



The subjects of this season's BAS winter lectures have moved from trains (in a talk delivered at a speed exceeding that of any train), to art, the cathedral in the fields and, in February, to archaeology. Personally, I rather dread the prospect of lectures given by archaeologists, having suffered rather too many that proceeded thus:

First, we dug Trench 1 (a slide of a trench looking much like every other trench one ever saw appears). We didn't find anything. Then we dug trench 2 ... and so on, ad infinitum.

Well, Ben Ford's talk was not like this. In fact it was exemplary in that he spoke about what the findings of his excavation *meant*, and showed slides which illustrated his point so well that they spoke for themselves. Moreover, he conveyed this to us with enthusiasm and authority.

The excavation in question had taken place in Oxford, adjacent to the Westgate Centre or, in medieval terms, mainly outside the walled city and extending to the south between the Thames and the Cherwell. Its focus was the Greyfriars friary, where building began in in 1240s and continued until the Dissolution, soon after which it was demolished, mainly by the citizens of Oxford, who robbed it of its timbers and stones to build their own houses. An aerial view of the site showed the footings of the complex of buildings, including foundation trenches emptied by the citizens, and places on the lower and soggy ground where timber baulks had been driven into the soil, rather as in Venice, to provide underpinnings for the buildings there. Some of these timbers had previously been used in other buildings, so that there is information to be had about not only the dates of the friary buildings but also of earlier buildings in Oxford. The view from above also showed where the course of a stream running through the site had been changed to make room for an addition to the friary complex, an extravagant measure as the building could easily have been accommodated with a slight change to its position or dimensions.

Other findings include the tiled floor and the writing implements shown in the accompanying illustrations. The tiling is medieval and formed part of the cloister walk. The 'stabbed Wessex' tiles (so called because they were 'stabbed' in the back to improve their adhesion when set in mortar) made attractive patterns, and the worn state of many bears testament to the heavy use of the cloister. The writing implements include a pencil made entirely of (metallic) lead, and a quill pen made not from a feather but a long-bone of a goose, or something of a similar size. Roger Bacon, philosopher and scientist, who studied and taught at Greyfriars, wrote, presumably with an instrument similar to one of those newly found, that 'light was the most extraordinary of all realities - as if the wind had become visible'. Such insights, however, proved dangerous and he was subsequently imprisoned for the 'suspected novelties' in his teaching. Robert Grosseteste, the first lecturer appointed to Greyfriars, Chancellor of Oxford University and Bishop of Lincoln, whose lectures Bacon attended, also carried out scientific work. One of his conclusions from this was that the universe began with an explosion, but this seems not to have been thought dangerous - theologically, at least.

Grosseteste left his collection of books to Greyfriars where it became one of the first libraries of Oxford University. Later, they acquired a further collection consisting of commentaries on the Bible. These books were still at Greyfriars in 1317, by when they formed two libraries, one for the friars, the other for students.

Anyway, Ben Ford shed light, Baconian or otherwise, on the findings of his excavation, and conveyed with a light touch the results of much time spent in libraries. It seems certain that the post-excavation work will shed further light and provide interesting reading.

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