

Friarwood Valley Gardens Speaking Tour

Friar tree carving

The friar is carved into the trunk of a flowering cherry that the Council's tree team had condemned for removal. We asked for the trunk to be preserved for a tree carving, and you can see that the tree has continued to grow and blossom in the spring. The Valley Gardens was the site of St Richard's Dominican Friary in the Middle Ages; the friars were known as the Black Friars from their black habits. They were a teaching sect who went out into the community to preach. The Friary was closed at the Reformation in 1539, demolished and its precise site was lost to memory until archaeological digs in the 1960s confirmed that the Friary site included the former Pontefract General Infirmary and the Valley Gardens.

The Crown owned the land after the Reformation and it was rented out as grassland initially, before being sold in 1545, the land including a cottage and 50 elm/ash, hence the name Friarwood. Over the next 200 years or so it changed hands several times and was eventually bequeathed to St Giles' Church in 1752. Subsequently, the owners of three houses on Ropergate acquired garden plots from the Church, that were accessed by a subway under Back Lane (now Southgate). Eventually, by the 1800s there were several privately owned garden plots growing a variety of fruit, vegetables and liquorice. Pontefract was renowned for its gardens in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Flowering cherry avenue

The Valley Gardens is renowned for its cherry blossom every April. The trees are over 70 years old and coming to the end of their normal lifespan. The Council have been removing trees because of disease and we are replacing them, but the new trees take years to establish and are vulnerable to vandalism. We hope to persuade the tree team to pollard them in future (as with the friar tree) rather than removing them.

Stream

The stream is called the Wash Dike and runs the length of the gardens but is enclosed in a culvert for most of its length. The stream was probably the reason that the Friary was built here. When Friarwood Valley Gardens was created as a public park in 1950, the stream was made a special feature, with a footbridge, weeping willows and water lilies. However, within a few years because of concern about pollution, it was converted to a culvert in 1955. This section was opened again in 2012 when the paddling pool was removed and a flood basin excavated. At that time the Bowling Green had been flooding frequently, but the problem was solved when the cause was found to be a tree root blockage in the culvert downstream in the Bluebell passage.

Pinhole camera (former aviary) and paddling pool

The octagonal building in the centre of the Valley Gardens was originally a garden gazebo, part of a formal garden belonging to one of the large houses on the other side of Southgate. It is seen on maps from 1840, which also show a subway beneath what is now Southgate, providing access to the gardens. The subway disappeared when Southgate was widened in 1938-9 and the large boundary wall built. It was clearly a massive undertaking and photographs at the time show a single-track railway at the foot of the wall for delivery of materials. The building was notorious for being a gambling den and was later bought by the Keighley family who were growing liquorice where the Rose Garden is now. It was probably used to store the liquorice root and "buds" for the propagation of new liquorice plants. Bill Keighley sold his 4 acres and the gazebo to the Council in 1947 and retired to Scarborough. When the Valley Gardens was created it was turned into an aviary. The paved area shows the extent of the aviary enclosure. It was a popular attraction along with the paddling pool which was installed in 1963. I recall that in the 1980s it contained rabbits, a pheasant and budgies. Unfortunately, it was the target for vandalism and was dismantled in the early 90s. When the Friends group formed in 2012 it was derelict. With the help of a grant from Wakefield District Housing in 2015 it was repaired, the brickwork repointed, and inside a concrete floor laid and the walls plastered. We have turned it into a giant pinhole camera. Inside with the door shut it is completely dark, two small apertures have been made in two of the steel shutters, letting in a narrow beam of light which forms an inverted image on the opposite side. It is open to the public several times each year and available for school visits.

When the paddling pool was removed in 2012, it had been unused for several years due to difficulties with its safe maintenance; it required daily attention by council workers and there was concern about broken glass.

There was also an "Old Peoples Shelter" opened in 1963 by the Mayor. No record of when it was removed.

Outdoor Stage

An outdoor theatre was part of the original plan of the new Valley Gardens in 1950, and people do remember the regular band concerts in those days. It was removed, presumably due to disrepair but the date of its removal is unknown. We reinstated the stage in 2017 with the help of a Tesco grant, and it has been used for the annual Friarwood Festival since 2018. Friarwood Festival is a music event giving the opportunity to local pop groups to perform to an audience of up to 4000, every August, tickets limited to 4,000 and usually a sellout.

Thermoplastic Play Trail

This was installed in 2022 from proceeds of Friarwood Festival.

Benches

14 years ago, the park benches were basic utility style, some were broken and many had already been removed and not replaced. Over the years we have installed over 30 traditional park benches and picnic tables. A couple of years ago there was a spate of vandalism with 14 of the benches being burnt and requiring removal.

Fortunately, we were able to get them all repaired by a local metal fabricator and reinstalled, paid for by the Council's insurance. We think that the new metal benches are superior to the previous plastic ones and certainly cannot be burnt.

Mulberry tree

The mulberry tree is full of fruit in August. There is a story that the tree was propagated from the Mulberry in Wakefield Prison; the origin of the nursery rhyme, "Here we go round the mulberry bush".

Byram Steps

Mr McCloy, the owner of Byram Park donated the stone pillars and steps to the Valley Gardens in 1950. A photo of the official opening in May 1951 shows the steps with plant containers on the pillars.

Crown Bed

The northwest area of the Gardens was previously the site of three star-shaped beds containing shrubs and lavender, but over the years they had become overgrown and neglected. We grassed over the two outer beds and retained the central one as a circular bed. In 2022 we commissioned a crown for the bed to commemorate both the late Queen's Platinum Jubilee and the coronation of King Charles. The cost of installing the Crown Bed was paid for by proceeds from Friarwood Festival. Also in this area is the late Queen's Jubilee bench and two granite benches which celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Valley Gardens.

Stone commemorative plaque

A stone plaque is set into the retaining wall commemorating the commencement of work to create Friarwood Valley Gardens in March 1950. The flowering cherry planted at that event is still blossoming every April. Last year, we planted a new tree close by.

Sensory Garden

In 1960 the Mayor of Pontefract opened a "Sensory Garden for the blind", a stone plaque in the wall records that event. By the time that Friends of Friarwood Valley Gardens was formed it had long since been grassed over. One of our first projects in 2013 was to restore the sensory garden, with funding from the Yorkshire Gardens Trust.

Decorative entrance arches

Our very first initiative in 2012 was to install signs at all the entrances because there was no indication at the entrances that this is Friarwood Valley Gardens. Two years ago, a decorative entrance arch was installed at the main Southgate entrance, made and installed at no cost by DC Fabrications. This year the Council installed a similar arch at the Townend entrance. The Southgate railings have also been restored by the Council after decades of neglect.

Rose Garden

14 years ago, the Rose Garden was neglected, overgrown with weeds and many of the rose bushes had died. In the autumn and winter of 2014 -15 we cleared all 31 rose beds and replanted with bareroot roses. Each rose bed planted with a single variety and each bed individually sponsored. Maintenance of the Rose Gardens is our main gardening task throughout the year.

Liquorice Cultivation and the confectionery industry

It is likely that the Black Friars were cultivating liquorice in the Friarwood Valley from the 1200s onwards. Liquorice probably came to Pontefract with the returning crusaders; the de Lacys of Pontefract Castle are known to have gone to the crusades, and liquorice is a middle eastern herb which was greatly valued for the medicinal properties of its roots. For thousands of years, since the times of the ancient Egyptians, liquorice was considered a healing herb, known to Hippocrates, the father of medicine, and used for a wide variety of ailments. The dried root was issued to Roman legionaries and Alexander the Great's soldiers to chew on route marches as it relieved thirst. Pontefract liquorice root was sent to the army in WWI.

Pontefract wasn't unique in growing liquorice it was grown in Knaresborough and Worksop, but it was in Pontefract that the liquorice industry developed and by the 19th century Pontefract was the liquorice capital of the world. The first Pontefract cakes were produced in the early 1600s by a local pharmacist as a medicine, stamped with an image of Pontefract Castle. After the English Civil War, Pontefract Castle was demolished and the grounds inside were used to grow liquorice, with the root being stored in the Castle's magazine. The Dunhill family were growing liquorice there for their pharmacy and it was George Dunhill who invented liquorice confectionery by combining liquorice with sugar, flour and molasses to produce sweet Pontefract Cakes, stamped with an image of Pontefract Castle; the invention of liquorice confectionery. By the 18th century liquorice was cultivated extensively in the town; more than 100 acres in 71 plots and the Friarwood Valley was one of the main areas. To produce the black liquorice we're familiar with, the root is boiled, turning the yellow root black and the resulting liquor is reduced to a paste, which is then mixed with other ingredients, depending on the liquorice sweet being produced. By 1900 there were 17 liquorice refineries in the Town, the largest being Dunhills and Wilkinsons, but the industry had outgrown Pontefract's capacity to provide enough liquorice root, and the raw liquorice extract was instead being imported from Spain and Turkey. Hence the local term for liquorice – "Spanish". Although liquorice grows well in Pontefract, it takes 5 years before the liquorice roots are harvestable, whereas in warmer climates such as Spain and Turkey it can be grown in two years and it became much cheaper to import the root. By the beginning of the 20th century liquorice cultivation in Pontefract was much less and was being cultivated in two main areas, the Friarwood Valley being one of them.

Liquorice growers adopted a system of succession planting. The mature 5-year crop would be harvested in October when the foliage was dying back. Trenches 4 – 6 feet deep were dug to extract the root; it was a labour-intensive process. Part of the root would be retained (buds), kept in storage over winter and put back into the ground in April for the next generation of liquorice. The plants being relatively small for the first

2 – 3 years enabled other crops to be grown between the rows, such as potatoes pharmaceutical companies in Sheffield and Nottingham as ingredients for laxatives and flavourings for medicines. Liquorice cultivation in the Friarwood Valley stopped in the late 1940s when the various market garden plots were sold or given to the Council for the creation of Friarwood Valley Gardens in 1950. The last commercial crop of liquorice was harvested in 1970

John Betjeman's connection to Pontefract

John Betjeman, Poet Laureate (1972-84) connection to Pontefract was through his friendship with Lady Rosse who lived in Womersley Hall. Lady Rosse (Anthony Armstrong-Jones mother) and John Betjeman shared an interest in Victorian architecture, and he was fascinated by Pontefract's liquorice history. His poem, "The Licorice (sic) Fields at Pontefract" is not well known outside of Pontefract; he is better known for Slough; "Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough..." and A Subaltern's Love Song, "Miss J Hunter Dunn, Miss J Hunter Dunn, Furnish'd and Burnish'd by Aldershot Sun". His Pontefract poem is installed next to the liquorice plot at the eastern side of the Rose Garden.

Hiroshima bench

This bench was installed in 1985 following a visit to Pontefract by a group of Japanese pharmacists. The original plaque on the bench "commemorated" the 40th anniversary of the first use of the atomic bomb in 1945, but after that plaque was stolen it was replaced with a plaque replacing "commemorated" with "acknowledging".

Playground

The playground was installed in 2015 paid for by grants from Wren and Wakefield Council. Since then, it has been extended twice and had additional play equipment added. The most recent additions funded by proceeds from Friarwood Festival. The latest improvement is the rubberised mulch surface which was funded by the previous Pontefract councillors' capital fund.

Bowling Green

The Valley Gardens Bowling Club was formed in the 1950s but unfortunately wound up in 2024. Friends of Friarwood Valley Gardens were concerned that if the green wasn't used, it would not be maintained by the Council and set up **Friarwood Valley Gardens Social Bowling** to ensure that crown green bowling continues in the Valley Gardens. It is not a competitive club, and provides the opportunity for anyone to play bowls, with an emphasis on encouraging novices to have a go. Currently, the green and pavilion are open on Saturday and Wednesday, but people who pay the modest annual subscription have access to the green any time, if they have their own bowls.

Tree carvings

There are 6 tree carvings in the Valley Gardens, some funded by individual donors and others from proceeds of Friarwood Festival.

Colin White, September 2026