

The London Charterhouse

Saturday 15 October 2016

The most complete medieval site in London, The Charterhouse was until recently little known. This will change as the charity opens its doors to the public.

In 1348 the Black Death reached London. Sir Walter de Manny, a close friend of the Black Prince, bought 13 acres of land from the Priory and Hospital of St Bartholomew as a burial ground for the corpses, which the city graveyards could no longer cope with. About 30,000 bodies were buried in this plague pit in the centre of the private Charterhouse Square, which has never been built on and is now being landscaped into a public garden. Next to the cemetery Manny built a chapel for the victims and their families and just before his own death provided funds for a Carthusian Monastery which became known as The Charterhouse – a corruption of ‘Chartreuse’ the site of the original Carthusian monastery. The Carthusians had a strict ascetic discipline, living in 25 solitary two-storey cells, each with several rooms and their own latrine, around a great cloister. Post-war renovation uncovered one of the old entrances to a monk’s cell with its food hatch used by the lay brother to serve the monk. In 1431 they installed a conduit in the centre of the courtyard with piped water brought from Islington.

In 1535, Prior John Houghton and many of his monks who refused to accept Henry VIII as head of the church were executed in a barbaric manner at Tyburn. Henry stripped The Charterhouse of their timber, glass and fruit trees for his garden at Chelsea, and embezzled their money and land. The buildings were granted to Sir Edward North, as a reward for helping Henry collect the revenues from



Brother David, our guide to the Charterhouse, with RFS members (Photo Jeremy Bate)



Early 17th-century table carved with the arms of the founder, Thomas Sutton, and now serving as an altar in the chapel (Photo Jeremy Bate)

dissolved monasteries. North demolished most of the monastery and converted the buildings into a mansion centred round a new courtyard: Master's Court, including the Great Hall, retaining much original wood carving including a hammer-beam roof which, along with a 15th-century table and stool in the lobby, survived the incendiary bombs of WW2. The 14th-century beams from the ceiling of the monks' refectory were incorporated into North's kitchen. A new chapel was built using the site and materials of the old Chapter House.

North died in 1564 and The Charterhouse was sold to Thomas Howard, 4th Duke of Norfolk. The politically ambitious Howard added the Elizabethan Great Chamber, or Tapestry Room above the old refectory with his heraldry embossed on the ceiling. The fire surround bears the arms

of Charles I, marking restoration during his reign. Howard was executed in 1572 for his involvement in the Ridolfi Plot to put Mary on the throne. The house was sold in 1611 to Thomas Sutton, the richest commoner in the kingdom, with a fortune amassed as a pioneer investor in mining and shipping coal to London. He died a few months later and left a huge endowment to found a school for 25 boys and a home for 80 genteel military pensioners. The original criteria for admission were that the pensioners or 'brothers' should be: 'those who had been servants of the King either decrepit or old Captaynes either of sea or land. Soldiers maimed or impotent, decayed Marchaunts, men fallen into decaye through shipwrecke Casualtie or Fryer or such evil accident; those that have been Captives under the Turkes'. The school is now in Surrey but Sutton's Hospital is still



Two chairs supplied to the Charterhouse by Thomas Tribe of 93 Old Street, St Luke's, London. Tribe was making Windsor, garden and japanned chairs, 1817–39 (Photo Jeremy Bate)

there and the conditions of entry remain much the same! Sutton's monument in the chapel is by Nicholas Stone.

In May 1941 The Charterhouse was badly damaged by incendiary and high explosive bombs. The sensitive restoration by Seely and Paget revealed much about the original monastery which was previously unknown.

The recent surge in the value of rents of their property holdings in Clerkenwell has allowed The Charterhouse to look towards expansion of their accommodation capacity, starting with Michael Hopkins' elegant new blocks completing Preacher's Court. On our visit we were excellently guided by David, one of the Brothers, who was as keen to learn from us about the furniture as we were to learn from him the fascinating history of this admirable institution, on the eve of opening a museum to the public for the first time in its history. Our discoveries included a 15th-century oak table with iron repairs, an early 17th-century oak table, now serving as an altar in the chapel, bearing the arms of Thomas Sutton and two surviving 19th-century Windsor chairs of a large set supplied by Tribe of Old Street, less than a mile distant.

Jeremy Bate