

Explore

Heritage

Blackfriars & Chinatown

Free heritage guide and map



Welcome to Blackfriars and Chinatown:

Welcome to Blackfriars and Chinatown, a unique part of the city, combining some of its oldest remains alongside an attractive green space, exciting new shops and lots of restaurants.

Blackfriars and Chinatown has buildings from several eras of Newcastle's history: A number of medieval buildings, Newcastle's first Georgian square, a variety of Victorian shop fronts and fine 20th century buildings such as the Art Deco Co-operative building on Newgate Street.

Blackfriars is the only remaining medieval friary in the city. It provides us with a peaceful green space to socialise and relax in. The area also has the largest surviving sections of the Town Wall and the remains of four of its defensive towers. One of these, Morden Tower, situated behind Stowell Street, is now used as a small music and arts venue. The New Gate was at the junction of Newgate Street and Gallowgate and was one of the main gateways into the medieval town and its numerous markets. Here you would have been able to explore the bustling markets including the Bigg Market, Poultry Market, Groat Market, Wool Market, Iron Market and the Flesh Market. Today it leads down to the new Eldon Square shopping centre entrance and the entertainment complex, The Gate.

In stark contrast to the new shopping buildings stands St Andrew's, the city's oldest church. This church has a long and fascinating history dating back to the 12th century. A section of the town wall can be seen in the churchyard and many notable characters are buried there; including the composer Charles Avison.

As Newcastle expanded outside of the Town Wall the area around Blackfriars began to be built up and in 1770 the construction of Charlotte Square began. This was Newcastle's first Georgian square and was this cities' first move into the grand London-style architecture. On the other side of the Town Wall is the Fever Hospital or House of Recovery, which had also acted as a Lunatic Asylum and as St Andrew's Poor House. This building still stands just outside the Town Wall and what was once an isolated building was soon part of a town beginning to sprawl.

In today's city the popular Chinatown is centred on Stowell Street, providing an opportunity to experience oriental culture and cuisine. The area has grown significantly in popularity in the last 40 years, as the Chinese community has grown, and the street has gained a number of architectural features including a post box and street lighting inspired by the Far East. This is crowned by the magnificent Chinese Arch, which is one of the largest in the UK.



Blackfriars, late 18th century.



Blackfriars: Middle Ages

Blackfriars is one of Newcastle's oldest surviving buildings and is the only remaining medieval friary in the city. The Dominican Friars or Blackfriars, so-called because of their black cloaks, came to Newcastle in the early 13th century.

Friars differed in a number of aspects to monks. Monks stayed in monasteries, often in the countryside, and spent their time praying and studying. They had little contact with the outside world and were self-sufficient.



Blackfriars' courtyard.

Friars, however, focussed on serving the local people through care, preaching and teaching. Friars were supposed to rely on the charity of people and usually had modest buildings, called friaries. The churches that they built were the first ones designed for preaching to large groups of people. Of all the different orders of friars (for example the Franciscans and Carmelites), Dominican Friars in general were the best educated and most fervent preachers.

In the medieval period there were three other orders of friars in Newcastle, including the Augustinian Friars who lived on the site of the Holy Jesus Hospital. Today few examples of friaries survive in the United Kingdom.

Tradition holds that the land for Blackfriars was donated by three sisters, but their names have sadly been forgotten. The original Friary was destroyed by fire in 1248 and rebuilt around 1250. The rebuilding was paid for by the first Mayor of Newcastle, Sir Peter Scott, and his son Nicholas. The scale and extravagance of the new building drew criticism from the General Chapter of the Dominican Order and the Prior (the head) of Blackfriars in Newcastle was forced to leave his post.

In the late 13th century the new Town Wall was built through the Friary's land. The Friary was granted the right to make a gate through this wall in 1280 so they could access their gardens beyond. This gate can still be seen blocked up in the best preserved section of the Town Wall on Back Stowell Street.

The friars had an orchard and two gardens. The gardens would probably have had different uses, for example a kitchen garden for growing vegetables and a herb garden for growing plants and herbs for medicinal uses.

Blackfriars: The Dissolution

In 1534 Henry VIII broke England away from the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and the Papacy, the power of the Pope. Shortly afterwards he began a programme of religious changes, which included the closing of monasteries and other religious houses in England and Wales, and the transfer of their land and wealth to the Crown. The Prior of Newcastle's Blackfriars, Richard Marshall, was forced to flee to Scotland in 1536 after speaking out against the King's religious changes.

In 1539 Newcastle's Blackfriars surrendered to the Crown. Each one of the friars was given a small payment to help him survive until he found a new occupation.

After an absence of over 300 years, the Dominicans returned to Newcastle in 1860 and opened St. Dominic's Priory on New Bridge Street in 1873.



Statue of St. Dominic in St. Dominic's Priory, Newcastle.

Following the closure of Blackfriars in 1539, Henry VIII granted the Friary to the Mayor and Burgesses of Newcastle for a sum of £53 7 shillings and 6 pence.

The church, sacristy and part of the chapterhouse were demolished and a lot of the salvaged materials, such as the stone, timber and lead, were used to build the first lighthouse at Tynemouth and the High and Low Lights at South Shields.

Blackfriars: The guilds

From 1552 the remaining buildings were leased to nine craft guilds, which used the buildings as meeting rooms. They included Blacksmiths, Fullers and Dyers, Bakers and Brewers, Tailors, Cordwainers, Saddlers, Skinners and Glovers, Butchers and Tanners. The guilds continued to use the upper floors of the building until the 19th century. The ground floor was used as almshouses for accommodating the poor and widows of members of the guilds.

Guilds were fraternities of workers involved in a specific trade or craft. They aimed to establish an association for mutual benefit and assistance for members and were similar in some ways to modern trade unions. They also regulated standards for their craft and ensured that every member had a fair chance of selling their wares. They would fine members whose work was not considered to be of good quality so that the high standards were maintained.



Blackfriars around 1904.

Craftsmen were not allowed to practice without having completed an apprenticeship. This took about seven years and was unpaid. The guilds charged admission fees and enforced strict rules in a contract between master and apprentice that was called an indenture.

The guilds carried out a lot of alterations to the buildings. For example, new windows were installed in most of the buildings while the old windows were blocked up over the years and floor levels were altered. Plaques dedicated to these works can be seen around the site. Although the buildings have changed a lot, thanks to the guilds the Friary survived. There are only fifteen medieval friaries left in the United Kingdom.

Guilds became less important as the Industrial Revolution gathered pace and in 1814 the indenture system was abolished. While the guilds still existed and used the buildings occasionally, they no longer had the power they once had and the buildings began to fall into a state of disrepair. Though in a very poor condition, people continued to live there until 1951.

Blackfriars: The restoration

In the 1960s Blackfriars was threatened with demolition. However, the building was saved, largely through the efforts of Alderman Peter Renwick, Mayor of Newcastle in 1963 and 1964 and Sheriff in 1967.

Various plans were considered for the restoration of the buildings, but serious plans were not put forward until a survey in 1973 revealed that unless restoration started in the near future, complete ruin would be unavoidable.



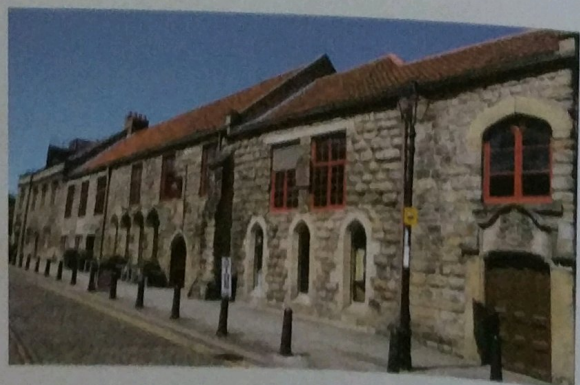
The Chapterhouse at Blackfriars in 1963.

It was recommended that premises for small businesses and craft workshops be created. The work was financed by Tyne and Wear County Council, the Department for Education and the English Tourist Board, at a total cost of £600,000.

During the restoration, archaeological excavations were carried out. The ruins of the church, which can be seen at Blackfriars, were revealed.

In 1980, as part of the celebrations of the 900th anniversary of the founding of Newcastle, H.M. Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother visited Blackfriars and unveiled a commemorative plaque. The restoration was completed in 1981.

Today, Blackfriars is a quiet public green space with a restaurant and craft shops in the remaining buildings.



Blackfriars as seen today from Monk Street.