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The Black Friars, Gloucester

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The Black Friars, Gloucester

Interim Report

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THE survival of much of the Black Friars priory at Gloucester has long been known and has been described in some detail by C. F. R. Palmer¹ and W. H. Knowles.² Since 1955, the Ministry of Public Building and Works³ has purchased portions of the priory so that, at the time of writing, most of the surviving buildings are in its care. The work of preservation was begun in the remaining fragment of the east range, which was the first property to come into the Ministry's hands. It is this work which is the main subject of this report.

The first mention of the house of the Dominicans is in 1241 when a Royal grant of twenty marks was made towards its building.⁴ The founder is considered to be Sir Stephen de Herneshull but, to judge from the number of royal gifts, the Crown can be regarded as the second main benefactor, and money was given abundantly during the 1240s. It would appear from the limited documentary evidence relating to the building that its main lines had been completed by c. 1265. The priory lands were enlarged in 1292 and again in 1364-65.⁵ The surviving buildings make it clear that, despite its position within the city walls, the priory was laid out more or less on the conventional claustral plan of the greater monasteries. The cloister, south of the church, was 80 feet square. On the east side was the dormitory above a centrally placed chapter house and possibly a vestry, parlour and

¹ C. F. R. Palmer, 'The Friar Preachers or Black Friars of Gloucester', *Arch. Journ.*, xxxix (1882), p. 296.

² W. H. Knowles, 'The Black Friars, Gloucester', *Trans. BGAS*, LIV (1932), p. 167.

³ Then the Ministry of Works.

⁴ *Liberat.* 15, Henry III, m. 17.

⁵ An abstract of the various benefactions was published by C. F. R. Palmer (1882).

warming house.¹ The south range was occupied by the rare example of a study dormitory on the upper floor.² The refectory and possibly the kitchen and guest chambers were placed on the west. A plan by J. G. Buckler in 1820 indicates further buildings to the south.³ To judge from a view drawn by Stukeley in 1721 the claustral buildings were virtually still complete at that time.⁴

In the heyday of the priory the number of friars reached as many as forty but, at the time of the surrender of the house in 1539, there were only six under the prior. The convent was then so poor that it had sold much of its possessions and had leased its land to Thomas Bell, the elder, a Gloucester alderman. This erstwhile friend had no compunction in making the inventory of the property for the commissioners, and ultimately purchasing the whole site, 'church, belfry, churchyard and all buildings and lands'.⁵ Bell was a clothmaker and draper. He turned the church into a residence for himself, called Bell's Place, and much of the priory buildings into a manufactory. The property later passed into the family of Dennis, and since 1769 it has been in many hands.

At the end of 1955 the Ministry bought the remaining portion of the east range and the yard which lay to the east of it. The building had been converted into tenements and was in a derelict condition. Because of the difficulties of the site little could be done towards the repair of this fragment until the easternmost of the two houses (Blackfriars), which then formed Bell's Place, was purchased. This was done in August 1960. Three months earlier, the south range, which had been part of a bottling factory, also came into the Ministry's hands. In 1962, the other house occupying the remains of the church (Friars Lodge) was bought, and, at about the same time, No. 17 Ladybellegate Street, which provided the south end of the refectory in the west range. The Ministry, thereby, now owns most of the priory buildings (FIG. 1). The remaining portion of the west range is occupied by houses whose gardens and yards extend over a good deal of the cloister garth.

¹ 'On the east side of the court was the chapter-house, which had been rebuilt in the 15th century, and a fine piece of rich perpendicular stone panelling remains on the extension or eastern face of the house, now almost hidden by modern buildings. . . . ' J. H. Parker, 'Mediaeval Houses in Gloucestershire', *Gentleman's Magazine*, II (1860), p. 335.

² As part of the 13th-century legislation and practice of the Order the cloister galleries were abandoned as the work place of the community, and the Dominican friar devoted to intellectual pursuits spent a great part of his time in the comparative privacy of his cell. Special concessions were made to lecturers and students but the common life was safeguarded. The study dormitory was divided into cubicles with a wooden extension sufficiently wide for a bed. W. A. Hinnebusch, 'The Early English Friars Preacher', *Institutum Historicum F.F. Praedicatorum Romae ad S. Sabinae. Dissertationes Historicae Fasciculus*, XIV.

³ C. F. R. Palmer (1882).

⁴ View from north-west by Stukeley reproduced by Knowles 1932, p. 109.

⁵ C. F. R. Palmer (1882).

The most serious disruption of the basic plan is the projection of a garage across the angle formed by the east and south ranges and into the cloister itself. It is evident from Buckler's plan that the damage to this corner of the claustral lay-out is of long standing.

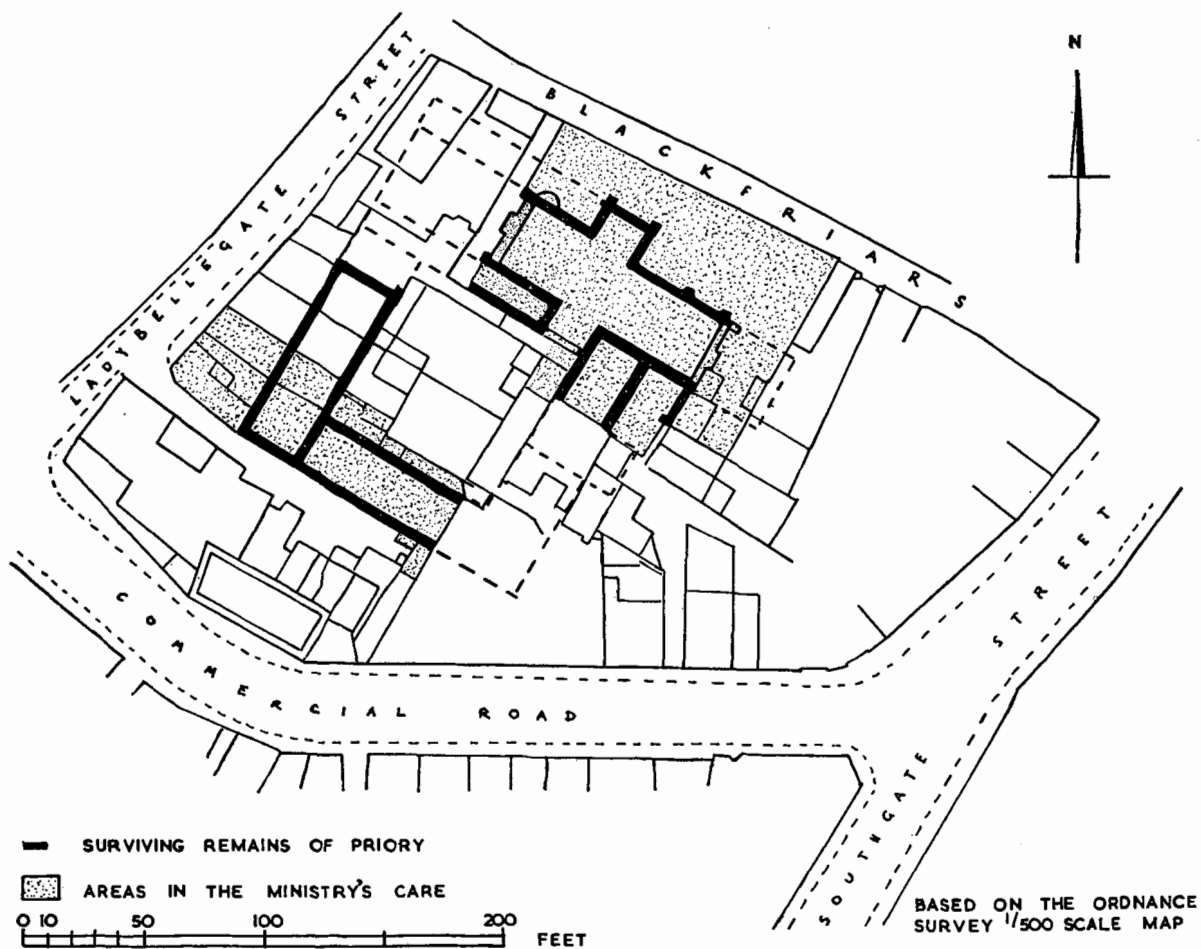


Fig. 1

It had been established by Knowles that Bell's Place did not occupy the full length of the church and that the nave extended west of the gable wall of Friars Lodge. Recent trial excavation has shown that the choir extended at least 26 feet beyond the east gable of 'Blackfriars'.

A certain amount of other exploratory work has been carried out in the church but it has been the east range which has, up to now, received most attention.

When the Ministry acquired the remaining portion of the east range as its first holding the practical difficulties were immense. Not only was the site cramped and the building partitioned and cut about as a result of domestic use but five of the seventeen roof trusses had collapsed into the building, at the same time pushing out a large section of the main east wall of the upper floor. Substantial alterations of the mediaeval structure had been made in the 16th century, and in more recent times additional windows and doors, one inserted in the middle of a four-light mullioned window, had mutilated the building further. In the yard to the east and built against the church wall was a single storey addition on the site of what was thought to be a vestry.

After creating a temporary cover over the building the damaged roof was stripped and the timbers, carefully numbered and recorded, were taken down in order to prepare for the consolidation of the walls. The roof construction is similar to that over the main body of the church, and to that over the south range of which Knowles has published a cross-section.¹ It is of the collar-beam and scissor-braced type. The seventeen trusses are independent, without purlin or ridge-piece, and only rough spacers separate them. Apart from the collapsed section, the timbers were in surprisingly good condition. Where necessary the rotten sections have been cut out and replaced with sound oak. By careful scarfing there has been no need for large-scale replacement. It seems likely that this roof is the original 13th-century construction. While there are no details in it which can give an aid to dating, the fact that it is of precisely similar design to the roofs over the church and south range means that it is part of a uniform building scheme. This is most likely to have been the initial building.

The need to consolidate the walls has allowed a start to be made in the study of the building history. The 13th-century masonry is in uncoursed rubble of thin slabs of limestone with ashlar dressings to the doors and windows. This contrasts sharply with the coursed ashlar which represents the post-Dissolution rebuilding and patching. The ground floor (FIG. 2)² is bounded by the south wall of the church and the fragmentary remains of the north wall of the chapter house. Traces of the latter survive on the line of the property boundary. The splayed jamb and springing of an arch remain in the west wall,

¹ Knowles (1932), p. 193.

² This plan is based on a survey by A. E. Sursham, formerly of the Ancient Monuments Drawing Office.

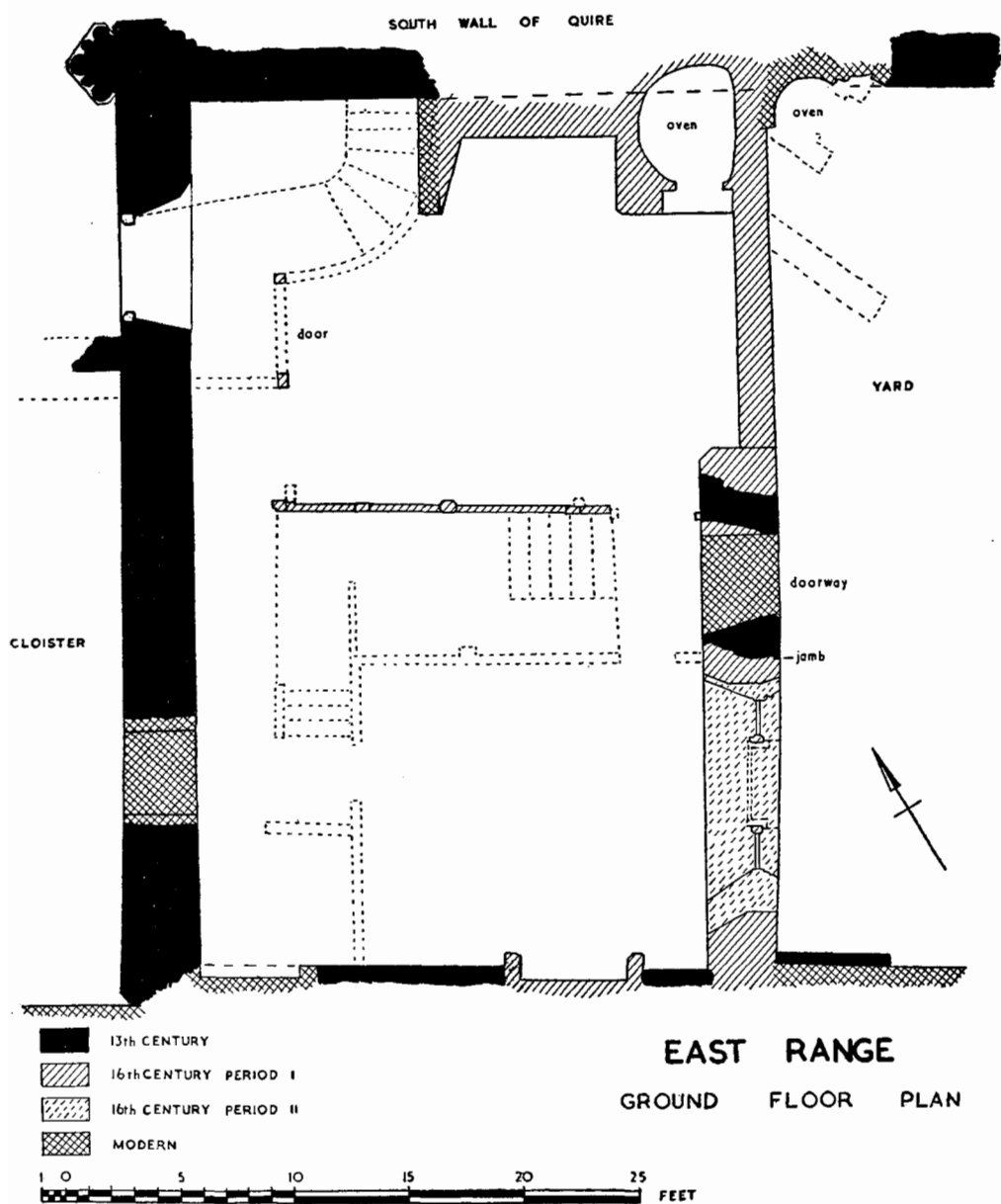


Fig. 2

and on the east is the stub of a wall projecting eastwards. A garage now occupies the remainder of the chapter house site. No evidence survives above ground of any sub-division within this room north of the chapter house, although it may have been L-shaped in plan with the short arm extending along the south side of the church. The room was entered from the doorway close to the church wall which had been replaced in the 16th century by a four-centred arched opening in which the actual door has survived. In the east wall there is a tall opening with a two-centred arched head splayed externally with a hollow chamfer on the inside. Little more than a foot away to the south is a straight joint in the outer face of the wall, and parts of a splayed jamb on the inner face, showing the position of another arched opening of perhaps similar form. The opening is 9 feet high and 3 feet 9 inches wide. At a later date it was certainly used as a doorway but this may not have been its original function. It may have been one of a pair of windows subsequently enlarged. From such scanty remains it is impossible without excavation to be sure of the original purpose of the room, or indeed its shape. With its position next to, and entered from, the church it is most likely to have been a vestry or sacristy.

On the upper floor was the dormitory with the open scissor-trussed roof over it (FIG. 3).¹ The walls have been severely cut about, indeed little original survives on the east. Nevertheless, there are remains of six short lancet windows, three in each wall to give evidence of the fenestration. Only one is complete, another is half missing, and the rest exist only in the springing of relieving arches or at best, single jambs. The window openings were enlarged in the 17th and 18th centuries. The original lancets have their heads worked in two stones with a relieving arch above. The openings are approximately 3 feet high and 18 inches wide, and spaced at intervals of about 7 feet. In the centre of the west wall the 13th-century window had been altered, possibly in the 15th century, to provide a doorway, which must have given access to the cloister roof or to a room above the cloister alley. The enlarged opening has a flat, segmental-arched head and chamfered jamb and has been made 6 feet high. The sill is on a level with the joist holes of the cloister roof. Later still this was blocked and remade into a window. Any evidence for an access from the dormitory into the church has been removed by the later alterations.

It is on the ground floor where the immediately post-Dissolution adaptations have remained to any great extent. This was part of the claustral buildings not turned into workshops. The northern portion

¹ This plan is based on a survey by A. E. Sursham and indicates the position of partitions since removed.

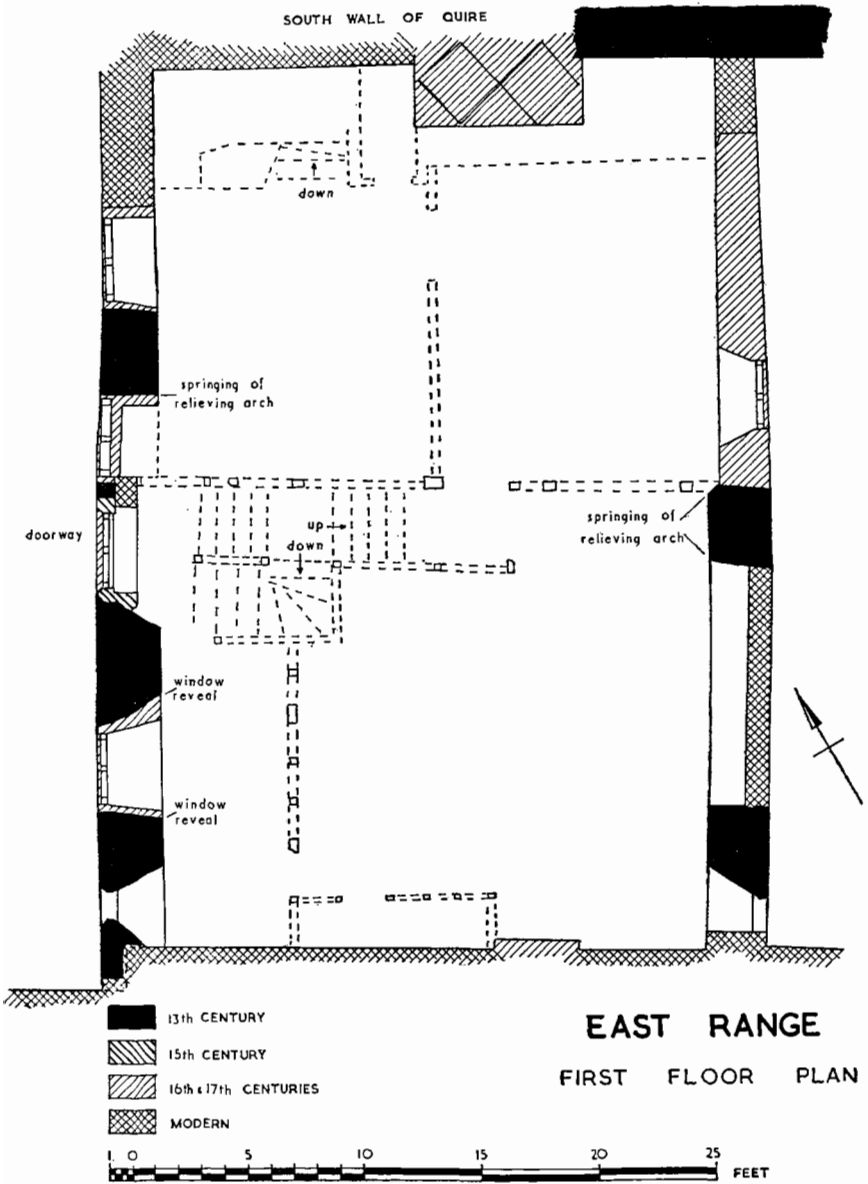


Fig. 3

of the east range was clearly in domestic use. There were two rooms divided by a timber partition and entered from a passage on the west side. The room on the north was evidently a kitchen with a large fireplace built against the church wall and a brick-lined oven beside it. The fireplace was later narrowed and much of the original west side cut away in order to contrive a passage into 'Blackfriars' to the north. This side has had to be thickened to something close to its original dimensions in order to support the massive, stepped stone chimney breast and the lofty stacks rising from it in thin, yellow, Tudor brick. The floor in the kitchen has been raised nearly 2 feet above the priory floor level. The room was lit by a large five-light window under a large brick four-centred relieving arch. Originally, this was perhaps in stone but in later years a wooden window took its place and has since decayed. The window was an insertion in an earlier opening. The partition dividing the two ground floor rooms is now very mutilated. Enough remains to show that the centre post had a carved capital and the other main timbers were stopped chamfered. The framing was filled with laths and plaster and it was set on a low masonry wall, which also served as a retaining wall for the cellar. The screen returned to form a passage along the west wall and the four-centred arched doorway into the kitchen survives. The room to the south has a small fireplace against the south wall which once must have been very distinguished. There are now only fragments of the moulded hood.

A fine, four-light, mullioned window was in the east wall. This window had had a 19th-century doorway forced through it but for structural reasons the mullions have now been restored. This window itself was an insertion. During the treatment of the masonry the window was found to have been set in an existing opening whose splayed jambs extended through the thickness of the wall. The splays were plastered and, what is more, had been painted with intricate designs of interlacing foliage with birds among the branches. At the top of the design are friezes now much damaged containing human figures and part of a 'black letter' inscription.¹ It is clear that there was another room in an extension further east sometime after the Dissolution, and entered through this opening in the wall. This extension was subsequently demolished, and the opening closed by the four-light window. It is remarkable how well the murals were preserved and in replacing the window the jambs have been cut back in order to show as much of the painting as possible *in situ*.

¹ These murals will be discussed in a later report.

In later years the house declined socially. Humble casement windows were inserted, the rooms were sub-divided and additional rooms created in the attics. The Ministry has since endeavoured to secure the mediaeval fabric and roof, and at the same time preserve as much as possible of the 16th-century, post-Dissolution features on the ground floor. On the upper floor the 18th- and 19th-century partitions have been removed in order to show the character of the priory dormitory. The floor has had to be renewed entirely and a new stair created. A reinforced concrete ring-beam has been set in the wall-top to counteract the thrust of the roof, which had previously pushed out a portion of the wall. The missing sections of walling have been filled up with rendered brick and the north-west angle reformed where it had formerly been cut away. On the ground floor a modern forced opening in the west wall has been blocked, and for structural stability the original opening in the east wall has also been filled.¹

Preservation work on the east range is nearing completion, and attention is now becoming directed on the church. Excavation within the east range and in the yard beside it is the next stage towards the completion of the archaeological record and its interpretation, which up till now has been confined to the upstanding remains.

¹ The consolidation and repair has been carried out by the Ancient Monuments Branch of the Ministry of Public Building and Works.