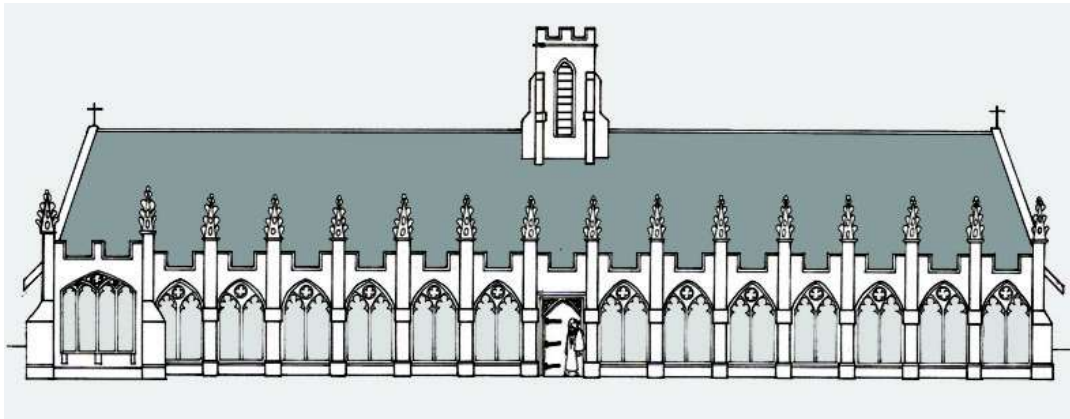


BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL
Blake Museum

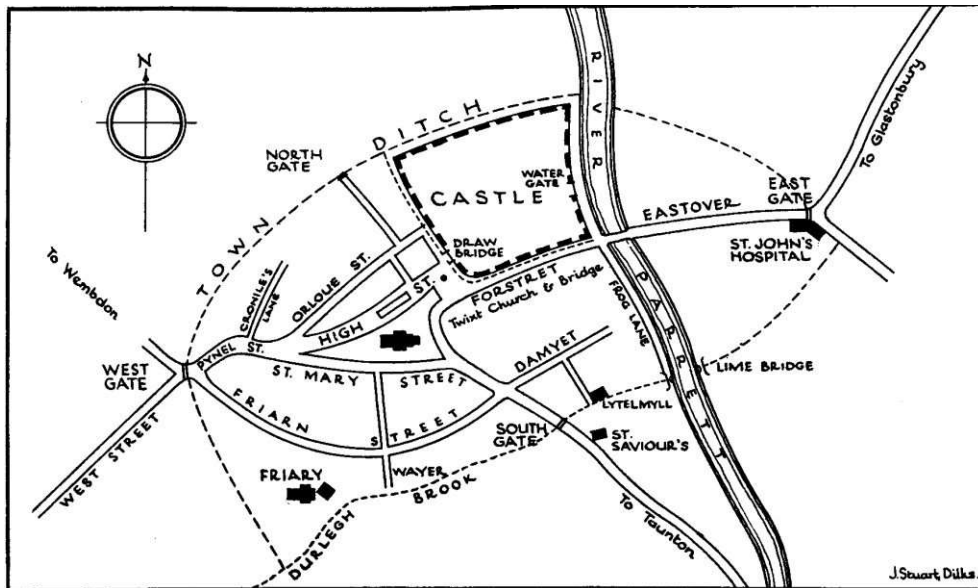


Hypothetical sketch of the later Greyfriars' Church. MKP 2010

THE FRIARS MINOR

BY DR PETER CATTERMOLE

From www.bridgewaterheritage.com



The location of the Friary



A Franciscan Friar

A friar is a member of one of the mendicant orders founded in the twelfth or thirteenth century; the term distinguishes the mendicants' itinerant apostolic character, exercised broadly under the jurisdiction of a superior general, from the older monastic orders' allegiance to a single monastery formalized by their vow of stability. A friar may be in holy orders or a brother. The most significant orders of friars are the Dominicans, Franciscans, Augustinians, and Carmelites.

The Grey Franciscan Friars may have come to Bridgwater as early as 1230, but it was in 1245 that Henry III ordered that some Franciscans he was sending should be found a site for a church and permanent buildings. Such a site was found in 1246. The friary, or convent, was soon set up. Building was still proceeding on the dormitory in 1278.

The first documentary evidence for Friarn Street is 1298, and we may presume that the house and grounds of the Friars Minor could be entered from somewhere along it via the gate, *porta fratrum minorum*. The Friars seem to have occupied only a modest area of

ground and did not apparently own property elsewhere, (unlike the Hospitalers of St John in Eastover).

It is probable that the Founder did not allow gifts of money to the friars, but this restriction must have been later relaxed as we can read of gifts to the Friars minor varying from 1/8 upwards but not usually more than 20/-. Sir Leonard Hakeluyt left £20 in 1413 to the fabric of the church in which he desired to be buried.. He asked in return that the friars pray for his soul. It was thought that to be buried within the consecrated precincts of a friary added to the security of the soul. In 1435, William, Lord of Botreaux, arranged for the bodies of some of his relatives to be transferred from the church at North Cadbury to the conventual church of the Grey Friars in Bridgwater.

Fr John Somer of the Grey Friars of Bridgwater, and later of Oxford from 1380 was a famous astronomer of that time. He was mentioned by Chaucer. He can be linked to the scientist, Roger Bacon (of Ilchester). He composed a calendar covering the years 1387 -1462, and a brief chronicle of the Bridgwater Convent.

The early church was rebuilt or extended, for rededication with a churchyard, in 1445. This church seems to have been of considerable size: 210ft (64 m) long by 52 ft (16 m) wide (exactly twice as wide as the street elevation of 32 Friarn Street).

The Friary was dissolved without obvious protest in 1538. *Memorandum*.

we the Warden & convent of the Grey Friars of Brygewater with one assent & consent without any manner of coercion or counsell do give our house into the hands of the lord visitor to the kings use desiring his grace to be goode and gracious to us. In witness we subscribe our names with our proper hands the xiiij day of September in the xxx year of king henry the viij John Herys warden, Thomas Howett, John Wake, Richard Harris, Gerard Morley, John Cogyn, Andreas Gocit, Robert Oliver.

In 1539, the king received £12 10s for lead £10 for elm and £10 for superfluous buildings associated with the former friary. Little more is heard until in the reign of Elizabeth I, when William Hodson claimed of John Davaige and Ellen, his wife, and William Saunders quiet possession under a lease, of certain messuages and buildings called the Grey Friars held by Friswide Hodson, under a lease from John Saunders, deceased. The Friary church was still standing in the 1642, as the King's Justices held a trial there (Percy Scholes, *The Puritans and Music*, 1934, p 240). If the Friary complex lay outwith the town ditch, whatever survived up to the Civil Wars may have been swept away to provide a clear line of fire for the town's substantial defensive circuit – the West Gate Alms Houses were probably demolished for this purpose.

Neither the site of the large church or of the other buildings of the friary have been located with any certainty.

Friar John Somer ca. 1340 -1410

John Somer was a contemporary of

Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1340 -1400). He was probably born in the 1340s and the last record of his receiving a grant was 10 October 1409, so he probably died in that year.

Somer seems to have entered the order of the *fratum minorum*, Franciscan friars, in the friary at Bridgewater. There were Somers in Bridgewater who were of some standing and who leased or owned property in Friarn Street. John Somer is a witness to a document in 1307, but this must be perhaps our man's father. John Somer appears in the Borough Archives in the 1330s and 1340s along with an Alice Somer (d 1352); perhaps his wife. Thomas Somer, co-executor of Alice's will may be her son. Later archives tell of Margaret, daughter of John Somer, in Bridgewater in 1405. Another John Somer appear in the archives in 1374, 1376, and 1379, but is not given the style *friar*, so perhaps not the same man.

Our John Somer, the author of a *Kalendarium* and other works, might be related to this family. It is safe to assume that Fr. John Somer was in Oxford by 1380, when he wrote his *kalendar ad meridiem Oxonie* for the meridian of Oxford). He was still a member of the Greyfriars convent in Oxford in 1394 and 1395, where he was recognised as an astronomer.

At Oxford, Somer would have had access to the Merton school of

astronomy. He would have found instruction and resources to stimulate his scientific investigations and resulted in the production of his *Kalendarium*. Chaucer, in his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, makes reference to the kalendar of the "reverent clerk Frere J Somer".

By 1380, Somer had established a reputation as an astronomer. The *Kalendarium* was produced for Joan of Kent, the Princess of Wales, and mother of Richard II. The Princess died in 1399, and he then received a royal grant from the new king, Henry IV. He continued writing astronomical and astrological treatises and updating the charts accompanying the kalendar thorough the 1390s. His reputation as an astronomer survived well into the fifteenth century and the horoscope figure and a copy of *Tabula Planetarum* where still being ascribed to him in the sixteenth century.

The *Kalendarium* is in four parts: a prologue, including instructions for use of the tables; the monthly kalendar; additional tables containing Zodiac Man and explanatory text; and eclipse tables. 43 manuscripts containing the kalendarium or parts of it survive.

Somer wrote a Chronicle, identified in a manuscript in the British Library *Chronica quedam brevis fratris Johannis Somour ordinis S Francisci de conventue ville Briggewater*. In this, are listed

every year from AD 1001 to 1532 and tabulated are the historical, religious, astronomical and political entries, probably in Somer's own hand between 1348 until 1402, when a great thunderstorm was noted in Taunton, and the Walsingham comet noted in the same year. Probably after Somer's death, the Chronicle records the laying of the foundation stone of the new church of the friars minor at Bridgwater between 9 and 10 o'clock in the morning of 4th March 1411.

It seem that John Somer was one of the leading, if not the leading, astrologer of his day. William Worcestre said he met an old man in 1478, Fr. John Wells, in Bridgwater then a tanner, who said he had been servant to John Somer.

John Somer left 40 marks for the library at the Bridgwater friary, and 200 marks for the new friary church.

Other works attributed to Somer are

Of Ille Days of the Yere (Days to be avoided in the year)

Canones pro veris motibus habendis planetarum : a perpetual calendar

Regule ad sciendum nati vitam secundum Johannem Somer ordinis minorum

Tabula medii motus solis in singulis 24 horis

Tabula proportionis diversitatis aspectus

Verus Motus Ultimo Decembri 1393
completus

A figure for casting a horoscope (in
the Corpus Christi Library,
Cambridge).

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John Somer*, The Chaucer Library,
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Links

[An article on almanacs](#)

[A version of the kalendarium copied
about 1417](#)

[Dictionary of National Biography](#)