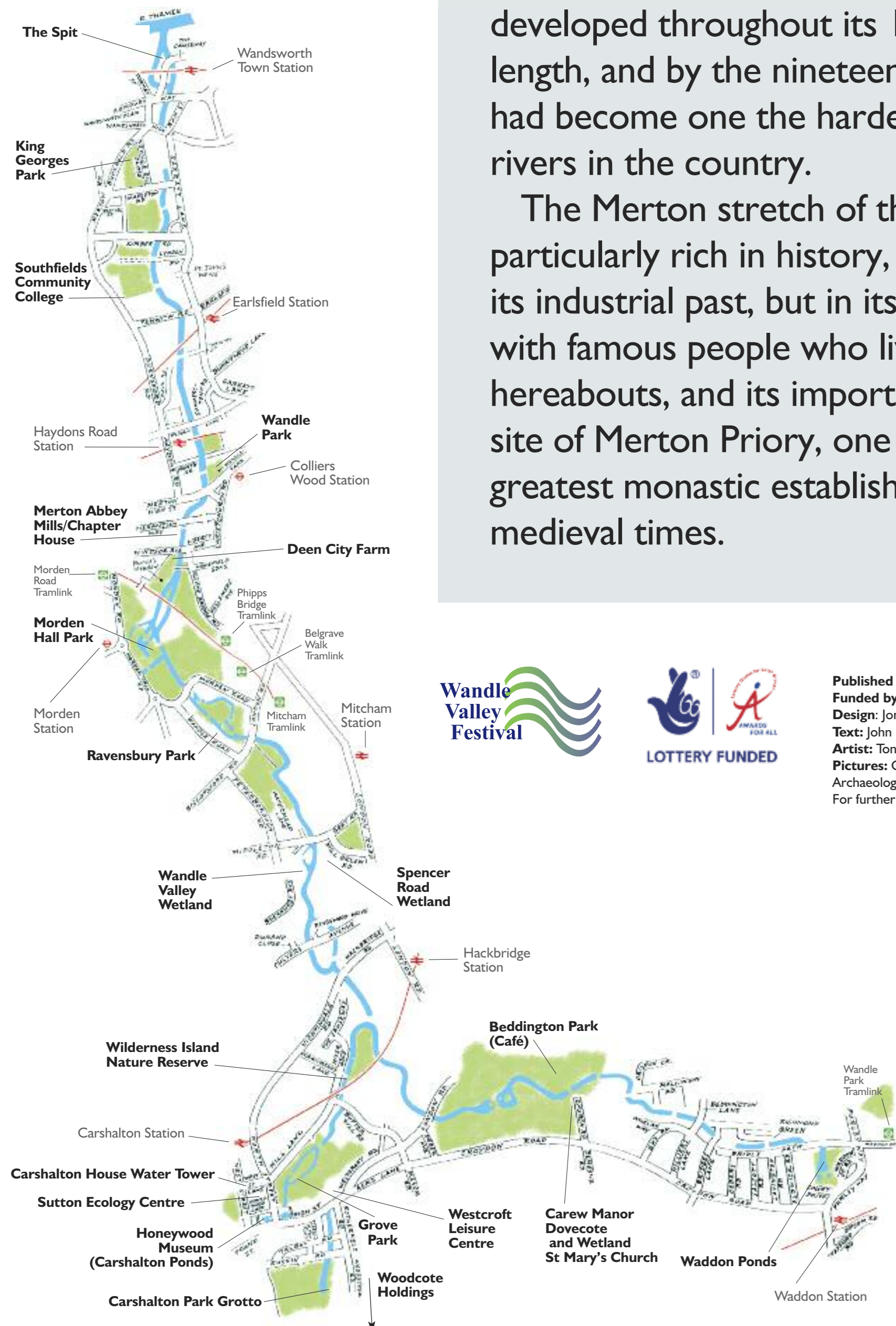


River Wandle In Merton

A rich history on the Riverbank

Once upon a time The Wandle was a peaceful chalk stream in open country, meandering past grand estates and pretty villages. Its fast flow, however, was ideal for watermills, which developed throughout its 12 mile length, and by the nineteenth century it had become one of the hardest worked rivers in the country.

The Merton stretch of the Wandle is particularly rich in history, not just for its industrial past, but in its connections with famous people who lived hereabouts, and its importance as the site of Merton Priory, one of the greatest monastic establishments of medieval times.



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 For further information visit: www.mertonpriory.org

Merton Priory

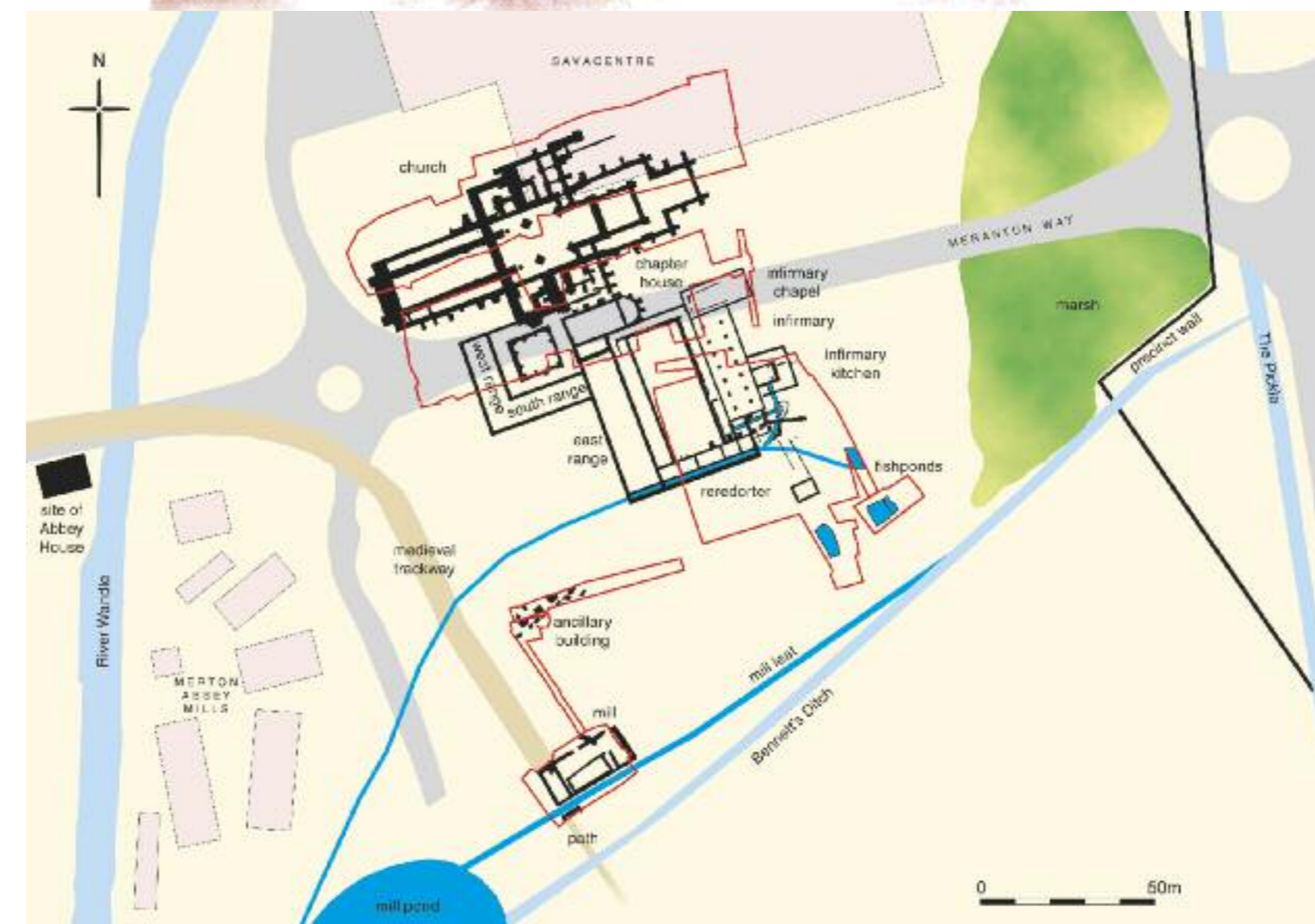


This artist's impression hints at how the Priory might have looked in relation to Merantun Way today.

500 years ago by far the biggest group of buildings on the banks of the River Wandle was Merton Priory, where Sainsbury's and Marks and Spencer's stands now. It was founded in 1114, and grew into one of England's largest and most important monasteries until Henry VIII's "Dissolution".

Henry was determined to reduce the power of the church, whose monasteries had huge wealth in land and property, and they were abolished in 1537/38. The monks and nuns were mostly pensioned off, and some of the buildings continued in use as cathedrals, churches and schools. But many were demolished and the materials recycled – as in Merton, where Henry used the stonework to build Nonsuch Palace near Cheam. So Merton Priory completely disappeared until major excavations were undertaken when the Sainsbury's hypermarket was built in 1988.

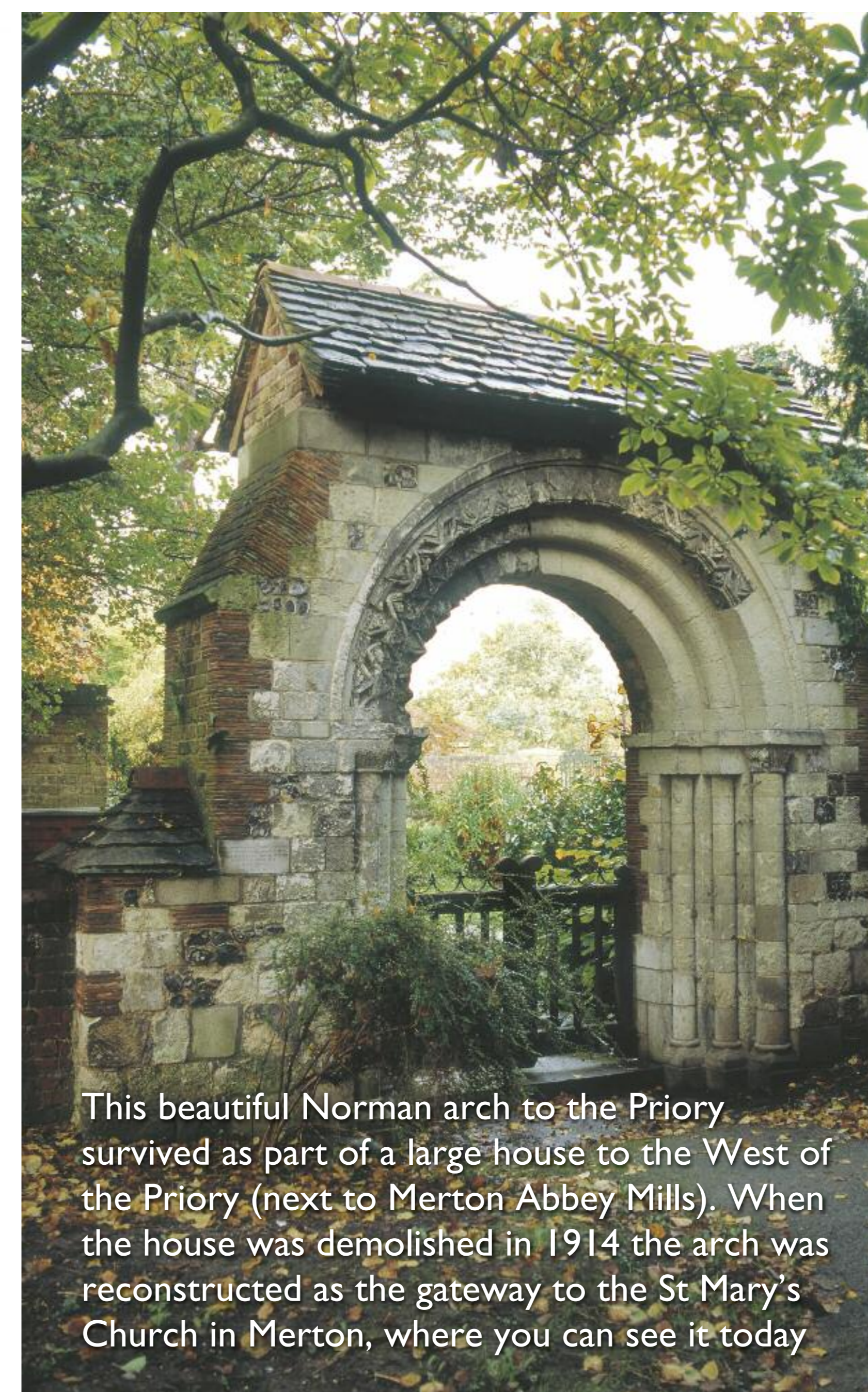
The historic seal of St Mary's Priory, Merton, is held at the British Museum. It was engraved in 1241 and shows the Virgin and Child.



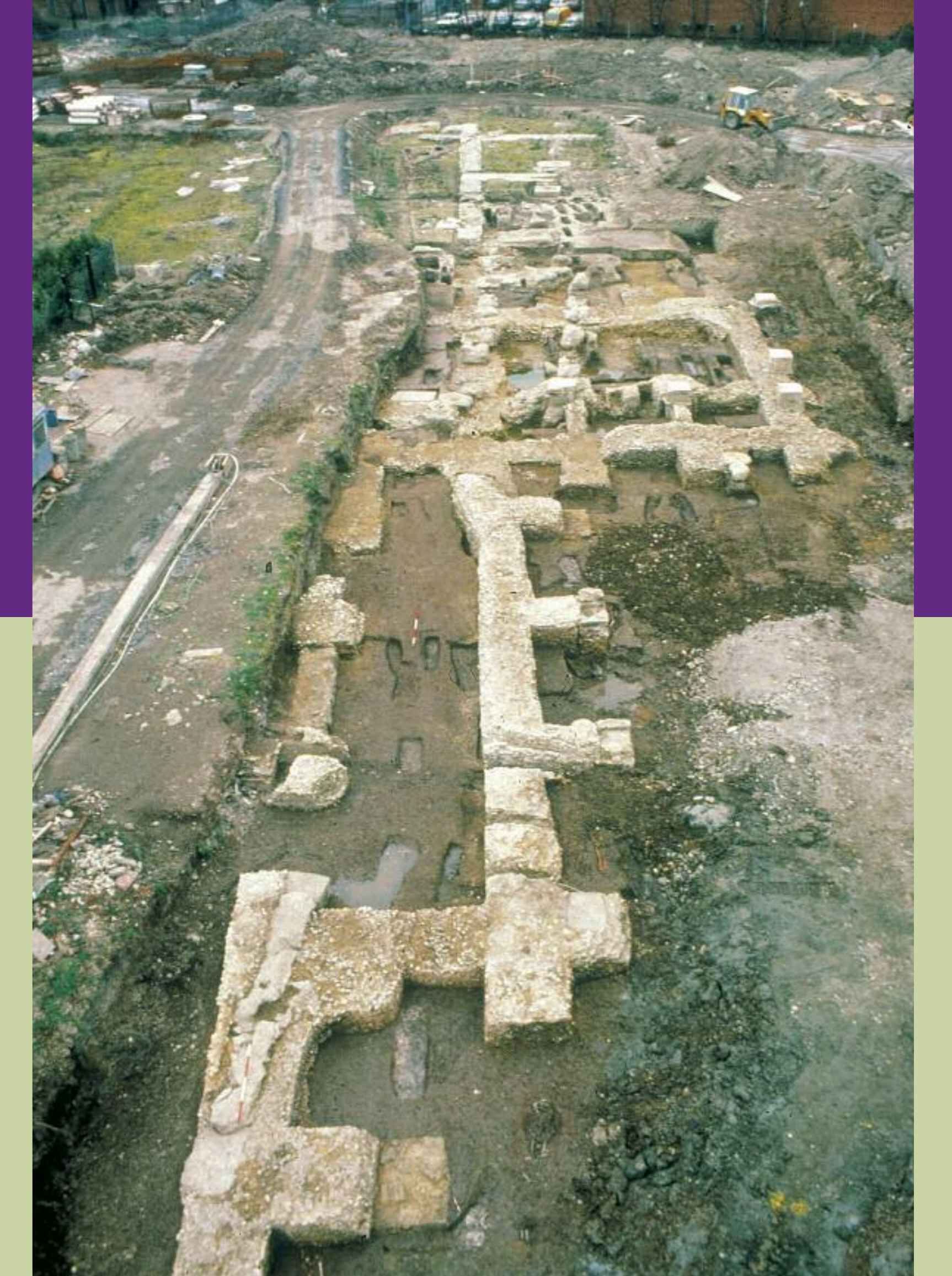
The main building of the Priory was the Church, but there were a large number of surrounding buildings where the monks lived and worked, including the Refectory and Infirmary, the remains of which were fully excavated in 1988-90.



Although the Priory itself completely disappeared after 1538, a good length of its boundary wall survives. It stretches from the Sainsbury's recycling centre to the Christchurch Road roundabout, and can be seen from the Priory Retail Park, amid the undergrowth on the other side of the Pickle Ditch. A small stretch can also be seen in Station Road (Illustrated).



This beautiful Norman arch to the Priory survived as part of a large house to the West of the Priory (next to Merton Abbey Mills). When the house was demolished in 1914 the arch was reconstructed as the gateway to the St Mary's Church in Merton, where you can see it today



Merton's huge Priory Church was as long as Westminster Abbey - its foundations were briefly exposed in 1988 when the hypermarket was being built.



Over 800 burials were discovered in the priory excavations, providing invaluable evidence of the medieval population - for example their size, diet, average age at death, cause of death.



The Chapter House was where the business of the Priory was carried on, in effect the 'Board Room'. Its foundations have been preserved under Merantun Way, 100 yards East of the Wandle, and are open to the public during the Wandle Valley Festival in June and London Open House weekend in September, or by appointment with the Merton Priory Trust. It's also used occasionally as a theatre.

The most important survival of the Priory is almost certainly the Colour House Theatre at Merton Abbey Mills, built of flint in the style of the period.

