

Friary Field Excavations 1972.

Due to the imminent development of this site the Department of the Environment were invited to take over the excavation of the field and during the year two periods of digging took place under the direction of Dr. I. Stead.

These excavations were undertaken full time, i.e. 8.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. and as our members can only work during their spare time we were unable to take part, but we were pleased to see that the Department confirmed our findings that this was the site of the Dominican Friary of Dunstable.

The east wall and part of the north side of the church was discovered and we were pleased to note the changes that had taken place in the structure during its long history.

These were perhaps best illustrated by the use of old tombstones as steps and the re-use of decorated floor tile. There seemed to be some evidence that a great porch extending the full width of the east end of the church had been a later addition and that at this time some destruction of the inner fabric had taken place.

This was particularly interesting to us as it conforms with our findings in the kitchen area of the monastery where a chimney-place had been added to the original building, new ovens installed over old worn-out ovens and the guest house converted to a two-storey structure re-using stone from the church fabric.

It will be interesting to read Dr. Stead's opinion of when these alterations took place. The known history of the site during the 15th century, the most probable time for the alterations, is almost a total blank but during this period some of the Canons from the Augustinian Priory together with some of the townsfolk broke into the Friary and assaulted the Friars wounding them and throwing one Peter into the town pond. The cause for this fracas is unknown. Could it have been inspired by jealousy of the new buildings. In the 15th century prior to the dissolution the Friary was very poor with a total estimated annual income of £4. 18. 8d. plus 4/-. At the time of the dissolution, the records tell us that in the summer and autumn of 1538, the Friary buildings were of little value and some of them had been let to tenants.

Perhaps the decay of the Monastery also took place late in the 15th century with the hostility of the local populace.

The Department also carried out a limited excavation on the timber building exposing some of the crosses and the great buttressed trench.

Careful excavation of two of the crosses leads them to a date about the 14th century for this structure. This also conforms with our excavations inasmuch that this dating is based on the pottery sherds within the crosses. The difference in interpretation is that we believe that this material is secondary and that the crosses had been re-opened and used as rubbish pits at this date.

It was of interest to note that the buttress trench continued to approximately 12/13 feet beyond the east end of the building and at right angles to this along the east facing wall was a wide disturbed area of chalk and soil that could well be the drip marks from the eaves of a building.

Before definite conclusions can be reached in the interpretation of this odd structure a lot of work must still be carried out and it is hoped that our Society will be able to undertake more excavation during 1973.