

MALDON DISTRICT COUNCIL
MALDON

FRIARY GARDEN

TL 850 069

A small walled garden, on part of the precinct of the Maldon Carmelite (White Friars) Priory

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The priory was founded in 1292 by the bishop of London and was granted 5 acres of land in Maldon the following year. A small adjoining plot measuring 60 feet by 17 feet was added in 1314. It was one of the poorest religious houses in England, its annual income at the time of the Valor being £1 6s 8d. After dissolution in 1536-8, it passed through various hands. In 1544 there is a reference to church, belfry, cemetery, 'le little courtyard', and 'le priours garden'. Recent excavations show that the monastic buildings were completely demolished down to the foundations, leaving little or no demolition debris on site. This has hampered the interpretation of the archaeological evidence, and it is not clear if the two cell building on the north of the cloisters was church or guesthouse or frater. If the last, it is possible that there would have been a second cloister to the south, traces of most of which would have been removed by the later buildings of Friary East and Friary West. William Camden, visiting at some date before 1576, noted at Maldon 'a desolate place of White Friars' though by 1574, one of the richest men in Essex, William Harris of Mundon, and his son Vincent, had built on the site the 'Mansion House...commonly called the Fryers, the which was the Howse or Cloyster of the White Friars in Maldon before the time of the dissolution...'. Vincent Harris may have been the principal builder, as in his will of 1574 he referred to debts incurred 'by reason of the great charges sustained in the building of my mansion house at Maldon'. Very little is known about this house, but it probably occupied a similar site to that of the two houses (Friary East and Friary West) which replaced it in the early C19, with gardens on the south side. The C16 house was taxed at 12 hearths in the mid C17, so was only of moderate size for a house of its type.

The property later passed into the Brickwood and Richmond families, the C16 house surviving until about 1805 when it was demolished and two separate houses (Friary West and Friary East) built in its place. These still survive (though altered), together with a stable block which has been modified and extended by the East Essex Adult Community College. Excavations in 1991, prior to the extension of the car park and construction of a new library, revealed the site of the cloisters, and the possible site of church or other monastic building, just to the west of the walled garden and north of Friary East.

The walled garden is north-east of Friary East. The date of its east wall is not known, but the materials used in its construction include worked stone (probably from the medieval priory) and Tudor brick, making it unlikely that the wall predates the dissolution (unless it was built on earlier footings). In 1921 the RCHM noted fragments of carved stone dating from the C13, C14 and C15 in the east wall. A section of this wall was rebuilt in 1997 after partial collapse, using the original materials and imported old bricks, bedded in lime mortar. The debris from the core contained cill stones of late C16 or C17 date (presumably from the demolished Tudor house) and some brown glass bottle bases, dateable by

their code numbers to 1884 and 1886. Presumably the latter indicate a late C19 rebuild. The present outline of the garden cannot be identified on the Chapman and Andre map of 1777, but is clearly shown on the 120" OS map of 1873. This shows a simple layout, with a path round the periphery, and a central axial path with a few trees planted along it.

The garden is now owned by Essex County Council and was formerly let out to various tenants for use as an orchard and allotments. By 1977 it was disused and neglected, and in 1988 there were plans to develop the site. After local opposition the Maldon and Heybridge Horticultural Society was given a licence to clear the site, record the trees and plants, and to use it as a garden. Volunteers have reinstated gravel paths, saved some of the fruit trees and designed new borders. It is funded from donations and open days, and the garden is also used by local schools and art classes.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM & SETTING

The triangular site is level, approximately 0.1h in area, bounded by Chequers Lane to the east, service buildings of Friary East to the south, and a pedestrian path from White Horse Lane to the Friary Education Centre on the west. It is close to the new County Library and car parks. These roads provide access for heavy goods vehicles to High Street premises.

ENTRANCES & APPROACHES

The garden is surrounded by historic walls, with a small pedestrian gateway and a modern locking gate in the west wall.

PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS

There are none, apart from a small wooden shed for the storage of garden implements at the south end of the garden.

GARDEN

The importance of the garden is due to the historic garden wall which runs north/south along the east side of the garden (listed Grade II) and to the probability that there has been a garden on the site since the C16. There may be buried archaeological remains of importance within the garden. The wall has suffered from both vandalism and vehicular damage. There is not a section that has not been partially rebuilt due to vehicle, wind or root damage. The other garden walls are of brick and are of more recent date. The garden itself has not been restored to any particular period. The gravel paths remain where they were found when the garden was cleared, and the borders positioned within the original path alignment. There is a pond at the north end, a number of benches and two arches. The planting is designed to give year-round interest with an emphasis on historic plant varieties. The garden is open to the public on the first Sunday of each month.

REFERENCES

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Maps and Images

1873 OS 120" map

Website

Garden website accessed from www.thisisessex.co.uk

Researcher: Sue Brice and Michael Leach. Site visit: Sue Brice with Arthur Cox on 1 March 2009