

St George Colegate – Location

The church stands immediately west of St George's Street at its junction with the northern side of Colegate. It occupies a relatively small churchyard, being bounded to the west by St George's Plain and to the north by a narrow alleyway linking Muspole Street with St George's Street. The footprint of the present building only permits exterior burial to the north and west.

There is topographical evidence that this small churchyard was itself considerably smaller for much of the medieval period. The curving alignment of Muspole Street seems to be the result of two separately-named streets being run together. The northern, west-to-east, part was called Soutergate by the 14th century with the north-to-south element being *Musepol* in 1298 (Sandred and Lindström 1989, 120). The apparent curve of *Musepol* is perhaps exaggerated by extension of the churchyard across its alignment which, if continued, would pass immediately in front of the west tower of the church. Crossing Colegate, it would also align with Water Lane, running to the river. Blomefield asserts that 'to complete the churchyard, a piece of common ground was added to it, in 21st Henry VII' [1505/06] (Blomefield 4 1806, 467). The 'common ground' was presumably part of the still extant open space of St George's Plain to the west. The location of a gate in the north churchyard wall at the point where the road now veers westward around the western part of the graveyard is located at the position where the original alignment probably ran.

Notwithstanding the exact bounds of the churchyard, its site seems likely to have been constrained geographically. Archaeological work to the east suggests that the alignment of St George's Street most probably follows that of a deep defensive ditch of early 10th-century date, excavated as part of Anglo-Scandinavian defences around settlement on the north bank of the River Wensum (Ayers 2009, 29ff). Although likely to have been obsolete defensively by the end of the 11th century, it is probable that the ditch and its associated banked earthwork were still highly visible features within the nascent urban landscape. It is possible that either a small stream (the Muspole) or, at least, a low-lying muddy area lay immediately to the west. Crossed by the highway of Colegate, much of the southern extent of this muddy location may have been infilled as the Plain. Slightly further east, on Colegate itself, Kirkpatrick records heightening of the highway, apparently without authority, in the early 14th century. One Peter Pirmund was fined in 1312/13 'because he had raised the King way ... with gravel and sand by wch he has stopped the Course of the Water of Muspol ... by which obstruction the Water of Muspol overflows and drowns ye neighbouring Houses to ye great annoyance of the Inhabitants' (Hudson (ed.) 1889, 75).

The Pirmund reference implies that the Muspole ran with sufficient water to cause problems if blocked. It seems likely that, flowing from the north, the stream passed the west side of the churchyard although, conceivably, it could have been diverted into the defensive ditch to the north of St George Colegate and thus ran immediately to the east. However, it remains probable that the church stands upon a small promontory, presumably of gravel, between the ditch east and low-lying boggy ground west. Recent excavation (2015) on the west side

of Muspole Street some 25m north of the churchyard has only produced equivocal results; there is little evidence of marshy or boggy ground but, at the same time, as Brian Ayers has observed during site visits, it is also clear that urban development west of the street was minimal prior to the 16th century.

The known extent of the parish of St George is considerable, running northward from the river almost as far as Botolph Street. However, it is highly likely that this extent incorporates most if not all of the parishes of the lost churches of St Margaret Newbridge (added to St George Colegate after 1349) and St Olave Pitt Street (added after 1546). The eastern parish boundary seems also to have incorporated the parish of the church of St John the Baptist which was added in the 13th century when St John's church was incorporated into the precinct of the first site of the Dominican Friary (Campbell 1975, 23-24). Westward the parish boundary may reflect an early boundary with the area of Coslany, although an early reference to the church in 1254 - 75 called it Sancti Georgii de Coslane implying that the entire area west of the 10th-century enclosure was originally regarded as part of Coslany (Sandred and Lindström 1989, 39).

Date of foundation

The dedication, assuming that it is the original one, would suggest a foundation date of c.1100, contemporary with known popularisation of St George following the First Crusade. Pre-Conquest occupation immediately outside the defensive alignment is unlikely and this lack of activity is supported by the results of nearby archaeological work, notably from excavations north of the church at Alms Lane in 1976. Here there was only evidence of possible iron-working before the 12th century (Atkin 1985, 145-7).

An archaeological watching brief was conducted within the churchyard north of the church in 1992 (NHER MNF559 - www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk) when general earth buildup was observed. The recovery of human bone and coffin nails from a gas trench excavated immediately south of the western graveyard in 1987 and 1988 suggests that the curtilage of the churchyard has been encroached upon by street widening, as observed elsewhere in the city (NHER MNF781 - www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk).

Bibliography

- Atkin, M. W. 1985. 'Excavations at Alms Lane (Site 302N). In Atkin, M. W. *et al* (eds.) 'Excavations in Norwich 1971 - 1978, Part II'. *East Anglian Archaeology* 26.
- Ayers, B. 2009. *Norwich: Archaeology of a Fine City*. Stroud.
- 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
- 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
- <http://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/record-details?MNF559-St-George's-Church-Colegate-Norwich&Index=2&RecordCount=2&SessionID=12dfa3ad-9f63-474b-8ea8-075431343307>
- <http://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/record-details?MNF781-Saxon-and-medieval-finds-outside-St-George's-Church-Colegate&Index=3&RecordCount=2&SessionID=94358fa6-bda8-4238-bd22-c41288f2accf>