

CLARE PRIORY

Clare priory has the most extensive remains of any Augustinian friary surviving in England, and the plan is practically complete. It is the oldest single house of the Order still inhabited by the friars. The main entrance is along the Ashen road, but there is easy access from Clare Castle Country Park car park. Cross the millstream, walk a few paces along the old railway track and drop down to the left.

The main buildings still in existence are the magnificent 14th century Prior's House, and the Infirmary, now converted to a church. Other remains or identified sites include the frater (dining area, with kitchen below), the chapter house with the dormitory above, the cloister, and the monastic church with St Vincent's chapel.

THE AUGUSTINIAN FRIARS.

The Augustinian friars (often called 'Austins' in England) have a traditional link with St Augustine of Hippo in North Africa, who lived 354-430 AD. Augustine had a Christian mother, a pagan father – and a brilliant mind. His student days showed excesses. He prayed 'Make me chaste, but not yet'. He searched for meaning in life through philosophers. He admired Bishop Ambrose's oratory, but not his Christian message. Then came a conversion experience in 386 AD. He had been reading St Paul's epistles. In a garden one day he seemed to hear a child's voice saying 'Tolle lege' (Take up and read). He chanced on Romans 13: 12-14 'Give up unrighteous acts' and became a Christian. From this experience derives the Augustinian logo showing a Bible which is afire, a heart pierced by an arrow which transfixes it to that Bible, and the phrase 'Tolle liege'. He lived under strict rule, and became an exceptional theologian, preacher, and prolific writer. As the Roman Empire fell to the Vandals he wrote a book 'The City of God', about that Kingdom which would outlast all empires - a book still in publication. He is one of the four Doctors of the Church and is recognised as one of its greatest thinkers of all time, and a saint.

The first followers of the rule of St Augustine were monks in his monastery at Hippo. As his followers grew in number they spread to Italy, and some ceased the normal monastic life to become hermits, authorised by the Pope to live by Augustine's rule. These hermits were later gathered together into orders, and in 1256 Pope Alexander IV united these orders in one fraternity, the Augustinian Friars. Not being confined to monasteries, they travelled widely. They kept the rule of poverty, had no personal possessions, and lived on alms.

The friars' activities were worship, prayer, study of the scriptures, and especially teaching and preaching. They spoke the language of the people, not just Latin, and this brought them close to their listeners, with whom they were very popular. They were famed for their work among the destitute and sick.

HOW THEY CAME TO CLARE.

Augustinian Friars had spread from Italy to France. Richard, the eighth lord of Clare, met them when visiting France and invited them to England in 1248. He established this settlement for the Friars Eremites (Hermit) of the Order of St Augustine (their formal name) in the shadow of his castle, on the banks of the Stour, with a footbridge to the town and castle. Later the friars built a gatehouse by what was called 'the Great Bridge of Clare', along the main road to London (now Ashen Road).

Clare was the mother house, the first Augustinian friars' settlement in England of an eventual thirty-four. From Clare they spread not only all around England, but also to Ireland, where they remained after the English Reformation, and then reached out to many parts of the world. They have a great missionary tradition, and were the first to circumnavigate the globe. Their current places of work include the USA, Australia and Africa. They continue their traditional activities, with an emphasis on teaching which includes the running of universities.

POINTS FROM THEIR HISTORY IN CLARE UNTIL 1538.

A set of two hundred 15th century hand-written documents give much information about the friars' acquisition of land and their activities.

By 1279 there was a set of buildings comprising a small church, a cemetery, living quarters, and a chapter house.

The brothers soon became familiar and popular figures to the inhabitants of Clare. In their work among the sick they used a spring in the field in the front of the house, whose water contained minerals with curative powers.

They soon had many patrons to support their work. Their popularity is indicated by the number of bequests made to them in local wills, and gifts of pieces of land which increased the size of their plot. Sometimes a nominal retaining rent was involved, perhaps a few pence a year, or one peppercorn. In 1349 Michael de Bures gave land on condition that he should receive a rose at the feast of St John the Baptist.

By the end of the 13th century their holding was almost surrounded by what was at that time the course of the river Stour, which the friars may even have diverted for their purposes.

In 1296, when Edward I made a visit, the community was probably at its peak. There were then twenty-nine friars and novices. The entire complex seems to have been re-built on a grander scale during the first half of the 14th century, the church being dedicated in 1328, and the rebuilt chapter house, cloister and cemetery in 1380. The friars had varied contacts over the years. Two of them took part in the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. On one occasion some ran away and became vagabonds but the king ordered that they be captured and returned to the prior for punishment. At times friars were well received at the parish church in Clare, but sometimes there was jealousy or actual antagonism from the parish priest of the time. There were close contacts with the castle, and with royalty, especially when Joan of Acre, Edward I's daughter, lived there. At the time of the Wars of the Roses, friars sided with the House of York, but Henry VI later pardoned them for 'their offences', although their sympathies remained with the Yorkists. A poem relating an imagined dialogue at Joan of Acre's tomb and written around 1460 shows this loyalty, as does a white rose painted on contemporary glass in a window in an old lobby at the priory.

The Reformation found the friars divided. Some remained traditionalist, but a few became enthusiastic followers of Luther, himself an Augustinian until his excommunication. When the general suppression of monastic houses occurred the friaries were at first exempted, but in 1538 their extinction also was decreed. On November 29th the king's agent, Richard Ingworth, arrived in Clare to receive the surrender of the property. The priory, with all its buildings, goods, lands, and revenues, became the property of the Crown, and soon passed into private ownership. What happened afterwards to most of the expelled friars is not known, although one became rector of Borley, and the last prior became a canon of Norwich cathedral.

THE PRIORY UNDER PRIVATE OWNERSHIP, 1539-1953.

The buildings had already declined. Presumably the church and chapter house were pulled down, and outer buildings turned to barns, the best of the domestic buildings being made into a family mansion. In 1596 the house came into the possession of the Barnardiston family, who, with a collateral branch, the Barkers, held it most of the time until its return to the Augustinians. One owner, Captain Giles Barnardiston, was a Quaker, and was buried in Clare Quaker burial ground in 1680.

The premises have sometimes been used for other purposes - as a school in the 19th century, by the army in the second world war (King George VI came in 1944 to talk with Field Marshall Montgomery about the plans for the invasion of Europe), and as a nursing home after the war. The final wish of the last owner, Lady May, was that it should return to the Augustinians, although she herself was not a Catholic. This wish was fulfilled, largely through generous acts of her heirs, one of whom, Stella de Fonblanque, now rests in the small cemetery, the first Catholic to be buried at the priory since the Dissolution. The transfer was effected, and the Augustinians returned in 1953.

THE PRIORY SINCE THE FRIARS' RETURN IN 1953.

The return of the Augustinians meant that a local church became available to Catholics again, and a symbol of the past was re-born for the whole of Clare. Over the years this local Catholic community has shared worship and service with other churches in Clare, but Whit Sunday 1992 offered what was one of Clare churches' great moments since the Reformation. Nonconformist congregations were already sharing a united eucharist with the Anglicans. Suddenly the door opened and the prior led in the congregation of the Roman Catholic Church, to be present at the eucharist. In addition to normal parish work, the priory shares in the training of students and novices, and offers sanctuary to those in special need. Essential repairs since 1992 and the building of a new accommodation block in 1998/9 have led to improved premises. The Priory is also a popular place for retreats for Christians of all denominations – and is in general a lively and growing spiritual centre, modern in outlook yet faithful to the spirit and traditions of the past.

A WALK AROUND CLARE PRIORY

THE HOUSE (Not generally open to the public).

This is basically 14th century, but a fire in the 15th century necessitated much rebuilding. THE MAIN ROOM, although traditionally named THE CELLARERS' HALL (a store for provisions etc) seems too grand for this and may have been the place for the reception of important visitors. The 15th century ceiling beams have carvings which include a devil fleeing from a church (near the window), animals, a monk's head, and a green man or monster at the centre. The 14th century door is called a 'cat and kitten' door - a small door within a large one. Panels on the outside once held images, now defaced - possibly Mary in the centre, Augustine on the right, and Monica, his mother, on the left. The windows are the original ones. The fireplace is probably 16th century. The present stairs are post-Reformation.

THE ORATORY was a morning room or parlour in the 18th century, having been created by the building of a party wall. The fireplace is probably original. The east window contains the arms of generations of Barkers when they were the owners. A fifteenth station of the cross in the form of an icon of the Resurrection has been added to the traditional fourteen.

THE LIBRARY was originally the buttery and pantry area. It became a kitchen in 1720 and a dining room by 1884. The mantelpiece is an old beam from a demolished passage wall, re-used and carved early in the 20th century with details of the Clare legend, pictures of the owners at the time, and the carpenter.

THE PASSAGE was created by a new partition in 1993. The figure of St Augustine, 17-18th century, is probably from Germany.

THE UPPER FLOOR originally consisted mostly of a great hall, but was altered to five rooms by private owners, and then further changed to smaller rooms. A panelled room has a carving '1604, T.B(arnardiston)', owner at the time, also remembered for the gallery-pew he constructed in the parish church, which bears his arms. There is also a graffiti '1719 TR lived here and not unhappily'.

THE PORCH has a door into the house with a dripstone, seeming to indicate it was originally a door to the exterior. The area was enclosed early on. It has a fine groined ceiling. The reconstructed window contains original glass, perhaps 14th century, including a nimbus of Jesus's head, the white rose of York, the initials 'T.B.' in an inverted form, and unidentified symbols (perhaps craftsmen's signatures). The present exit door was originally a second window. The stairs were originally exterior stairs to the first floor and refectory (see below). THE TIMBERED CORRIDOR running alongside the small courtyard was the original exit and is one of the oldest remaining features of the priory. It now contains a shrine to Mary as 'Our Lady of Good Counsel' based on a fresco from Italy, accompanied by an interesting sculpture. A nearby font-like object is the mortar from a pestle and mortar, perhaps dated around 1300 AD.

THE WING OF THE HOUSE RUNNING FROM THE GROINED PORCH is on the site of the old dining block, which consisted of a refectory above a kitchen. The original wall to the cloister is still visible in places. The present passage leads to what is now a conference room.

This has an ogee shaped roof in Netherland style, as was popular in the early 20th century when it was built as a billiards room for the private house. A projection, visible from outside and recognisable on the inside by its being the foundation of the chimney corner, indicates the existence of a lectern on the upper floor from which a friar read aloud during meals.

STABLE HOUSE ACCOMMODATION.

This new block opposite the side entrance to the main house was developed from the remaining wall of an old stable in 1998/9, and contains en suite and other rooms.

THE PRESENT CHURCH - PREVIOUSLY THE INFIRMARY.

The doorway is the original one, with a modern head. The roof, of exceptional quality, is also original. The building had two storeys (as it still has at the rear) but the intervening floor has mostly been removed. The ground floor was the infirmary. Five windows high on the north side, a recess on the south wall and two small windows at the east end suggest the first floor held cubicles for scholars or perhaps the quarters of novices and their master, with a small dormitory to the east. A central passage between the studies gave access also to the friars' dormitory at this upper level, above the present entrance to the infirmary. A reredorter (set of water closets) was at the east end, with arcading below (visible from outside, but now blocked), where a cleansing stream flowed. The panelling is probably 19th century, installed while the building was in use as a school. Some pew ends include the Austin friars' symbol and motto 'Tolle lege'. Some windows are early 14th century. The stained glass pictures of Mary and Joseph and some Augustinian saints are post 1953. The stations of the Cross are modern. A squint or niche outside, in the north wall, may imply there was a small chapel for the sick inside.

A BLOCK OF BUILDINGS used to lie at right-angles to the infirmary.

It stretched northwards from the end wall of the infirmary, and ran nearly parallel to the cloister wall, leaving an open space of a few metres between the two for much of the distance. THE DORMITORY formed the top floor of this block, thus making a link between the church and the infirmary at this higher level. THE CHAPTER HOUSE was below but ran out to reach its door in the cloister wall.

THE PATH FROM THE PRESENT CHURCH TOWARDS THE MAIN CLOISTER ARCH.

The first doorway and two windows on the left led from the cloister to the chapter house. The main arch at the end, which was adjoined by a small court, led between the cloisters and church to stairs used by friars coming from the dormitory to attend services in the church during the night, and also to a warming room.

THE CLOISTERS. These were covered.

The corner arch led to the dormitory stairway etc. (see above) and bears a remnant of an old door hinge.

ALONG THE EAST WALL (moving left from the arch): the blocked door presumably led to a passage through to the exterior, near a former cemetery. The open doorway (a replacement one) and windows (which are original) led to the chapter house.

ALONG THE SOUTH WALL (which is original, but modified): one door leads to the parish room; another (now blocked and in a buttress, perhaps with a window to its left) probably led to a passage in the former kitchen area.

SOUTHWEST CORNER: the arcading (now blocked) was the lavatorium, a place for washing hands on the way to the refectory. One arch of this was halved when this bay of the house built.

ON THE WEST SIDE: the outer bays at the rear of the house are 16-18th century. The bargeboards (the top diagonal beams) of two of them have carvings of the vine.

ON THE NORTH SIDE: a holy water stoup stands at the entrance to the monastic church, with a pin of the original door hinge.

THE MONASTIC CHURCH.

There was a smaller church originally, probably on the same site. Building of the great church presumably began around 1279, judging by gifts which poured in then. The consecration of the church was in 1338.

THE LAYOUT OF THE CHURCH. The church was fifty-two metres (168 feet) long, the south wall still standing for its full length. The outline of the north side of the church is marked by flower beds and cement edgings set in the turf. Two screen walls ran forward from the present entrance and separated the chancel from the nave. They also supported a slender central tower. The nave had a north aisle of five or six bays, with the eastern two widened for the Chapel of Annunciation (Lady Chapel), which existed at least by 1361. The chancel was aisleless and had six bays, with St Vincent's chapel and a sacristy to the south. A cemetery, perhaps for some who were not friars but people such as benefactors, ran from the west end of the church and around its north side.

WALKING AROUND THE SITE OF THE CHURCH.

To the left inside was **THE NAVE**. The bricked in niche presumably held an image. The piscina was probably used in connection with the nave's altar which would have been on the west (left) side of the screen wall.

To the right inside was **THE CHANCEL**. The blocked door led to St Vincent's chapel and the sacristy. The Joan of Acre tablet is not her tomb, but a memorial installed in the 1920s. A daughter of Edward I, she was buried nearby in 1307. She was responsible for the chapel of St Vincent. Her daughter Elizabeth de Burgh initiated the chapter house, dormitory and refectory, and founded Clare College, Cambridge. There are ruins of magnificent sedilia - two arches remain, but masonry from the third was probably used in creating a memorial tomb, possibly to Lionel, Duke of Clarence and son of Edward III, and his wife Elizabeth. The probable site of the original high altar is marked by the present altar-like construction, in front of which is the burial place of Lionel, interred here in 1375, and his wife. A wall tablet near the exit was installed by the Richard III Society and names that king's ancestors and relatives who were buried at the priory. This is matched by a tablet to a gardener. It is good that the lowly are remembered, as well as the famous.

THE CEMETERY near the small entrance, dates from the time of private ownership of the house. One grave, of Stella de Fonblanque, is a reminder of those who made possible the re-establishment of the Priory. Another is that of an African Augustinian who trained here and later died in England.