

## PONTEFRACT AND DISTRICT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

### **The Dominican or Black friars site, Pontefract. Site notes, SJN Tomson.**

Order founded 1216 at Toulouse S W France. Dominican mission to Britain arrived 1221, first settled at Oxford, at York by 1227. Eventually there were 59 Dominican Friaries in Britain.

The Dominicans' mission was to preach and counter heresy. The friars were trained preachers "racy, provocative, entertaining and informative". The order arrived at Pontefract in 1256. The priory (although the urban monasteries contained friars [brothers] they were ruled by a Prior [first] and therefore technically Priors) was sited on land donated by Edmund de Lacy at the edge of Pontefract, as the town was full of buildings and no site big enough for an urban monastery was available.

The Black friars owned nothing, begged the friary site, stone, builders, food, clothing and all else; giving to the friars was seen as an act of Christian charity by the population. The Pontefract Black friars were allocated a territory in which to preach and beg, encompassed by Pontefract, Rotherham and Wakefield. From 1330 onwards the Pope awarded the Friars the power to preach, hear confessions and bury the dead. Many townsfolk in Pontefract left small legacies to the Friars and requested to be buried in the Friary lay cemetery.

The Friary comprised a large 'preaching box' church with narrow chancel and large nave, cloister, dormitory, chapter house, refectory, kitchens, lavatories and guest accommodation. All the friary buildings lay south of the church, ranged around the cloister, today lying below the demolished former hospital site.

The Friary was dissolved by King Henry VIII in 1538 and surrendered to the crown. The two bells and roof lead were stripped and sold, as was the entire site; the buildings were demolished for their stone, wood, glass and fittings and sold to all comers. The site reverted to agricultural use as pasture and later became liquorice fields. The hospital eventually spread over the site after the foundation of the dispensary in the late 1890s.

## WHAT WE HAVE FOUND

1. The north wall of the Friary church nave. The wall is 75cm wide and set on a deep rock-cut foundation. The wall has been later buttressed to bear the weight of additions, possibly the construction of a nave clerestory (raised upper story above the nave with high windows to provide additional light into the church). After the dissolution, the walls were dug out to sell the stone, a process known as `robbing`.
2. The east wall of the nave north aisle, this too was later buttressed (twice) reusing a broken grave cover slab. Part of an altar (there would have been several) base survives within the church against the whitewashed east wall.
3. Multiple fragments and whole pieces of stone window tracery from one of the north wall gothic windows, the interior faces of which are whitewashed too. Fragments of painted window glass and the lead came into which it was set have been found too.
4. Graves of the lay cemetery lying north and east of the church; there is a particularly dense cluster of graves outside the east wall of the church while some on the north side are almost touching the wall.
5. A rare, high status, Purbeck `marble` sarcophagus, once set into a wall niche, later pulled out, broken open and ransacked, the bones of the occupant left scattered around it. The tomb had once held a high status burial; the sarcophagus was imported, probably from Barnack in Cambridgeshire or perhaps from Purbeck in Dorset. Fragments of fine decorative stonework, probably from the tomb niche décor, were also found nearby.
6. A single burial had been cut into the demolition debris from the church; it is possible that this individual may have been a civil war casualty 1645-48.
7. A 5' deep cultivation soil covered the site of the former church, this soil was improved with waste and manure from the town and used for the cultivation of liquorice from the 18th to the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the deep harvesting trenches can be seen in the soil section on the northern edge of the excavation.