

The Lost Grave

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By the 19th century, buildings surrounded the whole Greyfriars area and the exact position of the friary church and Richard's burial place had been lost. Historians have been fortunate, however, that archive sources have survived and given clues. The evidence was re-assessed in the 1980s and in 2011 the University of Leicester undertook an archaeological 'desk-study' of the area, using mainly maps and building and insurance plans held by the Record Office. These showed that the likely location of the church may have remained partly undeveloped. Gardens were still marked on later maps and despite the appearance and demolition of some outbuildings, it was possible that Richard's grave lay beneath a City Council office car park. In August 2012 the University archaeologists began a major excavation of the site, in association with Leicester City Council and the Richard III Society.



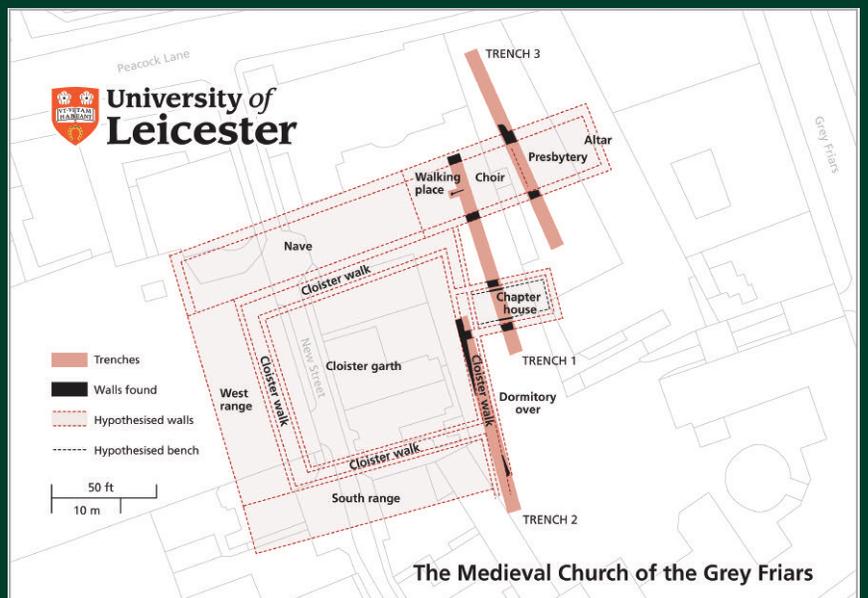
Map of Leicester by Thomas Roberts, 1741. This map in the Record Office is the earliest showing details of the Greyfriars site. It appears to mark the Herrick mansion (rough sketch by 'Fryer Lane'), with orchards and formal gardens behind – the likely position of the stone pillar. It is now thought that the map is earlier in date, as it does not show New Street which divided the site in 1740.



Ordnance Survey map, scale 125" to 1 mile, 1885. There were still open spaces in the Greyfriars area - especially the land to the left of Alderman Newton's School, at the rear of the buildings on St. Martin's, later to become a car park.



University of Leicester Archaeological Services staff removing the tarmac (Credit: University of Leicester).



Site map of the friary excavation.



Tile from the friary church (Credit: University of Leicester).

The project was ambitious. Finding remains of the friary and church was going to be hard, but to locate the grave of Richard III seemed a remote possibility. The archive research and known layouts of other 13th century friaries at least gave an idea of where to start. Trenches were dug in the car park with the hope of picking up the east-west walls. A burial was found almost immediately in the first trench, although its position and significance were not apparent until walls, stone benches and floor tiles were later located. Incredibly, the choir of the church had been found and the skeleton had trauma to the skull and curvature of the spine!

The Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester & Rutland



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