

The Grey Friars, Leicester

AUDREY STRANGE

'As the early disciples of St. Francis went about the world, inspired by his example and strengthened by his memory, a new light seemed to penetrate the dark corners of the earth, as those who thought that they had been deserted by God and man found that they were still remembered and loved.'

John Moorman¹

If you walk from west to east along Friar Lane in Leicester, turn left into Hotel Street and left again into St. Martin's/Peacock Lane almost as far as the traffic lights leading to Southgate Street, you will have walked round the area occupied by the old Franciscan friary. Its western boundary ran along gardens which backed houses along Southgate Street. It is crossed by New Street and Greyfriars Street.

The first Friars Minor landed in England in 1224 and the Order spread rapidly with the encouragement of Henry III. The Province of England, headed by the Minister Provincial was divided into seven Custodies each with its friaries and friars. Some of the brothers were priests, some were lay-brothers, but they all wore the grey-brown habit with a knotted cord round the waist. They were dedicated to live like Christ in extreme poverty and as the servants of all, moving freely about the country unlike the monastic orders. Many prominent people gave gifts for the Friars Minor to build their houses and churches, others bequeathed gifts in their wills. The ownership of the houses and lands did not pass to the friars but always remained with the benefactors and their heirs. They lived on alms and as a return for these the friars 'preached frequently to the people, instructed the ignorant and children, and were always ready at a call to watch with the sick, to hear confession, and to assist and comfort all persons in distress, even in the times of battles, or sieges, prisons or dungeons, or in the most pestilential or contagious distempers'.²

The usual type of English Franciscan church was a rectangular building with a roof continued from east to west without a break, and its characteristic feature of a belfry above a central passage. Most of these had a single great bell. The church was always built alongside a public thoroughfare and the townspeople entered the nave through a door usually in the north-west corner. There were sometimes stone benches round the walls and there were two or three altars against the rood screen with statues over the altars or on brackets on the walls. Through a door in the screen was the wide passage below the belfry which separated the nave from the choir. This was the friars' private part of the church and the high altar, which in Leicester was dedicated to St. Francis, was below the east window – the only one allowed to contain stained glass. Here also they were allowed images of the Crucifix, St. Mary, St. John the Evangelist, St. Francis and St. Anthony.

There was an open passage between the church and the cloister walk and these two were joined by a short covered corridor. The main living apartments were on the floor over the cloister walks and were built of timber,

half-timber or rubble masonry. Individual buildings mentioned as part of some friaries include church, vestry, frater, buttery, kitchen, brewhouse, dormer, infirmary, chapter-house, guest-house, Warden's or Guardian's apartments, private lodgings, schoolhouse, library. These were built according to the generosity of the citizens and within the rules of the Order which did not allow expensive overdecorated buildings.

After the Pope in 1250 gave permission for burials of lay people within friaries, they had small cemeteries between church and road, and the gateway to these was often the dwelling-place of an Anchorite. The friars' own burial-ground was between the church and the chapter-house or in the cloisters. The church was reserved for the burials of royal personages and other important benefactors. The largest Franciscan church, London, had in front of the high altar the tombs of Queen Margaret, second wife of Edward I; Queen Isabel, wife of Edward II with the heart of her husband; Queen Joan de la Tour, wife of King David the Bruce of Scotland; Beatrice, Duchess of Brittany and daughter of Henry III, close to a wall niche burial of the heart of her mother, Eleanor of Provence. William Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick was buried at the Grey Friars, Worcester, in 1298. The Hastings family had a private chapel and vault at Coventry Grey Friars. The body of Ann Mowbray, Duchess of York, was recently found on the site of the Minories, a female house of the Order of St. Francis of which there were but three in England (the others were at Denny, Cambridgeshire and Bruisyard, Suffolk). It was also considered a very special privilege to be buried wearing the Franciscan habit. Henry VII had a particular attachment to the Friars Minor. His father was buried in the friary church at Carmarthen and when a stricter branch of the Franciscans called Observants came to England, Henry helped them set up several friaries and left £200 to the one at Newark (Nottinghamshire) when he died.

The friary church in Leicester was therefore a natural choice of burial place for his late opponent in battle, Richard III. However, in choosing a place where the body could be shown to the public, Henry, heir of the Lancastrian cause, chose the collegiate church of St. Mary-in-the-Newarke, a Lancastrian foundation.³ The last of the Yorkist Kings was displayed among tombs of Henry, Earl of Lancaster, Henry, Duke of Lancaster, Mary de Bohun, grandmother of Henry VI, and where also the obit of William, Lord Hastings was said on each anniversary of his death. After a visit to the town in 1495, Henry arranged for a tomb with King Richard's likeness to be erected on his grave in the Grey Friars – '£10.1s. to James Keyley for King Richard tombe'.⁴ Two Ministers Provincial of England, Peter Swynfled and William of Nottingham and also Henry de Reresby, Minister Provincial of Scotland, were buried at the Leicester friary.

The friars paid a rent of 24s. a year to the King until February 1536 when Henry VIII sold it to property speculators John Bellows of Grimsby and John Broxholme of Owersby, Lincolnshire. Before the Dissolution the King sent out special commissioners to take inventories of the possessions of each religious house and at the time of surrender the lists were checked carefully by the bailiffs. The suppression of friaries began in 1538 and the surrender document of the one in Leicester was drawn up on 10 November and signed by William Giles, Guardian; fr. Simon Harvey, lecturer; fr. Henry Shepshed;

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fr. John Standish; Robert Ashton; Ralph Herrick; William Abbot. The lead on the buildings was reserved for the King, then public auctions were held – the first option being given to the new owners of the site. The buildings were locked up and gradually dismantled – the stones, timber and grave slabs sold for re-use. St. Martin's church nearby has one of these originating from some religious house and which has since been used four times!

The next owner of the Grey Friars site was Robert Catlyn. He sold it to Alderman Robert Herrick who built a large house on the eastern part of the site. It was he who, in 1612 when showing the young Christopher Wren, later the father of the famous architect, around his property, pointed out a handsome stone pillar three feet high which had the inscription 'Here lies the body of Richard III sometime King of England'. Robert Herrick's descendants sold Grey Friars in 1711 to Thomas Noble who, in the 1740s had New Street laid out and sold the land on both sides of it to people who erected houses there. When the foundations of the houses nearest St. Martin's were being dug, a number of human bones and complete skeletons were found.⁵ Subsequent owners of the house and the eastern part of the property were Richard Garle in 1752, Thomas Pares in 1776 who enlarged the house into an imposing mansion, Beaumont Barnaby in 1824 and Leicester Corporation in 1866. The Town Council considered using the mansion as a new town hall but later changed their minds. The building was pulled down and Grey Friars Street laid out across its site.

There are various rumours about Richard III and Leicester, e.g. that the night before Bosworth Field he stayed at the Blue Boar Inn and left his bed there containing a hidden hoard of money. However it is extremely unlikely that he stayed at the inn when Leicester Castle had been carefully maintained and repaired throughout the fifteenth century;⁶ he had stayed there only the previous year and Henry Tudor stayed there immediately after the battle. The Town Hall, which in those days was near if not next door to the Blue Boar Inn received the wounded after the battle⁷ and indeed for many years was believed to have been the place where Richard's body was displayed to the public.⁸ If this were so, one can see how the saying that his body spent its last night above ground there became a rumour a century later that he spent his last night on earth at the Blue Boar, ignoring the subsequent night on Bosworth Field. The fact that the blue boar was a badge of de Vere, Earl of Oxford, should have been enough to deter a stay there on such an occasion. The story of the so-called Richard III Bed has been dealt with effectively and conclusively by C.J. Billson.⁹

The story of Richard's bones being thrown over Bow Bridge into the river at the Dissolution first appeared in print during the life time of Robert Herrick who put up the afore-mentioned pillar. Herrick could easily have asked any one of the surviving friars to point out the place of Richard's grave. The bones of John Wycliffe a few miles away at Lutterworth actually were disinterred, burned and thrown into the river in 1425. Here also is a possible basis for the rumour referring to the King. By coincidence, a skeleton was found under the end of Bow Bridge, Leicester, in 1862, but was proved to be that of someone younger than Richard III and furthermore in too good condition to be that of anyone killed in battle.¹⁰

The poor and needy still go to the friary site for assistance, only nowadays

1612 lost
marker to
grave!
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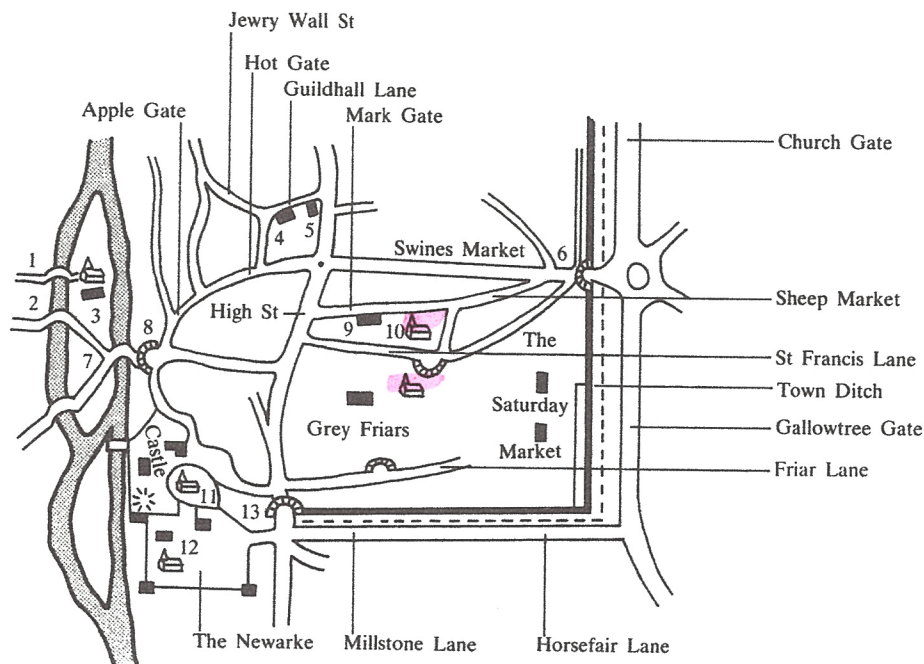
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1612

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THE GREY FRIARS, LEICESTER MEDIEVAL LEICESTER

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KEY

1. Little Bow Bridge
2. Bow Bridge
3. The Austin Friars
4. Old Mayor's Hall
5. Blue Boar Inn
6. East Gate
7. West Bridge
8. West Gate
9. Guildhall
10. St. Martin's Church now the Cathedral
11. St. Mary-de-Castro
12. St. Mary in the Newarke
13. South Gate

Memo: Street names have changed several times over the centuries:

Guildhall Lane became Blue Boar Lane.

St. Francis Lane is now Peacock Lane.

High Street is now Southgates.

Swines Market is now High Street.

Kirk Gate is now Guildhall Lane.

they apply to the social services of the County Council. The offices together with those of solicitors, insurance companies, banks and a school outline the area. Their private car parks cover the centre and under one of these are the foundations of the thirteenth century church, the dust and bones of the once powerful King and saintly friars.

'Lord, Thou hast given me a cell
Wherein to dwell,
A little house whose humble roof
Is weatherproof.
Low is my porch as is my fate,
Both void of state,
And yet the threshold of my door
Is worn by the poor
Who hither come and freely get
Good words or meat,
Tis Thou that crown'st my glittering hearth
With guileless mirth.
All these and better Thou dost send
Me to this end,
That I should render for my part
A thankful heart.

Robert Herrick¹¹

NOTES AND REFERENCES

This article was first published in *The Ricardian*, Vol. III, No. 50, (September 1975), pp. 3-7.

1. J. Moorman, *History of the Franciscan Order*, (Oxford 1968), p. 303.
2. A. Parkinson, *Antiquities of the English Franciscans*, (1726), p. 220.
3. R. Allen Brown, H.M. Colvin and A.J. Taylor, *The History of the King's Works*, Vol. 1, *The Middle Ages*, (London 1963), pp. 267-8.
4. S. Bentley, *Excerpta Historica*, (London 1833), p. 105
5. J. Throsby, *History and Antiquities of the Ancient Town of Leicester*, (1791), p. 291.
6. H.M. Colvin, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 475, Vol. 2, p. 703.
7. Mary Bateson (ed.), *Records of the Borough of Leicester 1327-1509*, (London 1901), Vol. 2, p. 316.
8. J. Throsby, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
9. C.J. Billson, *Mediaeval Leicester*, (1920), pp. 187-92.
10. *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, Vol. 2, (1870), pp. 109-10.
11. Nephew of Alderman Robert Herrick of Grey Friars.

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Throsby →
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