

Map - Philippa

Also see Society Map/  
Canty Council  
Medieval Plan - of

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FS Bone

Carol Simmonds

## The Bare Bones of Dissent

CAROL SIMMONDS

How does a Society justify the idea of looking for a single needle of evidence in the mother of all haystacks? Fellow Ricardians, I refer to the issue of Richard III's bones. It has been suggested that archaeological techniques, notably the invasive method of excavation, should be employed in a quest to find these relics. As an archaeologist and a Ricardian I should like to give the debate another slant.

I suspect that most members' impression of archaeology comes from watching *Time Team* and *Meet the Ancestors*. There is nothing wrong with that, but they cannot be used as a yardstick by which to measure all archaeology, which considers all aspects of the material past. Non-media archaeology lacks resources and legislative clout to find Richard. It would be impossible to persuade anybody to excavate on a plot of land for whatever reason without appropriate research and permission first.

It is my intention to consider some of the evidence and illustrate how some of the proposals are ineffective, and work towards a more realistic agenda. This is not to say I do not sympathise with Mr Marshall's sentiments (*Bulletin*, September 2002). It would be a coup to find Richard's current resting place - if there is one. I shall be looking at the following areas: (a) the evidence for disposal of the body; (b) the City of Leicester, Greyfriars and the Soar area; (c) archaeological profession and practice; (d) archaeological methods. Finally I shall propose some form of research strategy which the Society might like to consider.

### The disposal of the body

There are many popular legends associated with the disposal of Richard III's remains. All

we can be sure of is that on 22 August 1485 Richard III was defeated, killed and taken back to Leicester a beaten corpse. The new Henry VII allowed his dead rival to be displayed and then buried in Greyfriars, Leicester. Some time later there are accounts detailing that Henry VII paid £10 for an alabaster or marble tomb. Then between 1536 and 1538 the dissolution of the monasteries affected Greyfriars. The buildings were robbed of valuable building material and the land sold to Leicester's citizens. Then the situation darkens, we have absolutely no evidence of what happened beyond hearsay (see Ashdown-Hill, 2001).

There are three main scenarios for the fate of Richard's bones: (a) that they are somewhere within the Greyfriars precinct, (b) that they were removed elsewhere (such as to another church), (c) that they were disinterred (perhaps into the River Soar).

(a) Assuming there are remains on the Greyfriars site. What are we looking for, archaeologically speaking? Is there going to be a great neon sign saying 'Dig here' pointing to a specific spot? I doubt it. Greyfriars was a friary, it served the local community, including burying the dead. How many people would have been buried in such a place over a few hundred years? Where would they bury a *defeated* king? Near the high altar, or in a less honourable position? We can only guess. Very few friary sites have been excavated, and even fewer in any detail. The recent excavation of an Augustinian friary in Hull turned up 245 skeletons (Evans, 2000) - if Greyfriars in Leicester were ever to be excavated, many skeletons would be found, and who could tell if one were Richard's?



(b) If we assume the remains were moved elsewhere, perhaps with a change of coffin, then heaven knows the state they would be in – where would they be? If we look in a different church, there would be many skeletons.

(c) Finally the River Soar. It is unlikely that human remains would have survived around 450 or so years from the Dissolution in a river, amid all the activity that occurs on the river bed (Patricia Excel, pers. comm.). It is unlikely that anybody would agree to drain a portion of a major inland waterway, and even if human remains were found – so what? There could well be other people's bones on the bed of the river anyway.

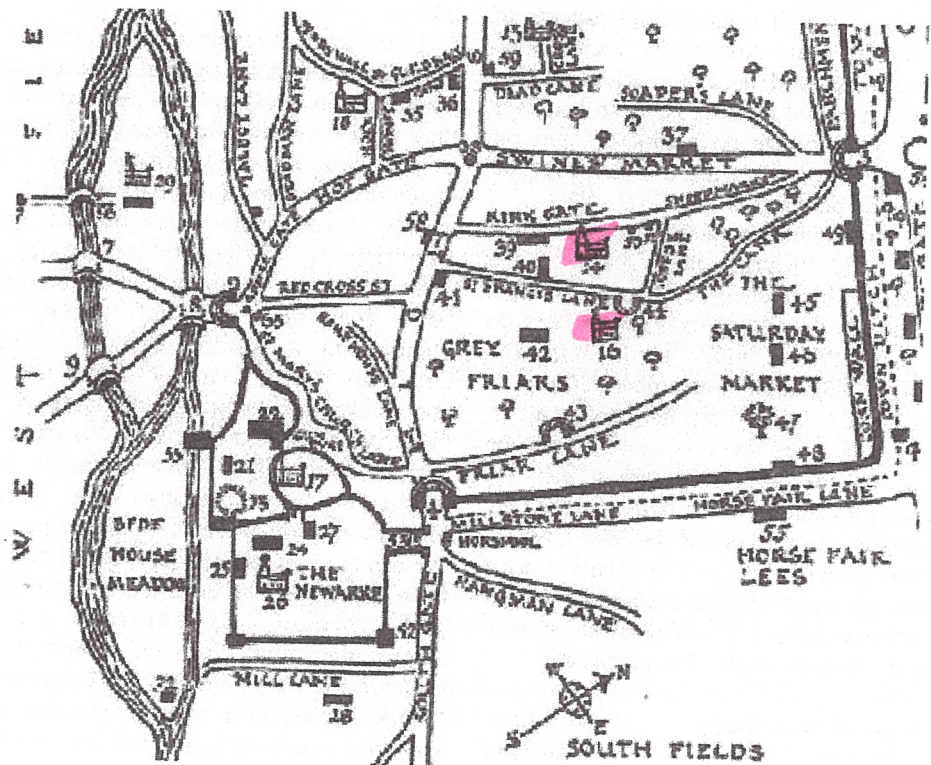
### The City of Leicester, Greyfriars and the River Soar

In urban archaeology there are special issues to be addressed and strategies to deal with. David Treybig in his 1999 article "In Search

of Greyfriars" located the site by obtaining copies of maps from the medieval period, but it had been extensively built on, and there was no trace above ground of the friary.

Treybig identified the site of Greyfriars to be the area east of Southgate, with Peacock Lane and St Martins to the north. If we see how far this is from the River Soar it is a good half mile as Geoffrey Wheeler says in his letter (*Bulletin*, December 2002). Bow Bridge is marked on the medieval map below and it too is a fair distance away from the friary site.

Greyfriars is clearly marked, and obviously has great importance as a prime urban location. It was very extensive and the remains of the church, gatehouses and friary buildings must be beneath the modern ground plan. There have been many other changes in modern Leicester, the streets do often follow the medieval pattern, though frequently with different names commemorating previous





structures. New roads have also been constructed, subdividing plots of land and many churches have disappeared along with Greyfriars.

**Archaeological profession and practice**

There are four main spheres in archaeology. These are voluntary, media, research and contractual. There are two main reasons why the first three spheres would not be able to excavate such a site. The first is purely mercenary economics: money. It is expensive to run any form of investigation and the vast majority of organisations in the twenty-first century would not be able to research such a site. The second is interest and research feasibility. A media-led investigation would have to be sure that something would be found, not just to make good viewing but also to support its credibility (Tim Upton-Smith; pers. commun.).

If a site were to be developed, it would be contractual archaeology that dealt with it. I very much doubt whether the area will be developed in the foreseeable future as it is within Leicester City's 'Castle Park' area – which is a flagship of Leicester's heritage (Courtney 1995).

Contractual archaeology tenders for work made necessary either as part of a pre-planning evaluation or in response to a planning application (David Evans, pers. comm.). The developer may wish to build on or quarry away the land, and on advice from the County Archaeologist, archaeological consultant and the local planning authority, may have to fund and allow archaeological investigation on the site. A planning clause in legislation deals with this – Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (PPG16). It is a far from simple process. Work may begin with a desk-based assessment (DBA) of all available evidence. Then further strategies are planned with regards

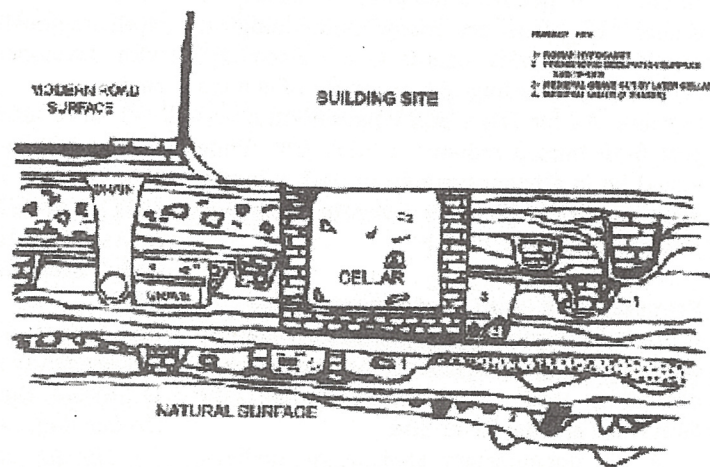
to the results of this DBA. It may result in excavation, perhaps only partial. It is rare these days totally to excavate a site, due in part to the desire to conserve sites for the future and money. Whatever the situation the finds have to be recorded and published. The sum of money submitted in the tender by the successful company has to cover all this including labour and overheads. So Ms Williamson (*Bulletin*, June 2002) is correct in her assumption that archaeology is expensive, but I doubt whether many people will have realised how involved the process is (for more in-depth and expert reading see Grenville, 1993).

Such factors, I believe, may have ramifications on the suggestions put forward and on any work done in Leicester or indeed any other part of the country. The point is there are rules and guidelines which must be adhered to. There is also good research procedure to be followed.

**Archaeological methods**

This would be very complicated and not helped by the fact that the archaeology could be disturbed. Below is a 'typical' build up of deposits to illustrate the complexity of archaeological deposits.

If we look at the Greyfriars site from an methodological perspective, then first we must consider the following. Apart from the legal and logistical issues, the site is undoubtedly complex. Since the area may have had occupation from the Roman straight through to





modern times without a lapse, then archaeology may be deep, in parts disturbed and be multi-period.

There may also be historic and listed buildings on the site and it might be a good idea to understand how these fit into the urban development. The use of buildings often changes through time. One only has to look at all these farm building conversions in the country side for examples, or in the conversion of town houses into shop fronts or restaurants.

It has been suggested that geophysical survey would help find a stone sarcophagus. In such a multi-period urban context I very much doubt whether any clear readings of walls would appear let alone a stone coffin! With all the stone and brick debris it renders the use of geophysical survey impossible. In such a situation, excavation is the only way ahead to make sense of the past. Although, as I have said I would doubt whether such an excavation is likely.

These days it is considered good practice not to head straight down to the Roman layers and thereby cutting through the post-medieval, medieval and any dark age deposits. So it is therefore unlikely that anybody will find a reasonable archaeologist to dig straight down to medieval. Ideally a study of how the periods relate to their historical and archaeological context would be welcomed. Of this the human remains at such a site would only be a portion.

I have already suggested that there are probably hundreds of skeletal remains buried on the site. Aside from the possible identity of Richard III, there are many methodological considerations with regards to the discovery, excavation, recording and recovery of human remains. As for DNA and what one may expect from human remains, I think Bill White would be in a better position to deal with any bone enquiries. [See his letter in *Ricardian Bulletin* December 2002.]

#### **Proposal for a multi-disciplinary study**

It might be a good idea if the Society were to contact Leicestershire County Archaeologist to obtain a full statement regarding the Greyfriars and the River Soar.

A full documentary analysis of medieval

and post medieval archives of Leicester. This is so we can understand how a site has altered over time and predict the state of preservation.

We would also require a full study of the archaeological literature pertaining to the site and indeed the surrounding area. Fortunately, Leicestershire County Council have already begun evaluating archaeological resources, perhaps the Society should keep a close eye on this as and when it develops.

A Building or standing remains survey of the areas and a analysis into their current legislative status.

Undertake research into the human remains found in the River Soar (this could be problematic and expensive).

These proposals are fully open to discussion and criticism. Please let us have your views.

#### **Acknowledgements**

The medieval map is derived with permission from Leicestershire County Council's drawings of the medieval plan.

The figure showing a typical build up of archaeological deposits was drawn by the author but inspired by illustrations seen in Greene, 1995, pp. 66, 73; Renfrew and Bahn, 1996, pp. 101, 113, 140.

David Evans is County Archaeologist for Humberside and is currently working on the publication of the friary in Hull. Patricia Excel is a human remains specialist and is a student of Professor Don Brothwell, a leading international expert in that field. Tim Upton-Smith is a Project Supervisor for Northamptonshire Archaeology, and deals with developer-led projects on a day-to-day basis.

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