

The Franciscan Friary



In 1226, the Franciscans set up house in Norwich. Their beginnings were humble but by the end of the century they had expanded dramatically. In 1292 they acquired eighteen plots, which eventually formed the basis of a precinct of some 4.2 hectares or 10.4 acres in the prime part of the city, with the cathedral to the north and the castle to the west. Until recently, a large part of this area was occupied by the Mann Egerton coach building works, but following its demise it has been

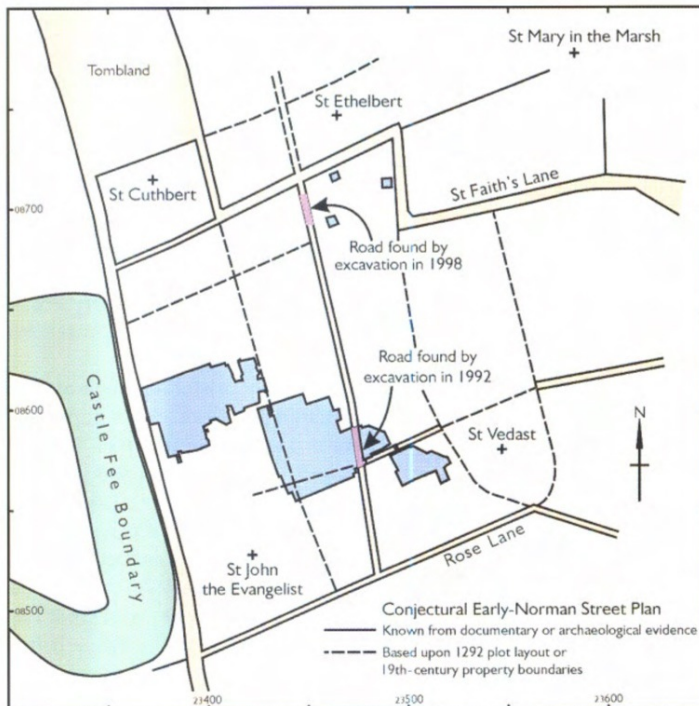
The settlement began surprisingly early. The coin above left is a sceatta of the Saxon runic type dating to 700-710.

Above right is a middle Saxon openwork disc brooch.

redeveloped as insurance offices; and this enabled a major archaeological excavation to take place in a key area.

In many ways, however, the friary was of secondary interest to the archaeologists: the real question was what came before. Located close to the historic core of Norwich, the friary excavation provided a marvellous opportunity to study the origins of this thriving late Saxon town. Perhaps the most significant finds were those indicating activity in the Middle Saxon period, including a sceatta (coin) of "runic" type (700-710), only the third of its kind from Norwich, a Middle Saxon disc brooch, a bronze pin and 31 sherds of Middle Saxon pottery. These finds were mostly detected in the low-lying, eastern part of the site, enhancing the impression that early settlement was concentrated on the margins of the River Wensum.

Such finds, while indicating settlement, say nothing as to whether it was urban in character and evidence of the street layout does not appear until the late Saxon period. The most dramatic evidence was of a north to south lane that was closed off by the construction of the Friary. It had been cut into the natural slope, and was buried by



Left. The early street plan. Tombland, top left, was the Saxon marketplace. The Normans then put down the Castle, to the left, and the new Cathedral (unmarked, but top right). Thus the earlier grid pattern of roads became fossilised.