The search for Richard III begins...
Who were the Greyfriars in Leicester?

Little is known about Greyfriars, the medieval Franciscan friary which once stood in Leicester. However, one event of note stands out in its 300 year history. On 25 August, 1485 King Richard III’s body was buried in the friary church, having been stripped and despoiled on Bosworth Battlefield then brought to Leicester following his defeat by Henry Tudor.

Why is this important now?

On Saturday 25 August, 2012 – 527 years after King Richard III was buried in Leicester - University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) began a historic archaeological project, in collaboration with Leicester City Council and the Richard III Society, with the aim of discovering whether England’s last Plantagenet King still lay buried in Leicester City Centre.

The project represents the first ever search for the lost grave of an anointed King of England.
Site History

Why is the friary under a car park?

The friary was founded in the mid 13th century possibly using money donated by Simon de Montfort, earl of Leicester or his wife Eleanor.

The choir of the church appears to have been finished in 1255 and the rest of the church was complete by 1300.

In 1402, three of the friars were executed for treason at Tyburn in London. The friars had been caught spreading rumours that King Richard II (not III, he wasn’t even born yet) was still alive during King Henry IV’s reign.

The Battle of Bosworth took place in 1485. After the battle, the dead Richard III was displayed for two days in the Church of Blessed Virgin of the Annunciation in the Newarke before being buried in the Church of the Greyfriars. It is unknown how his grave was originally marked but ten years later King Henry VII (who defeated King Richard III) had an alabaster tomb erected over the grave.

The friary was dismantled by King Henry VIII in 1538 during the dissolution of the monasteries and most of the buildings were demolished soon after.

Over seventy years after the friary was demolished, rumours started that Richard III’s body had been dug up and thrown into the river at Bow Bridge when the monastery was closed down.

In the early 17th century, the land was bought by Robert Herrick, a former mayor of Leicester. He built a house and garden on the site. In his garden, Herrick erected a memorial pillar inscribed:

‘here lies the body of Richard III sometime King of England’.

As Leicester flourished and expanded during the following centuries, parts of Herrick’s land were sold off and built on. This meant that the precise location of the church and the tomb was eventually lost.
What we found

How do you begin an archaeological dig?

Fortunately, a map of Leicester dated 1741 still shows the Greyfriars site. Using historic descriptions of the friary and old maps, archaeologists have been able to establish a search area in this part of Leicester's historic medieval town centre. Today much of this area is built over but some parts do remain as open spaces, usually as car parks, in which archaeological investigation can be carried out.

First, Ground Penetrating Radar was used to see if the walls of the church could be found under the ground without digging up the car park. This process is like using sonar to find objects under water. Unfortunately all the radar could find were pipes and cables from the buildings built recently.

So, archaeologists opened two trenches to search for clues to show where the walls might be. These were placed north to south, the reasoning being that a church would be aligned east to west and so digging trenches at right-angles across it should provide the best opportunity to find some of its walls.

This worked! Medieval archaeology was found a metre below the ground although at first it was unclear what had been discovered.

In the southern half of Trench 1 was a stone building containing the remains of a tiled floor and stone benches built against its walls. This building was also found in Trench 2, where it joined a long north to south corridor running the length of the trench. The corridor had also once been floored with tiles, now missing, but their impressions were still preserved in the mortar that held them in place.

Although parts of the friary had been found in these first two trenches, there didn’t seem to be any evidence of the church where Richard III was reputedly buried. The only clue was a pair of legs from a burial sticking out into the trench, but as it wasn’t clear whether they were in a grave inside our outside the church, they were left undisturbed for the moment.

So, archaeologists dug a third trench. In this (Trench 3) they found the remains of a large east to west building (about 10.5m wide). This had once been floored with decorated tiles and contained the remains of choir stalls and tombs; whilst amongst the building rubble was the remains of an impressive early 15th century window (right).
What the archaeology tells us

What else do we know about Greyfriars?

The friary was built of grey sandstone, with slate roofs decorated with bright green and orange glazed ridge tiles. Inside, the walls were plainly plastered and the floors were laid with glazed tiles mostly set in a diamond pattern. These were generally plain, except in the presbytery of the church where they were highly decorated. Many of the windows would have contained glass, some of which we found.

After the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1538 the friary was stripped of everything of value, then left to decay as an empty shell before finally being demolished.

Evidence of the people who lived in the friary was scarce. Pieces of pottery vessels dating from the 13th to the 16th century were found, along with two medieval silver pennies and a number of brass letters from tomb inscriptions.

Right: A 13th century floor tile from the friary church, depicting an eagle on a shield. This is the coat of arms of Richard Earl of Cornwall and King of the Romans, the 2nd son of King John.

Above: Brass letters (c.1270-1350) from tombstones in the presbytery.

What does all this mean?

The bits of walls, floors and masonry suggest that the building and the corridor found in the first two trenches are the friary's chapter house and part of the eastern cloister wall. This would mean that the building in Trench 3 is the eastern end of the friary church, and more importantly part of the choir and the presbytery.

Not all of this was guesswork! Many Franciscan friaries were built with a similar layout, when space permitted. The friary at Walsingham is a good example of how the one in Leicester may have looked.
More proof was needed...

To prove it was Richard III, the skeleton was taken to the University of Leicester for further testing by experts.

Radiocarbon dating provided a date of death of AD 1455-1540, consistent with someone who died in 1485.

Using osteoarchaeology the marks and damage to the skeleton were investigated. The man had ten wounds to his skeleton, consistent with injuries received in battle. These include a puncture wound to the top of the head, most likely caused by a dagger, and evidence that the back of the head had been sliced open by two sharp bladed instruments, probably a halberd and a sword. The damage to the back of his head would have been fatal.

Other minor injuries include a nick to one of his ribs and to the jaw, and damage to his right cheek. There is also evidence that his corpse may have been defiled after the battle, with a sword or dagger thrust through the right buttock.

After the skeleton had been scanned, a 3D computer model of the skull was sent to the University of Dundee where the muscles and skin were modelled by Caroline Wilkinson, resulting in a lifelike bust of the king.

Finally DNA testing was used to see if the skeleton had the same Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) as two people who had been identified as descendants of Richard III’s sister, Anne of York. This type of DNA is only passed on through the female line. All three DNA samples share a type of mtDNA that is relatively rare in the population of Europe, so it is highly unlikely that the match is coincidental. It proves that all three people are related.

So, is it Richard III?

Like any modern forensic case, all evidence must be assessed together. Combined it makes a strong case that this is indeed the skeleton of King Richard III.
What about King Richard III?

Once the church had been found in Trench 3, it was realised that the legs of the skeleton found in Trench 1 on the first day were in a grave which was located at the west end of the choir, exactly where Richard III was reputedly buried, most likely against the southern choir stall. The trench was therefore widened so the entire skeleton could be uncovered.

The grave appears to have been hastily dug and was too short for the body, which was partially propped up at one end (below). No evidence for a coffin, shroud or clothing was found. This fits with historical accounts, which say that Richard III was buried without pomp or solemn funeral. In particular, the placement of the arms is unusual, raising the possibility that the hands could have been tied.

What could we tell from the skeleton?

The skeleton (above) is in good condition apart from the feet which are missing, almost certainly as a result of later disturbance.

The individual is male, in his late 20s to late 30s, compatible with Richard’s age of 32 at death, with a slim build. He had severe idiopathic adolescent onset scoliosis. Unaffected by scoliosis, he would have stood around 5ft 8in (1.73m) tall, slightly above average height for a medieval man, though his apparent height might have decreased as he grew older and his disability may have lifted his right shoulder higher than his left. This description matches with the contemporary reports of Richard III’s appearance.