

The Carmelite Priory in Doncaster



Richard Cuell

Introduction

Today, passers-by saunter down High Street, Doncaster, the majority no doubt unaware that they are passing the site of a former priory which once stood in central Doncaster.

This priory was active in the town for the better part of two hundred years before it fell, like so many others, in the 1530s.

In attempting to relate the story of the Doncaster Carmelite Priory over the next few pages, I have drawn heavily on the sources as listed later.

Direct quotations have been acknowledged, otherwise the content of the text is largely a compilation of information drawn from two or three main sources where footnotes of sources of information are identified. These footnotes have not always been included in this text.

The first friars arrived in the town around 1346 and within a few years the Carmelite Priory was established in the town by the two founders, and the co-founders by virtue of patronage, Richard II and his uncle, John of Gaunt.

Alienation of mortmain was granted by license on the 30th November 1350, by John, son of Henry Nightbrother de Eyam and Richard le Ewere of Doncaster, to the Carmelite Priory of Doncaster. This provided the Carmelites with a plot of approximately six acres of land on which to build a church and shrine in honour of St Mary, together with living accommodation for the friars, a development described in a document listed in the Victoria County History Vol 3 as *"a right goodly house in the middle of the town"*.

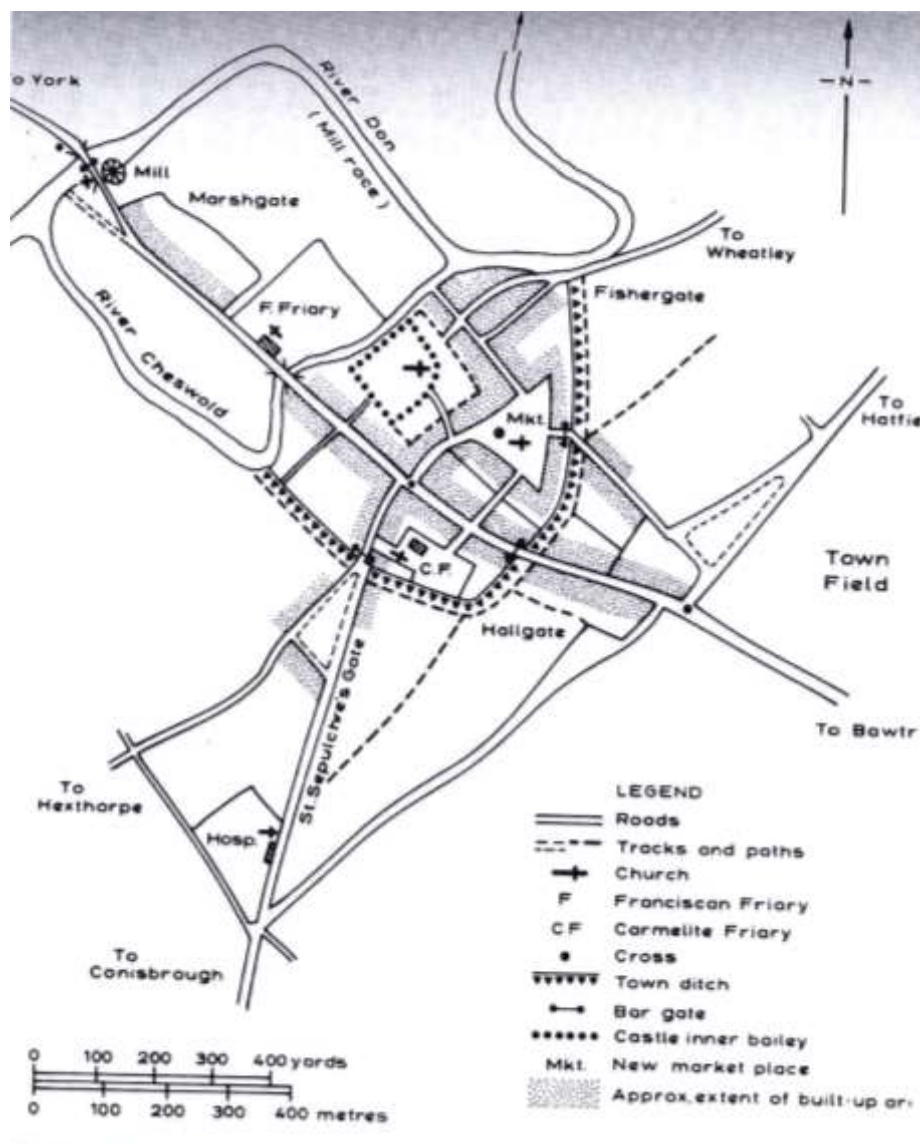
The friars also bought additional land to extend the entrance and exit to the priory in 1397.

In Archaeology of Doncaster Vol 2, by P.C. Buckland and J.R. Magilton, the authors state *"Much of the southern quarter of Doncaster, bounded by the town ditch and the rear of the burgage plots on St Sepulchre Gate and High Street is known to have been in the possession of the Abbey by the time of the Dissolution."*

The plot which, more-or-less, had its entrance gate opposite the current west end of Scot Lane, would at that time have been within the town, the southern boundary of which ran along what is now the line of Silver

Street and Cleveland Street. Thus, the new religious house would have been on the periphery of the town as it was then, and not in the town centre as would have been the case years later as the town developed.

Relying on donations in order to continue to function, the Carmelite Priory almost certainly would have benefited from the fact that the Great North Road was immediately outside their gateway. Ever since the Romans had constructed the road from Lincoln to York, which passed through Doncaster town to cross over the Don, had this highway become the country's most important thoroughfare. Travellers of all descriptions, kings and their retinues, merchants of all kinds, soldiers of various armies over the years and common travellers alike had all past by the gates of the Carmelite establishment.



From Archaeology of Doncaster by Buckland and Magilton Vol 2

Accordingly, there were several royal visitors over the years. The Priory could provide accommodation for the royal personages and their guests would attend service there at the Shrine to St Mary.

Henry IV in July 1399 and Edward IV in 1470 were two such visitors and in Tudor times, Henry VII, as a newly-crowned monarch, was another visitor of note. Later on the 13th June 1503, his daughter, Margaret lodged at Whitefriars on her way north to become the wife of King James IV of Scotland.

The Shrine of Our Lady of Doncaster was regarded as the most important shrine dedicated to our Lady in Yorkshire. As such, it attracted both devout pilgrims and they and wealthy benefactors who would perhaps donate devotional gifts for the Shrine or lay out money in their wills for candles to be lit before the Shrine on their behalf and for masses to be said at regular periods as set down in their wills.

The records provide details of several such bequests, such as those shown below listed by T. Storey in "Our Lady of Doncaster and the Carmelite Friary".

"At the Carmelite Priory, 'Our Lady' was surrounded by lit candles and tapers and occasionally devotional gifts. Anthony Lord Rivers penitent's hair shirt after his execution at Pontefract at the end of Edward IV's reign in 1483; Constance Bigod of Settrington's silver and gilt work girdle (1449); Katherine Hasting's 'Tawny Gown' (1506); "my best bedes" from Alice West of Ripon; and John Twisilton's silver gilt crown. Presumably the bed linen and gown were utilised for vestments."

The Northumberland Household Book contains the following entry:

"Item: My Lord useth and accustomyth to paye yerly for the fyndynge of a light of wax to birre befor our Ladye in the Whit-Frers of my lordis foundation at Mastyme dayly throwout the yere sett befor our said Ladye there. To be paid to the prior of the said hous for the hole yere for the fyndynge of the said light. To be paid ounes (once a yere, xiii s. iiij d.)"

In translation, the Earl of Northumberland paid 13/4d per year to the Priory in order to maintain the candle light in front of the Shrine.

A goodly few were even buried close to the Shrine. In 1484, Margaret Cobham, wife of Ralph Neville, 2nd Earl of Westmoreland was buried

there in a white marble tomb that was removed to the parish church on the Dissolution.

The reputation of the Shrine was enhanced by what was considered to be a miracle brought about by the intercession of Our Lady Of Doncaster on the 15th July 1524. William Nicholson and his servant were driving an ox cart carrying Richard Leche, his wife and two children across the ford over the Don, when in the strong winds and rain the cart was forced away from the shallows of the ford and overturned. The passengers called out to Mary to save them, their pleas being joined by others from the bank side.

They believed a miracle had occurred as all found the safety of the river bank, the plight and rescue of Mrs Leche being particularly difficult as she had been carried about a hundred yards away in the constantly rolling wagon.

On the following Mary Magdalen's Day, the Leche family all swore to the events, claiming that this was a miracle and it was recorded as such in front of the Prior and witnesses and three hundred souls.

"Be it known to all Christian people that on the 15th day of July, 1524, that as one William Nicholson of Townsbrough (some three miles from Doncaster) should have crossed the river (Don) at a ford at Seaforth Sands with an iron-bound wagon with six oxen and two horses, laden with household stuff, having in the said wayn or wagon one Robert Leche, his wife, two children (one child being half a year of age, the other being under seven years) set his servant Richard Kychyn upon the forward horse; and when past midstream, due to wind and rain, all were driven down stream; the first horse was drowned and the wayn and all was upset, with the wheels upside down.

"Then did the company all call and cry out to Almighty God and Our Blessed Lady, whose image is honoured and worshipped in the White Friars of Doncaster. Each in turn managed to call upon Our Lady and be saved; but Robert Leche's wife, carried three hundred foot and more midstream, and the wagon rolling over and over, and she in it. "All people on land did kneel, and prayed that if ever Our Lady of Doncaster showed miracle, she would show some grace upon this woman. And saved she was; shouted out that she did right well for God, and that Our Lady of Doncaster had saved her. "And that these premises be true and not feigned, William Nicholson, Robert Leche and his wife and children,

came to Our Lady of Doncaster upon St Mary Magdalene's Day next after, and did declare this gracious miracle, and it was sworn upon a book before the Prior and Convent with various witnesses named. "And at that day this gracious miracle was rung and sung in the presence of three hundred people and more. Deo Gracias."

Source: Kenyon MSS Historical Manuscripts Commission

A miracle or not, it did not save the Priory or the Shrine from the attentions of those tasked with advancing the Protestant order and the break from Rome.

The statue of "Our Lady" was removed before the Dissolution itself on the orders of Archbishop Lee of York, and may have been transferred to London to be burnt with other such images.

A letter written by Bishop Latimer writing to Thomas Cromwell, Henry's Chancellor, makes reference to the Statue from the Doncaster Carmelite Priory. Whilst writing with reference to the Our Lady of Worcester, the letter says – *"She has been the Devils instrument, i fear, to bring many to eternal fire, now she herself with her older sister of Walsingham, her younger sister of Ipswich, and their two sisters of Doncaster and Penrhys, will make a jolly muster in Smithfield. They would not be all day in burying."*

Source: Sermons and Remains of Hugh Latimer (1845) p.395

The decision of King Henry to dissolve the religious houses, beginning with the smaller ones, was not warmly received across the length and breadth of the land. The first opposition arose in Lincolnshire and was crushed, but then a more substantial uprising, the Pilgrimage of Grace, arose in Yorkshire and the north of England.

Thirty thousand armed pilgrims/protesters marched as far as Doncaster and camped on the northern side of the Don near Scawsby in October 1536. The representatives of the King, the Duke of Norfolk and the Earl of Shrewsbury and their soldiers (a combined force about five thousand strong) were ordered to the area on the 19/20th October 1536, and on arrival in Doncaster took command of the bridge and the ford over the river. The noble gentlemen were housed at the Carmelite Priory where Prior Lawrence Cooke acted as a mediator between the northerners and the Council for the King.

Many of the events which followed are clouded in uncertainty, with claim and counter claim, but what is certain is that the bargaining/negotiation took until the end of the year.

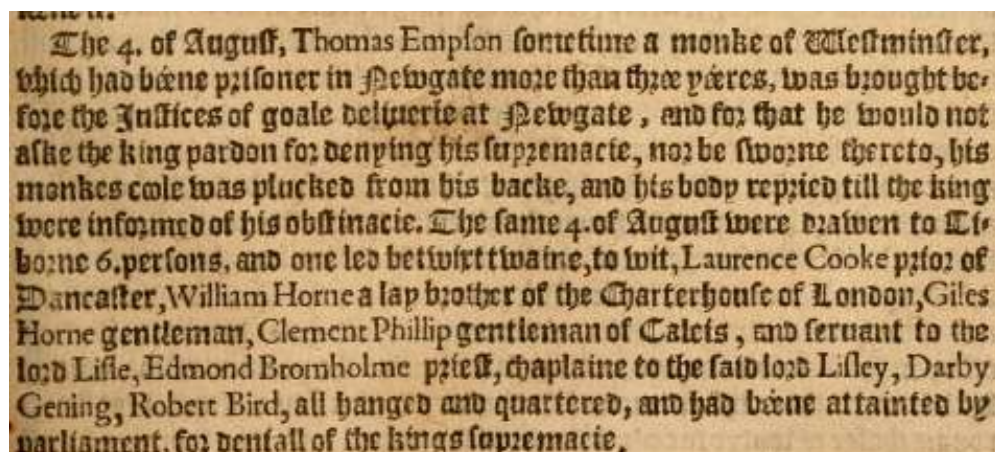
The protesters had several demands including, amongst others, a return of the abbeys already suppressed; the holding of a parliament in the north of the country instead of in London; the dismissal of Thomas Cromwell from his position of power; and, of course, a free pardon for all those involved in the uprising.

Henry VIII did not look favourably on these demands, but the Duke of Norfolk (who was the king's agent) had a serious problem to face in attempting to resolve the difficulty. His troops were grossly outnumbered and he believed he would lose should negotiations fail and fighting break out. Fortunately for him, whilst Robert Aske twice decided to press the issue by crossing the guarded bridge and fording the river to march south, the water level in the River Don rose to a height which made the crossings impossible to undertake.

After some entreaties to the King, the terms of a negotiation were found to be acceptable to both sides and on the 9th December, the protest came to an end and the protesters returned to their homes.

However, no sooner had Robert Aske (the leader of the protesters) dismissed his supporters, than (and once again claim and counter claim arise) the King's men arrested the leaders and Robert Aske was hung in chains in the tower at York.

The Prior too was arrested and placed in the Tower from 1538-1540. It is believed, (John Stow "Annals of England to 1603", that he was hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn on the 4th August 1540, for denial of the King's supremacy).



The 4. of August, Thomas Empton sometime a monke of Westminster, which had bene prisoner in Newgate more than thre yeres, was brought before the Iustices of goale deliverte at Newgate, and for that he would not aske the king pardon for denyng his supremacie, nor be sworne thereto, his monkes cole was plucked from his backe, and his body repried till the king were informed of his obstinacie. The same 4. of August were drawen to Tyborne 6. persons, and one led betwixt twaine, to wit, Laurence Cooke prior of Duncaster, William Horne a lay brother of the Charterhouse of London, Giles Horne gentleman, Clement Phillip gentleman of Calceis, and servant to the lord Lisle, Edmond Bromholme priest, chaplaine to the said lord Lisle, Darby Gening, Robert Bird, all hanged and quartered, and had bene attainted by parliament, for denfall of the kings supremacie.

The Dissolution of the Doncaster religious house of the Carmelites didn't come about until after the conclusion of the Pilgrimage of Grace. The priory was surrendered to the King's Commissioners by the new prior- Edward Stubbis -and the seven friars on the 13th November 1538.

In an inventory compiled at the time, a list of everything was prepared. The list, as shown in the Victoria County History Vol 3, included the following items: the plate, sent to the royal jewel house included 25 oz of gilt plate, 109.5 oz of parcel gilt and 48.5 oz of white plate. Later the sale of the goods realised £21-18-4d.

The tenements were described as being in some decay, but the site with dovecot and houses, garden and orchard surrounded by a wall and with 2.5 acres of land was let to Hugh Wyrall at a rent of 10 shillings/year.

Of the other holdings, away from the priory site itself, two had been rented out but a few weeks before the surrender of the priory: An inn, situated in Hall Gate and known as "Le Lyon" had been rented out to Alan Malster on a forty-one year lease at 40 shillings per year on the 18th August 1538. Similarly, a tenement in St Sepulchre Gate had been rented out to Emmota Parsonson on the 2nd September 1538 for 12 shillings per year.

In all, with some other small tenements, cottages and shops, the rental income from the former Priory property portfolio amounted to £10-17-4d per year.

So that was the end of the line for the Carmelite Priory in Doncaster and, as was the case in many other similar situations, the former priory land exchanged owners on several occasions over the years.

In a 1588 in leasing of some of the land, it was stipulated in the leasing document that the tower which stood on the land was not to be destroyed without permission.(Sykes Collection).

Further records in 1613 (from a deed 15th Oct., 10 James 1 -1613) show that at least the gatehouse remained and *"lyeth over against the south west corner of Scot Layne."*

Further quotations from Buckland and Magilton's work "Archaeology of Doncaster Vol 2 "draw a picture of the gradual development of the Priory site.

The authors quote De la Pryme (BM Lansdowne MSS,698):

"About the middle way down the street from the aforesaid great cross, on the left hand side, is to be seen in the walls the ruins of the White Friars, a great priory. There is yet good gardens within, and the walls encompass the same all on the backside, as they did before its destruction. Over the gate that comes in on the back side is engraven, in very old characters, these words, with an odd sort of a coat of arms between the words, thus :- E, Th. Prior Anno Do.1515"

Buckland and Magilton continue the story as follows:

"Even in the eighteenth century, in 1767 when the earliest town map was drawn, the site was still largely devoid of any building, the main friary buildings, including the church and the gatehouse, had been demolished."

We know that a portion of the site was purchased in 1739, in order that the Mansion House could be built on part of the site, as was the residence of Alderman Sheardown. Apparently a few stone remnants of some of the buildings could still be seen in the early 1800s in the time of Mayor Sheardown.

Meanwhile, Buckland and Magilton observe that in 1831-1832, during the construction of a new road through the centre of the site, (later called Priory Place) remains of the Carmelites of Doncaster were discovered.

They quote F.R. Fairbank in "The Carmelites of Doncaster" (1893) in commenting on aspects of the site in the later Victorian period - *"There is now, or was recently, the slightest possible trace above ground of the building of the Priory, situated near the Post Office, between that building and those fronting onto High Street. When excavations were made a few years ago for the Post Office, some further remains were found."*

They add that in 1970 some burials were disturbed during the building of a new telephone exchange to the west of the post office and it is thought that the friary church had probably been beneath the properties on the southern side of Priory Place.

The 1852 OS map indicates where the Priory once stood and to the rear of the Mansion House, which was built on the site around two centuries

after the priory fell into the king's hands, stands what is considered by some to be the remains of the garden wall of the priory.

The reading on the plaque attached to the wall is as follows:

"This wall was uncovered during alterations undertaken in 1986 and was probably part of the boundary wall within the curtilage of the Carmelite Priory which stood on the site until the Dissolution of the Monasteries."

Other than that, all that is left to show that there was ever a priory on the site are a few names: Priory Place - roadway constructed many years after the Dissolution; Priory Walk - the way from the High Street to Printing Office Street; and one of the internal rooms of the Mansion House - the Priory Suite.

Today a new 'Our Lady' shrine, cut from Roche Abbey stone, exists at Doncaster's Roman Catholic St Peter in Chains church in a Shrine Chapel on the north side.

Sources

- Victoria County History Vol 3
- Paul C. Buckland and J.R. Magilton -The Archaeology of Doncaster Vol 2
- J. Hunter - South Yorkshire Vol 1
- T. Storey - Our Lady Of Doncaster and the Carmelite Priory
- E. Miller - The History &Antiquities of Doncaster
- J. Stow - Annals of England to 1603