



THE MEDIEVAL CHURCHES OF NORWICH: CITY, COMMUNITY AND ARCHITECTURE

www.norwichmedievalchurches.org

The Location of the Church of St Martin at Oak

THE CHURCH of St Martin stands within a roughly rectangular graveyard east of Oak Street and immediately south of St Martin's Lane. It is situated some 360m south of St Martin's Gate within the medieval city wall. Its southern parish boundary is only some 40m south of the churchyard but its northern boundary extends beyond the city wall. To the west the parish is bounded by the River Wensum and, to the east, largely by the line of Gildencroft Lane (now Quakers Lane).

EARLY NAMES for Oak Street seem exclusively to use Coslania (as in 1146-9) or variants (such as Coslane in 1254-75, Koselanye in 1287 or Coselayne in 1293). Indeed, the earliest name recorded for St Martin's Gate is Porte de Coslayn in 1275. However, by 1696 the street was known as St Martins Street and in 1746 as St Martin at the Oak Street. (Sandred and Lindström 1989, 21 and 98-99) Campbell suggests Tothille for that part of the street north of St Martin's church, a usage not noted by Sandred and Lindström although they suggest that 'in or near Gildencroft there was an observation hill' of this name (deriving it from OE *tōt-hyll* meaning 'look-out hill') (Campbell 1975, map 6; Sandred and Lindström 1989, 108). Kirkpatrick specified that the 'high part of the Street was called Tothille 19 Edw. 1', presumably that part north of St Martin's churchyard (Hudson (ed.) 1889, 72).



Ordnance Survey, 1883

ST MARTIN'S LANE, immediately north of the churchyard, is now curtailed in length eastward (following construction of the Inner Ring Road). It originally linked to Pitt Street. The earliest reference to it is 'the Common Lane by the Cemetery of St Martin's' but by 1308 it was called *Horlane*, usually derived from OE *horu* meaning 'filth', although the possibility that its meaning could have been *hār* or 'boundary' has also been suggested (Sutermeister 1978, 37; Sandred and Lindström 1989, 138). Discussing this latter interpretation Sandred and Lindström reference Campbell who in turn referenced Carter with 'the discovery of a ditch under St Martin's Lane', interpreted as a possible early fortification (Campbell 1975, 4-5).

NOTWITHSTANDING whether St Martin's Lane reflects an early and pre-conquest defensive alignment, it does seem clear from documentary evidence that it effectively divided the parish of St Martin into two parts, north and south. The northern area, east of Oak Street until the late 13th century, was Gildencroft, open land which was only encroached upon at the Oak Street frontage from the 1290s or thereabouts (Sutermeister 1978, 37-38). St Martin's Lane held tenements occupied by tanners at the beginning of the 14th century, perhaps suggesting that Horlane did indeed refer to a filthy area. Wealthier tenements stood west of Oak Street on the river frontage and also south of St Martin's church. The medieval parish itself has been described as 'fairly typical ... neither particularly rich, nor particularly poor; not in the city centre and not especially densely settled.' (Sutermeister 1978, 36).

THE DEDICATION of the church to St Martin is probably early and may well reflect its location on a boundary, be it defensive or one between developing urban settlement and an open enclosed space. St Martin of Tours famously divided his cloak in order to give half to a beggar at the gates of the city of Amiens (Farmer 1978, 265). The suffix 'at Oak' refers to an oak tree which stood in the churchyard and contained an image of the Virgin Mary. Blomefield recorded that 'at the coming of Edw. VI. to the crown, she was dismounted, and I am apt to believe the poor oak, also cut down, least that should be visited for her ladyship's sake ...' (Blomefield and Parkin 1805-10, 4.484).

TWO OTHER CHURCHES dedicated to St Martin, one at least documented as in existence by 1066, stood within medieval Norwich. The foundation date of St Martin at Oak is unknown although a pre-Conquest origin is not unlikely. As with the churches of St Mary Coslany and St Michael Coslany, the church stood within an area identifiable as a low ridge between the river to the west and south and with low-lying ground to the east.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blomefield, Francis and Parkin, Charles, 1805-10. *An Essay Towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, Vol. 4. London
- Campbell, J., 1975. 'Norwich'. In Lobel, M. D. (ed.), *Historic Towns II*. London
- Farmer, D. H., 1978. *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*. Oxford
- Hudson, W. (ed.), 1889. *The Streets and Lanes of Norwich: a memoir by J. Kirkpatrick*. Norwich
- Sandred, K.I. and Lindström, B., 1989. 'The Place-Names of Norfolk: Part One - The Place-Names of the City of Norwich', *English Place-Name Society*, XVI
- Sutermeister, H., 1978. 'Documentary Research and the Oak Street Site' in Atkin, M. W. and Sutermeister, H. 1978. 'Excavations in Norwich - 1977/8. The Norwich Survey - Seventh Interim Report'. *Norfolk Archaeology* 37 (1), 35-44