

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - September 2023

Greyfriars Church, Reading - Malcolm Summers

The History of Greyfriars Church, Reading, going back over 700 years, was the subject of Malcolm Summers' illustrated presentation in September. However, it was not one of the three old established parish churches in Reading - St Laurence's (in Friar Street), St Mary's (in the Butts), and St Giles' (in Southampton Street). The photograph taken by Henry Taunt in 1875 (*below*) is the earliest known of it after restoration work had enabled it to become a parish church just 12 years earlier.

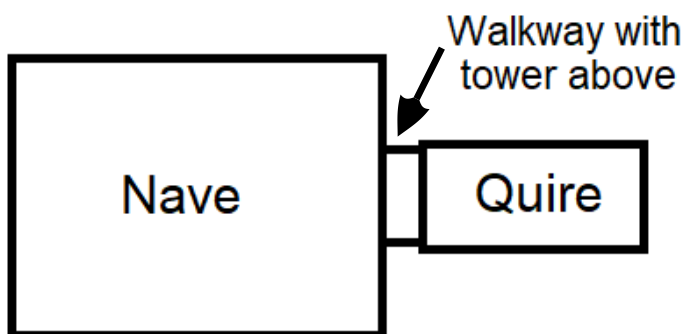


The history of the site, however, can be traced back to the 13th century. The order of Franciscan friars, who observed a vow of poverty, observing a life of prayer, preaching and poverty, was founded in Italy in 1209. Members of the order were commonly known as Greyfriars, on account of the colour of their habits. They soon came to England, and are recorded as preaching in Reading Market Place in 1233. That area belonged to Reading Abbey, so the friars petitioned the Abbot, as they wanted to establish a 'house' locally.

The Abbot was not keen to provide land for this, but when presented with letters from the King and from the Pope, reluctantly the Abbot granted them a plot of land. It was outside the then town centre, alongside the road from there to the bridge over the River Thames. Their first friary was built of wood, on somewhat marshy ground (near where the railway now crosses Caversham Road). The area was liable to flooding, and even though some buildings were supported on stilts, the buildings were not convenient. A new Abbott had arrived at the Abbey, and the friars were able to persuade him to give them an extension to their land, "up the hill" The friary was then rebuilt in stone from 1285 at the top of the hill. Normally, friary buildings would be built to the south of a friary church, but as the nave was put on the highest part of the land, the other buildings were put on the north side. By the late 19th century, however, most of that part of the friary grounds had been used for housing.

A Franciscan church was of unusual design. To the west end was the nave, where the congregation would be, and to the east the quire, where the friars would sing the services. In between was a walkway, with a tower housing the bells over this passage. The nave tended to be wider and shorter than those of other church designs, so that sermons could be heard more easily - the Franciscans preaching (unusually) in the vernacular at the time. Unlike the monks at the abbey, they would also be out preaching in the town.

In Reading, it is the late 13th century / early 14th century Franciscan nave that survives as the present church, the stonework of the west window also dating from that period. The architecture was of the Decorated Gothic



style. Originally the windows contained a lot of stained glass (although only images of the Cross, St Francis and St Anthony were used), but this was lost at the dissolution, although a mason's mark survives high up in the window tracery of the west window. The mason had probably come from the continent, as the pattern of this stonework is almost identical to that at Angers in France.

It has been suggested that the friary church had been completed in 1311, as a will of that time refers to "the works of the church", but that could mean other building work or the pastoral work of the church. As it was recorded that the roof was in place in 1303, it seems more likely that the construction took place from 1285 to 1303. The friary grounds included a burial ground - it being believed that the plots at the east end would result in earlier resurrection - and an area for growing produce, enclosed by a perimeter wall. The Reading friary accommodated 12 friars and a warden.

When Henry VIII ordered the dissolution of the monasteries, all the friars and monks were expelled, and anything removable confiscated by the King. The friars had to sign a document to say they gave all their possessions "freely to the Crown, and that they had "seen the error of their ways, and would then live a secular life", in return for a pension. As the Franciscans observed a vow of poverty, they had nothing - and did not receive a pension. It would be 325 years before the building was used as a church again.

Although there was nothing of much value at the friary (apart from the lead on the roof), Henry VIII was in need of money, and so decided to sell all the land and buildings, apart from the nave. They were bought by Robert Stanshawe for £30, and an annual charge of 6/8d. A later owner of this land was Tanfield Vachell - Stanshawe Road and Vachell Road are in this area - as is Tudor Road. The nave was not sold with that land, but the Mayor of Reading asked if - as a special favour - it could become the Yield Hall (ie Guildhall or Town Hall), in place of the existing one in a smelly location by the 'common washing place' alongside the River Kennet. The wish was granted, and the structure became the Guildhall from 1542 until 1578. When Elizabeth I came to the throne, she gave the building to the town. After a while, the Mayor and Burgesses decided that this was 'so far from the centre of Reading' that they wanted to move back towards St Laurence's.

The nave building then took on a new role, as a poor house (or hospital, often written ospital - a place of hospitality rather than to meet medical needs). To cater for the 'impotent poor' (ie those who were powerless) of the 3 parishes of Reading. It was funded by charitable donations and by selling things produced there. There was also the problem of what to do with the undeserving poor - sturdy beggars who could but would not work, and so from 1614 until 1642 the nave was also a House of Correction; (ie a prison).

England then entered the period of the Civil War, and from 1642-3 the nave was used as a barracks, leading up to the Siege of Reading in 1643. There were 3,000 soldiers billeted in the town - which was otherwise a population of just 2,000. The effect was to make what had been a prosperous wool town into a near derelict one by the end of the war. The nave became part of the wall to fortify the town, and when the Royalists had to leave, they went via the Greyfriars Gate. The Parliamentarians also ravaged the town and the building.



From 1642 until 1862, the nave reverted to being a House of Correction - also known as the Bridewell (derived from St Bride's Well prison in London). When the building lost its roof in about 1786, prisoners had to be relocated to a jail in Castle Street, and the nave became used as a daytime exercise yard. A partition was erected to keep different classes of prisoner apart, and over time the west window was gradually bricked up to prevent the possibility of prisoners trying to escape that way. (as seen in the picture taken in about 1860, left).

By this time, the Bridewell was in such poor condition that it needed to be rebuilt or a new facility provided. The Borough wanted to

bring the prison and police station together, so Highbridge House in Duke Street, became the prison, and by 1862 the nave was once again vacant.

The Revd William Whitmarsh Phelps, vicar of Trinity church in Oxford Road (an area seeing a lot of back-to-back housing being developed) formed a plan to buy the nave and adjacent Pigeon public house from the Corporation, raising funds for the restoration of the nave and an endowment to provide for a vicar. When the architect, William Woodman, dug trenches he found some foundations onto one side, and thought they indicated there had been a transept - although Franciscans never had such, and he added one on either side. He also raised the roofline (as can be seen from the photographs). His original plan was to have a chancel at the east end, but that would have impinged on the adjoining garden, so the arch where that would have connected to the nave was filled with brickwork. This resulted in a 'T shaped church, rather than a Cross shaped one. It was dedicated as Grey Friar's church on December 2nd 1863. In due course, the house alongside was bought by the church, but was in poor condition, so was demolished in 1963. Instead of building the planned chancel, the house was rebuilt, largely to the previous design with the existing materials. It now houses the Greyfriars Nursery.

The first vicar, Revd Shadwell Morley Barkworth, stayed until 1874, and initiated the building of the Greyfriars Schools, which were extended over time, and also provided various other facilities for the community. His successor, Revd Seymour Henry Soole, provided an Iron Mission Church, in North Street, which lasted from 1876 - 1980. Revd Soole's wife was the daughter of Martin Hope Sutton, of the seeds firm, the latter is one of very few people to have a memorial within Greyfriars church. From 1863 until the present there have been just 10 vicars at Greyfriars.

In more recent times, an extension was added at the western end, but this was demolished 3 years ago to be replaced by the new Atrium area, which includes a coffee shop and bookshop. The church was re-ordered in 2000, to create a lighter and more flexible space within, and is now the only complete Franciscan building in England that is still in use as a church. Malcolm has written a history of Greyfriars, which is available in the church's bookshop.

For more information about the society, visit the website at www.wargravehistory.org.uk
