

THE OXFORD GREYFRIARS: A CENTRE OF LEARNING

WESTGATE
OXFORD



The Oxford Franciscans (Greyfriars) are significant in the history of the University of Oxford and the development of academic learning, especially scientific study.



Statue to Roger Bacon in the Natural History Museum, Oxford

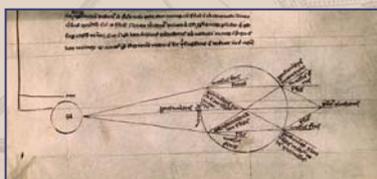
As a *Studium Generale* the friary served as an important early "college", within a network of similar Christian colleges throughout Europe. The friary had two libraries, a scriptorium (where books were copied out and translated), many knowledgeable friars or masters, and a structured teaching programme. It was only rivalled in the later 13th century by similar colleges in Paris and Cambridge. With such a good reputation students came to Oxford from across Europe, including France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Germany.

The Oxford friars were inspired by great scholarly Arabic texts from the Islamic Golden Age during the 9th and 11th centuries. They used these texts (translated into Latin) which enabled the ideas and knowledge from previous centuries of Islamic scholarship to be studied more widely in the emerging medieval universities of Europe.

The Greyfriars friary in Oxford was associated with a number of notable scholars who taught there, such as William of Ockham, John Duns Scotus, Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon.

Roger Bacon one of the Greyfriars' most famous scholars, died in 1292 and was possibly buried in their church (which lies at what is now the west end of Turn Again Lane). He was known as Doctor Mirabilis, which means "wonderful teacher". His life's work was guided by the principle that "half of science is about asking the right questions", and that mathematical method, though essential, is insufficient. It must be supplemented by the method of experiment: "experimental science governs all the preceding sciences".

Bacon is known to have had a huge variety of interests which were detailed in a number of books, most notably his 'Opus Majus', an 840-page encyclopaedia produced for the pope that covered all aspects of learning, including grammar and language, logic, mathematics (which included dancing, singing, gesticulation, and performance on musical instruments), physics, optics (it is probable that spectacles were first constructed using work by the Greyfriars), philosophy and alchemy.



Optics from Bacon's Opus Majus

Alchemy was the medieval forerunner of chemistry. Alchemists were famously concerned with the search for a way to convert low grade (base) metals, such as iron and lead, into precious metals, such as gold and silver. They were also absorbed with trying to find the elixir of life, which would bring the user youth and longevity and perhaps immortality.



To date, little physical evidence for the practice of alchemy has been identified through archaeological excavation. However, in 2005 a group of ceramic and glass alembics, skillets and furnace fragments were found in an old pit (used as a lavatory) belonging to a medieval hall buried below Peckwater Quad, Christ Church, Oxford. The group of objects are the earliest of their kind yet found in Britain, dating to the early 14th century. The vessels have been identified by glass and ceramic specialists as likely to have been used for alchemical experiments. Could these early scientists have been taught or inspired by Bacon within the very buildings we are excavating?



Alchemical finds from Peckwater Quad