

FRIARWOOD VALLEY GARDENS AND THE BLACK FRIARS

The Dominican or Black Friars (so called because of their black cloaks), were founded in France by a Spanish priest and followers moved to England, seeking out sites from which they could easily be reached. The roads from Ackworth, Darrington, Carleton, Purston and Wakefield converge on an area of land that would suit their needs. Circa 1256, Edmund de Lascy, the Constable of Chester, bequeathed lands to the friars and laid the foundation stone of an establishment that became the Church of St Richard of Pontefract. This church was part of the priory that was situated at the eastern end of the area we now know as the Valley Gardens. The friars soon made the Pontefract site, 'the valley to laugh and sing'.

In 1309, the area on the southern edge that we now know as Friarwood Hill was assigned to the Black Friars from Walter de Baghill. This enlarged the land holding of the friars, but only after parliamentary legislation discussed the loss of tax revenue to the crown, as the friars did not contribute towards general taxation.

The Black Friars continued to do the work of god and to cultivate the land, whilst receiving financial bequests from the local populous, such was their standing in the local community. Not only were the friars held in such high esteem locally, but also from the highest in the land. They were given monies directly from royalty, in exchange for their godly services and the entertainment of guests. In 1309, when Edward I visited the town, the accommodation of the friars was sequestered for use of the royal suite, with financial recompense being given for food and damage to the buildings. Edward II and III also made payments to the friars for their services.

The Black Friars were vegetarians and truly lived off the land in the valley and there was no evidence of luxury. Their number had also been reduced by the effects of the Black Death and the struggle of the friars was further compounded by oppressive land laws which meant firstly that they could not gain financially from the wills of the deceased, which had been a major source of revenue. In their heyday, there were at least 40 friars living in the valley, however, upon their eventual demise there were 8.

On 26 November 1538, the remaining friars were visited by Commissioners of King Henry VIII, advising them that they would have to surrender their assets, which were valued. The date of the expulsion of the Black Friars from the valley was 24 November 1539 and their meagre 'moveable' possessions were sold in total for 108 shillings 4 pence, which equates to little more than five pounds. The valley had been the home of the Black Friars for nigh on 300 years.

The land was taken by the crown and rented out, initially to Robert Foxley and Alan Ayre, for them to use as grassland. The remaining buildings were to be left and the ousted friars were allowed a right of use of the land, for pleasure and exercise. Over the ensuing years, the Church of St Richard and the buildings of the priory were left, fell into disrepair and the materials were probably 'spirited away' by the locals, leaving not much more than a 'footprint' (this was discovered by recent excavations).

In 1545, Michael Welbore (Wildbore) purchased the land from the crown which included a cottage and 50 elm/ ash. The land changed hands a number of times in subsequent years and was eventually purchased by Marmaduke Fothergill, who was said to be a learned, devout and godly man. In 1712,

Marmaduke made an offer to the 'Corporation' that if they would allow the land to remain tax free, then he would bequeath the land to St Giles Church for the establishment of a catechist (an afternoon lecturer, distinct from a vicar). Upon the death of his widow, in 1752, the valley was indeed returned to the church, more than 200 years after it was taken from the friars.

Subsequently, the owners of 3 houses in Ropergate wished for additional gardens for their properties and the land in the valley was exchanged for property elsewhere in Pontefract. Thus began the fragmentation of the ownership of the 'gardens'. These plots of land could be accessed by a tunnel under Southgate (Back Lane) and entry could also be gained to the gaming den, which later became the aviary and is currently home to the pin-hole camera.

The valley was moving into another era of ownership as the plots were exchanged, by the Church, for other property in the town. These plots in the valley were owned by private individuals, being used for pasture, allotments, orchards and, of course, the cultivation of liquorice. The patchwork of plots continued until after World War II, when it was suggested that the valley could be turned into an area of gardens for public use. The 'Corporation' thus began buying the various plots from the different owners and they were generously donated land by Albert Wilcock and William Ross. By 1958, they had acquired the final plot and now the valley was in the 'public hands' of the 'Corporation'. The gardens were laid out to the plans of Mr RW Grubb, who was the Parks and Cemetery Superintendent, and include (in the north-west area), a set of steps from Byram Park.

Indeed such is the rich history of the Friarwood Valley Gardens, as touched upon in the foregoing, that English Heritage have awarded the valley a grade II listing as a Park or Garden of Special Historic Interest.

Post scriptum; If a proposal during the 'railway mania' period had come to fruition, then the Valley Gardens would not have existed in its present form, if at all. The plan of 1843 was to build a railway line between London and Leeds via Pontefract. The line would have entered the town via Badsworth and East Hardwick, with the construction of a 500 yard (approx. 460 metres) tunnel under the town centre, the tunnel being accessed in the Valley around the point of Friarwood steps.