a return along what is now the south side of Merton High Street to The Pickle at Merton Bridge (see below Section 1.2.1 – 114).

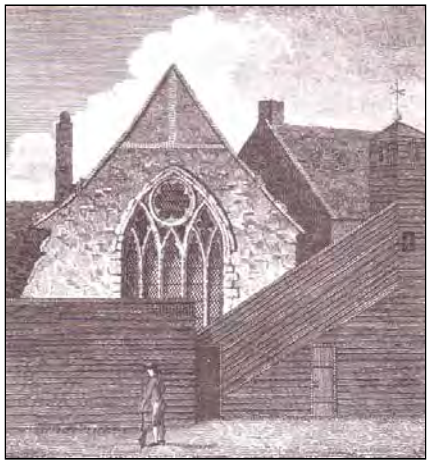
We have provisionally referred to this circuit as enclosing the *monastic precinct.*

Within this enclosed space there appears to have been a secondary or inner precinct wall of which a section survives along the south side of Station Road and we have tentatively referred to this as enclosing a smaller court on its south and west sides. The wall included a modest gateway which has been attributed to the medieval period (*Saxby 2005* : 23 and see photograph below in Section 1.1.4), though this has now been replaced by a replica (for description of the wall and gate see Section 1.2 - 102).

The wall appears to have continued to the southeast and is shown on early editions of the Ordnance Survey twenty five-inch plan (see below). On the 1950s edition it is referred to as 'Priory Wall' and on the 1893-94 edition it is shown accompanied on its east side by remnants of a water-filled feature which evidently continued to the north and south and presumably pre-dated the new course of the Wandle created in the late seventeenth century.

It has been suggested that the surviving wall and the, now replaced, gateway are or were, perhaps, not as old as previously suggested and that they might even date to after the Dissolution. However, the wall and the space it enclosed was cut through by the new cut for the River Wandle, which is believed to have been created in the late seventeenth century, so it presumably pre dates this work.

While the function and, indeed, the date of the smaller court are not clear it does appear to have contained a *chapel* of which the east elevation, including a large and ornate fourteenth century window, is depicted in an engraving produced in about 1800 and the structure was identified on Heales' plan as 'E-gable and windows shown on Malcolm's engraving' (see below Section 1.2.1 – 116).



Engraving produced in about 1800 by J. P. Malcolm, showing the chapel in the inner precinct.

This smaller court may also have contained the Priory guest house for lay visitors. It is referred to simply as a wall in the Listing description, but Saxby (*2005* : 22) refers to it as an outer court wall and this is the name adopted for the Conservation Plan.

THE PRIORY CHURCH

The first Priory church, established in 1114, was probably of timber and is believed to have been located on another site, probably in the western part of the manor near the site occupied by the present parish church of St Mary the Virgin, to the west of the Priory site.

In 1117 the Priory was moved to near or on the present site and work must have first centred on the building of the church. Moulded stones recovered from later features indicate a masonry building completed by about 1140, but, as yet, no *in situ* remains of it have been found (*Phase 1*). It may have been located in an adjoining area which has not yet been investigated.

A second masonry church appears to have been built in about 1170 (*Phase 2* – shown green on the plan). It was cruciform in plan with an aisleless nave to the west, a short presbytery, and two side chapels flanking a north transept and, possibly, a south transept.

Simplified plan, showing the principal phases of construction of the Priory church and the main monastic buildings (after Saxby 2005 : 10).

It was only a short while after its completion, perhaps in the 1190s, that the central tower collapsed in 1222.

A major programme of reconstruction was undertaken in the thirteenth century, probably as a direct result of the collapse of the tower, and this included not only the complete rebuilding of the church, similar in plan to the later and more elaborate Cistercian churches, but also a series of monastic buildings to the south (*Phase 3* – shown purple on the plan). These included a square-ended chapter house separated from the south transept by a narrow passage or *slype*; a cloister walk and ranges; an infirmary hall, with its own cloister, chapel and kitchen; and a reredorter (see below).

The thirteenth century church comprised a nave with north and south aisles supported on Purbeck marble columns; a tower over a crossing; a north transept with side chapels; and a south transept.

Remains of a Purbeck marble column found during the excavations (after Bruce and Mason 1993 : 14).

The remains of the north transept, with its three side chapels to the right (east) overlying the robbed-out walls of the earlier building (after Saxby 2005 : 10).

The nave was paved with slabs of Reigate stone and areas of small, plain glazed floor tiles in the north transept survived in at least five shapes, and these would have been used to form decorative mosaic patterns.

Reigate stone paving, on the north side of the church nave.

In the fourteenth century an eastern extension of the church was added in the period c1310-1340 and this included a presbytery and a Lady Chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary (*Phase 4* – coloured blue on the plan). In its completed form at this time the Priory church was 110metres long.

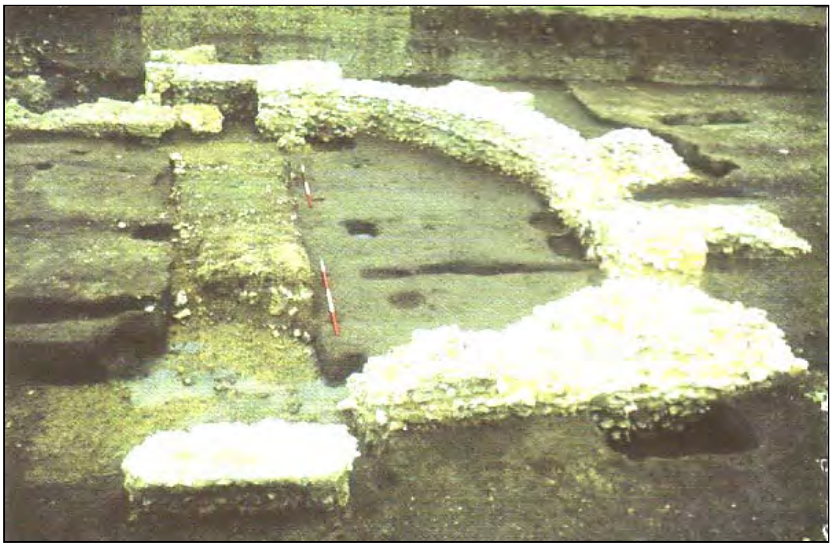
The northeast corner of the church, looking east, with the north wall of the Lady chapel in the background (after Saxby 2005 : 11).

During the fifteenth century buttresses were added to the church walls, presumably to strengthen them, and the discovery of a fifteenth century kiln for producing roof tiles suggests that it may also have been re-roofed at this time (*Phase 4* – shown brown on the plan).

THE CHAPTER HOUSE

This was second in importance to the Priory church within the monastic buildings. This was where the community gathered for daily meetings and, at Merton, it is likely to have been in this building that the major gatherings were held, for example the King's Great Council in 1236.

At Merton the chapter house was situated to the south of the Priory church, the position adopted in most monasteries, and in its early thirteenth century form it was rectangular in plan, measuring about 17.5 metres long by 10metres wide (*Phase 3*). In the fourteenth century the east wall was removed and replaced by a semi-circular apse (*Phase 4*).



The remains of the east end of the Chapter House, looking north during excavations (after Saxby 2005 : 12).

It had a floor of elaborate mosaic tiles, probably laid in the thirteenth century, which included representations of robed figures and animals, and fragments of coloured and painted glass indicate that it may have contained an elaborate east window.

It contained 31 graves, some later re-used, which included burials in stone-lines graves (cists) or wooden coffins and others which had no lining or container of any kind (see also cemeteries below).

THE CLOISTER AND RANGES

This consisted of a modest courtyard or 'cloister garth' surrounded by a corridor or cloister walk, which provided access between the various buildings within the monastic complex.

The central space is likely to have been laid out as a vegetable and herb garden.

The canons lived, ate, studied, and slept in ranges on three remaining sides of the buildings around the cloister but, as yet, these have not been fully excavated. The usual arrangement was for an upper storey on the east side to be used as the dormitory or *dorter,* while on the south side was the dining room or *refectorium,* where the canons would take their meals.

Many monasteries also had a *scriptorium,* where important books and manuscripts were produced, and the discovery during excavations of one bone stylus and eight of lead; three oyster shell 'palettes' containing coloured pigments; and several book mounts and clasps indicate that some such activity was carried out at Merton. The cloister walk may also have contained study areas and bookcases.

Some of the re-used fourteenth century worked stone found during excavations at Henry VIII's Nonsuch Palace is thought to derive from Merton Priory and appears to be from the arcade of the cloister.

THE INFIRMARY HALL

Every medieval monastic house had an infirmary where the sick and elderly were cared for. At Merton the infirmary hall, which was built in the first half of the thirteenth century, was situated to the southeast of the cloister and chapter house, which was the usual position in the layout of a monastery.

The infirmary complex and ancillary buildings paralleled the functions of the main monastic buildings, forming a self-contained community enabling the sick and infirm canons to relax away from the main monastic complex in a group of buildings which included a great hall or ward, a chapel, and a kitchen. At Merton the infirmary appears to have been relatively large.

Excavations of the remains of the infirmary hall, with the kitchen located at the top right (after Saxby 2005 : 14).

As with some other monastic houses, Merton also had a second cloister and it would probably have also included a latrine block, a bathhouse and gardens.

The infirmary hall was 30 metres long and 9.5 metres wide internally, and it included aisles divided into eight bays. Each stone column base contained a recess for a vertical timber post.

The floors were of re-used tiles, except for an open area in the middle of the central space, which had coloured glazed floor tiles set diagonally. The building was heated from a central hearth, formed of tiles set on edge, and there was evidence for another hearth near the south wall.

The floor of one of the rooms in the infirmary, with a pitched-tile hearth in the foreground (after Saxby 2005 : 14).

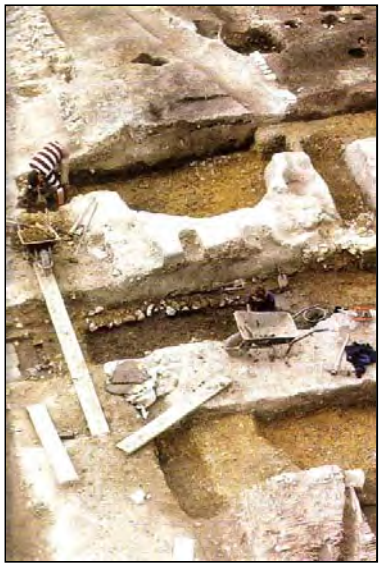
During the fourteenth century there was a move from communal living to private living in infirmaries, and at Merton this trend was evident from the insertion of partitions which subdivided the hall into smaller, individual rooms along the east and west walls.

THE INFIRMARY CHAPEL

This was at right angles to the north end of the infirmary hall. It was aligned east-west and was about 20 metres long and 9 metres wide.

THE INFIRMARY KITCHEN

This adjoined the east wall of the infirmary hall and measured about 10 metres east-west by 9 metres.



Remains of the infirmary kitchen during excavation (after Saxby 2005 : 15).

Water was supplied to the infirmary kitchen by a lead water pipe and was taken away in a stone-lined drain.

The stone-lined kitchen drain.

THE INFIRMARY REREDORTER

This was situated to the southeast of the infirmary hall and was about 28 metres long and 8 metres wide.

It would have had two floor levels comprising a ground floor with an undercroft divided into small rooms and a first floor forming the canons' latrines.

As excavated, the north side of the infirmary Reredorter was divided into five rooms of varying size.

Remains of the infirmary Reredorter and the south end of the infirmary hall during excavation (after Saxby 2005 : 16).

THE MONASTIC WATERMILL

This was located within the monastic precinct to the south of the main group of monastic buildings and was fed by a purpose-built water channel.

It was constructed in masonry in the twelfth to thirteenth century, measured over 25 metres long by 11 metres wide, and contained an oven and possibly a drying room.

Remains of the watermill during excavations (after Saxby 2005 : 16).

The watermill had been rebuilt in brick in the sixteenth century, at which time a large stone-lined water tank was inserted within the walls and this may have been used in the process of parchment or papermaking.

The mill was evidently demolished in the early eighteenth century.

THE FISHPONDS

A group of fishponds were located to the southeast of the infirmary and these would have provided the monastery with a regular supply of farmed freshwater fish, although fish remains found during excavations indicate that these were supplemented by a wide range of marine and estuarine species of fish and shellfish.

The remains of one of the fishponds during excavation (after Saxby 2005 : 18).

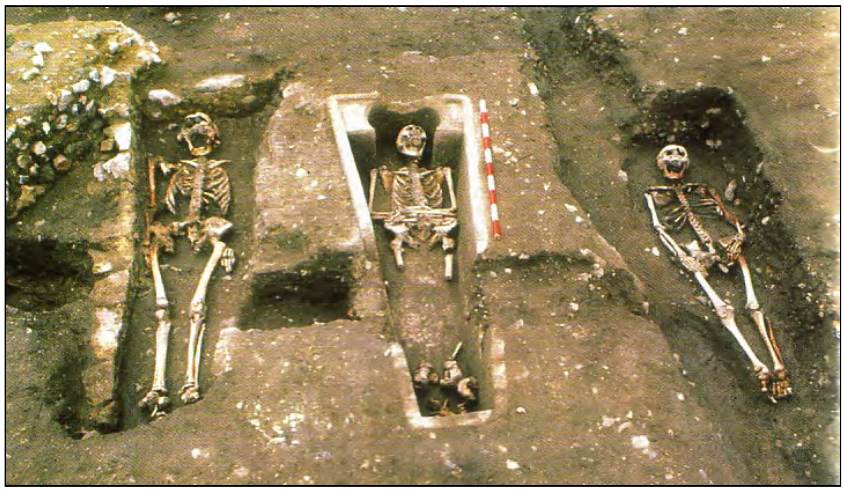
THE CEMETERIES

Four distinct cemetery areas have so far been investigated on the site and these comprise a lay cemetery north of the Priory church; burials within the Priory church itself; burials in the chapter house; and a canons' cemetery to the east of the chapter house.

The cemeteries at Merton Priory (after Bruce & Mason 1993 : 20).

It was usual for the lay cemetery to be located north of the Priory church and here the graves excavated so far appear to be in distinct groupings, perhaps indicating family plots for parishioners.

Burial inside the Priory church was usually reserved for clergy and a few notable lay people, mainly local gentry. In popular locations such as close to the high altar, graves were found to have been cut through earlier ones.



Three burial types within the chancel of the Priory church, from the left these comprise a stone-lined grave, a stone coffin, and a shroud burial (after Saxby 2005 ; 20).

As has already been mentioned, the chapter house contained 31 burials, set out in orderly rows. This area is likely to have been set aside for the burial of Priors and the grave of Prior Michael Kympton, who died in 1413, is probably indicated by part of a copper-alloy inscription plate.

The canons were probably buried to the east of the chapter house, south of the Priory church.

738 medieval burials have so far been excavated at Merton and these have included individuals interred in simple shrouds; burials in lead, stone, or wooden coffins; stone-lined graves or cists of various forms; interments on 'grave pillows'; and a burial laid on ash or charcoal. These have included five stone coffins and three plain tapering lead coffins.

Remains of a wooden coffin (after Saxby 2005 : 22).

The skeletons examined so far have revealed evidence for medical procedures at the Priory, for example the treatment of bone fractures, and one male was buried with an iron hernia belt fitted.

Spoil samples revealed evidence of medicinal herbs and spices, including black mustard seeds, opium poppy, henbane, black nightshade and hemlock.

1.1.4 The Dissolution

Merton Priory continued its monastic functions until the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII in the period 1536-1540. Even before Merton Priory was formally surrendered to the commissioners in 1538 it appears that demolition had started, some of the Priory stone being used in the construction of Henry VIII's new palace at Nonsuch, where work commenced in 1538 (*Dent 1962* : 42).

However, not all of the Priory buildings were pulled down. It would appear that only the main body of the church was demolished immediately, for in the indenture between Henry VIII and Sir Thomas Hennege on 6 July 1540 it is mentioned that the *'Crown has given, granted and leased to the said Thomas the house and site of the late Priory of Merton in co Surrey now dissolved, together with all houses buildings barns (orreis) stables dovecotes gardens (orti) orchards gardens (gardinis) mills land and soil existing within the site and precinct of the said former Priory.... and reserved and occupied to the use of the hospicium at the time of the Dissolution. Excepting always to the king great (grossis) trees and woods growing on the premises, and all kind of buildings within the site and precinct of the said later Priory which the king may hereafter order to be demolished and removed (imposterum prosterni et auferri mandaverit). To be held by Sir Thomas and his assigns from Michaelmas next for a term of 21 years, for £26 13s 4d, repairing all houses and buildings of the premises in timber as often as necessary, and keeping in good and sufficient repair during the term'*.

After the death of Sir Thomas Hennege in around 1557/8 the manor of Merton and the site of the Priory and its lands were granted to the Priory of Jesus of Bethlehem at Sheen, but reverted to the Crown on the accession of Elizabeth in 1558 (*VCH 1905* : 2). It is recorded: *'Grant to the new charterhouse at Sheen, including and also all that our manor of Marton with its rights (iuris) members and pertinances in co Surrey, lately once belonging to the dissolved monastery of Marton in the same county of Surrey, pertinences and parcel of the possessions once existing, and also all that site of the said late dissolved monastery of Merton and all lands, meadows, pasture, grazing, commons and hereditaments belonging to the site or with the same site hitherto leased, located, used or occupied and lately in the tenure and occupation of Sir Thomas Hennege deceased and his assigns.... 14 November 1558* (*Ministers' Accounts, PRO C66*).

On 29 May 1568 the site of the Priory was leased for twenty-one years to '*Gregory Lovell anvener of the stable, of the house and site of Marten alias Merton Priory and demesne lands thereof (named) in Moredon, Mychelham, Stretham and Longe Dytton, with reservations, from Michaelmas 1582, being the termination of a lease thereof inter alia by indenture of the Court of Augmentations of 7 March 34 Henry VIII* [1543] *to Sir Thomas Hennege with reservations (including buildings in the site ordered by the king throuygh his commissioners to be removed), for 40 years from Michaelmas then last at a yearly rent of £26 13s 4d; same rent; lessee may have firewood from a wood (named) in Stretham and Mychelham only. For his service and a fine of £53 6s 8d paid at the Exchequer* (ibid, 1568).

In 1587 Gregory Lovell renewed his lease of the Priory site and lands for a further twenty-one years: *'Gregory Lovell, gent, cofferer of the household of (i) the site of the late Priory (predictam domum et scitam dicti quondam Priorat) de Marton alias Merton... with all houses, buildings structures gardens stables dovecotes gardens orchards gardens mills waters ponds vineyards, fisheries, land fundum soil and hereditaments existing within the site of the circuit and procinct of the same former Priory; and lands in Merton, Moredon, Mitcham, Streatham and Long Ditton, leased for 21 years to GL under patent of 29 May 10 Elizabeth* [1568]*, reciting a 40 year lease to Thomas Hennage under seal of Augmentations dated 7 March 34 Henry VIII* [1543]*, and (ii) land in Merton, lately of Shene and previously of Merton, leased to William Barthilmew, groom of the scullery and Thomas Spenser boy of the scullery by patent of 21 April 9 Elizabeth [*1567*]. From Michaelmas last at £26 13s 4d for (i) and £10 5s for (ii). In consideration of the surrender of a previous lease to GL and lease to Barthilmew and Spenser, whose title GL now holds. Fine of £40* (ibid, 1587).

Gregory Lovell died in 1597 at the age of seventy-five years and was buried in the Parish church (*Jowett 1951* : 76). The lands and manor of Merton passed through many hands during the early seventeenth century.

In 1648 the Civil War parliamentarian troops were garrisoned at the remains of Merton Priory.

In addition to the material taken for the construction of Nonsuch Palace, stone and probably timber were also used in the construction of local buildings, of which several sixteenth century properties on the south side of Merton High Street remain, and the building which is now the Colourhouse Theatre at Merton Abbey Mills which almost certainly contains re-used fabric.

A few buildings to the west of the Priory evidently survived and were re-used for centuries after the Dissolution, within the area which we have called the lay precinct, and these include the fourteenth century chapel referred to and illustrated above (see Section 1.1.3).

Further west, the sixteenth century and later Abbey House concealed an elaborate twelfth-century arch from the monastic buildings, which was rediscovered when the property was demolished in 1914.

The twelfth-century opening found during the demolition of Abbey House (after Saxby 2005 : 6).

Most writers identify Abbey House as the large building which formerly existed immediately to the west side of the new cut for the River Wandle, -created in the late seventeenth century- and to the south of the gateway of which a replica survives in Station Road. This building is shown on the three editions of the Ordnance Survey twenty five-inch plans of 1871, 1898 and 1911. On the latter two it is identified with an antiquity cross as 'Merton Abbey (site of)' but the property is not actually named on any of them. It had evidently been demolished by 1933-34, although the antiquity symbol and annotation were both retained. However, the first edition of the Ordnance Survey twenty five-inch plan also has a property called 'Abbey House' further north, on what would have been the north boundary of the monastic precinct on the road which is now Merton High Street. This had been demolished before 1911 and cannot have been the building in which the twelfth century opening was discovered during demolition in 1914.

The reconstructed arch is now located immediately west of the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Merton Park, and forms a gated opening between the churchyard and the vicarage. It is a Grade II Listed building and the Listing description, prepared in May 1954, reads as follows :

> *Freestanding archway. Late C12, erected here in 1935. Stone. East face with round headed archway with recessed decorated voussoirs and stepped, shafted jambs with scallop capitals (some renewed). Set in surrounds of stone, flint and tile, and with a stone slate roof.*

Other medieval fragments built into west face. The archway possibly formed part of the former Hospitium of Merton Priory.

Most writers suggest that it may have formed part of the guest house for lay visitors (see below Section 1.2.2 – 115).

The reconstructed arch from the east (right) and a detail (above).

The principal elevation is on the east side and includes a substantial amount of re-used fabric at its south end. The opening is about 2.8metres high and would appear to be about the right size for a principal opening into an important and substantial building.

The west side is mostly as rebuilt in 1930s brick and tile, but it incorporates a column capital and the springing for an arch, to the north of the opening, and a stone corbel to the south of it. These are unlikely to be in their original positions relative to the arch, but give some indication of the form of the original building.

The reconstructed arch, from the west.

Above the arch is an inscription which reads –
'This gateway of the Guest house of Merton Priory (c1175) discovered in AD1914 was restored and re-erected on the new site in AD1935. Laus Deo.'

If this arch was *in situ* when found then it may have been part of the remains of the lay guest house. If it was not *in situ* then it may have been moved from the Priory church or perhaps the main gatehouse.

The medieval gateway in the precinct wall on Station Road has already been referred to (see Section 1.1.3). It survived until the 1980s at which time it was replaced with a replica (for description see Section 1.2.1 – 102k).

The medieval gateway, now replaced by a replica (after Saxby 2005 : 23).

1.1.6 Merton Abbey Mills

During the late seventeenth century the former site of Merton Priory, often referred to as Merton Abbey, was developing into an important manufacturing centre and for the subsequent development of the area we have adopted the name usually used today – Merton Abbey Mills to describe the area contained within and immediately adjoining the monastic precinct.

By 1667 there was a silk works on the site [although this is contradicted in some sources] and during the eighteenth century a series of water-based and water-powered industries flourished along the banks of the River Wandle, with calico-printing, flour-milling, copper-working and brazil wood grinding, for then extraction of dyes, all occurring on or in the vicinity of the site of Merton Priory.

These works were provided with a clean and improved supply of water created when the River Wandle was diverted to its present courses through the former monastic precinct, possibly in the late seventeenth century and certainly before Rocque's London map of 1740.

For the purposes of the Conservation Plan we propose to concentrate on those industries which took place within the former monastic precinct of Merton Priory that have had the most marked effect on the built heritage and on the significance of the area in the history of technological and artistic development.

Silk Works : 1667

By 1667 Johannis Walker was operating a silk manufacturing works at Merton Abbey (*Marsh 1913*) and the Jacob family were using part of the Priory site as a bleaching ground.

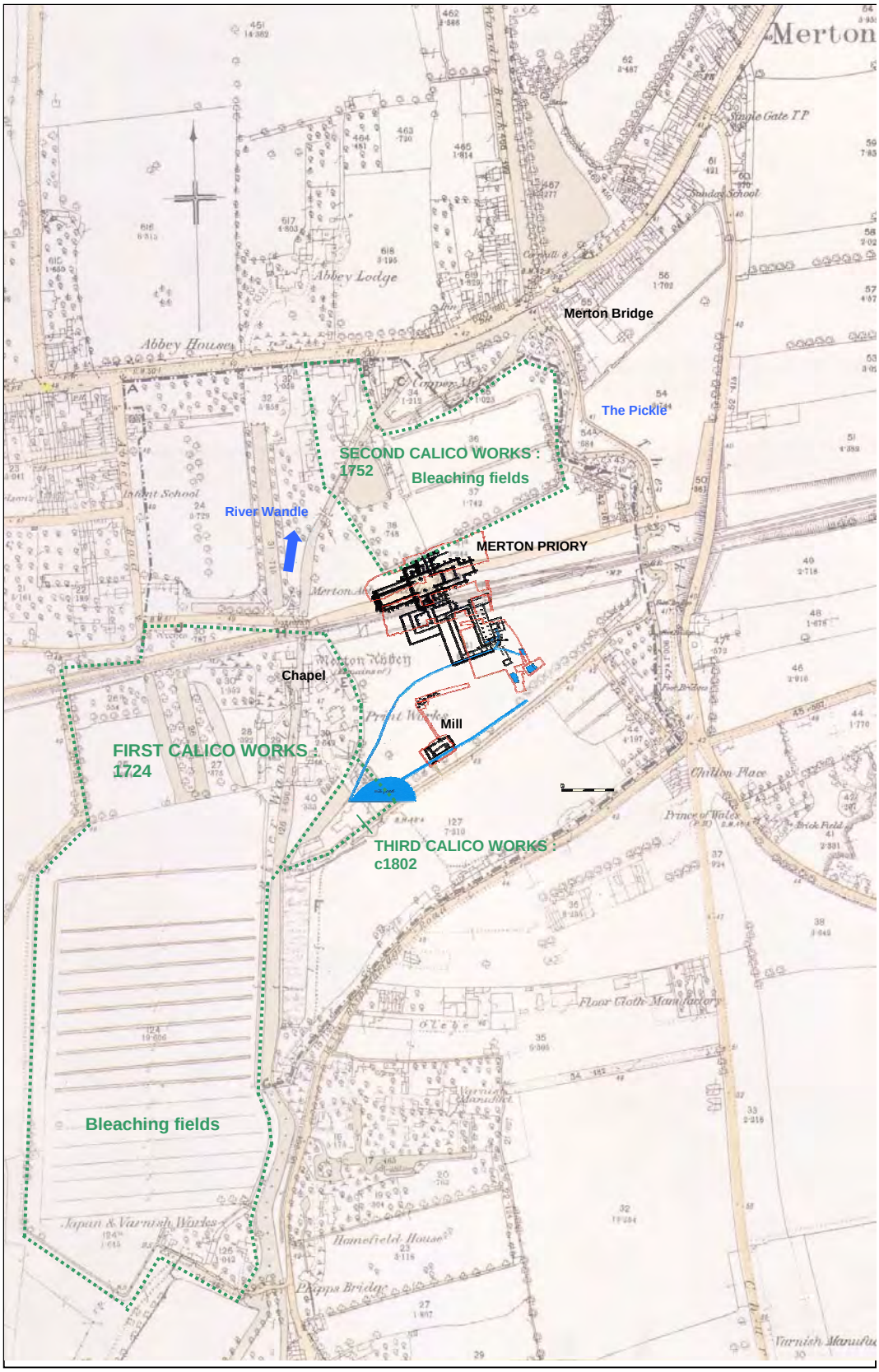
The precise location of the silk works is not known, but it may have been situated within surviving Priory buildings close to the new course of the river.

First Calico Works : 1724-1833

Of the various industries along this part of the Wandle, calico-printing was the main one at Merton Abbey and, along with Mitcham, the area became a major centre for textile printing and dyeing in England. This was greatly helped by a good supply of clear water for bleaching and printing, as well as to drive machinery.

The first calico-printing works at Merton Abbey was established in 1724 on the east bank of the river and probably incorporated the former chapel and other surviving monastic buildings for printing and dyeing.

A second calico works was created to the north in 1752 and a third was created to the south in about 1802 (see plan below).



Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1871, overlaid by the plan of Merton Priory and the approximate extents of the first three calico works of Merton Abbey Mills.

During the seventeenth century the East India Company imported from India a cotton cloth called ‘callico’, which was painted in bright colours. The English woollen producers were concerned about the effects on their industry and in 1700 obtained an Act of Parliament barring the import of printed fabrics. As a result, merchants imported plain cloth and developed techniques of printing on it.

The cloth had first to be bleached in crofting or bleaching grounds, which were large open areas of grassland intersected by parallel, water-filled ditches, and several of these are depicted on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey twenty five-inch plan of 1871. Others, now backfilled, have been encountered during excavations. The cloth was first immersed in an alkaline solution made from wood ash and then in sour milk. The cloth was laid out to bleach in the sun between and parallel to the ditches, from which water was scooped and poured onto the cloth.

It was initially a slow process taking between a few weeks and some months to complete, but in the 1750s the bleaching time was greatly reduced by using dilute sulphuric acid and by the end of the century chlorine, in the form of ‘bleaching powder’, made new methods of mass-production possible. It is perhaps, significant that the first calico-printing works of 1724 at Merton had extensive bleaching grounds, the second calico-printing works of 1752 had a relatively small area of bleaching grounds, and the third calico-printing works of *circa* 1802 appears to have no bleaching grounds at all (see below), although this might also be a result of the printers buying in bleached fabric.

The early calicoes were printed by using wood blocks and, from the 1750s, by engraved copper plates introduced by Francis Nixon of Merton Abbey, which enabled greater detail in the printing but were still operated by hand. By the end of the eighteenth century copper cylinders were also being used and these enabled cloth to be printed in long lengths and at a much faster rate. Block printing nevertheless continued until the second half of the twentieth century.

One surviving building from the early print works is the ‘Colour House’, which was built in 1742 (see description below Section 1.2.2 - 201).

It is not certain who established the first calico works at Merton, but in a will of 1756, a John Cecil is referred to as a calico printer of Merton Abbey. Between *circa* 1776 and 1786 a calico printer called Robert Maxwell had acquired the works. He became bankrupt in 1783 and his copper plates were acquired by Joseph Talwin and Joseph Foster, who operated a works at Bromley Hall on the River Lea. In 1784 John Leach had taken over the works at Merton and a year later he was joined by a partner and they traded as Leach and Howard.

In 1786 the firm was called Leach and Co. and then between 1787 and 1811 Leach was joined by various partners and the works was known as Newton, Leach and Co.

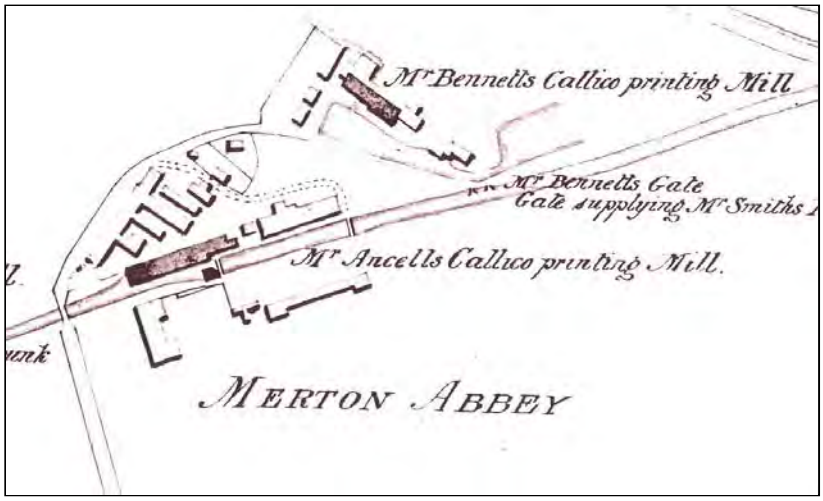
It was subsequently known as Newton, Leach, Greaves and Hodgson and as Newton, Hodgson and Leach at the end of the eighteenth century.

Newton had previously been printing in Wallington and in about 1779 had engaged a manager, the Irish designer William Kilburn, to whom he sold the Wallington works in 1784.

In 1801 John Leach dissolved the partnership and set up on his own, constructing a range of print and dye houses further to the south (see below – Third Calico Works).

Between 1811 and 1819 the works were in the hands of Newton, Langdale, Simpson & Co.

In 1820 Joseph Ansell had taken over the Newton, Langdale, Simpson & Co. works at Merton Abbey and the property is shown as 'Mr Ancells Calico printing works' on a map produced between 1820 and 1831.



Extract from the map of 1820-1831, showing the first and third calico works (see below). North is to the left of the map.

In 1831 Edmund Littler took over the works for the production of silks and fabrics. The Littler family were an established calico-printing firm both in West Ham and at Waltham Abbey in the Lea Valley.

In 1833 Littler also acquired Bennett's print works to the south, which had been established in *circa* 1802 (see below – Third Calico Works), to form one large printing manufactory – the Merton Abbey Print Works (see below).

The approximate extent of the first calico-printing works can be determined from old maps and plans and appears to have been contained to the north and east by the walls of the lay precinct, with extensive bleaching fields to the southwest, beyond the new course of the River Wandle.

Second Calico Works : 1752-1881

A further calico-printing works was established within the north part of the former monastic precinct, close to Merton High Street, in 1752. Since these works were leased to William Morris & Co. in 1881 and we know the extent of his property (see below), we can established with some certainty the location and probable extent of the original calico-printing works (see plan above).

It is not certain who established these works, but from about 1775 they were occupied by Benjamin Vaughan & Son, and William Fenning and James Halfhide, who were calico printers. By 1778 they were occupied by Fenning, Halfhide & Co. However, in 1788 Fenning was declared bankrupt and the company name was altered to Halfhide & Sons and they continued in production until that company finally went bankrupt in 1804-1805.

By 1805 a major alteration had divided the works into two properties – 'The Gatehouse', James Halfhide's former residence – was occupied by Charles Smith, while the printing works were operated by William West on a sub-lease. At this time a more efficient mill house was erected.

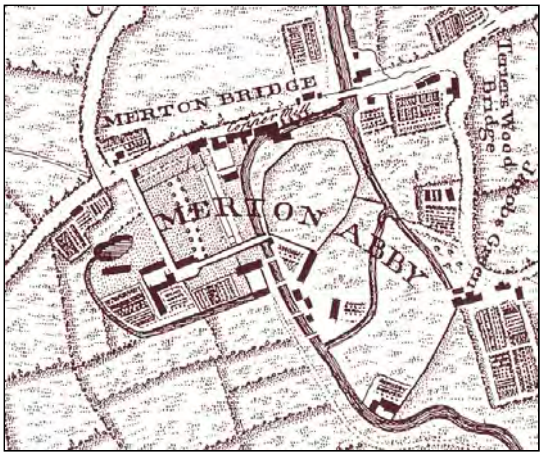
William West left in 1812 and a succession of companies then occupied the site, but only for short periods. From *circa* 1816 to 1834 it was occupied by two separate industries – a leather factory and a silk works, and on a map produced in about 1820 it is shown as 'Mr Smiths Grounds' and 'Mr Allchin's Silk Mill' (see below).

In 1846 the site was leased to Thomas Welch who set up a table-cloth printing works. Welch was a successfully printer who obtained a prize medal at the Great Exhibition in 1851.

The works continued in his family until 1881 when it was acquired by William Morris (see below).

John Rocque's Map : 1762

John Rocque's Map of Surrey, produced in 1762, shows the area in some detail but insufficient to determine the layout of the works and buildings at that time.



Extract from John Rocque's map of 1762, showing Merton Abbey.

Merton Place : 1801-1805

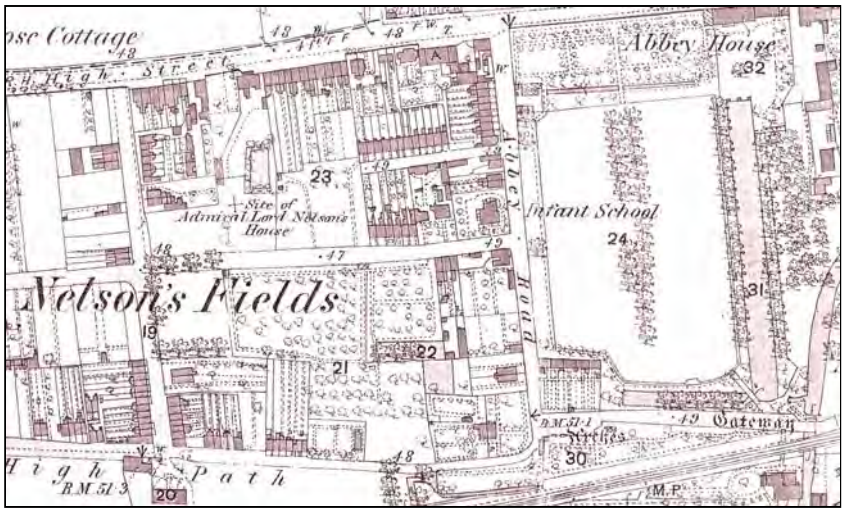
In 1801 Nelson asked his mistress Emma Hamilton to find a house for him to buy, away from prying eyes but convenient for London. Charles Greaves, a partner of the Merton Abbey Print Works, had recently died and his house, Merton Place, was on the market. Emma and her husband moved in and the final papers were signed when Nelson was next home on leave. The lovers referred to Merton Place as 'Paradise Merton'.

Merton Place in 1801. Taken from 'Wimbledon 200 Years Ago' – Richard Milward.

The house, located south of Merton High Street west of what is now Abbey Road, was about 200 metres outside the former monastic precinct of Merton Priory. Originally known as 'Moat Farm', it was built by Henry Pratt in June 1748. Pratt's son sold the house in 1764 to Richard Hotham who altered and enlarged it, but it was still relatively small. Emma had the house enlarged and Nelson subsequently extended the estate.

The estate was an ideal retreat for Nelson, where he could relax with Emma and their daughter Horatia. However, Nelson only spent a short time here before he was killed at Trafalgar in 1805. By 1808 debts forced Emma to sell Merton Place and the estate was eventually broken up into building plots and sold over a period, the final parcel in 1823.

The site of Merton Place, referred to as 'Site of Admiral Lord Nelson's House', was recorded on the Ordnance Survey twenty five-inch plan of 1871, by which time there had been quite extensive development of terraced housing as an estate called 'Nelson's Fields'.



Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1871, showing the site of Merton Place

Third Calico Works : *circa* 1802

A third calico-printing works was established in about 1802 by John Leach for his improved method of madder dyeing (*Harris 1992*) and this appears to have been to the south of the Priory site, but still within the monastic precinct (see plan above).

The works are evidently recorded on an 1805 estate map of Merton Abbey, at which time they comprised three buildings.

These works were subsequently taken over by Thomas Bennett, Leach's son-in-law, who carried on the process of madder dyeing, chiefly for the production of colourful handkerchiefs.

A map produced in 1820-1831 refers to the buildings as 'Mr Bennetts Calico printing mill' (see below).

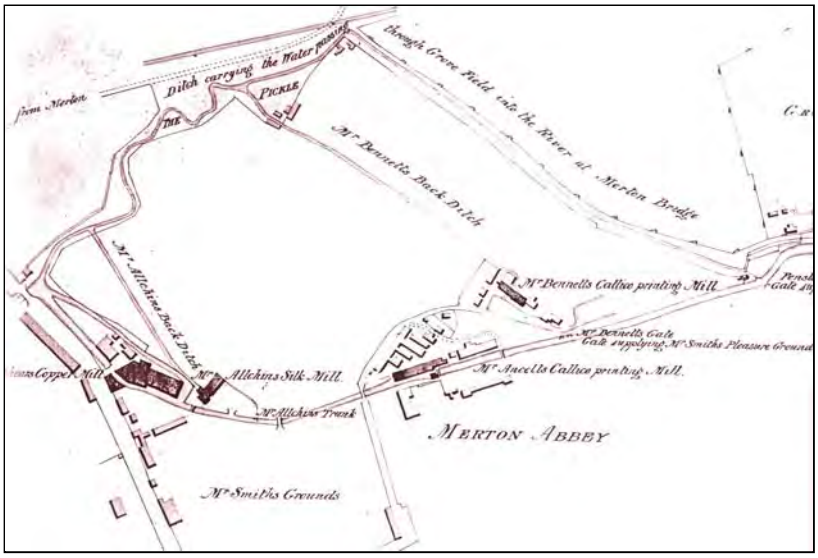
In 1833 Bennett's printing works were acquired by Edmund Littler and merged with the original calico-printing works established in 1724 to form one large printing manufactory – the Merton Abbey Print Works (see below).

Map : *circa 1820*

A map of which a copy is held in Morden Library is said to date to about 1815 and is entitled 'Plan of some property on the River Wandle from Mr Polhill's Snuff Mill to Merton Bridge'.

It records all the watercourses and industrial premises between Phipps Bridge, to the south, and Merton Bridge, to the north, and includes the three calico works referred to above.

The map refers to the original calico-printing works established in 1724 as 'Mr Ancells Callico printing Mill'. We know that Joseph Ansell took over the works in 1820 and that it passed to Edmund Littler in 1831 and, therefore, the map must date to the period 1820-1831.



Extract from the map of 1820-1831, showing all three original calico works. North is to the left of the map.

Copper and Paper Mills : *circa 1820*

The River Wandle is said to have provided power for a great number of mills at various times and these included two mills located on the south side of what is now Merton High Street which were probably first erected in about 1700.

At one time they were known as ‘Amery Mills’ and on the map of *circa* 1820-1831 they are shown as ‘Shears Copper Mill’.

Copper milling became the main activity of both mills during much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and they are shown as ‘Copper Mills’ on the edition of the Ordnance Survey plan of 1871 (see below).

They were subsequently modified for the manufacture of paper in about 1895, and are shown as ‘Merton Abbey Mills (Paper)’ on the second edition of the Ordnance Survey twenty five-inch plan for 1898.

Their final owner was the New Merton Board Mills Ltd, who manufactured paper and cardboard from around 1924 until 1984.

Merton Abbey Print Works : 1833

By 1833 Edmund Littler had acquired not only the original calico-printing works established in 1724 but also Bennett’s printing works to the south, and these were merged to form the Merton Abbey Print Works.

Between *circa* 1845 and 1862 the works were in the hands of Mary Ann Littler and in about 1865 they were in the hands of William and Edmund Littler, presumably sons of Edmund and Mary. In 1875 Littler’s started to print goods for Liberty’s Regent Street shop and by the 1890s all their production was for Liberty’s.

The hand block printed quality that Littler’s used became synonymous with ‘Liberty Art Fabrics’ and, with the new Liberty’s commission the company was able to make a number of improvements to the works.

Liberty’s purchased the Merton Abbey Print Works in 1904 and they gradually replaced a number of earlier weather-boarded workshops, including Bennett’s Mill, and replaced them with new brick buildings, many of which survive to the present day (see description below Section 1.2.2 – 203-208).

Watercress beds : mid nineteenth century

The traditional method of bleaching and washing in water was no longer needed after chemical processes had been introduced at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Some of the old water-filled ditches in the bleaching fields found a new lease of life as watercress beds, which was consumed by Londoners in large quantities during the nineteenth century but eventually these, too, disappeared.

Merton Abbey Station : 1868

The station was opened on the 1st August 1868 to serve the loop line of the Tooting Merton & Wimbledon Railway between stations at Merton Park and Tooting Junction.

It would appear that it was not known at the time that the station was built on the site of some of the monastic buildings of Merton Priory. However, in 1954, following Bidder and Westlake’s excavations, a memorial stone to Merton Priory was erected in the memorial garden across the road from Merton Abbey Station, the position believed to have been occupied by the High Altar of the Priory church. It read ‘Here stood once the High Altar and part of the Church of Merton Priory. A house of Austin Canons 1117-1538’.

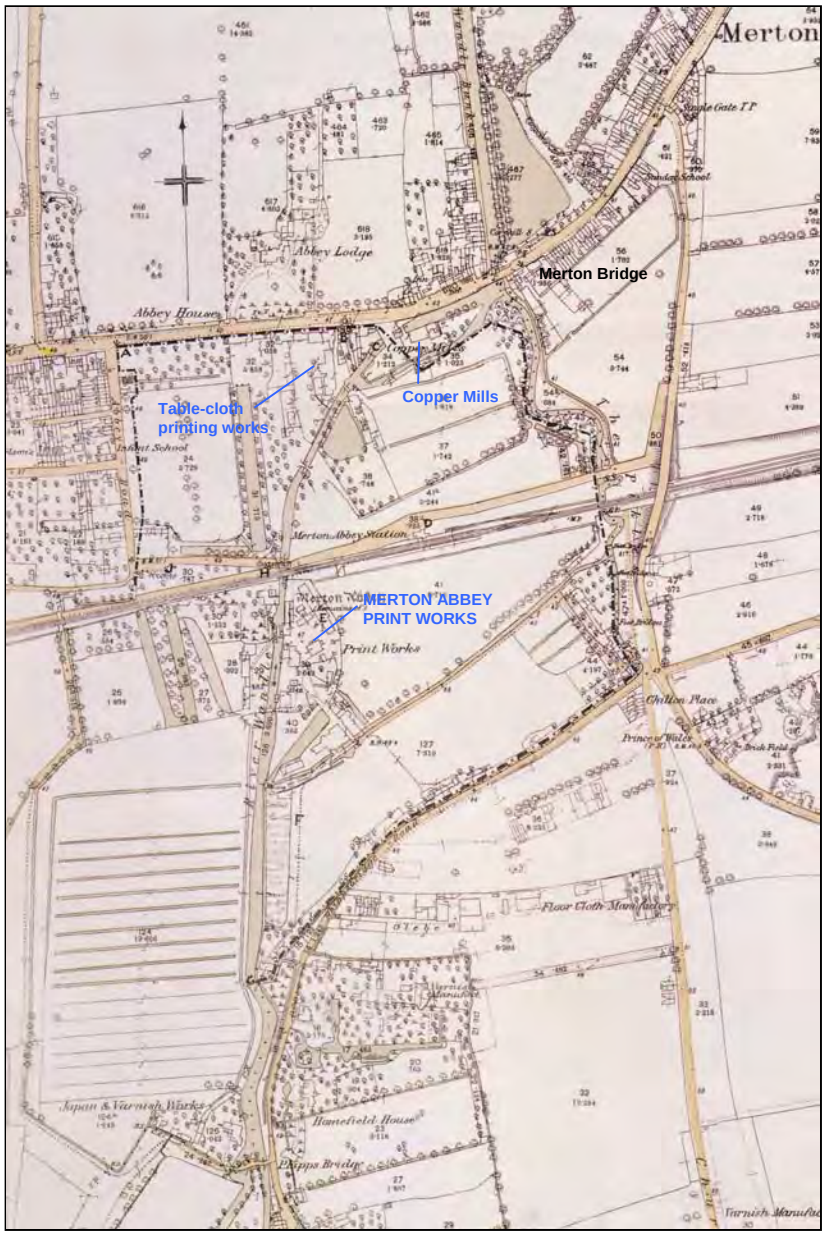
The station was closed to passengers in March 1929 but the line remained open as a goods line long afterwards.

The former Merton Abbey Station in 1968, looking west.

Ordnance Survey plan : 1871

The surveys for the first edition of the Ordnance Survey twenty five-inch plan of the area were undertaken in 1865 and it was published shortly afterwards. A revised edition was published in 1871.

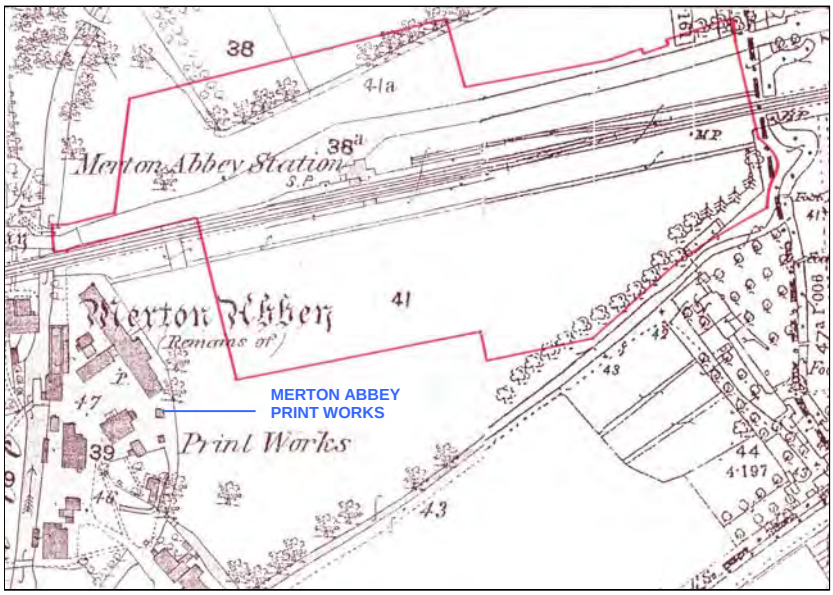
It recorded all the industrial premises existing at that time in the vicinity of the former Merton Priory and its monastic precinct.



Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1871, showing part of the presumed alignment of the monastic precinct wall (after Heales 1898) and identifications of some of the industrial premises in existence in 1871.[13]

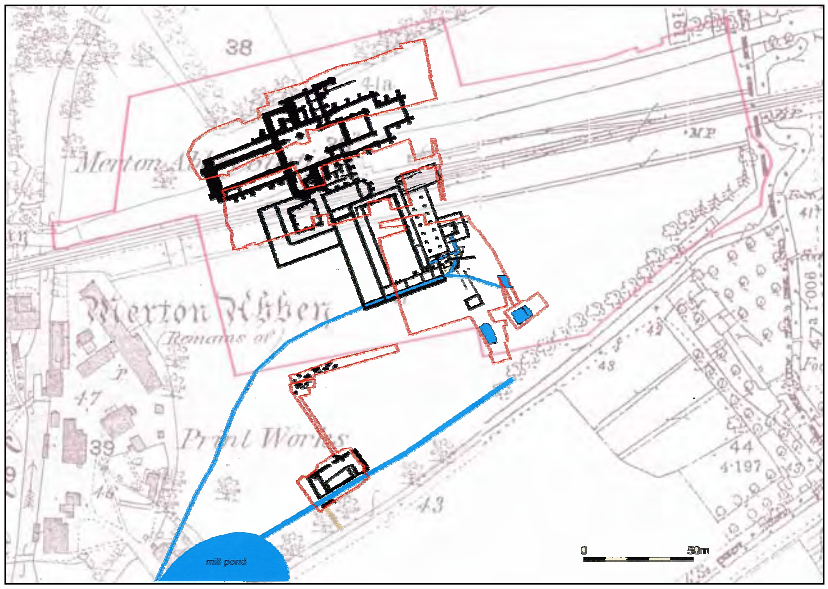
[13] With the exception of Figures 1 and 2, the extracts from the Ordnance Survey plans are mostly not reproduced in this document to a particular scale as in most cases they are too large to fit the page size. Hence, we have used the term 'reduced extract' to signify that they are not reproduced at their original scale. The plan of the principal Priory buildings, which is overlaid on them does, however, carry a bar scale indicating a distance of 50 metres.

The Ordnance Survey plan of 1871 depicts the area in the vicinity of the former Merton Priory and Merton Abbey Print Works in some detail.



Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1871, showing the Merton Abbey Print Works and the extent of the Scheduled Ancient Monument known as Merton Priory (outlined red).

At that time the precise location of the former Priory was not known and the name referred to remains of the fourteenth century chapel at Merton Abbey Print Works. Subsequent excavations by Bidder in 1921-1922 showed that the main monastic buildings, including the Priory church, were in the vicinity of Merton Abbey railway station.



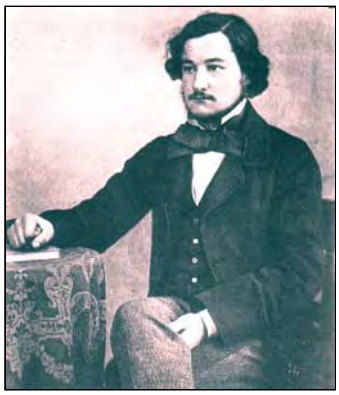
Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1871, showing the extent of the Scheduled area and the approximate positions of the principal buildings of Merton Priory (see also Figure 1).

In 1871 the site of the principal buildings of Merton Priory were occupied by the railway line, Merton Abbey Station, an access later known as Station Road, and agricultural land to the north and south.

William Morris : 1834-1896

In 1881 William Morris acquired the second calico-printing works close to Merton High Street and established his stained glass, weaving, printing and tapestry works, which continued to operate after his death in 1896.

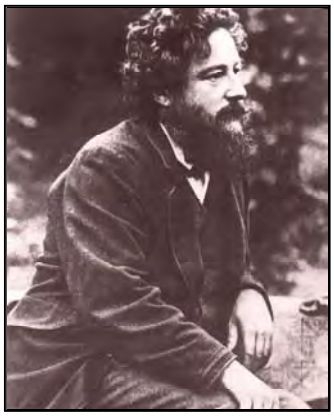
William Morris was born in Walthamstow, East London, in March 1834, the son of a successful businessman. He studied theology at Oxford, with the intention of becoming a clergyman, and there met lifelong friend, Edward Burne-Jones. Through Burne-Jones he met Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and who influenced both the younger men to abandon their studies and become artists.



William Morris, at the age of 23.

Morris left university, abandoning the idea of becoming a clergyman, and went to work for the architect G.E.Street. He soon abandoned architecture in favour of the decorative arts and experimented with stained glass, ceramics, furniture, book design, wallpapers and textiles. He was already writing poetry and prose and continued to do so for the rest of his life. Always a political progressive in his views, he became a revolutionary socialist in the 1880s, writing articles and verse for the movement and giving speeches all over the country.

With partners who included Burne-Jones and Rossetti, he set up the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. as a ‘company of Fine Art Workmen’ , producing furniture, wallpaper murals, tapestry work, stained glass windows and metalwork. It started in Red Lion Square, London, and in 1875 the company became simply Morris & Co.



William Morris in the 1870s.

Morris opened a shop in Oxford Street in 1877. In 1879 he and his family moved from Queen Square, Bloomsbury to a house in Upper Mall, Hammersmith, which he re-named Kelmscott House after Kelmscott Manor in Oxfordshire, the country house that he had rented. Kelmscott House became his home until he died in 1896.

The Arts and Crafts Movement

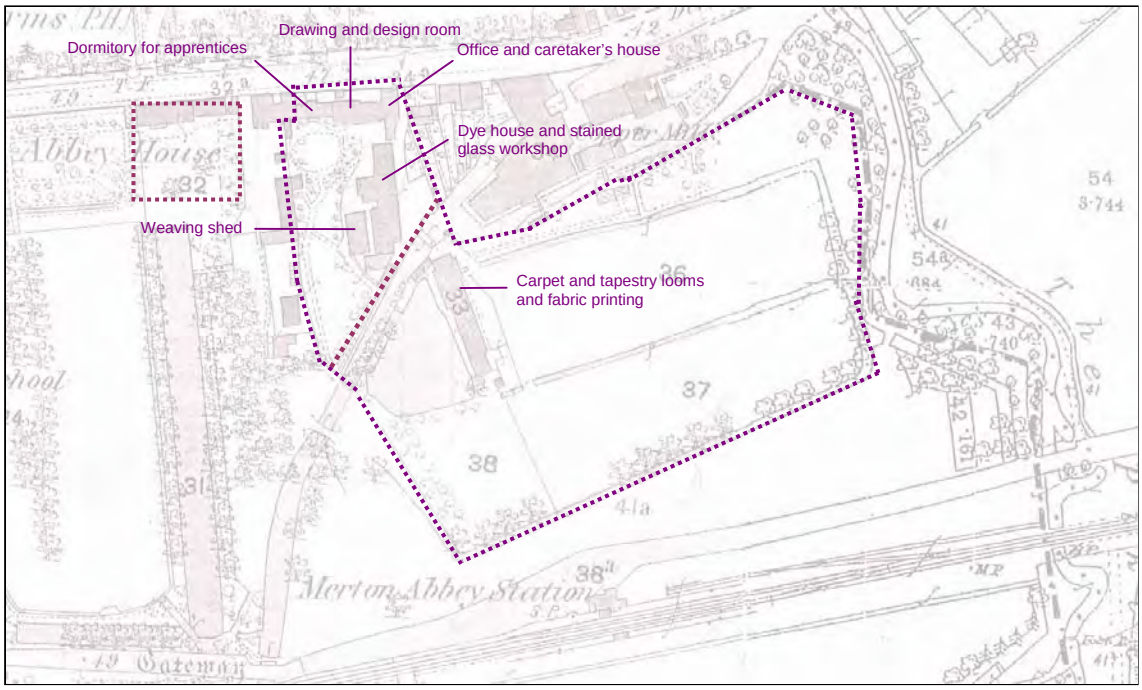
William Morris is celebrated as the founder of the Arts and Crafts movement, which rejected the tastes of the Victorian era and mass production in favour of simplicity, good craftsmanship and good design. The movement's notions of good design were linked to their notions of a good society, where pride in craftsmanship and skill would replace the brutalized working conditions found in factories.

In Britain the Arts and Crafts movement focussed partly on the richly detailed Gothic style, with interior walls whitewashed and hung with woollen draperies. Patterned wallpaper, usually depicting medieval themes, was a cheaper alternative which Morris never used in his own houses. Their ceramic and textile designs were intricate, colourful and realistic. But while the original intention was to provide handmade goods to the common man, the cost of paying craftsmen an honest wage resulted in high prices, which limited the movement to the wealthier classes.

Morris & Co. at Merton : 1881-1940

William Morris signed the lease for the property alongside Merton High Street, which we have previously referred to as the second calico-printing works, in June 1881. He refused to pull down the existing buildings and simply adapted them for his new uses and they remained unchanged until the works finally closed in 1940.

The buildings and their uses have been established from archival and photographic sources (*Saxby 1995*). Although they were all demolished following closure of the works in the 1940s, and the site has been redeveloped for retail or for housing, their remains and objects associated with them were revealed during excavations undertaken by the Museum of London Archaeology Service in 1992 (*Saxby 1995*: 5-8).



Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1871, showing the extent and layout of Morris & Co. Merton Abbey Works; the uses that were put to the pre-existing buildings.

A scale model of Morris & Co.'s works at Merton Abbey can be seen at the Wandle Industrial Museum.

The model of Morris & Co.'s works (after Saxby 1995 : 5).

Adjoining the office was the caretaker's house, then the drawing and design room and then the dormitory for the apprentice boys contained in a sixteenth century house, rebuilt during the eighteenth century and then adapted for this latest use.

The dormitory for the apprentice boys (above) and the walls and cellar floor of the same building during excavations in 1992 (after Saxby 1995 : 6).

A two-storey shed to the rear of the buildings on the High Street contained the dye vats on the ground floor and the stained glass studio on the first floor. Outside this building was a small two-storey weaving shed.

The dye house and stained glass studio, from the southeast.

On the south bank of the Wandle was a large shed, overlooking the millpond, which housed the carpet and tapestry looms at ground level with the fabric printing workshops above.

The carpet, tapestry and printing shed as seen across the millpond.

Some of the processes conducted at the works were as follows.

Dyeing

Fabric dyeing was undertaken in the dye-house in large sunken vats; smaller vats were used to dye the silk and wool yarns.

All the dyes Morris used were made from natural substances based on early herbal recipes. These dyes gave a richer tone to the textiles than the new aniline dyes whose colours tended to be harsh and soon faded.

One of the main reasons Morris decided to move to Merton was that he found the water of the Wandle ideal for dyeing. Many of the fabrics Morris & Co. produced used the indigo discharge method. First the cotton cloth was dyed to a shade of blue in one of the large indigo dye vats and then the cloth was printed with a bleaching agent to remove the blue as the patterns requires. Mordants (fixing agents) were then printed on the white parts and the cloth dyed a second time with madder and again with yellow. The three superimposed colours gave green, purple or orange. The excess dye was washed away and the colours set by passing the fabrics through soap at nearly boiling point. Afterwards the fabric was rinsed and laid out in the meadow to dry.

Dyeing fabrics in the dye vats at Merton (after Saxby 1995 : 14).

Block Printing

This was undertaken on long padded tables which ran the length of the workshop. The printer would first place the printing block on the dye pad and then press the block onto the cloth. The block was pressed down with the aid of a lead weighted mallet to produce an impression. The dye pads were carried on trolleys which the printer could pull along as he worked along the length of the cloth.

Block printing at the Merton works (after Saxby 1995 : 19).

After the first set of impressions was dry a second set of blocks was printed on the cloth and the process repeated. Small pins projected from the blocks so each successive impression could be aligned. The early printing blocks were carved from pearwood which were later replaced by blocks with metal inserts padded with felt to hold the dye.

A chintz pattern produced at the Merton works, which was given the name 'Wandle'.

Stained Glass

Morris based his stained glass on the style of the later medieval period, which had an emphasis on rich glowing colours in a free-flowing pattern unlike the stained glass of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which were literally over-precise painted reproductions of medieval stained glass.

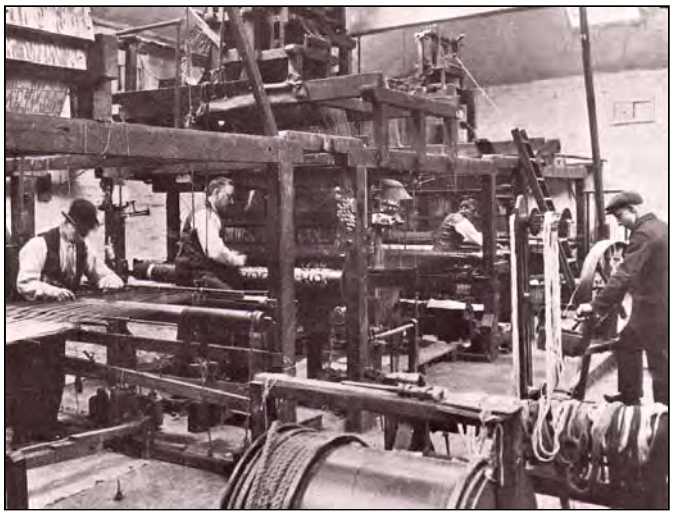
The designs for stained glass were first drawn on small sheets which were photographically enlarged to full size as a working drawing known as a 'cartoon'. Different coloured glass was placed over the cartoon and cut to size. The stained glass artist would then place the individual pieces on his easel and paint on the design. These would next be fired in a kiln located next to the office. After firing the painted glass was leaded together to form the overall picture. The finished design was polished with linseed oil and bran to give a high gloss.

Most of the stained glass made by Morris & Co. was to designs by Edward Burne-Jones, but after Morris's death Dearle became responsible for the artistic direction of the company's stained glass.

Burne-Jones's original drawing for the 'Moses' window at the church of St Mary the Virgin, Merton, and the completed work (after Saxby 1995 : 20).

Weaving

The looms used by Morris & Co. at Merton were Jacquard looms invented in 1802 by the Frenchman, Joseph Marie Jacquard which were widely used from the 1820s onwards. The advantage of using this type of loom rather than the more traditional draw-looms was that it used a series of punched cards to lift the warp threads automatically, enabling a more accurate design. The cards could also be stored which meant that patterns could be easily and accurately repeated. The draw-looms were slower and the finished designs less accurate.



Jacquard looms in use at Merton.

Morris spent much time in historical research at the Victoria and Albert Museum (then the South Kensington Museum) and was much influenced by the fourteenth century Italian textiles as well as Middle and Far Eastern patterns. Many of Morris's designs were based on these early examples.

Carpet weaving

The carpets made at Merton Abbey were hand-knotted and continued to be known as 'Hammersmith Rugs' from their place of origin. This was to distinguish them from the machine-made carpets made by outside contractors.

Morris designed almost all of the firm’s carpets. He would produce a scale drawing, about one eighth of the full size. The design would then be transferred on to point paper, a squared paper with each square representing a single knot of the carpet. The point paper was hung on the loom and the design copied by the weavers. The loom consisted of two rotating horizontal rollers between which hung the vertical warp threads. Two-inch long weft threads were knotted around the warp threads. As each row was finished the weft was beaten down and the process repeated. As the carpet progressed the upper roller unwound enabling a new section to be woven.

Mostly girls were employed in carpet weaving, as their smaller hands were better suited to the intricate work. Each weaver would produce around two inches of carpet a day.

Carpet weaving at Merton (after Saxby 1995 : 23).

Tapestry

The tapestries were woven by boys on high-warp looms. The high-warp or upright loom was a type of loom used in the late medieval period by Flemish tapestry weavers.

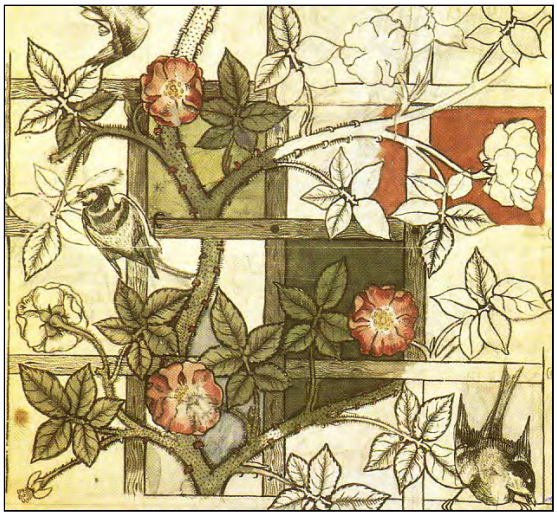
Almost all of the tapestry figures were designed by Burne-Jones. He would draw the figures about 15 inches high. The drawings were photographically enlarged to full size, mounted, and Morris and Henry Dearle would draw in the foreground and background. The finished drawing was then placed against the loom and traced onto the warp.

High-warp tapestry weaving at Merton (above) and the tapestry 'Pamona', with the figure by Burne-Jones and background by Henry Dearle (right – after Saxby 1995 :

The tapestries were woven using the plain weaving technique which had a parallel set of warp threads interwoven across the warp with the weft threads. The weft treads were then packed down with a comb to hide the warp threads. Three looms were initially set up with three people working at each loom. Each weaver would sit facing the back of the tapestry with a mirror positioned in front to reflect the design.

Wallpaper

Wallpaper designed at the Morris' works was made by an outside contractor Jeffrey & Co. The process of printing wallpaper was similar to that of printing textiles. The paper was printed with wooden printing blocks, pressed down with the aid of a foot-operated weight and the process repeated.



William Morris's first wallpaper, which he designed in 1862 and called 'Trellis'.

Furniture, tiles, embroidery, and wallpaper, designed at the Merton Abbey works, were all made elsewhere.

Land at what is now Colliers Wood adjacent to the Morris' works was leased by William De Morgan for the production of fine art pottery.

The stamp adopted by William De Morgan for the pottery he produced at Merton.

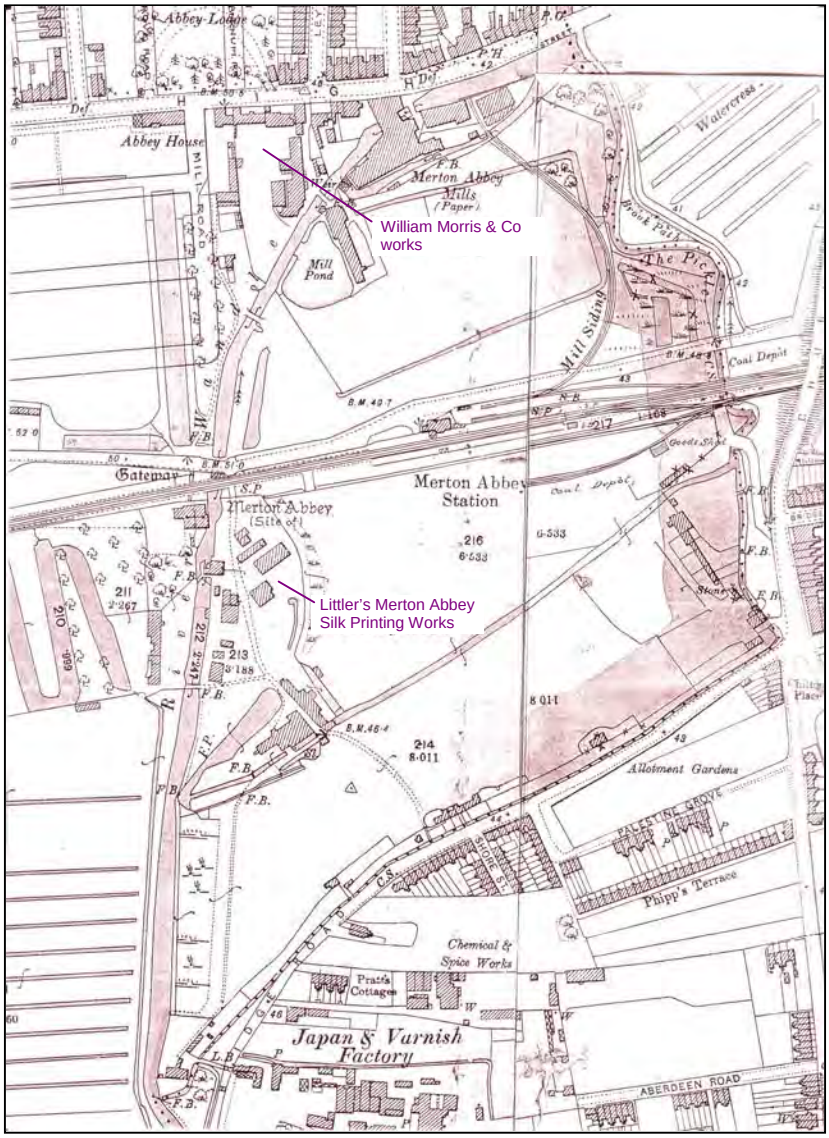
In January 1891 Morris established the Kelmscott Press for printing and binding books, but this was located at Hammersmith, close to Kelmscott House, and not at Merton. The books were designed in a distinctive medieval style, with ornamental borders and illuminated letters.

After William Morris died in 1896, the Merton factory continued production under his junior partners Frank and Robert Smith, with John Henry Dearle promoted to Art Director. Burne-Jones died two years later and the majority of the designs for wallpaper, stained glass, textiles and carpets fell to Dearle.

In 1905 Henry Marillier joined the company as managing director and the new company was named Morris & Co. Decorators Ltd. In 1925 the company was renamed as Morris & Co. Art Workers Ltd. With the death of Dearle in 1932 the company lost its artistic strength, the quality of work gradually fell and with the depleting market the order books shrank. The company continued to decline until it went into liquidation in May 1940.

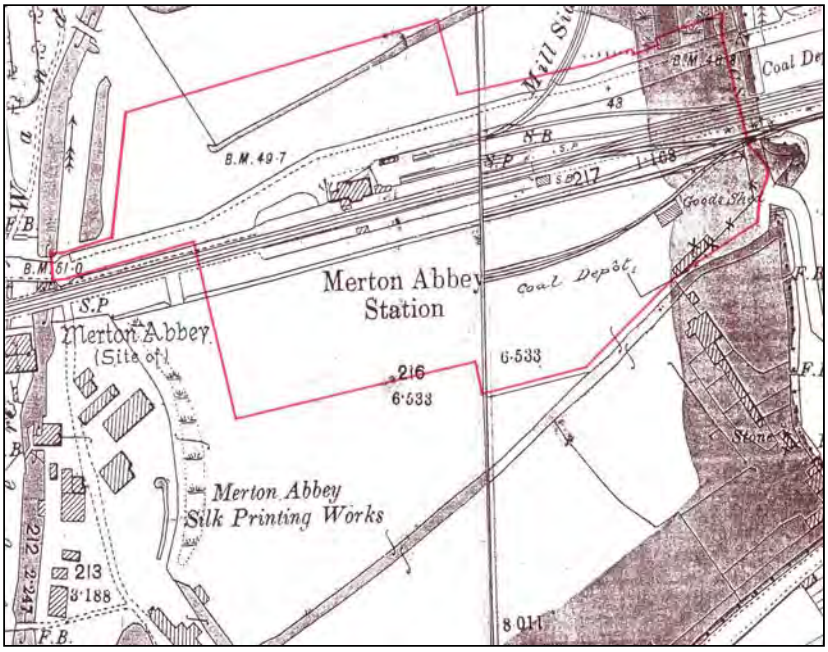
Ordnance Survey plan : 1893-94

The revisions for the second edition of the Ordnance Survey twenty five-inch plan were undertaken in 1893-94 and a further revision was published in 1898.



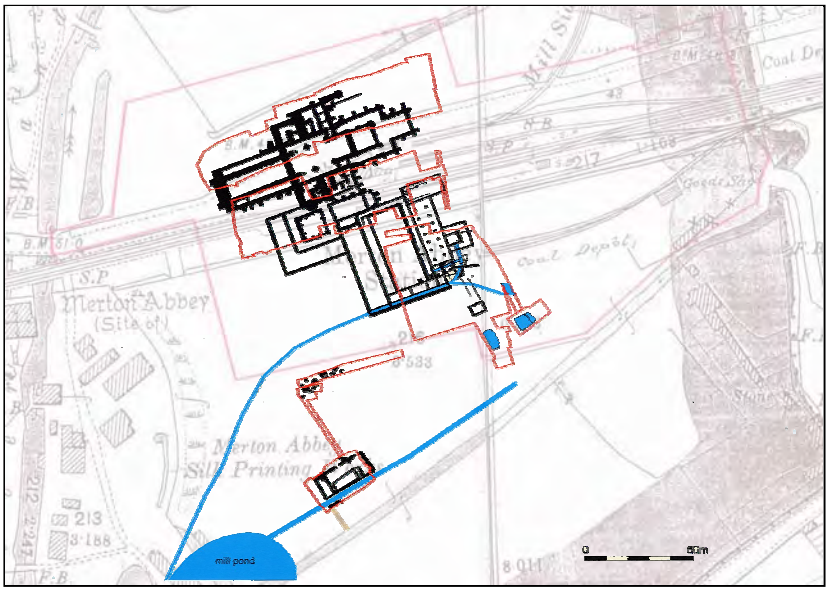
Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1893-94.

In 1893-94, the first and the third calico-printing works were occupied by Littler's as the 'Merton Abbey Silk Printing Works'. To the north were the 'Merton Abbey Mills (Paper)', served by its own railway line known as 'Mill Siding', and the William Morris works, then referred to as 'Merton Abbey Works (Print & Tapestry)'.



Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1893-94, showing the Merton Abbey Silk Printing Works and the extent of the Scheduled Ancient Monument known as Merton Priory (outlined red).

Apart from additional railway sidings to serve the paper mills, the site of Merton Priory had not been further developed since the surveys were made for the first edition in 1871.



Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1893-94, showing the extent of the Scheduled area and the approximate positions of the principal buildings of Merton Priory.

Liberty & Co. : 1904

In 1904 Littler's silk printing works was taken over by Liberty & Co.

Arthur Lasenby Liberty was born in Buckinghamshire in 1843 and after a brief schooling he was apprenticed as a draper in Baker Street, London.

In 1862 he was taken on by Farmer & Roger's Great Shawl & Cloak Emporium in Regent Street and was eventually placed in charge of their oriental warehouse in Regent Street where he sold their Indian shawls, Japanese prints, drawings, lacquers, porcelain, and silks.

In 1875 he opened his own shop in Regent Street selling ornaments, fabric and objects d'art from Japan and the East. Liberty initially concentrated on selling products made from Japan, but later imported goods from China, Java and Persia, and then began producing his own range of distinctive textiles produced by Littlers at Merton.

Liberty gradually expanded his business and by the 1880s his shop had seven departments: Silks, Embroideries, Furniture, Carpets, Porcelain, Curios and Miscellaneous Items. In another shop in Regent Street, Arthur Liberty sold Japanese and Chinese antiques.

In 1904 Liberty purchased the works at Merton and, over a period, many of the old timber and weatherboarded buildings were demolished and replaced by new ones in brick.

In 1905 the Regent Street shop was remodelled, with Liberty's now selling furniture and a wider range of products. Liberty, the store, became the most fashionable place to shop in London and the fabrics were used for both clothing and furnishings. The name Liberty became synonymous with high quality fashion.

Arthur Liberty was knighted in 1914 and then retired, with his family carrying on the business.

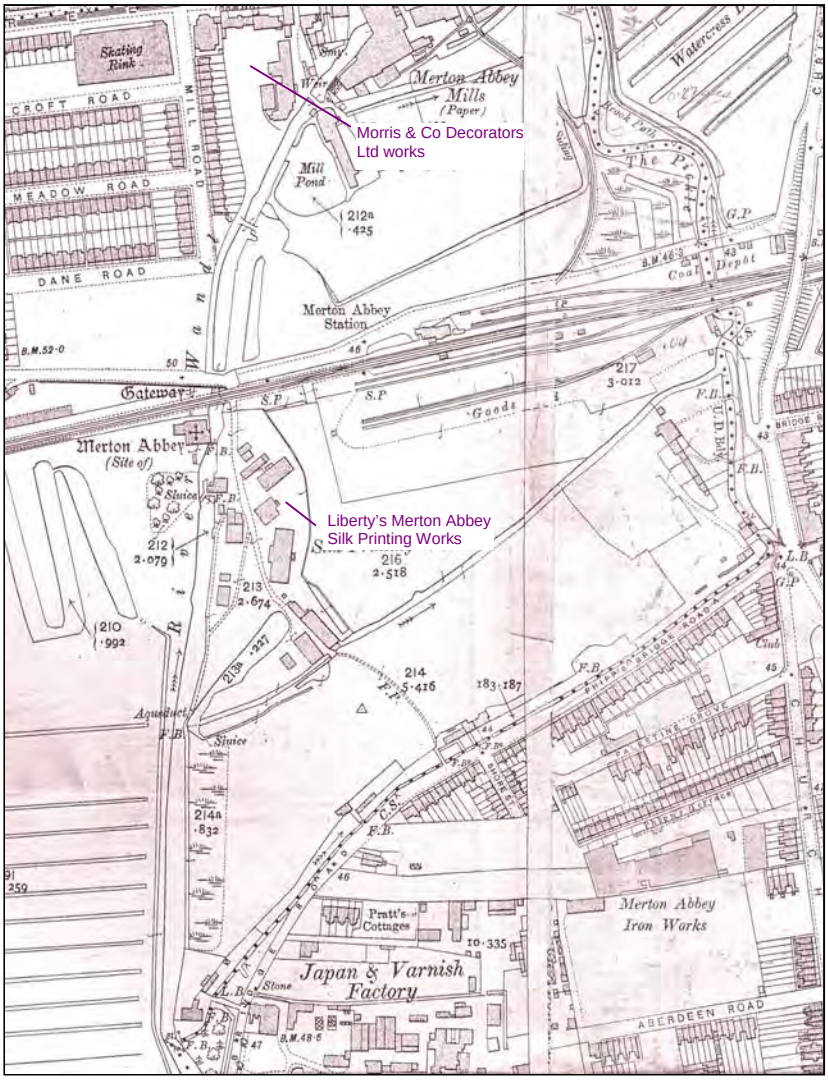
In 1940 Liberty's leased part of the factory, set aside for the screen-printing shop, to Parnall Aircraft Components Ltd. of Yate Aerodrome, Bristol Ltd., a Bristol based aircraft manufacturer. Parnall's also leased the 1929 shop. The work included the assembling of gun turrets for the Bristol Blenheim Fighter Bomber. After the Second World War in 1945 Liberty took back the building leased to Parnall's and finally set up their screen-printing shop.

Liberty and Co. ceased production at the Merton Abbey Works in 1972, but textile production continued at Merton with Vita-Tex Ltd., Riseline Ltd. and finally Merton Fabrics Ltd. The premises finally closed in 1982.

Many of Liberty's buildings are still in use today as shops, cafes and a market called Merton Abbey Mills (see description below section 1.2.2).

Ordnance Survey plan : 1911

The revisions for the next edition of the Ordnance Survey twenty five-inch plan were undertaken in 1911 and it was published in 1913.

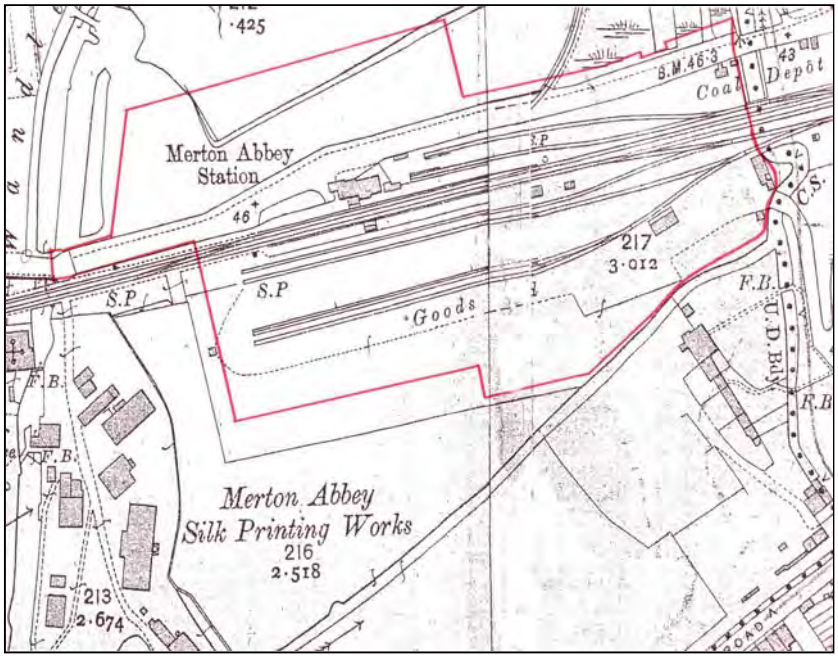


Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1911.

By 1911 some of the buildings at Liberty's works, still shown on the plan as 'Merton Abbey Silk Printing Works', had been replaced.

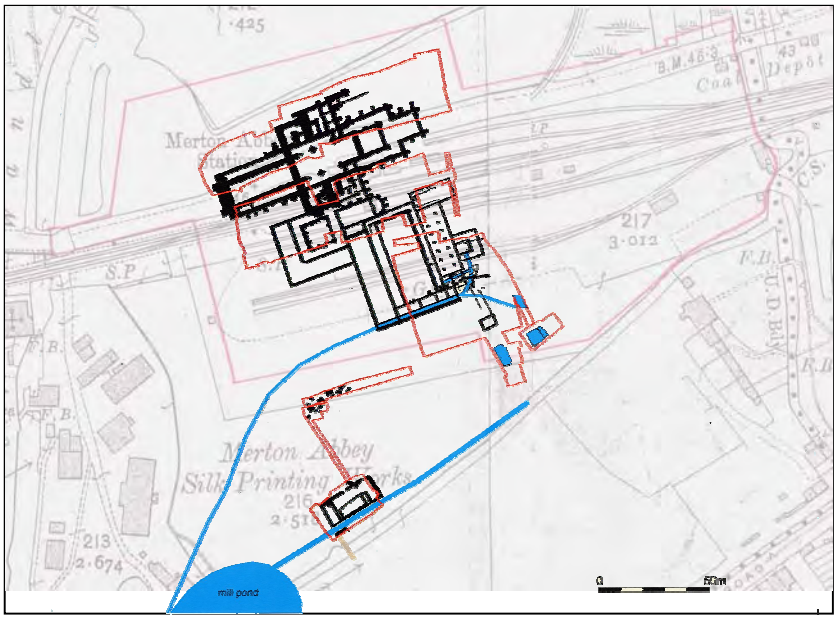
The paper mills and William Morris's former works, now operating under the name of Morris & Co. Decorators Ltd, had not altered.

The sidings at Merton Abbey Station had been further extended to serve all the works in the vicinity and included a goods yard on the south side.



Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1911, showing Liberty's Merton Abbey Silk Printing Works and the extent of the Scheduled Ancient Monument known as Merton Priory (outlined red).

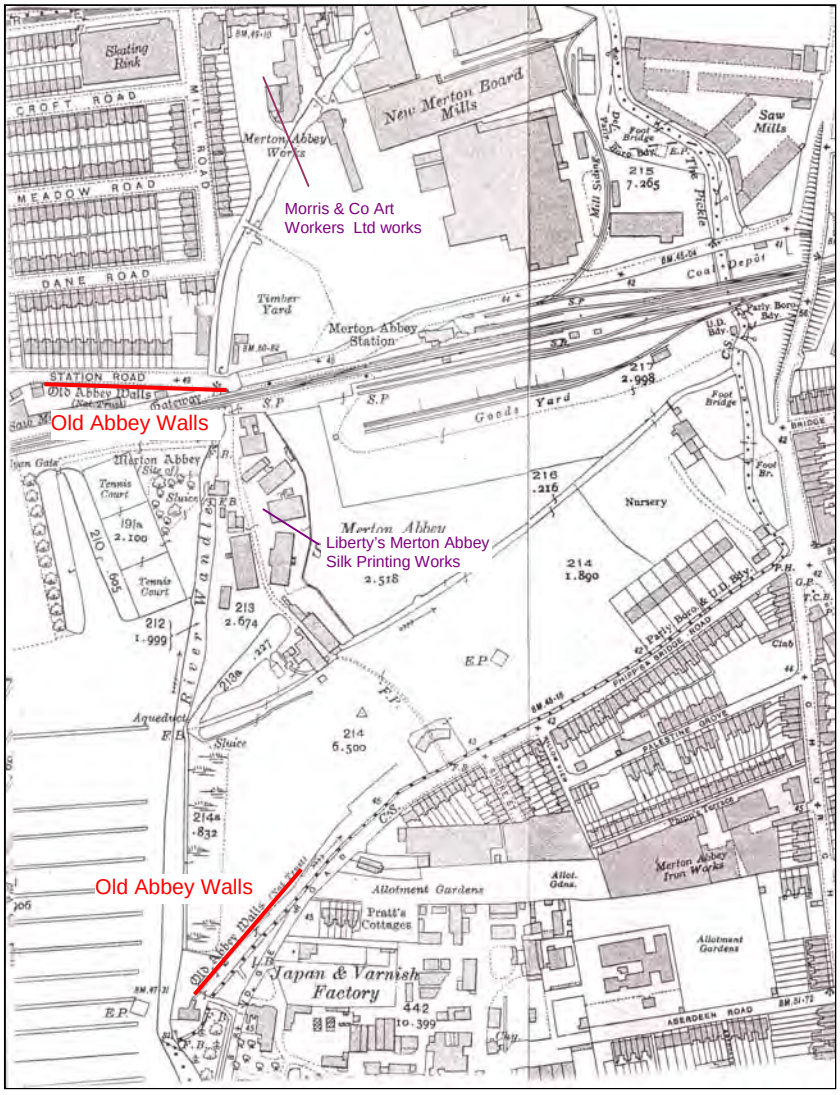
Apart from additional railway sidings, the site of Merton Priory had not been further developed.



Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1911, showing the extent of the Scheduled area and the approximate positions of the principal buildings of Merton Priory.

Ordnance Survey plan : 1933-34

The revisions for the next edition of the Ordnance Survey twenty five-inch plan were undertaken in 1933-34 and it was published in 1933.

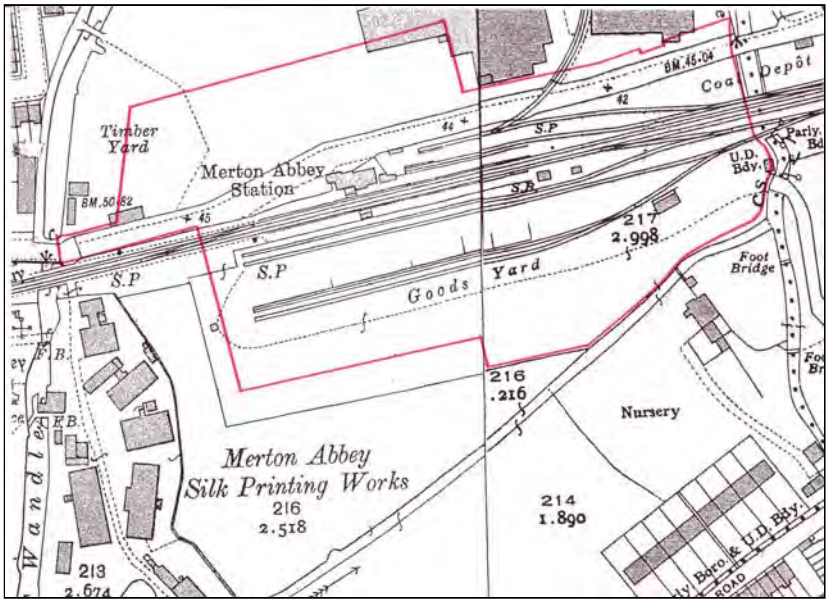


Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1933-34, highlighting the walls and gate believed to have formed parts of the Priory precinct.

The 1933-34 edition of the Ordnance Survey plan identified, for the first time, lengths of wall close to Phipps Bridge Road and alongside Station Road as 'Old Abbey Walls', as well as the 'Gateway' in the latter, and these are presumed to have been parts of the monastic and lay precinct walls.

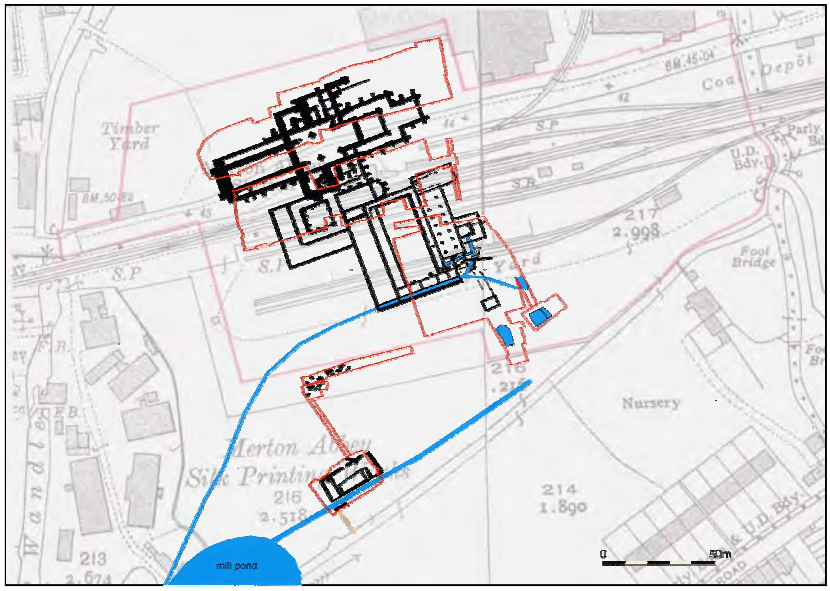
By 1933-34 there had been some further redevelopment at Liberty's Merton Abbey Silk printing Works and William Morris's former works, now known as Morris & Co. Art Workers Ltd and referred to on the plan simply as 'Merton Abbey Works', was in decline but the buildings still existed.

The major new development by this time was the creation of the vast 'New Merton Board Mills', operated by a company of the same name, which had taken over the old mills in about 1924 and manufactured paper and cardboard until 1984. A large building to the south, later referred to as an engineering works may have been a separate development.



Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1933-34, showing Liberty's Merton Abbey Silk Printing Works and the extent of the Scheduled Ancient Monument known as Merton Priory (outlined red).

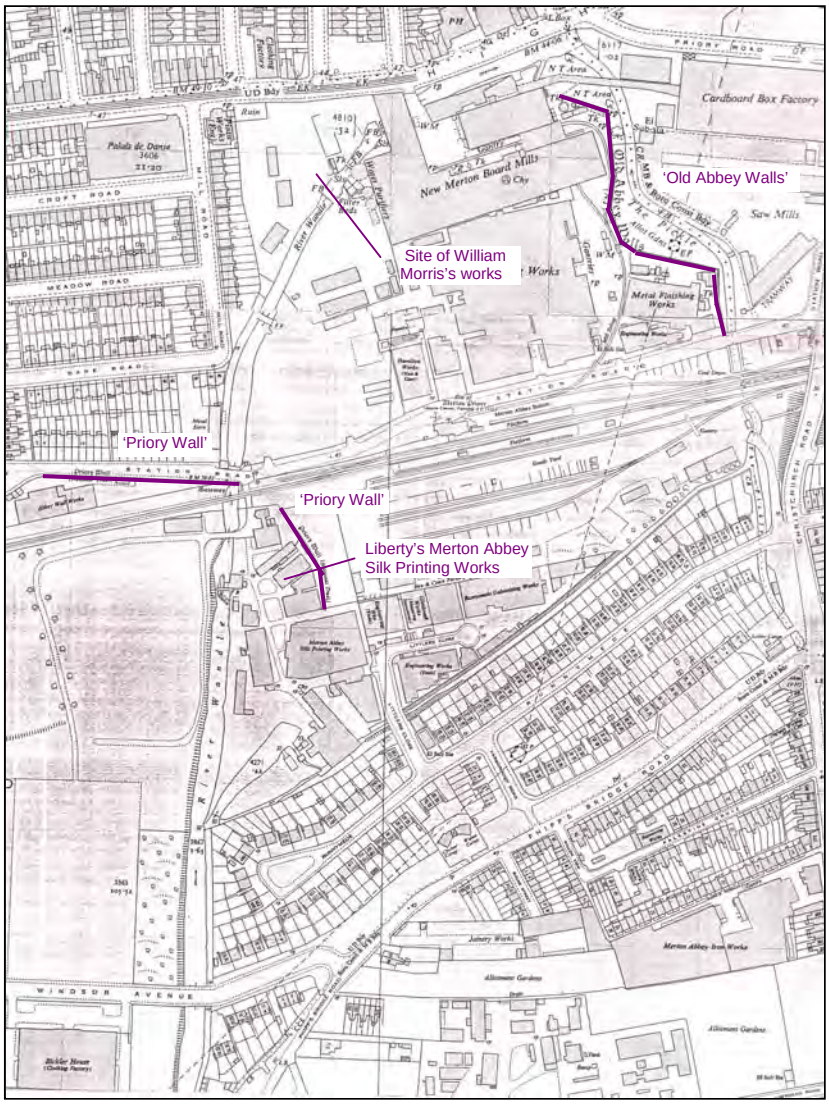
The new paper mills and engineering works buildings had begun to encroach further on the former monastic precinct of Merton Priory, although in 1933-34 the only development that had occurred on the site of the principal monastic buildings was the railway station, the railway sidings and the approach road.



Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1933-34, showing the extent of the Scheduled area and approximate positions of the principal buildings of Merton Priory.

Ordnance Survey plan : 1952-53

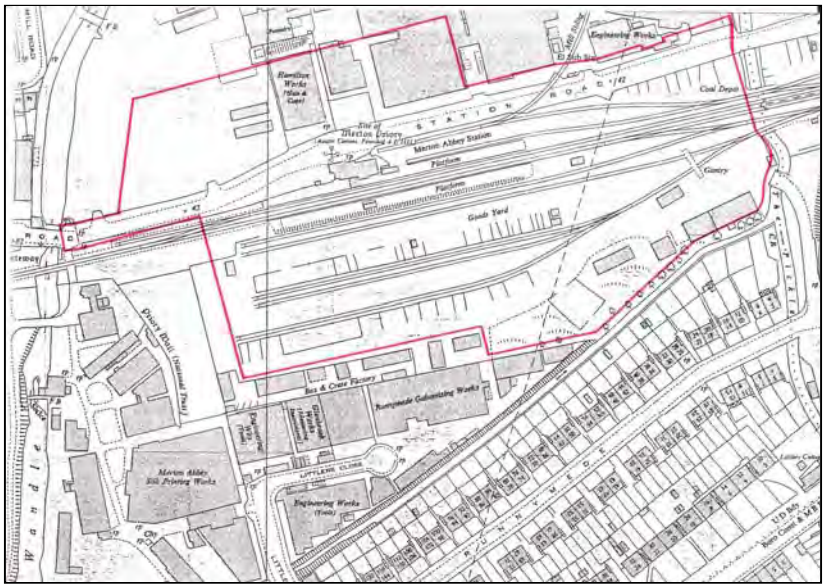
The next edition of the Ordnance Survey twenty five-inch plan was published in 1952-53. By this time there had been extensive development and redevelopment within the former monastic precinct of Merton Priory.



Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1952-53, identifying the walls believed to have formed part of the Priory precinct.

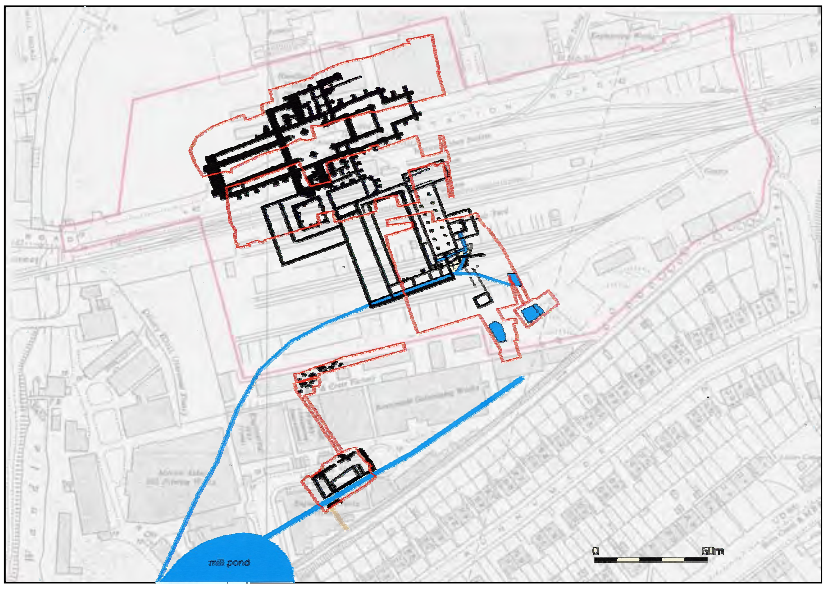
The 1952-53 edition of the Ordnance Survey plan identified, for the first time, lengths of wall close to The Pickle, south of Merton Bridge, as an antiquity referred to as 'Old Abbey Wall', and these are presumed to have been part of the monastic precinct wall. By the 1950s the 'Merton Abbey Silk Printing Works' had been further developed by Liberty's and William Morris's works had for the most part been demolished. Between the railway station and the New Merton Board Mills was an extensive 'Engineering Works', which had been erected by 1933-34, and a number of other smaller industrial premises. The railway goods yard had also been further extended and an industrial estate had been created to the south, which comprised a number of separate premises. Further south still, between the industrial estate and Phipp's Bridge Road was an extensive housing estate.

The 1952-53 plan also refers to the wall which survives on the south side of station Road as ‘Priory Wall’, and the same caption is applied to another wall, now demolished, curving around the east side of the Merton Abbey Silk Printing Works.



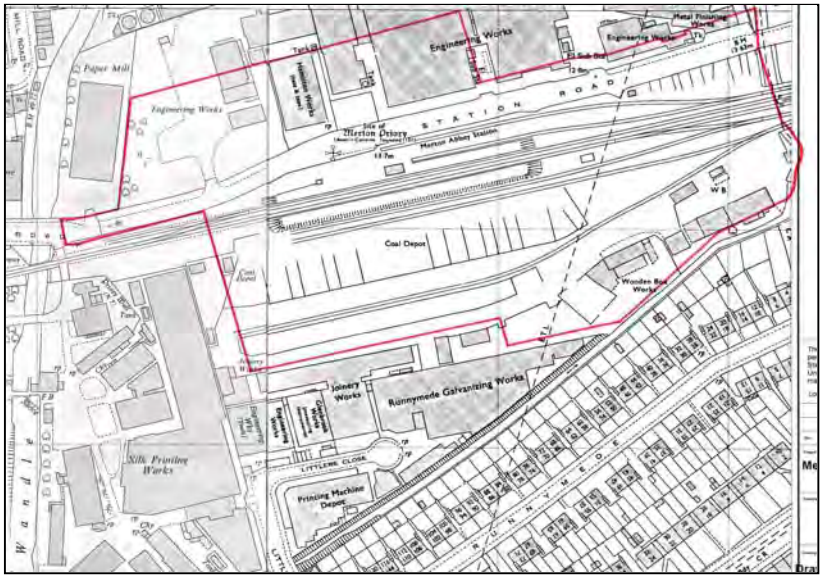
Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1952-53, showing Liberty’s Merton Abbey Silk Printing Works and the extent of the Scheduled Ancient Monument known as Merton Priory (outlined red).

The various works on the north side of Station Road had by the early 1950s begun to encroach on the site of the principal monastic buildings of Merton Priory and the development to the south of the railway sidings had begun to encroach for the first time on the former monastic precinct on this side of the site.



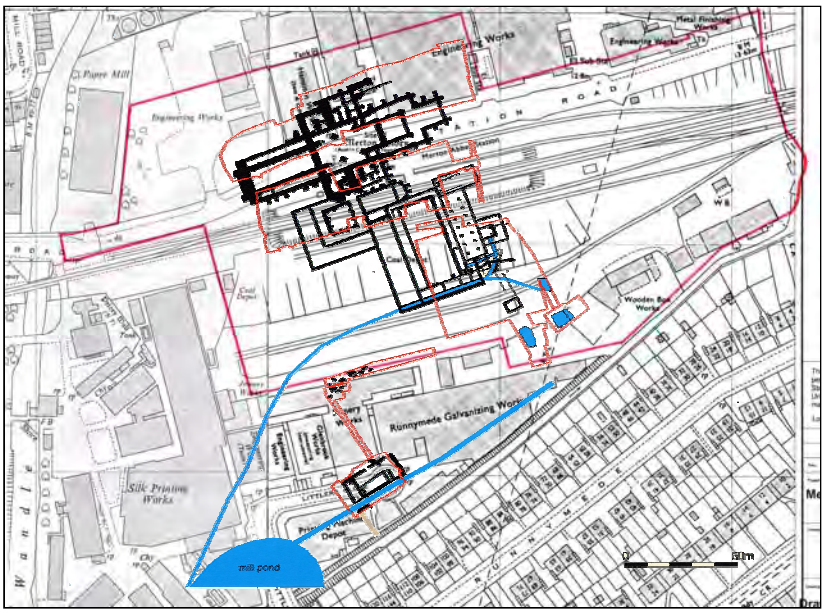
Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1952-53, showing the extent of the Scheduled area and approximate positions of the principal buildings of Merton Priory.

The next edition of the Ordnance Survey twenty five-inch plan was published in 1970 and this records some further development within the former monastic precinct, including a large redevelopment of parts of Liberty's 'Silk Printing Works', although only a small section of the feature shown as the 'Priory Wall' survived these works.



Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1970, showing Liberty's Merton Abbey Silk Printing Works and the extent of the Scheduled Ancient Monument known as Merton Priory (outlined red).

However, many of the structures recorded in the 1950s edition still existed, including the railway sidings, but this was on the eve of the major redevelopment that was to take place in the 1980s and 1990s, which included the creation of Merantun Way, on the route of the railway line, and the construction of the Sainsbury's Savacentre.



Reduced extract from the Ordnance Survey plan of 1970, showing the extent of the Scheduled area and approximate positions of the principal buildings of Merton Priory.