

# GREYFRIARS FRIARY

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After Richard III was killed at Bosworth Field, his corpse was returned to Leicester where it was displayed to passersby. The remains were then taken to Greyfriars, a religious community, where the Grey Friars quietly buried the remains. About ten years later, Henry VII is said to have purchased a simple headstone for the grave.

At the Dissolution of the Monasteries the friary was closed. At this point, allegedly, Richard III's remains were disinterred, his bones thrown into the River Soar, and the stone coffin taken away to be used first as a horse trough and then later, in broken sections, as cellar steps. It is a point of considerable dispute whether Richard's bones were in fact thrown into the River Soar, or whether they remain buried somewhere on Greyfriars property.

This article does not purport to resolve the question of whether or not Richard's bones were thrown into the River Soar or whether his remains abide today under the Leicester urban buildings and car parks that were previously the environs of Greyfriars friary. They may be in either place, or neither, or both, or somewhere else entirely.

But where exactly was Greyfriars located? What was its social history as related to its geographic location in the Leicester community? And where today can Greyfriars — or what remains of it — be found?

## The Grey Friars arrive in Leicester

Preaching friars were an innovation in 13th century religious life. Previously unknown, these new religious organizations embraced poverty. They held no property individually or collectively. Such structures and buildings as places of worship, and gardens or small fields — if they had them — were held for them by trustees so as not to distract the friars from their primary purposes. Analogous organizations today would be the Salvation Army, Alcoholics Anonymous

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WHERE YOU CAN ACCESS THE ORIGINAL  
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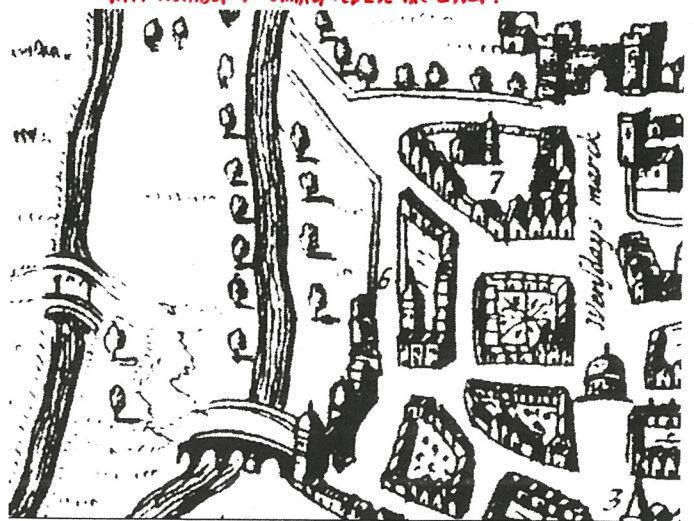
1230, and "... joined by new brothers, they moved into the town c. 1235, having obtained a site in St. Sepulchre's from the citizens, and, their friary being complete by 1258, they began building houses for the schools. There were 34 friars in 1300."<sup>1</sup>

## Location appropriate to activity and mission: 1258 - 1610

Friaries and monasteries tend to seek locations appropriate for their missions. The more reclusive and contemplative orders seek locations in the country-side or on the periphery of the towns, while "activist" orders tend to seek locations in towns' or cities' central districts where human activity is focused by daily economic and commercial interaction. In Leicester, for example, the Dominicans chose a location close by the inside northwest wall of the city, at the periphery, while the Austin friars chose a location outside the city's west gate, where they served many citizens as confessors and preachers.<sup>2</sup>

The Franciscan Grey Friars, in accordance with their more activist or "mendicant" orientation to religious life and enthusiasm for its application in urban settings, were able to obtain a location nearer the central hub of Leicester's economic and other social life: the western edge of the market, to the west of the street/market known as "Wednesdays Marck" and to the southwest of St. Martins. In the detail from a 1610 map of Leicester by Pierre Van Den Aa, the "Greye fryers" location is designated as "7."<sup>3\*</sup>

\* His note 3 says map NOT DATED, but presumably 1610 because of similarity to Speed. However Speed's ref No for GREYFRIARS is '23' so does this number '7' simply represent the entry?



Map 1: 1610 Leicester

By the time the Grey Friars came to Leicester, the city had changed from its earlier emphasis on manufacture (13th century), undergone a period of transition, and presented itself to Grey Friars as a hub for trade and service industries.<sup>4</sup> Wednesdays Market and its environs were doubtless a beehive of activity, and the Grey Friars were in the thick of it.

“The most obvious sign of that economic change is the colonization of the great market place...”<sup>5</sup> The entire area between Silver Street and the present Market Place, including Cank Street and the block to the east of Grey Friars, represents a gradual accumulation of stalls, shops, and houses on the open site that first accommodated the Wednesday market. This was doubtless the primary place where the populace gathered for economic and social activity, although the smaller Saturday Market in the southeast corner of Leicester doubtless played a similar though lesser role.

### The Grey Friars and Richard III's burial.

A walled city at the time of Domesday, square-shaped Leicester had four city gates: the North, South, East and West Gates. A return from Bosworth would have reasonably been across Bow Bridge and through the West Gate.

*“And moreover, the king ascertaineth you that Richard duke of Gloucester, late called King Richard, was slain at a place called Sandeford, within the shire of Leicester, and brought dead off the field unto the town of Leicester, and there was laid openly, that every man might see and look upon him.”*<sup>6</sup>

Richard III was killed on a Monday. Bosworth Field lies not far from Leicester, which would have meant — and this is speculation — entering Leicester's West Gate late Monday or on Tuesday, certainly in time for Wednesday's market, which would have been filled with its usual hubbub.

This display of Richard's corpse, intended as it was to convince the populace of Richard's death and help cement Henry's elevation to the throne, would reasonably have taken place in one of three sites: the West Gate itself (Greyfriars was close by and to the north-northeast), or somewhere in Wednesdays Market, possibly at its south end, which is most central and directly opposite the West Gate (and again, Greyfriars was nearly adjacent, just slightly to the west), or outside Greyfriars itself.

At whatever place Richard's corpse was publicly displayed — the West Gate, or Wednesdays Market, or perhaps both — the proximity of Greyfriars and its mission made it a reasonable place of interment for Richard's corpse. Such service to a “dishonored”

king would come more reasonably to the Grey Friars than to the other orders of friars in Leicester. As mendicant and begging friars, the Grey Friars had less property and prestige than did some of the other orders, and thus it made sense both socially and in terms of their perceived mission to accept Richard III's remains for burial within the grounds of Greyfriars.

Allegedly, the Grey Friars received permission to bury the body in an unmarked grave and the remains were therein interred, “... homely buried within Leicester, which being ruinated, his grave rests as obscure, overgrown with nettles and weeds.”<sup>7</sup> It is intriguing to speculate by what means the grave marker purchased years later by Henry VII could be accurately placed on an unmarked grave. According to some sources, Richard's grave was later opened, the bones removed from the coffin and thrown into the River Soar, previously designated on maps as the “River Stoare.”

### Greyfriars at the Dissolution of the Monasteries: 1538 - 1741

At the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the Greyfriars was closed. When the doors were shut, “There were ten friars besides the warden at the surrender 28/10/1538: VCH, 11, 146.”<sup>8</sup>

The Greyfriars property did not change dramatically but instead underwent gradual but continuing transformation of land use. Map 2 is dated 1741, or, 203 years after the Grey Friars surrendered the property. Examining it, we see no evidence of striking change in land use, but instead observe that previous tendencies continued and perhaps increased.



Map 2: 1741 Greyfriars

## Greyfriars Friary

The 1741 map's larger number of houses — perhaps as many as thirty — are an increase from the thirteen or fourteen houses and some sheds observed in the 1610 map. Associated with these dwellings and behind them can be noted a similar increase in what appear to be private plots for growing vegetables or other similar private uses of the land, probably on behalf of household income and table.

“Grey Fryers” is clearly visible in the middle part of the map. And on close examination can be seen — just above the word “Grey” — the darkened circular outlines of the friary itself, with some markings radiating north, south, east, and west from the core of this construction. And three new street names appear to help mark the Greyfriars area: Cank Street (west), High Street (south), and Wednesdays Marck has changed to Fryer Lane, leaving only the north perimeter as an unnamed street.

“After the dissolution part of the site was occupied by Grey Friars House, the home of the Burnaby family. This was demolished and the street laid out in 1872”<sup>10</sup>

What “street”?

### Grey Friars in 1889: New Street

The 1889 map of the Greyfriars area [see map 3] shows dramatic evidence of urban economic growth and development. In the 148 years since 1741, the previously noted thirty or so dwellings are now more than 120 units, many of which are highly differentiated, and have subunits behind the units' front facing the streets.



Map 3: Grey Friars in 1889

Perhaps these are back to back terrace houses. Also, the units or structures seem smaller than before.

Three small areas in the center of the property seem to be green areas or small parks. The northwest of these three garden areas seems to contain at the southwest corner of its periphery, even at this late date, an indication of the remnant wall of the old Greyfriars. This area will appear in a more recent map.

Furthermore a new street — cunningly named New Street — has appeared on the map, running north/south down the center of the Greyfriars property, nearer its east perimeter. Probably this is the street referred to in the notation: “After the dissolution part of the site was occupied by Grey Friars House, the home of the Burnaby family. This was demolished and the street laid out in 1872”<sup>11</sup>

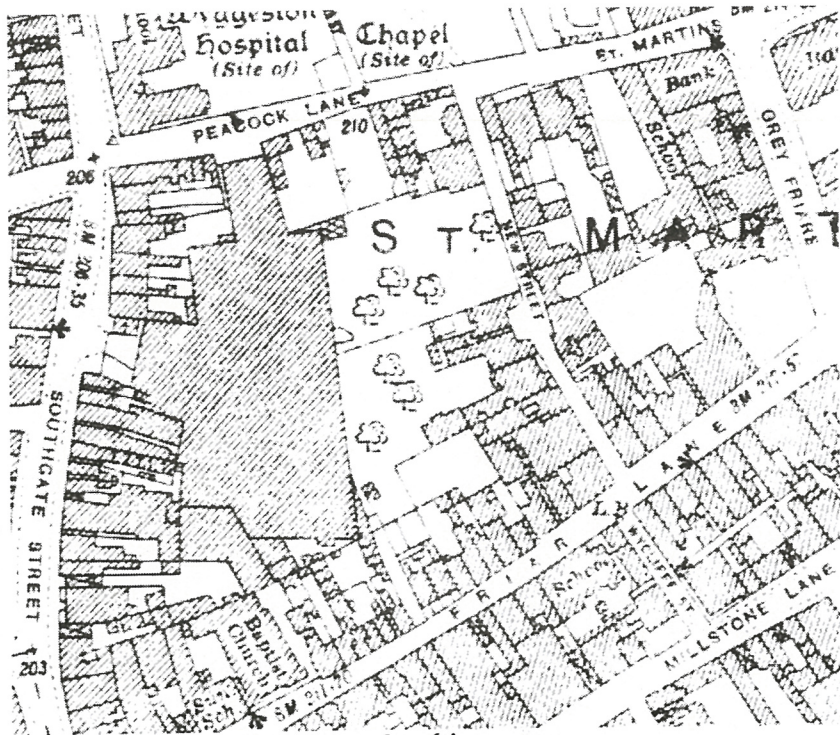
Other street name changes appear on the 1889 map. Cank Street (to the west) has been renamed Southgate. The previously unnamed street on the north perimeter is now Peacock-St. Martins. To the south, High Street has been renamed Friar Lane, and Friar Lane (east) has been renamed Grey Friars. These names will be retained on all subsequent maps reviewed in this article. [Note: Given the name changes of all four perimeter streets, plus the addition of New Street, it is no small wonder that Ricardian pilgrims bearing ancient maps sometimes find themselves lost in today's Leicester!]

### Greyfriars in 1930

The 1930 map of the area indicates a slowing of urban differentiation, in large part due to the effects of renovating existing structures rather than building new ones. Several previously disused or vacant buildings or sites are again put to some use. Notice that the southeast garden in the previous map has now disappeared in the 1930 map, leaving only two of the gardens or parks seen in the 1889 map. [See map 4, page 7] The northernmost of these two garden or park areas is that previously noted as probably being where the remnant of monastery wall is located.

### Greyfriars in 1955

The 1955 map shows no dramatic change of land use for the Greyfriars site, nor should we expect a dramatic change in only twenty-five years. What can be discerned, however, is that there is no longer any indication of a small



Map 4: Greyfriars 1930

can be found an entrance to the area with the remnant of wall.

A detailed view of the area [see map 5a] clearly reveals these features. Other structures on the map include three County Council Offices, a Girl's School, Friar Lane Baptist Church, a bank and a library.

### Greyfriars in 1965-1968

The 1965, 1968, and 1993 maps of the property previously known as Greyfriars show little discernable change from the 1955 map, and for that reason are not included here. The perimeter street names remain the same. No garden areas or plazas are designated as such. The "Site of Friary - Franciscan" is noted, along with an emblematic cross, but there is no further indication of a "Ruin."

garden or park where previously such were found.

However, notice that there is an indication of a "Franciscan Friary: Site of" in the upper left quadrant of the map, directly above the "Omnibus Depot." [see map 5]

And at the lower left side of the Car Park, just below the cross, is a small area designated "Ruin." This is the area of the remnant of wall from Greyfriars. It is off Peacock-St. Martins, down New Street, where

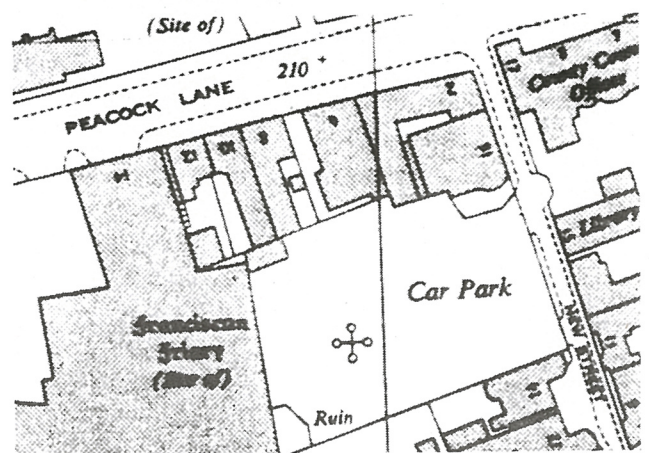
### Currently available Tourist Maps

Two free "tourist maps" are widely available in Leicester at the present time, and can be obtained at various sites or by mail if requested.

The University of Leicester's "How to Get There" is available to people making general inquiries about the University. Although focused primarily on University locations, one-eighth of the map consists of a map of "Leicester City Centre." However helpful it may be to inquiries about the University, it is of no assistance whatever to anyone searching for the environs of the previous Greyfriars, nor does it give any indication of the existence or whereabouts of the memorial statue of Richard III. Greyfriars is included in a colored area with no markings whatever. Peacock Street is named to the north of the site,



Map 5, Franciscan Friary



Map 5a

Reduced size on east

### Greyfriars Friary

but the other three perimeter streets are not named on the map and, indeed, Friar Lane is not indicated on the map, although Newarke Street further to the south, is noted.

"Leicester City Centre," a map published by Leicester Promotions and also free on request is somewhat more helpful. All four perimeter streets and the north/south dissecting street — Peacock Lane, Grey Friars, Friary Lane, Southgates, and New Street — are visible on the map. Unfortunately, the area enclosed by these streets contains no information whatever. A person seeking the Greyfriars and who knows where to look would be able to find the locale. The naïve tourist seeking historical sites would find no mention of Richard III or Greyfriars on this map. Elsewhere on the map, there is a numbered list of "Historic Buildings and Monuments." On the list are seven entries, but there is no indication about Richard III or his memorial statue.

### Conclusion

A review of the maps contained herein lead to these conclusions:

First, the Greyfriars Friary was perhaps ideally situated for its mission, given its activist outreach in an urban community, located as it was on the western edge of the largest and busiest market street in the City of Leicester.

Second, it occupied its sizeable property until the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Friary buildings, grounds, and gardens were located primarily in the large middle two-thirds of the site.

Houses and what appear to be small kitchen-economy plots increasingly occupied the outer perimeter of the friary.

Third, as Leicester urbanized and its population increased, the friary having been torn down, expected urban uses gradually consumed almost all of Greyfriars.

Fourth, the original Greyfriars site first noted on the 1610 map continues to exist, albeit in changed aspect, and its whereabouts can be located on maps of Leicester today, some more readily available than others, and some more helpful than others.

Fifth, the fragment of ruined Greyfriars wall is only a small section of the friary site as it existed in 1610 and before the Dissolution of the Monasteries. This fragment of wall is the only part of the friary visible to the unaided eye. Its whereabouts is best seen on the 1955 map.

Sixth, in today's Leicester, the perimeter of the Greyfriars site consists of an area contained by four streets: Peacock Street (or St-Martin's-Peacock

Street) to the north, Grey Friars to the east, Friar Lane to the south, and Southgate Street to the west.

Finally, the function of the fragment of wall in old Greyfriars is not known. Viewing it, however, can sometimes blend with other specific historical knowledge in the world of the imagination and evoke sights, sounds, and even images from the days when as many as thirty — perhaps more — Grey Friars walked these grounds, tended their gardens, garnered medicinal herbs, and trod the streets of Leicester in pursuit of their vision of God's work. In pursuit of those tasks, the friars offered last rites for and interment of the remains of Richard III, who was for a time buried in these grounds. And still may be, because although some believe his bones were thrown into the River Soar at the Dissolution of the Monasteries, there is no empirical evidence to prove incorrect the view that his grave may yet lie, unmarked, somewhere on these premises.

### References

1. David Knowles. *Medieval religious houses, England and Wales*, by David Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock. (New York, St. Martin's Press [1972, c1971],) p. 222.
2. Ibid.
3. Pierre Van Den Aa, map not dated but approximately 1610.
4. N. Pye, ed., "The Evolution of Leicester" in *Leicester and its region* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1972), p. 273.
5. Ibid.
6. *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, Vol. I. The Early Tudors (1485-1553), ed. P.L. Hughes and J.P. Larkin (New Haven, 1964), p. 3.
7. Script insert in map of "Leicester Shire," on which is found the 1610 map of Leicester prepared by John Speede. This map of Leicester is virtually identical, though lacking some artistic details found on the map by Pierre Van Den Aa. My interpretation after close examination of these maps, using a computer and Adobe Photoshop LE is that Speede prepared the original map and Van Den Aa added some enhancing cosmetic details.
8. David Knowles, *Medieval religious houses, England and Wales*, by David Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock. (New York, St. Martin's Press [1972, c1971],) p. 222.
9. J.D. Bennett, "The Street Names of Leicester," (Leicester: Leicestershire Museums Art Galleries and Records Service, undated), p. 13.
10. Ibid.