

## Archaeological Excavations at Grey Friars, Leicester

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Last summer there was considerable fervour in some sections of the Richard III Society as some members appeared to believe that the last resting place of Richard III was about to be discovered. The reason was that word had got out that a site on a Leicester street named Grey Friars was about to be redeveloped, and there was to be an archaeological excavation before that happened.

### Richard III's tomb

In order to understand the reason for the fervour, members need to recall what is known of the fate of Richard III's body. Following his victory at Bosworth, Henry VII entered Leicester in triumph on 23 August, 1485. One of his first acts was to place the deposed king's body on display, in order that there could be no doubt that Richard was dead. It is likely that Richard's naked body was shown on one of the gates of The Newarke, a religious precinct that lay just to the south of Leicester Castle. After three days the body was taken down and given to the care of Franciscan friars. The Franciscans, or Grey Friars, had a friary on the southern side of the walled town, and would probably have buried him within their church, as befitted someone of such rank. Without any endowment, however, there was probably nothing other than perhaps a simple plaque to mark the grave.

Some ten years after Bosworth, in July 1495, it appears that Henry VII moved to correct this omission. Royal Commissioners appointed a craftsman in alabaster from Nottingham, paying him £50 to erect monument over Richard's grave. There are no contemporary records of the nature of Richard's monument, but in his *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, published in 1577,

Raphael Holinshed says that it incorporated 'a picture of alabaster representing his person'. The use of alabaster for the monument is a useful additional clue as to the location of the grave within the friary. Alabaster is a material that weathers rapidly when subjected to rain. This makes it even more likely that Richard's resting place was in the body of the church.

### After the Dissolution.

Leicester's Franciscan Friary was dissolved in November 1538, and the subsequent fate of Richard III's remains is shrouded in mystery. There are no readily available records of the immediate fate of the friary church and other cloistral buildings. All that is known for certain is that, shortly after the Dissolution, the site of became the property of Sir Robert Catlyn. There can be little doubt, however, that in a prosperous town such as Leicester there would have been a ready market for stone from a dismantled friary located within the town walls. Demolition of the stone buildings probably began almost immediately. When John Leland visited Leicester, sometime before 1543, he recorded that the friary 'stode at the end of the Hospital of Mr Wigeston' and that 'there was byried King Richard 3' (Vol. 1, p. 16). Both of these remarks suggest that much of the structure had been dismantled before Leland's visit.

The fate of the tomb of Richard and his body after the church was taken down is unclear. One local tradition is that Richard's body was removed from its coffin, carried through the streets and cast into the River Soar, but there is reason to doubt the substance of this story. The first recorded mention of it is only found more than 70 years



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after the Dissolution, and there is no satisfactory explanation as to why, more than fifty years after his death, Richard III would have been so unpopular in Leicester. Moreover, other local traditions speak of Richard's stone coffin variously as being in one piece, and used as a horse trough at a local inn, or else having been broken-up and placed on display.

It is impossible either to confirm or to refute these traditions. Even the written accounts seem to be at odds. All that is known for certain is that the Catlyn family sold the site of the friary to Robert Herrick, a former mayor of Leicester, and that Herrick built a large house, Grey Friars, in the south-eastern part of the friary precinct and probably retained most of the land as a garden. The two sources that refer to Richard's grave are *The History of Great Britaine* by John Speed, the cartographer, published in 1611, and a history of the family of Christopher Wren, the architect of St Paul's Cathedral, published at the end of the eighteenth century. When John Speed visited Leicester at the start of the seventeenth century he recorded that the site of Richard's grave was 'overgrown with weeds and nettles ... and not to be found'. However, it is reported that when Christopher Wren's father walked in the garden of Herrick's house in 1612 he was shown 'a handsome Stone Pillar, three Foot high' erected for Robert Herrick and inscribed 'Here lies the Body of Richard III, some time King of England'.

#### **The Layout of the Friary.**

Before considering the findings of the recent excavation it is necessary to say something about what is known of the Franciscan friary, and what happened to Grey Friars House.

As well as there being no readily available records for the Dissolution, there are few known surviving documentary accounts for the friary before the Dissolution. It is possible, however, on the basis of cartographic evidence and existing property boundaries, to work out the approximate extent of the friary precinct. This appears to have been an area roughly 180 metres long and 130 metres wide

at the western end and 70 metres wide at the eastern end.

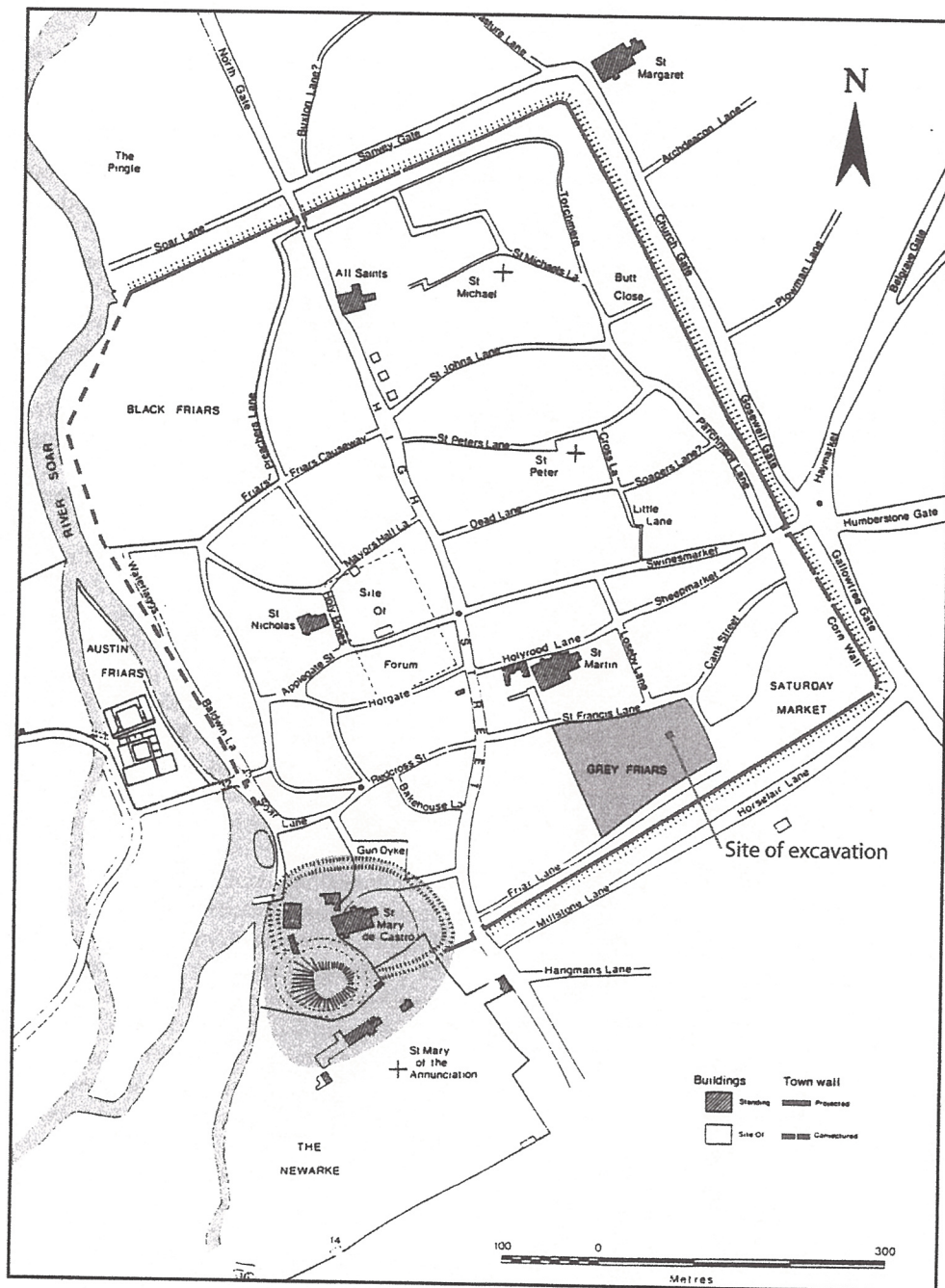
This raises the question as to how much of the precinct at Leicester would have been occupied by the church and the cloistral buildings. However, without either detailed documentary or archaeological evidence we cannot be certain where in the precinct the church and the cloisters were located.

Apart from a vague report that burials were found towards the western end of the area of the former precinct in the 1740s, the only clues come from what we know of Franciscan friaries elsewhere in the English Midlands. Franciscan friaries in this region tended to conform to a standard basic plan, with a church, which was invariably aligned on an east-west axis, with a cloister, or cloisters, to the south. Churches were normally long and narrow, with a large nave at the west end, in which friars would preach to the townsfolk. There was usually a crossing at the east end of the nave, with a crossing tower and with transepts to north and south. To the east of the crossing lay the chancel. The chancel would have been reserved for the friars, and was separated from everything to the west by a dividing wall built to about head height.

The precinct of the Franciscan friary in Lichfield, Staffordshire, was similar in area to that of the Franciscan friary in Leicester. Unlike the example in Leicester, however, the location and plan of Lichfield friary is reasonably well understood, as a result of a combination of good documentary evidence and evidence recovered from a large excavation in the 1920s, evidence which was confirmed in the 1990s. At Lichfield the nave was 33 metres long x 18 metres wide, the chancel was 28 metres long x 17 metres wide, and the main cloister (there was also a little cloister to the south of the main cloister) was 24 metres square.

Hence the principal buildings of the Lichfield friary only occupied a small fraction of the total area of the precinct, the rest of the area having been taken-up by a graveyard, various outbuildings and extensive gardens. There is no reason to believe the principal buildings would have occupied a larger fraction of the precinct at Leicester.

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### Grey Friars House.

In the centuries following its construction in the late sixteenth century for Robert Herrick Grey Friars House passed through several hands. During this time it declined in status from being a house in single occupancy to being sub-divided and occupied by tenants. Cartographic evidence suggests that by the early eighteenth century much of the land on the street frontage had been sold off. In 1740 the eastern end of the former precinct was sold and a new road, New Street, created across the entire width of the site.

In 1776 Thomas Pares, the owner of a hosiery company, purchased Grey Friars House and the eastern part of the former precinct. Following the decline of his hosiery business, in 1800 Pares founded a bank. The offices of Pares's Bank were established in the north-eastern corner of the former precinct. During the succeeding decades Pares's Bank prospered whilst Grey Friars House continued to decline. Thus Grey Friars House was demolished in 1872, to make way for a street on the western side of Pares's Bank, and in 1901 the original Pares's Bank building was torn down to make way for a grander bank building with a large domed banking hall and ornately decorated exterior. This bank is now a Grade II\* Listed Building.

### The Archaeological Excavation.

Over succeeding generations Pares's bank was merged with larger banks, forming what is now the NatWest Bank. The imposing building, however, remained in use as a bank until the late 1990s, when NatWest decided to transfer their business elsewhere in the town centre.

In 1990, members of the Richard III society placed a plaque on the west side of the bank identifying it as the site of the Franciscan Friary. This, more than anything, probably explains why some members came to believe the bank might mark the final resting place of Richard III.

After the building became vacant various proposals, were put forward for its use. Most

of the proposals foundered because they would result in unacceptable changes to the fabric of the bank; however, the most recent proposal has been approved. This entails the conversion the ground floor into a restaurant and the conversion of the upper floors into flats.

The aspect of this proposal which led to the archaeological excavation was the demolition of a single-storeyed extension built in the 1950s, and its replacement with a block of flats. The block of flats is to be quite small, measuring approximately 15 m. x 15 m. However, as it lies within the defences of Roman Leicester, defences that were re-used in the Middle Ages, and is believed to lie within the precinct of a medieval friary, the developers were required to appoint an archaeologist to record the buried remains that might be destroyed by the erection of the flats.

This excavation got under way in the late summer of 2007 and continued into the early autumn. Members who anticipated the discovery of a medieval grave alongside clear traces of a friary church will be disappointed. The first archaeologically significant strata were encountered some 1.5 metres below the surface. These consisted of Roman deposits which probably represented the remains of a sequence of Roman structures. The only evidence that there might have been a church in the vicinity came in the form of a fragment of a stone coffin lid that was found in a post-medieval drain.

Whilst the absence of traces of a friary church might mean that post-medieval disturbance has destroyed any medieval deposits, the assumption has to be that the friary church lay elsewhere within the precinct. The chances are that the Franciscan friars were only given the site for their friary in the mid twelfth century because it lay close to the defences and was largely undeveloped at the times. As noted above, the church and the cloister, or cloisters, occupied a fraction of the precinct, and much of the rest would have been gardens. The excavation only examined 1.25% of the area of the former friary precinct.

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