

## Monks, Canons and Friars Tour

### St Oswald's Priory

The first church was founded here c 890 by Aethaelflaed, Queen of Mercia. It was a royal minster, staffed by priests who ministered to the parish to the north of Gloucester, now the Kingsholm area, to the royal palace that grew there, and to the tenants on the extensive landholdings, given as endowments to support the priests and church. These were secular priests, not monks, who probably lived on site, and probably could marry and pass property to their heirs.

The church became wealthy and famous in the late 9<sup>th</sup> C when it acquired the relics of St Oswald. However, in the early 10<sup>th</sup> C some of the endowment lands were confiscated and ended up in the hands of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and later belonged to the Archbishop of York. This loss had a profound detrimental effect on the fortunes of the church.

So both archbishops and the Bishop of Worcester all had an interest in the ownership and management of the church and parish. The priests resisted the interferences of the bishops. In 1100, St Oswald's priests had the exclusive right to teach boys in town, a right which was devolved to Llanthony Priory in 1137.

By 1153, the minster church was reformed into an Augustine priory. At this point the site was transformed into the standard design for a monastery: cloisters and associated buildings were built. The lines of the cloister walls are outlined on the grass. Also there were a guest house, stables, infirmary, and so on.

Sadly, the priory never recovered its strength, and was always the poorest of the monastic institutions in Gloucester. There were many conflicts with church authorities. In 1231 the prior and canons were sent into exile because they were in debt, and in 1280 they refused admission to the archbishop and were excommunicated.

The canons applied to King Edward I for redress. The king sided with the priests. They had been a 'Royal Foundation' and were free from episcopal control.

Nevertheless, by 1536, they were amongst the first wave of monastic institutions to be closed in Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries. There were seven priests and eight servants.

As the historian Michael Hare states, in 'The Two Anglo-Saxon minsters of Gloucester', it is an enduring mystery why a house possessing relics of the greatest royal saint of Anglo-Saxon England became such a spectacular failure.'

### Llanthony Secunda Priory:

When St Oswald's was formed, it was initially staffed by priests from Llanthony Secunda Priory. Augustinian priests are called 'canons', and they follow the Rule of St Augustine, so are known as Canons Regular. They were communities of clerics living a semi-monastic life, and performing the daily rituals, the prayer and psalm cycle. Canons added the commitment of religious vows to their primary vocation of pastoral care. But they did not commit themselves to corporate poverty, which is a defining element of mendicant orders.

Unlike friars, but like monks, canons were generally organised as a large community to which they were attached for life by a vow of stability. Their houses are abbeys with an abbot, or if smaller, priories. Canons served the poor and sick throughout Europe, nursing and educating.

These men were recruited from the educated and priestly caste. They were known for their scholarship and provided teaching and healing facilities in the community. They also dealt with the tenants of their vast estates, and with the parishioners of churches in their stewardship. Llanthony had the care of St Owens and St Mary de Crypt in Gloucester. It also owned the present Dick Whittington and 200 other properties in and

around the town. They employed servants to do the more secular work. St Oswald's canons were given the sole right to educate boys in Gloucester in 1100, a power which was taken by the Canons at Llanthony by 1215? We have no record of a hospital at St Oswald's, but there was one at Llanthony as early as 1138, shortly after its foundation on the other side of the present docks. Llanthony had an extensive library and many of the inmates wrote learned works. The canons there were also well-known for their hospitality. Though they too, had periods of mismanagement, Llanthony Secunda Priory became by the end of the Middle Ages, the 4<sup>th</sup> largest and 10<sup>th</sup> most wealthy Augustinian Priory in the country. Even so, it too was closed in 1539.

#### The Abbey of St Peter:

The first Christian house was founded here, probably under the carpark, by 679 AD. It too was a royal foundation, built by Prince Osric of Mercia, on land given by King Aethelred I. Typical of its age, it was a 'double minster', an institution for female members of royalty and nobility, along with male priests. Men were useful because they could perform the sacraments, and minister to the tenants of their widespread estates.

The two factions had separate living quarters, but shared the church. Sites like this became famous as centres of culture, learning and piety. They also controlled vast swathes of land. The church authorities vetoed their formation after 800 AD, as they could be seen as too opulent, and there were rumours of impropriety.

Here at Gloucester, the convent closed in 676 AD and the nuns were disbanded. This may have happened at a politically difficult time, or in response to civil unrest. The male priests appear to have remained on site, acting as what is known as a 'College of Secular Priests'. In conjunction with secular priests at St Mary de Lode, they worked as a team ministering to the townsfolk and the wider district.

By the late 10<sup>th</sup> C or very early 11<sup>th</sup> C, the institution was reformed into a Benedictine monastery. This was part of a greater reform taking place across the country. King Cnut was sceptical of the male secular priests, because they had families and passed their churches on to their heirs, and were known for their high lifestyle.

Benedictine monks lived in seclusion, according to the 'Rule of St Benedict'. These were not priests, but laymen, at least in the beginning. Over time, more than half of the monks took 'holy orders' meaning they became ordained as priests. In that way they could have higher status in the monastic community.

Unlike the other orders of religious men, Benedictines took vows of Obedience, Stability and Conversion of Manners, Poverty and chastity were 'givens' in the 'conversion' part of the vows. They were to live separately from the wider community, their chief goal 'to seek God'. Their days were to be spent in prayer, work and reading. As time and climate dictated, they hired servants to perform many of the work function. They also had a guest house, which was a diversion from their seclusion, and led to the building of three inns in the town, becoming one of their business ventures. At the height of their power, the monastery owned property on every street of the medieval town.

The abbey was a major force in Gloucester for, although meant to be apart from the secular people, they did accumulate vast wealth and property. The monks undertook massively expensive building projects. A church built in 1058 was replaced by another in 1089-1100, built by the first Norman abbot, and successive waves of modernisation and additions culminated in the astonishing building we still have today.

Like the other monasteries, it was closed by Henry VIII. Unlike all the others in town, it is still a church. Henry allowed the building to be reformed as a new cathedral, largely because of the many royal connections associated with Gloucester in general and the abbey in particular, such as the burial of Edward II.

### Greyfriars Priory:

By the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> C there was a backlash amongst the religious orders against the Benedictines, Augustinians, Cistercians and various other orders, which were seen as having deviated from the original principles of service and devotion. Their inmates had become lazy and wealthy. Francis of Assisi and Dominic of Spain and several others began to form new groupings.

The Franciscans, or Greyfriars were the first of the mendicant, or begging, orders to arrive in Gloucester, forming their priory here in 1231. Francis meant his followers to live a simple, austere life of poverty, begging and preaching. However, in order to flourish, they needed a base, a church to perform their rituals, and a community to furnish them with the land, buildings, food and other necessities. The site here was added to, to afford space for the friars to grow their own food, rather than beg for it, and eventually the Greyfriars priory took up the whole south-west corner of the town.

Meant at first to have no possessions, not even books, they gradually accumulated libraries and here at Gloucester, they were allowed to hold a school of theology in one of the turrets of the town wall. In 1285 they argued with the Benedictines over the right to a burial, and again in 1357 over water supply.

Greyfriars were welcomed at first by the population, because they ministered to the poor, but their simple buildings were soon supplanted by more opulent ones, because the donors wanted to show off their own wealth and piety. These ruins date to 1518, a mere 20 years before the priory was closed. At the end there were only five friars remaining and they delivered their house into the hands of the king's commissioner.

### Whitefriars Priory:

Another type of religious 'Order' was the Carmelites, or Whitefriars. We know little of their priory here, which was founded in 1268/9. It is thought to be near the bus station or further along London Road. From its height with 31 friars, it was down to three in 1538.

They were a contemplative order, whose inmates spent much time in silent prayer and reading.

### Blackfriars Priory:

Dominic wanted his followers to be preachers and teachers. They were to combat heresy and save souls. Like the Greyfriars, they were founded in the early 13<sup>th</sup> C and rapidly spread throughout Europe. This house was founded in 1239 and lasted 300 years. Though they were meant to be poor, they needed a base in which to study and preach to the local community. Patrons gave land and material, and therefore dictated the state of their buildings. Here we had one of their regional schools, where the recruits could spend a year or more learning how to be a Dominican friar. To become a priest, they would go to Oxford for further study.

The friars were not confined to their house, but were enjoined to strike out into the countryside and the towns and preach against the heresies popular at this time. To do this they had to be well informed, and able to speak in the common tongue. They became very popular amongst the educated classes, many of whom left the parish churches and came to the Blackfriars and Greyfriars priories. Considerable bad feeling grew between the various orders in Gloucester and other major towns where several orders coexisted. There is very little information that suggests such disturbances here.

Though all of the outbuildings and grounds of this site are gone, the core is about half intact. For this we have to thank Sir Thomas Bell, who bought the priory at its dissolution and transformed it into his house and a factory for making woollen caps. What remains is the best preserved medieval Dominican Priory in England, with the earliest surviving purpose-built library in the country.