

Friar Lane Independent Chapel and Its Burial Catacombs

By Richard Gosling



Front of Friar Lane Chapel, Nottingham; M. A. Hine

It was a paragraph in Alfred Stapleton's cheery 1911 tome *The Nottingham Graveyard Guide* that was largely to blame for the obsession that led to this article. The passage, beneath the heading 'FRIAR-LANE CHAPEL,' read as follows:

'This chapel (which must not be confounded with old Friar-lane Baptist Chapel in what is now called Park-street) was built in 1828 by a body of Congregationalists who thus early seceded from St. James-street Chapel. Orange, 1840, in the course of an extravagantly laudatory description of the structure, says:- "Underneath it are catacombs for the reception of 500 dead bodies, in one of which, as soon as a

coffin is deposited, the receptacle is covered over with a large flag stone, from Yorkshire, and made air-tight by cement, and there is a constant draught through the place, which is whitewashed and kept exceedingly clean...”¹

Burial catacombs in Friar Lane! Could they still exist? I decided to find out as much as I possibly could about this somewhat forgotten chapel and its sizeable catacombs.

Congregationalists were dissenters (also known as nonconformists). The term dissenting historically referred to Protestant groups and individuals whose religious outlook and practices did not align with those of the Church of England.

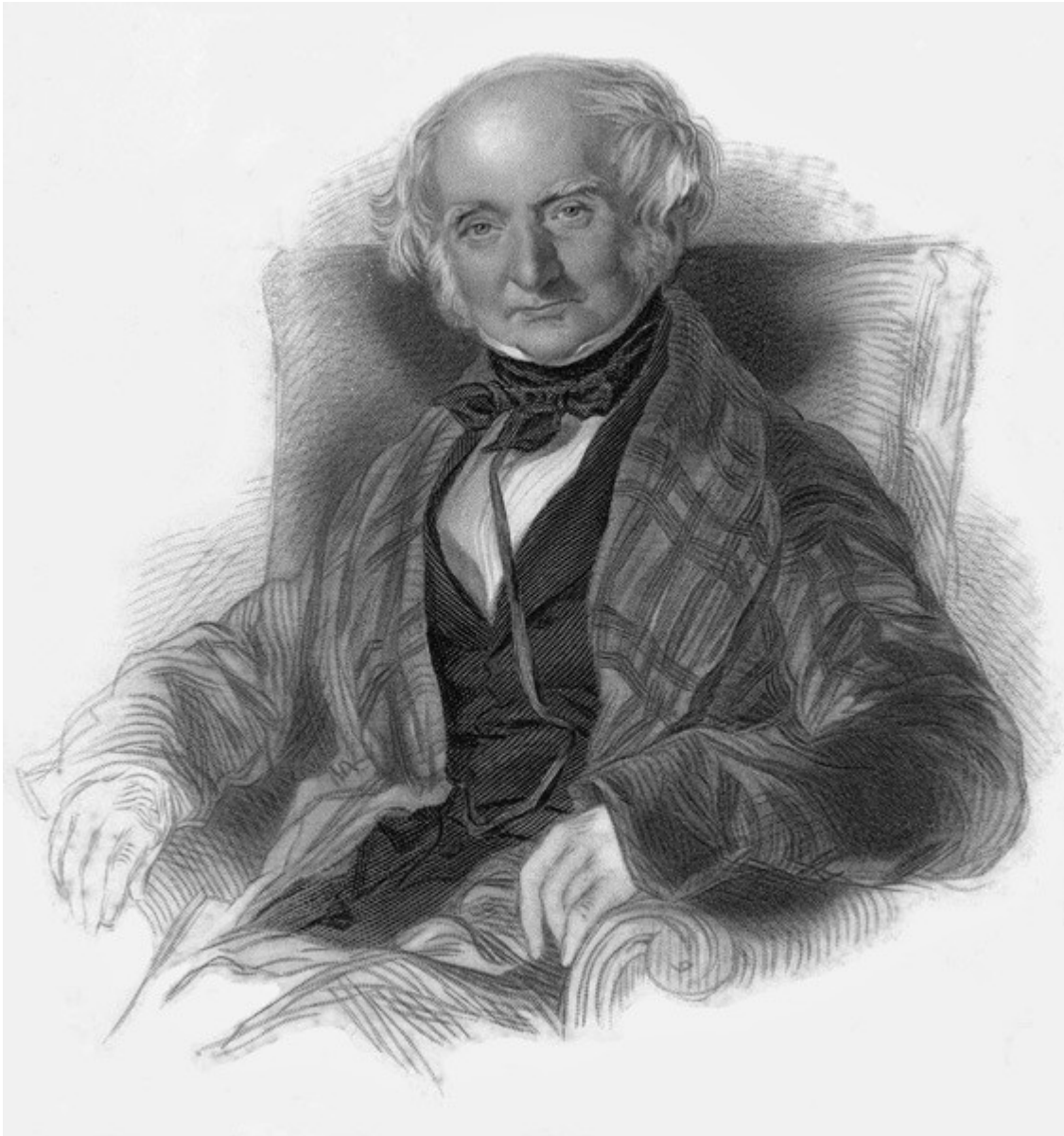
The Congregational (or Independent) movement emphasised the autonomy of each individual church. Nottingham’s first Congregational church was on Castle Gate. A second place of worship was established on St James’s Street in 1823, and it was a schism there that led to the building of the Friar Lane Independent Chapel, of which no above-ground traces survive.

The existence of Friar Lane Chapel coincided with a large increase in the town’s population, which more than doubled between 1821 and 1871, from 40,190 to 86,621. At the same time, the number of churches and chapels was increasing significantly – particularly nonconformist places of worship, which, at the time of an 1833 survey by Richard Hopper, were said to have 12,000 available spaces compared to a total of 5,800 in the Anglican sites.²

At this time, Friar Lane was narrower than it is today, eventually being widened (on the opposite side to the chapel site) in the 1920s.

Joseph Gilbert plays a large part in the story of Friar Lane Chapel, where he ministered for almost twenty-five years. Born in Lincolnshire on 20 March 1779, he arrived in Nottingham in 1825 with his wife Ann (née Taylor – a poet and writer) and their children, joining another minister at St James’s Street Chapel. Friction within the congregation resulted in the secession of Gilbert and his supporters, who celebrated communion in his house on 13 May 1827, subsequently meeting in the

Exchange Hall before securing land on Friar Lane on which to build a new place of worship.



The Reverend Joseph Gilbert; drawn by Josiah Gilbert, engraved by John Cochran

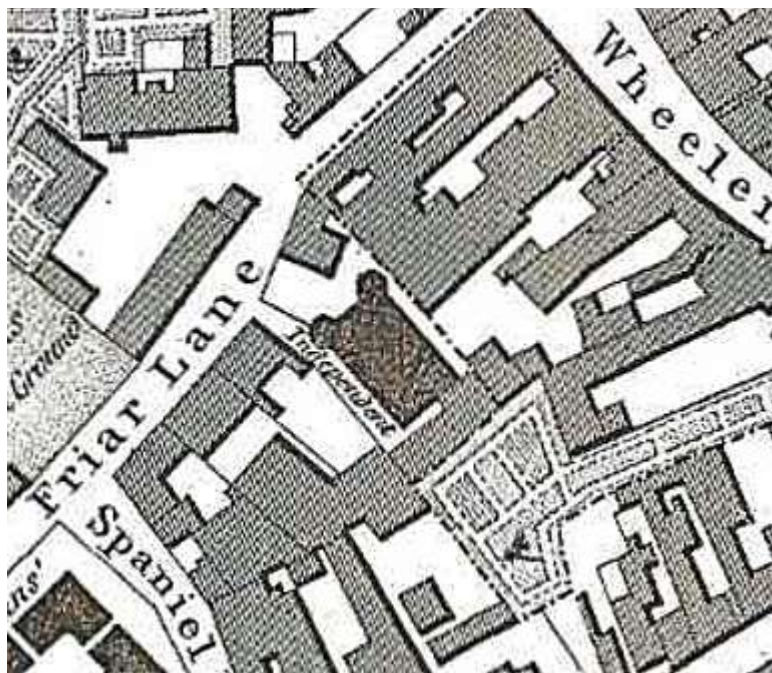
Thomas Bailey, in an entry for 1828 in the fourth volume of his *Annals of Nottinghamshire*, describes the new chapel, which had its first service on 17 April of that year:

‘It is a handsome gothic structure, though somewhat heterogeneous in style. Two octagon towers, 52 feet in height, and 10 feet 8 inches in diameter, at the entrance

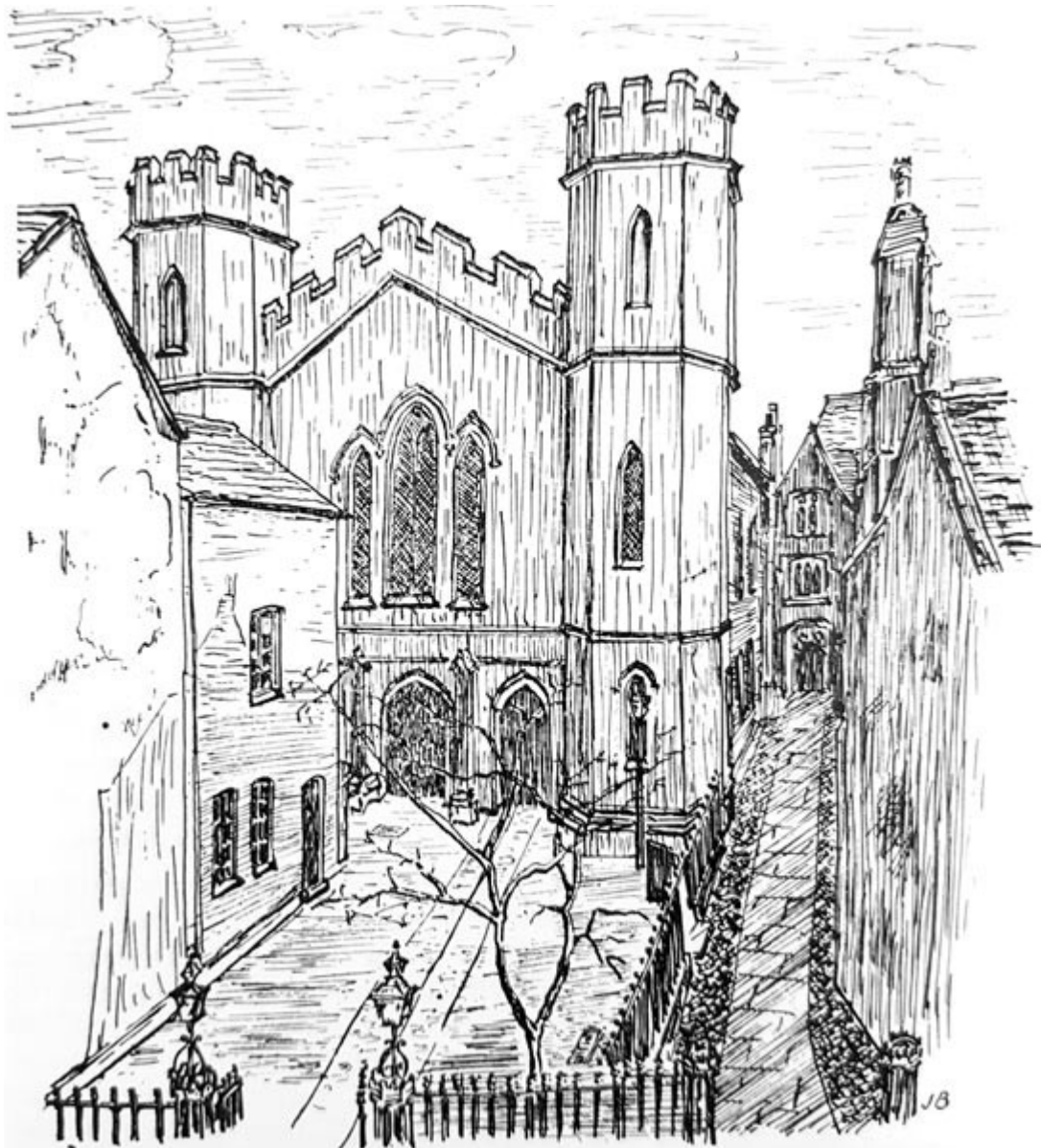
serve as staircases leading to the galleries for the congregation, and above these are two narrower galleries for the Sunday-school children... The centre part of the stairs in each tower is ingeniously constructed as a ventilator: one for the catacombs, and the other as a chimney for the furnace that warms the building.'³

James Orange's 'extravagantly laudatory' entry for the chapel in his *History and Antiquities of Nottingham, Volume II* ('It is an *original production*, of a highly cultivated taste; is a copy of none, but a pattern for all... and as far as a work of man can deserve the name, it may be called a *perfect chapel*'⁴) describes its setting:

'The approach to this most handsome building is out of Friar-lane, through a pair of iron gates leading into a small grass plat in front, through which is a broad pavement of flags, reaching to the chapel doors...'⁵



Detail from Staveley and Wood Nottingham map, 1831, showing the location of Friar Lane Independent Chapel



Friar Lane Church, by J. Bleakley

Excluding the upper galleries, the chapel had space for 750 worshippers⁶, and its architect was a Mr. John Wallen of Moorfields⁷. It was funded almost entirely by follower and benefactor Frances Greaves⁸, though the Gilberts' son Josiah was to reveal in later years that, at the time of her death in 1837, Miss Greaves 'had not made any provision respecting a large sum lent at the time of the erection of the chapel', a fact that 'pressed heavily afterwards upon the resources of the congregation.'⁹

On Friday 5 October 1827, with the chapel under construction, the *Nottingham Review* reported on plans for the addition of catacombs:

‘On Friday last, it was determined to build a cemetery under the chapel, on a new plan. The entrance is to be in front of the building down a number of stone steps, leading into a wide passage or aisle, the whole length of the chapel. On each side of this aisle, there will be a number of compartments, something like a nest of drawers when the drawers are out, each of these will admit a coffin lengthway, so that the feet on the one hand, and the head on the other hand, will be next to the passenger, as he walks up the aisle. When a corpse is deposited therein, the niche or compartment, is to be bricked up, so that all possibility of any noxious effluvia escaping will be completely prevented.’¹⁰

In the same edition, the *Review* covered an inquest at the Wheat Sheaf pub on Long Row into the death of one Robert Cross, who was to become a seemingly unlikely (and unexpected) first interment in the Friar Lane Chapel 'cemetery'.

On the previous afternoon, Cross had purchased some laudanum from a local druggist, stating that it was for his wife. At the time, laudanum (a mixture of opium and alcohol), which was readily accessible, unregulated and cheap, was widely used for all manner of ailments, but was also used recreationally and even as a means of committing suicide. The dangers – including the risk of accidental overdose – were generally recognised, but legislation to restrict its sale was not enacted until 1868.

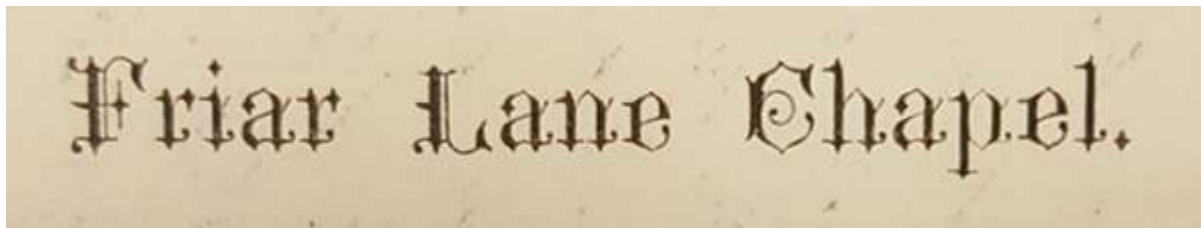
Cross drank the laudanum himself, as well as a quantity of ale, before - while at the Wheat Sheaf - becoming drowsy and falling to the floor. He had earlier told his neighbour ‘good bye, for the last time.’ A medical man was sent for, but attempts to save Cross’s life were in vain. The *Review* reported that Samuel Wood, a lacemaker, ‘deposed that the deceased had been subject to attacks of insanity for the last five months, and had been twice in the Lunatic Asylum.’¹¹ A verdict of insanity was reached.

The *Nottingham and Newark Mercury* reported on 6 October that Cross had been interred in the new chapel the day before - ‘...the first corpse buried in that spot.’¹² Work on the burial provision at the chapel must have been proceeding at pace.

The next interment didn’t take place until March 1828, with the chapel opening for services not long afterwards, on Thursday 17 April.

On the opening day, sermons were preached by Joseph Gilbert’s father-in-law, the Reverend Isaac Taylor, in the morning, and the Reverend Thomas Raffles – a well-known Congregational preacher ministering in Liverpool – in the evening, with the Reverend Gilbert taking his place behind the pulpit for the first time on the following Sunday.

Ann happily described the congregation at this time as being ‘chiefly drawn from the highways and hedges...’ (that is, the marginalised of society) ‘... where no shepherd ever went before’¹³, and she and her husband involved themselves with many of the liberal causes of the time.



Detail from Friar Lane Chapel stationery

Milestones for the chapel were many and varied. 1831, for example, saw the establishment of a provident society, while in 1833 Joseph Gilbert was appointed chair of the Congregational Union of England and Wales (set up in 1831 to support and advise its member churches).

In 1838, the chapel was registered for marriages. This followed the Marriage Act of 1836 which allowed nonconformists (and Catholics) to marry in their own places of worship and introduced non-religious civil ceremonies. The first marriage at Friar Lane Chapel took place in September 1839 between John Bennett (whose father officiated) and Amelia Hine, a sibling of the architect Thomas Chambers Hine.

Progress continued to be made, and 1841 saw the installation of an organ¹⁴, purchased second-hand, having originally been built for a Roman Catholic chapel in the late 18th century¹⁵. This organ was to remain at the chapel until 1884, when it was sold to Emmanuel Church on Woodborough Road, who repaired and enlarged it¹⁶, before eventually selling it in 1903 to Lady Bay Church, where it remained until 1932¹⁷.

Perhaps the most notable organist at Friar Lane Chapel was Edmund Hart Turpin. Turpin was born in Nottingham in 1835 and became the chapel's organist in 1847 at the tender age of 11, remaining in the role until 1850 when he moved on to St Barnabas on Derby Road. He was also a composer and served as Honorary Secretary of the Royal College of Organists from 1875 to 1907, having been permanently based in London from 1865. He was organist at the famous St Bride's Church on Fleet Street from 1888 until his death in 1907 and is buried at Highgate Cemetery.



Edmund Hart Turpin (detail from a photograph published in *The Tatler*, Vol. IX, No. 117, 23 September 1903)

Turpin had returned to Friar Lane Chapel on 8 May 1884 to 'open' the new organ that had been installed there after the sale of the old one to Emmanuel Church. The next day's *Nottingham Daily Express* reported that '...A fine collection of music had been arranged for the recital, and the announcement that Mr. Turpin was to appear was sufficient to bring a large audience. The organ delighted all who heard it, and the general opinion was that Messrs. C. Lloyd and Co., of Nottingham, had supplied a really magnificent instrument of much grandeur in tone and general excellence... the case was constructed by Messrs. Foster and Cooper from some excellent

designs by Messrs. [Samuel Dutton] Walker and [John] Howitt, the architects... On Sunday next Mr. Joseph Herbert, who for 35 years has given his services as organist to the chapel, will take the place at the new organ he so worthily filled at the old.’¹⁸

Another respected Friar Lane organist was Edward L Manning, born in 1864, who, in his lifetime, held such positions as chairman of Nottingham Education Committee (the Manning School was named after him), chairman of the Castle Museum and School of Art and Mayor of Nottingham (in 1922/23).

The Lloyd organ that Turpin inaugurated in 1884 had (and continues to have) an even more interesting afterlife than its predecessor. After Friar Lane Chapel closed in 1897, the organ was transferred to Friar Lane’s successor church, Friary Church in West Bridgford. By 1992, it was, perhaps unsurprisingly, in poor condition. The option of repair having been found to be prohibitively expensive, it was replaced by an electronic organ and sold to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Lusaka, Zambia, to where it was shipped over in pieces before being restored and installed by Stephen Cook and Dr Richard Godfrey in 1996. And there it remains to this day - a little piece of Nottingham history in southern Africa.



The Friar Lane Chapel Lloyd organ at the Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Lusaka, Zambia (image courtesy Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Cross)



The Friar Lane Chapel Lloyd organ at the Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Lusaka, Zambia
(image courtesy Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Cross)



The Friar Lane Chapel Lloyd organ at the Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Lusaka, Zambia
(image courtesy Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Cross)



The Friar Lane Chapel Lloyd organ at the Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Lusaka, Zambia
(image courtesy Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Cross)

But we are ahead of ourselves.

The year after the chapel's first organ was installed, *Original Hymns*, edited by the Rev. J Leifchild, was published. In *Autobiography and Other Memorials of Mrs Gilbert*, Josiah Gilbert states that his mother Ann contributed a remarkable seventy-six hymns to that volume, though he felt that they were 'not among her happiest efforts'¹⁹. In his assessment of his mother's contributions to the book, Josiah gives us the interesting background to one particular hymn, and in doing so provides a further insight into the matter of the Friar Lane catacombs:

'She needed a personal interest, and one of the hymns included in the collection owes its superiority to this. It was written for the funeral of a lady who, during the early years of my father's ministry at Nottingham, was familiarly called "the Deaconess," from her untiring, unobtrusive labours. There had been excavated in the solid rock under the chapel, vaults in the fashion of the Roman catacombs, and the scene was very striking, when, after a service in the chapel above, the dead

were borne with lights along the rough-hewn aisles below, and the mourning group, half hidden in the darkness, gathered round the spot, where the loved remains were to be sealed in their rocky tomb. Several of the honoured founders of “Friar Lane” lay there already, when this “young saint” was brought to join them, and the effect of the following lines, sung around the bier in those subterranean corridors, will not be forgotten by any who heard them...’²⁰

The hymn’s title in the Leifchild collection is ‘On the death of a young believer,’ and it is remarkable to think of the following words echoing around that forgotten, sacred underground space all those many years ago:

He comes, the Saviour comes,
His mourning church to thin;
The faithful few to peaceful tombs
How quickly gathered in!

Here fast the ransomed dead
Are sheltered from the strife;
Each slumbering in a quiet bed,
Till death is lost in life.

Here, mothers sink to rest,
Unheeding infant cries;
Here, in his labours richly blest,
The christian veteran lies.

And still, with happy tears,
Another saint we bring;
How old in faith, how young in years,
This gem of Christ our King!

Stir, stir thee, O my soul,
T’await the trumpet call;
His chariot wheels, how near they roll!
His shafts, how quickly fall!

E'en now, thy lamp to trim,
Turn, turn from earth away,
And follow those who followed him,
Through darkness, into day.²¹



Ann Gilbert, from a painting by Josiah Gilbert

On 8 December 1843, the *Nottingham Review* reported a further expansion in the chapel's operations in the form of a library:

‘FRIAR-LANE LIBRARY.- In addition to the public evening school, at the Friar-Lane Independent Chapel, a public library has also been established, catalogues of which are just printed, giving a list of well selected, useful, interesting standard and evangelical works, amounting to more than 250 volumes. The quarterly subscription is so trifling, that all classes may readily avail themselves of its advantages.’²²

All-in-all, the Gilberts and their fellow church members perhaps couldn’t have hoped for a more auspicious start to the life of the chapel. However, on the night of Sunday 15 November 1846, a devastating event was to occur.

Reverend Gilbert had officiated at the evening service as usual before the lights were turned out and the chapel locked up for the day at approximately 9pm. At around 10.30pm, a passer-by noticed unusual light coming from within the chapel, and a fire was discovered to be raging inside the building. The attending firemen were able to extinguish the blaze within an hour, but much damage had been done.

The *Nottinghamshire Guardian* reported that ‘the wood floor, on which the pulpit stood, the pulpit, the reading desk, and pews around it, were entirely destroyed, the gallery and organ extensively burnt, and considerable other mischief done...It was found that the vestry had been ransacked, two thirds of a bottle of wine drank, a cash box broken open, in which no money had been left, lucifer matches taken out of a cupboard, and the vestry door left wide open.’²³

Interestingly, the *Guardian* reporter commented that ‘... as the congregation are, for the most part, wealthy, the loss will not be seriously felt’²⁴, which seems to indicate that the chapel’s demographic had changed somewhat since Ann Gilbert commented that its congregation was ‘chiefly drawn from the highways and hedges’.

At around 2.45am, some time after the original fire had been extinguished, a further fire, put out without any great difficulty, broke out in a pew used by the mayor, William Cripps, this second fire having ‘evidently been smouldering for some hours...’²⁵

Speculation as to a possible motive was rife and a reward was offered for information leading to the discovery of the identity(ies) of the individual(s) who started the fires, but it seems that no-one was ever charged with the crime.

A temporary home for the congregation was found at Mary-Gate Chapel, with Friar Lane Chapel eventually reopening for worship several months later, on 11 April 1847.

The late 1840s saw the addition of schoolrooms adjoining the chapel, designed by Joseph and Ann's architect son, Isaac Charles Gilbert, who also designed the original People's College buildings that still stand today between College Street and The Ropewalk. By 1852, the chapel's Sunday school was said to be attended by two hundred children, who were taught by thirty-two teachers²⁶.

A particularly notable burial took place in the Friar Lane catacombs on 11 February 1848 – that of Mary Chambers, who, in 1843, had co-founded what shortly afterwards became the Midland Institution for the Blind, whose work continues to this day in the form of My Sight Nottinghamshire. The *Nottingham Journal* carried the following obituary:

'DEATHS. At her residence in Park Street, Nottingham, on Friday the 4th instant, Miss Mary Chambers, in the 7^{1st} year of her age... Deprived of sight from the age of two years, she nevertheless was enabled, by close study and unremitting effort, to acquire a thorough knowledge of classical literature, being well versed in the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin languages, and was also skilled in arithmetic, geography, and the use of the globes. For upwards of thirty years she had conducted a school in this town, and was an inestimable friend to the blind, having taught, gratuitously, very many blind children, and assisted in founding an institution in the town for such, the benefits of which are greatly acknowledged by numerous individuals of that afflicted class.'²⁷



Mary Chambers

Joseph Gilbert, meanwhile, beset by health problems, was only able to participate in occasional services from late 1850 onwards, and resigned his pastorate in November 1851 at the age of 72.

He died just over a year later, on 12 December 1852. His funeral took place at the General Cemetery on the following Sunday, preceded by a service at the chapel over which he had presided for nearly a quarter of a century. Several thousand were said to have been in attendance at the cemetery²⁸. Ann was to be reunited with him there fourteen years later, in 1866.

The next incumbent, the Reverend Edward Vincent, was appointed in 1853, but resigned only two years later. He was succeeded by the Reverend James Matheson, who was to remain in the position until his death in 1878, by which time he had served the chapel for almost as long as Joseph Gilbert. Matheson was followed by the Reverend James Alexander Mitchell, who resigned the post in 1893, after which the Reverend Clement F Bryer became the final incumbent before the closure of the chapel.

Following the series of Burial Acts that were introduced from 1852 onwards in response to health concerns about burial grounds, inner-city burials began to be restricted. Friar Lane Chapel's catacombs were not exempt, and an order was given on 30 January 1856 (subsequently published in the *London Gazette*) that burials there were to be 'discontinued forthwith'²⁹).

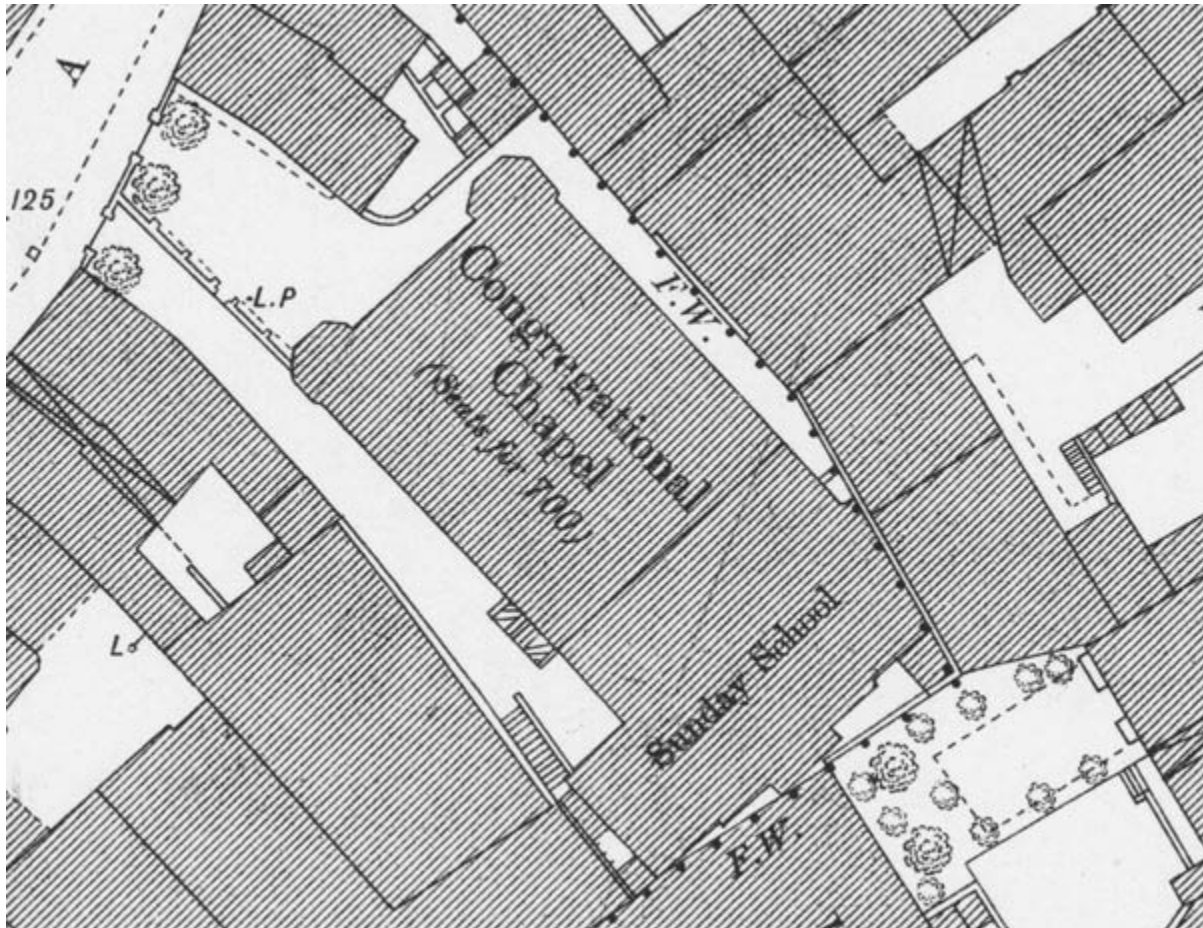
The Corporation's Sanitary Committee noted that 'The Church Cemetery lately opened, the General Cemetery recently enlarged, the Four Acres of land adjoining thereto set part as the Dissenters Cemetery and the St Anne's Parochial Cemetery within its hitherto unused portion of ground afford together for the present, ample provision for interment'.

The last recorded burial in the Friar Lane Chapel catacombs – that of Ann Pritchard, widow of Thomas Pritchard - took place on 19 March 1854. This was burial number 96 in the register. According to a notice in the *Nottinghamshire Guardian* of 16 March 1854, Thomas Pritchard was 'formerly of the Colonel Hutchinson'³⁰ - a pub on Castle Terrace, which was where the currently disused People's College site is today.

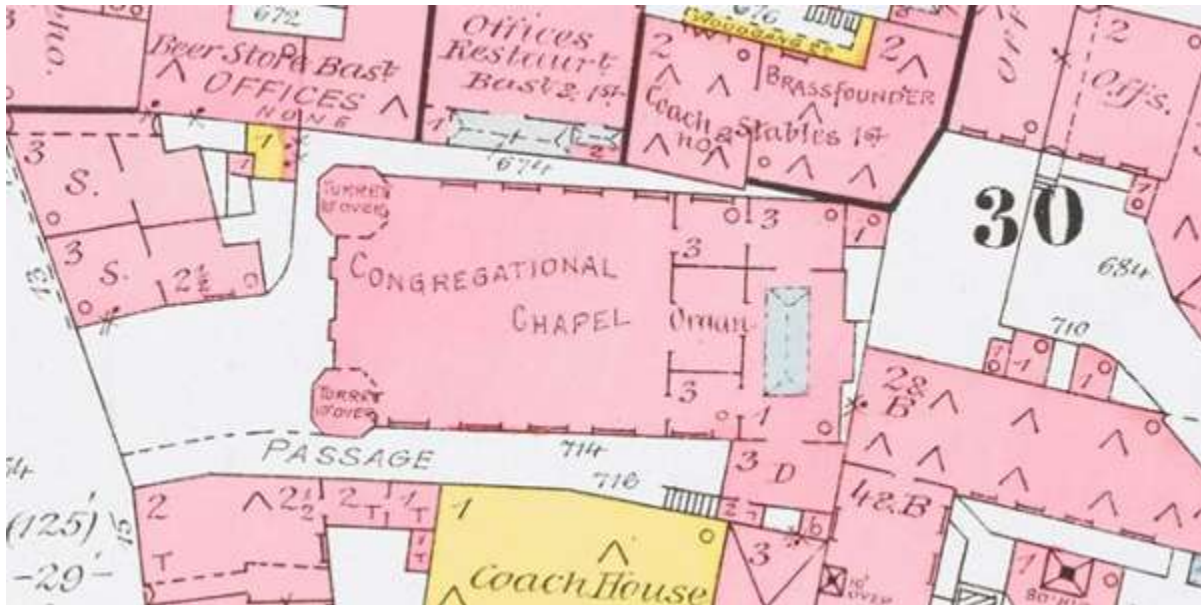
The chapel seemed to attract less attention as the years passed by, though an 1871 advertisement for a conference of the Liberation Society (which campaigned for the disestablishment of the Church of England) in the chapel lecture room indicates that it continued to be a thriving community with a liberal agenda.

In March 1874, a bazaar was held at the Mechanics' Hall with the aim of raising funds to improve the seating in the chapel and to reduce the debt incurred by the

building of its schoolrooms in the 1840s. On 9 November of that year, the *Nottingham and Midland Counties Daily Express* reported that ‘This place of worship, which has for some time been closed on account of alterations, was yesterday reopened. The interior has been repaired... and a decided improvement has been effected in comparison with the accommodation previously afforded...’³¹



1882 1:500 OS map detail showing Friar Lane Chapel (surveyed 1880)



1886 Goad insurance plan detail showing Friar Lane Chapel

White's Nottingham Directory of 1894 notes that, at that time, Friar Lane Chapel had a branch church at Bulwell and a mission room in Wool Alley³², which was between Barker Gate and Woolpack Lane at a time when those streets extended further eastwards than they do today. Its former location now sits beneath the footprint of the National Ice Centre.

Electric light was installed at Friar Lane Chapel in 1894, but, as the century drew to a close, the chapel's continued existence was being brought into question as a result of the demographic changes that were taking place in and around Nottingham - particularly the expansion of the suburbs.

It was felt that the nearby Castle Gate Congregational Church could cater for the needs of the town (shortly to be granted city status), and a proposal for a move to West Bridgford was discussed and subsequently agreed. Permission was sought and received from the Charity Commissioners and Friar Lane Chapel was put up for sale, the final services having taken place on Sunday 25 July 1897.



Friar Lane Congregational Chapel interior, 1897 (Nottingham Historical Film Unit); note the Lloyd organ in the background, which survived and is now at the Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Lusaka, Zambia



Friar Lane Congregational Chapel interior, 1897 (Nottingham Historical Film Unit)

In advance of the sale, a rather important matter had had to be dealt with – that of the ninety-six souls buried in the chapel’ catacombs.

The following public notice was published in September 1897:

‘THE CONGREGATIONAL CHAPEL, FRIAR LANE, NOTTINGHAM.

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN, that the Trustees of the above-named Chapel, in pursuance of a Licence under the hand of her Majesty’s Secretary of State for the Home Department, dated the 7th September, 1897, propose to remove the human remains buried in the vaults of the said Chapel, and to reinter the same in the General Cemetery, Nottingham.

Any desires which relatives of the deceased may have with regard to the reinterment of the remains should be forthwith communicated to us, WELLS and HIND, Solicitors, Fletcher-gate, Nottingham.’³³

The work took place shortly afterwards under the supervision of Nottingham's Medical Officer of Health, Philip Boobbyer, and is referred to in the City of Nottingham Annual Health Report for 1897, authored by Boobbyer himself:

'During October last I was entrusted with the removal of the bodies interred in the vaults of Friar Lane Chapel, preparatory to the sale of the latter and its site. The majority of the bodies had been buried in wooden coffins, and these were nearly all reduced to dust and gave rise to no trouble or nuisance in removal. Others, however, were in lead coffins, and in the case of one of these, though 70 years buried, the process of decay had been prolonged to such an extent as to cause a very serious and even dangerous nuisance when the blown lead burst, as it did in the course of its removal from the vault.'³⁴

On 28 January 1898, a notice of the auction of the chapel premises, to take place on 16 February at the Bridlesmith Gate mart of Messrs. Morris and Place, auctioneers, valuers and surveyors, appeared in the *Nottingham Daily Express*, the location of the chapel being noted as 'an excellent one for business purposes, being near the Market-place.'³⁵

The sale was not, however, effected at this time, and the premises appeared at another auction held by the same firm over a year later, on 26 April 1899, with local newspapers reporting afterwards that they had not been sold on this occasion either.



Friar Lane Chapel sale brochure, 1899

Eventually the chapel was purchased by the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) for use as a saleroom. CWS salerooms enabled buyers from the Co-operative retail societies to view products and place orders. The CWS had opened its original Nottingham saleroom on Lister Gate in 1886, and they moved into their new premises just after the turn of the century.



Friar Lane Congregational Chapel, 1900, seemingly in the process of being converted into the Co-operative Wholesale Society's new Nottingham salerooms; note the foreground, suggestive of below-ground works (photograph by Henson and Co.)

The first services of the new West Bridgford congregation had taken place on 5 September 1897 in the temporary location of a luncheon room at Trent Bridge cricket pavilion. It must have been a huge wrench for many of those who had previously worshipped at Friar Lane.

The successor church was known as Friary and the first services in its new Musters Road location took place in September 1901, another building on the site having provided the necessary accommodation in the period leading up to the opening.



Friary Church, Musters Road, West Bridgford, 2023 (author's photograph)

Friary Church did not forget its origins, and in 1927 it celebrated the centenary of the establishment of its mother church.

On Friar Lane, meanwhile, the former chapel's imposing, yet somewhat incongruous crenellated towers were to remain a feature of the local skyline for at
28 of 54

least a little while longer. They can be seen on a postcard published by Raphael Tuck & Sons that was in print between 1903 and 1959. The view – a painting by Charles Edwin Flower, who worked for Raphael Tuck & Sons for nearly forty years and was a member of the Nottingham Society of Artists - is from what is now the Maid Marian Way end of Friar Lane, looking down towards the junction with Spaniel Row.



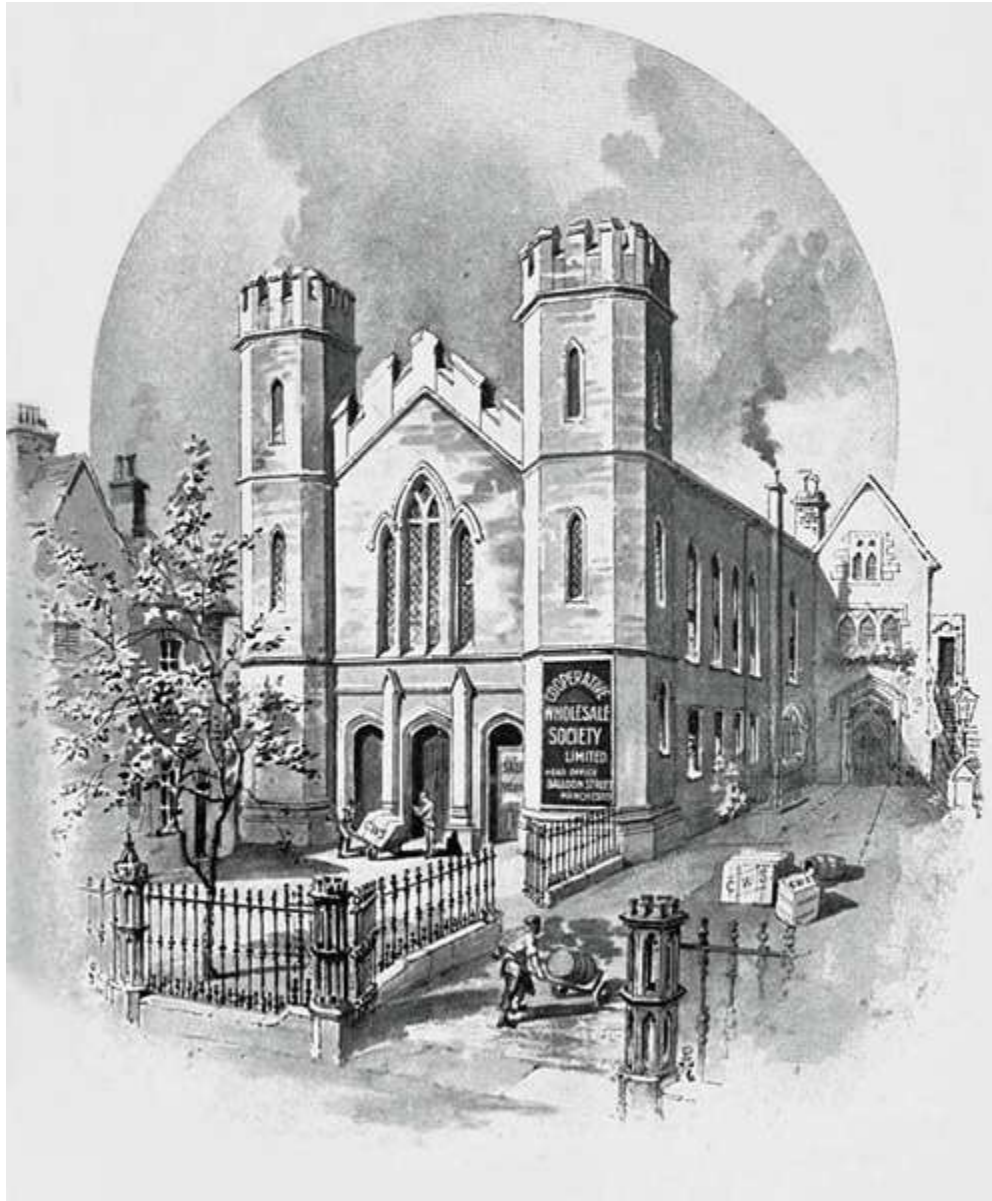
Painting of Friar Lane by Charles Edwin Flower, as published in postcard form by Raphael Tuck & Sons; note the Friar Lane Chapel towers on the left-hand side of the image

The saleroom in the old chapel is described in the 1912 *CWS Annual*:

‘On entering, there is a clear floor space of 48ft. by 42ft. The ground floor is occupied by the grocery and grocery productive departments, and a representative display of samples is tastefully arranged on counters and tables, while handsome showcases are placed throughout. What was originally the vestry is now the manager’s office.

‘A wide staircase leads to the gallery which completely encircles the room. This is occupied by the drapery, woollens, boots, furnishing, and crockery departments.

The millinery and mantles have a special room on the ground floor at the rear of the building.³⁶

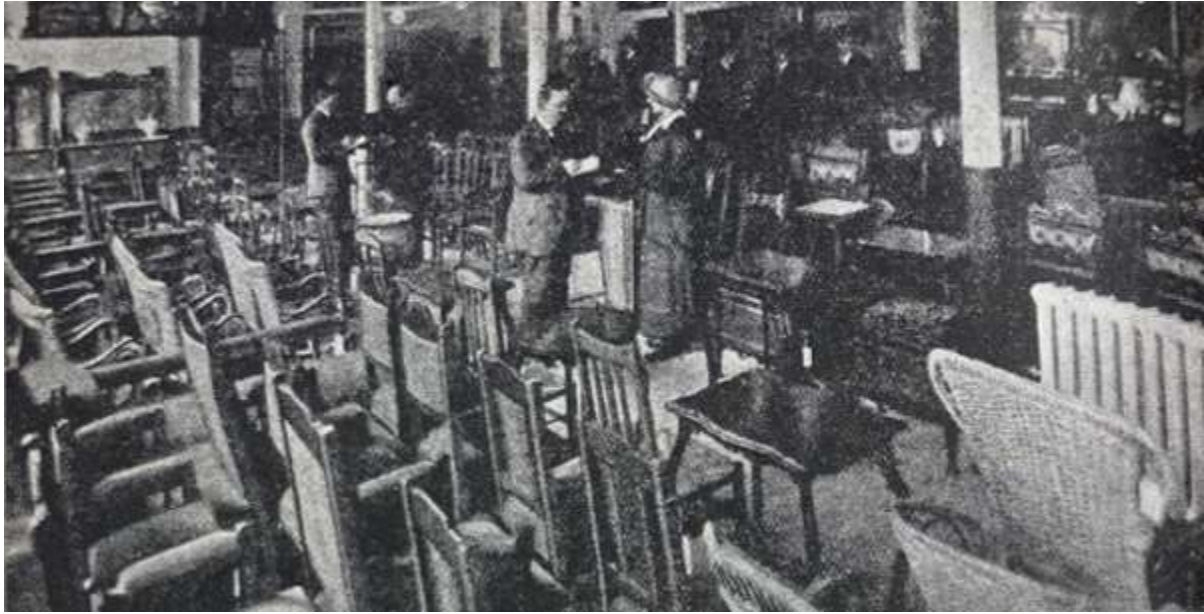


An illustration of Friar Lane Chapel after its sale to the Co-operative Wholesale Society (from the 1912 CWS Annual)

A 1916 article in the CWS members' magazine *The Wheatsheaf* reported on an extension and remodelling of the saleroom that had increased the total floor space to 13,700 square feet – more than six times the original area – and doubled trade within the space of three months³⁷. It seems that it was at the time of this extension that a floor was put in to divide the former chapel space in two vertically.



The grocery saleroom in the CWS's Friar Lane premises (photograph published in *The Wheatsheaf*, 1916)

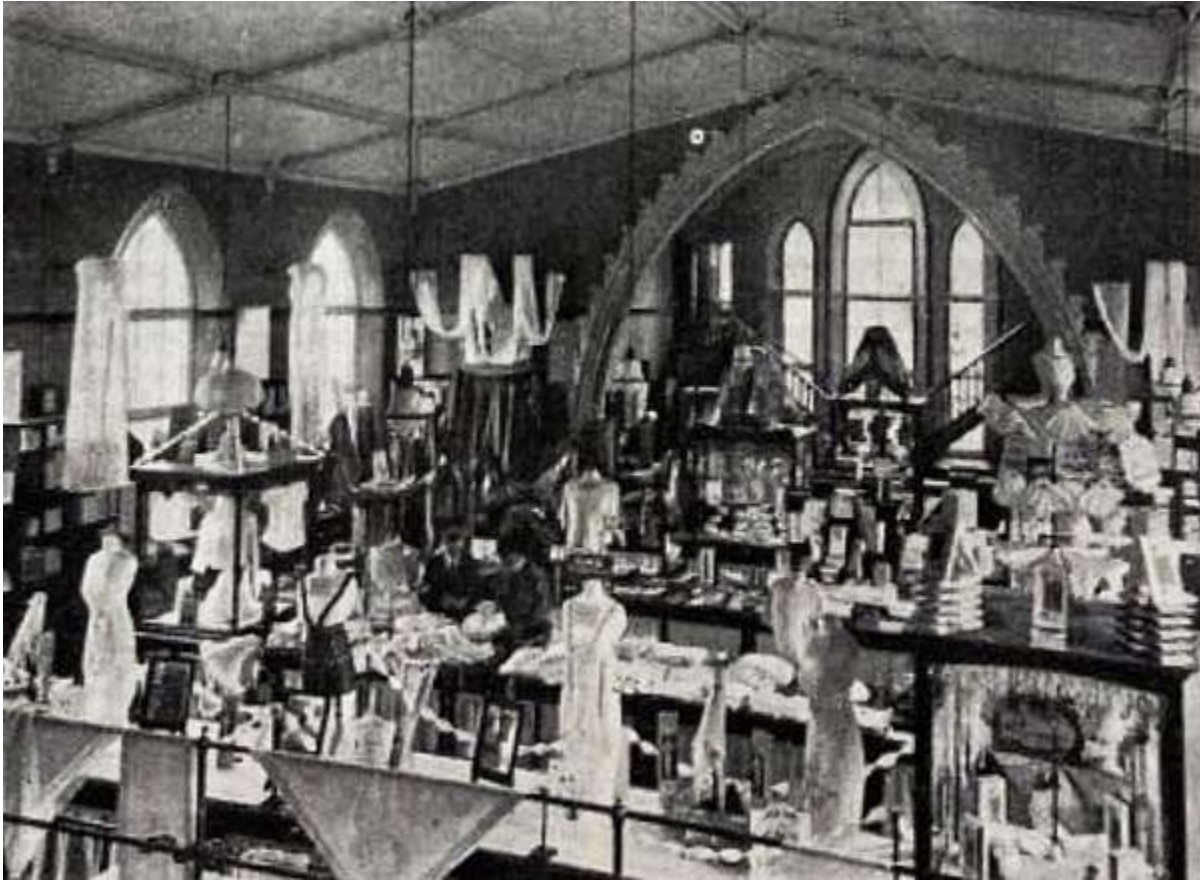


The furniture saleroom in the CWS's Friar Lane premises (photograph published in *The Wheatsheaf*, 1916)

The July 1924 edition of *The Producer*, a magazine for employees of co-operative societies, carried another report of the Nottingham saleroom, complete with photographs of two areas - the grocery saleroom on the ground floor and the drapery saleroom on 'the upper storey' - which, it can be seen, was the upper half of the former chapel space, where the gallery was originally located. The article also noted that 'behind' the grocery saleroom was 'a good range of furniture, musical instruments, hardware, and similar goods.'³⁸



The grocery saleroom in the CWS's Friar Lane premises (photograph published in The Producer, 1924)



The CWS drapery saleroom in the main area of the former Friar Lane Chapel, which had been divided vertically in two by the time of this photograph (published in *The Producer*, 1924)

The author of the article considered that, since the chapel had been ‘converted to commercial interests that seek to develop the altruistic idea’, there was ‘no incongruity in the architectural features of the upper storey where drapery, millinery, clothing, and the score of branches associated with textiles are displayed for the incitement of loyalty among the Midland managers...’³⁹

At the time of the article, an exhibition of Nottingham lace had been installed – a forerunner in a sense of the Lace Hall that occupied the former High Pavement Unitarian Chapel (now a Pitcher & Piano pub) in the 1980s.

No mention is made in any of these sources of what use (if any) was made of the catacombs - referred to as ‘extensive Vaults’ in the 1898 sale particulars - though a news report in the *Nottingham Journal* of 22 November 1940 includes ‘C.W.S., Friar-

lane' in a list of air raid shelters in an article highlighting an appeal for wardens⁴⁰, which suggests that the catacombs may well still have been accessible at that time.

The 1930s saw the beginnings of an unseemly tussle between Nottingham City Council and the CWS – who by that time wished to move from their Friar Lane premises - over the site of the Collin's Almshouses on Carrington Street, which had been put up for sale by the trustees with a view to moving their residents to a more tranquil location away from the busy city centre.

In spite of the extension to the Friar Lane premises that had taken place at around the time of the First World War (the chapel's impressive towers, no longer in evidence on aerial photographs from the 1920s, having presumably been removed at that time), they were no longer deemed adequate.

The CWS purchased the almshouse site in 1936, with the *Nottingham Evening Post* reporting at the time that it was 'probable' that the Friar Lane saleroom business would be 'transferred in its entirety to the building to be erected on the new site and that new departments will be added.'⁴¹

The council and the CWS became involved in a dispute over the CWS's proposals. Also at stake, of course, was continued survival (or otherwise) of the remaining parts of Friar Lane Chapel.

The Second World War interrupted matters, a public enquiry took place in 1949, and the whole sorry story dragged on for several more years before the council agreed the purchase the site. By March 1955, work to level it for use as a temporary car park had begun, inevitably accompanied by a debate between those who viewed the derelict almshouses as an eyesore and those who viewed them as important buildings that should have been given a preservation order.

At this point, a decision seems to have been made to retain the Friar Lane site as a CWS base and to redevelop it, which effectively signed the death warrant of remains of the old chapel, which were demolished soon afterwards.

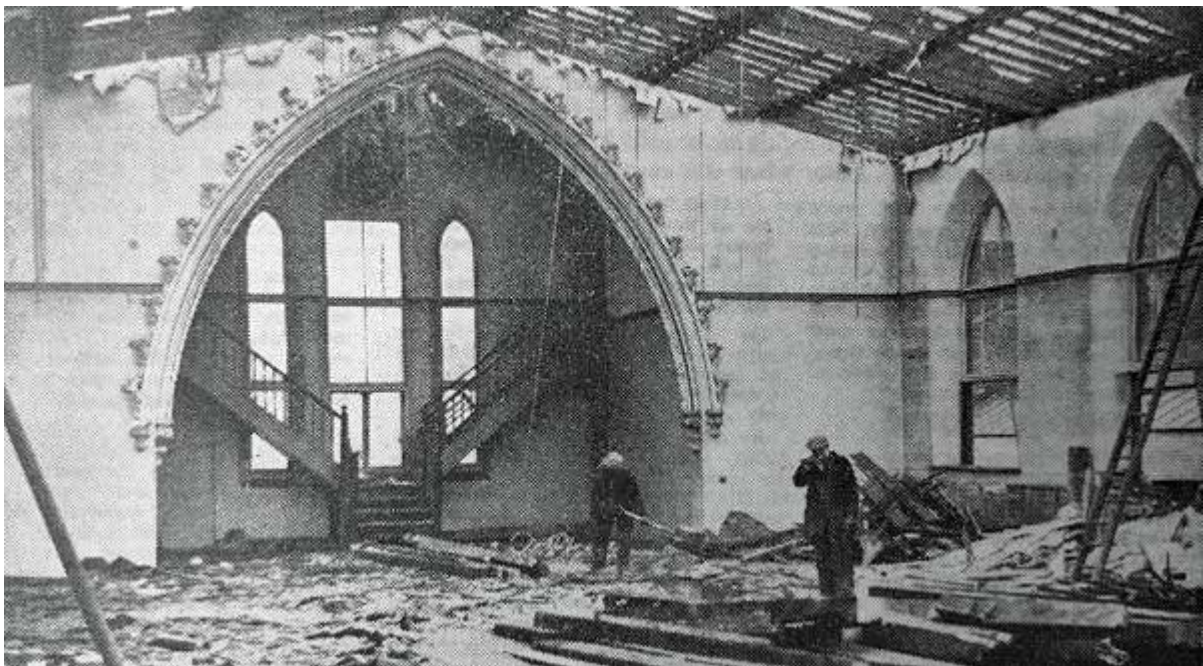


An aerial photograph showing the CWS Friar Lane premises in 1953, with the former chapel building clearly visible

On 13 April 1957, the *Nottinghamshire Guardian* carried a report of the site demolition work that was in progress at that time – in particular, the uncovering of ‘the graceful, decorated arch of a nonconformist chapel...seen for the first time by many people who work in the commercial offices in Friar-lane.’⁴²



A photograph taken during the demolition of the former Friar Lane Chapel building in 1957 (published in the Nottinghamshire Guardian on 13 April of that year)



Another photograph showing the demolition of the former Friar Lane Chapel in 1957, published in the Nottinghamshire Guardian on 13 April of that year

With the resources that we have today, both online and offline, it is a relatively simple matter to identify that there was once a chapel on the site, and to find out a little more about the history of that chapel. This was evidently not the case in 1957. Remarkably, the *Guardian* reported that ‘Not until the Nottingham Central Library referred to a recently discovered map of the town in 1851 was the identity of the chapel definitely established.’⁴³

The catacombs are mentioned briefly, but what may or may not have remained of them is left unclear:

‘Under the chapel were catacombs for 500 bodies, but the coffins had been removed many years ago, and to-day only a vault slab remains for the demolition workers’ hammers.’

A four-storey building, which still exists, was to replace the existing arrangement of structures, with the report also noting that ‘While test borings were being made by mining engineers to determine the strength and depth of the foundations, a small hole in the concrete revealed an old stone staircase. No one knows yet where these stairs lead. This might be an exciting discovery of the entrance to caves unexplored for centuries. But historians and archaeologists must wait until the demolition work reaches ground level.’⁴⁴

Reading this all these years later, it seems odd that no-one suggested that the staircase might lead down to the former burial catacombs.



The new building on the Friar Lane Chapel site, 1973, with a branch of the Co-operative Bank on the ground floor

Here the trail goes cold. All my efforts to find further reports of the demolition – or, indeed, any references at all to the catacombs space between the year of demolition and the present - have been unsuccessful.

Plans of the new building erected on the site show a basement and a smaller sub-basement. The basement is currently occupied by a bar, which I have visited, and the sub-basement is used for storage purposes. Employees I have spoken to say

that they have no knowledge of any features on the premises that might once have formed part of the catacombs.



The former chapel site in 2022; the ground floor and basement of the building that replaced the former chapel/original CWS saleroom premises is now occupied by the Bierkeller chain (author's photograph)

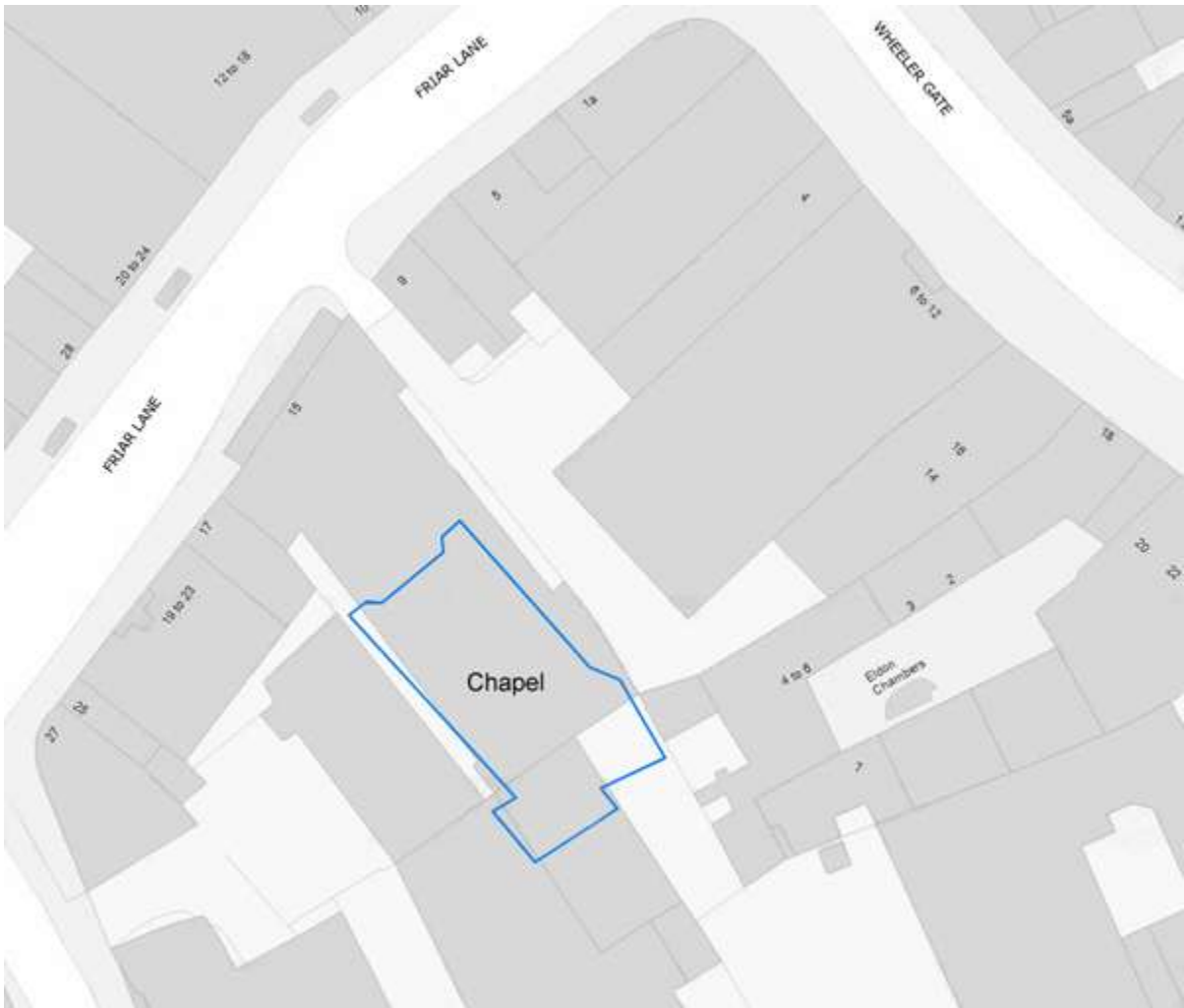


Image showing the footprint of Friar Lane Chapel superimposed on a modern-day street plan



The Bierkeller basement bar in 2023 (author's photograph)

In the same year that the demolition of their former home was taking place, Friary Church was celebrating and commemorating its sixtieth anniversary with a thanksgiving service at Trent Bridge cricket pavilion and the launch of a booklet entitled *Sixty Years of Congregationalism in West Bridgford*, written by Dr P. E. Kent.

Confusingly, although the booklet states of the original Friar Lane chapel that 'The building has now almost completely disappeared', it also comments that 'a few relics of doors and windows only survive at the corner of Spaniel Row.'⁴⁵ Perhaps they had been purchased around the time of the demolition, moved the short distance down the street and incorporated into another building.

The *Guardian Journal* of 17 August 1957, meanwhile, reporting on Friary Church's commemorative celebrations, informed its readers that 'It is interesting to mention that one door of the original church premises in Friar-lane is still in existence',

without giving any further detail⁴⁶. Who knows – maybe that door languishes to this day in some forgotten basement or anteroom.

As well as the mysterious ‘corner of Spaniel Row ‘relics, the *Sixty Years of Congregationalism in West Bridgford* booklet contains a list of items that had once resided at the mother church and were still in place at the West Bridgford site in 1957, together with details of a feature that was sadly lost along the way:

‘Friar Lane contributed not only the large financial bequest to the founding of the new Church, but also a large and ornate carved pulpit to the school hall... and the present organ, which has now been in use for seventy-three years, since 1884... The old pulpit was removed from the school hall when the existing stage was erected, and the remaining physical links with Friar Lane are the organ, four of the Vestry chairs and the memorial plaque to the Rev. Gilbert, which survives as an example of the decorative style of the original chapel.’⁴⁷

‘...The carved rostrum and pulpit from Friar Lane which... [the stage] replaced were found to be too heavily worm infested to be usable for other purposes and had to be destroyed.’⁴⁸

In 1968, it was announced that the CWS saleroom on the site of the old chapel was to close as part of a rationalisation process, with the loss of 23 jobs⁴⁹. It had not been decided at that time what would happen to the saleroom space, but the site’s links to the Co-operative movement were to remain until the 1990s, when the Co-operative Bank there was converted into a pub.

Friary Church, having become part of the United Reformed Church in 1972, celebrated its centenary in 1997 with the publication of an updated version of *Sixty Years of Congregationalism in West Bridgford* entitled *Friary Church 1897 – 1997* (P. E. Kent, Lorna O. Kent, et al) and a book of reminiscences, as well as a special service at Trent Bridge pavilion, exactly 100 years from the original service in that location. A series of other events were planned, including an exhibition and a walk from the former site of Friar Lane Chapel to its West Bridgford successor.

Sadly, Friary Church closed in 2022 due to declining membership, thus bringing to an end a 195-year history that had begun with that first communion in Joseph Gilbert's house in 1827.

The church building is now a mosque.

A number of items from Friary Church subsequently appeared at auction, but none seemed to have any provenance linking them to the original Friar Lane site. Thus, aside from the 1884 organ presently residing in Zambia, the only item from Friar Lane Chapel that I know still exists (archival documents excepted) is the ornate memorial to Joseph Gilbert, which remains in situ at the former Friary Church, covered up in line with the building's current use. The wording on the memorial, which I viewed during a visit to Friary before its closure, reads as follows:

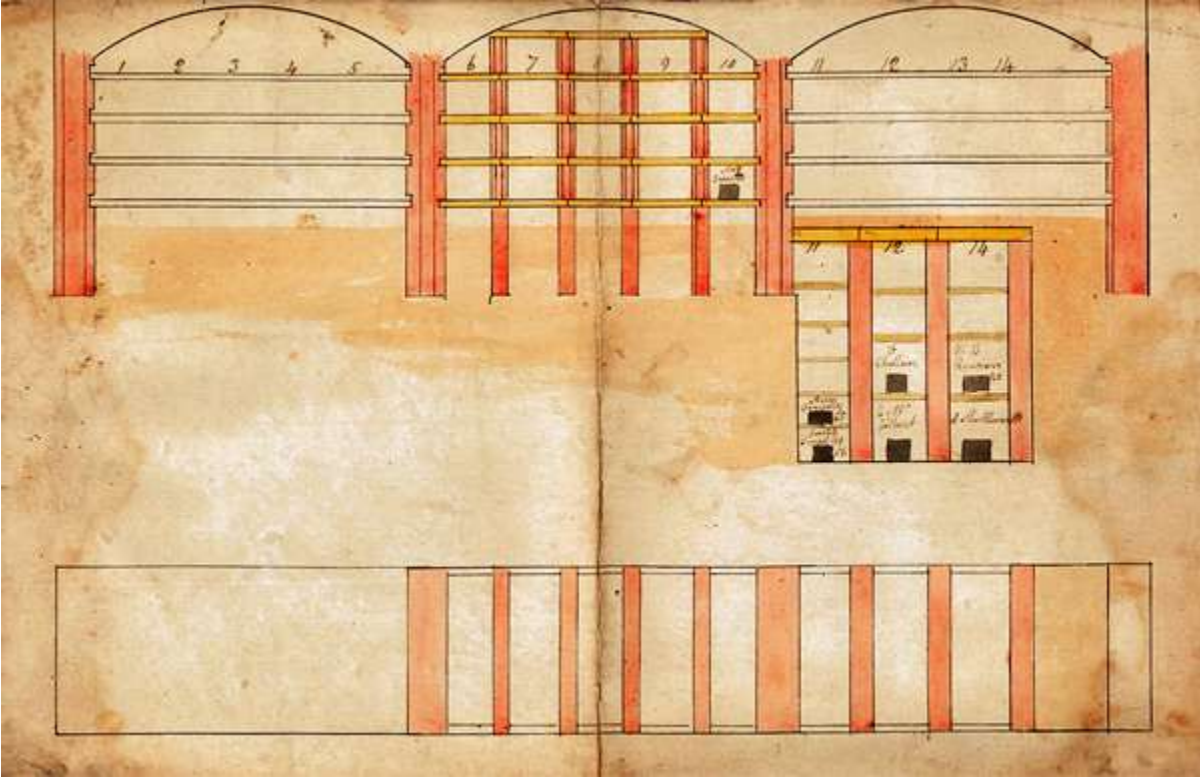
‘TO THE MEMORY OF THEIR FIRST PASTOR, THE REVEREND JOSEPH GILBERT, THE CHURCH AND CONGREGATION ASSEMBLING IN THIS CHAPEL HAVE ERECTED THIS TABLET. A FAITHFUL COURSE OF PUBLIC SERVICE DURING MORE THAN FORTY YEARS AS CONGREGATIONAL MINISTER, TUTOR AND THEOLOGICAL WRITER COMMENDED HIM TO THE AFFECTIONATE REGARDS OF ALL WHO CAME WITHIN HIS INFLUENCE. HE DIED DECEMBER THE 12TH 1852, AGED 74 YEARS.’



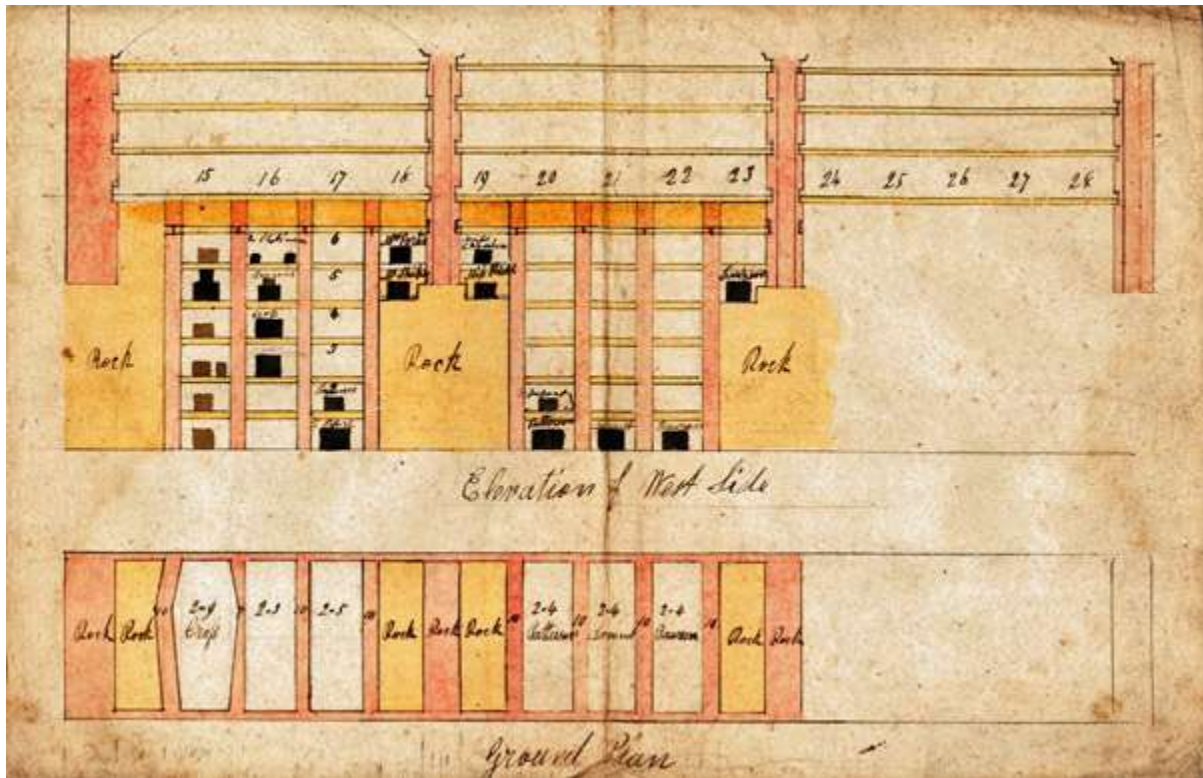
The Joseph Gilbert memorial, originally located in Friar Lane Chapel and subsequently moved to Friary Church after the closure of the former (author's photograph, 2022)

The University of Nottingham's Manuscripts and Special Collections archive holds a number of records and registers relating to Friar Lane Chapel as part of its Friary Church collection⁵⁰, but records relating specifically to the burial catacombs proved elusive until, thanks to a discovery elsewhere, I was able to view a wonderful, original plan of them that was accompanied by a book containing the original burial notes for each vault in use at that time.

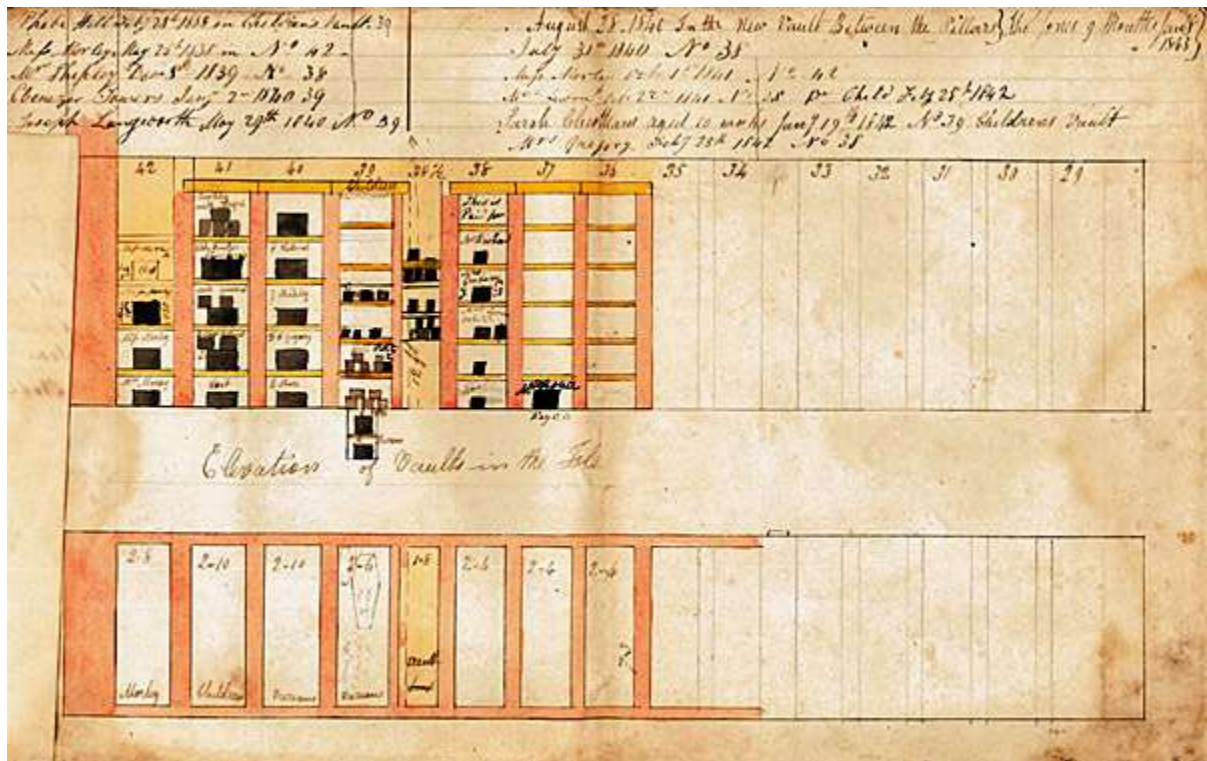
The plan did not move me any further forward in terms of establishing where the catacombs lay in relation to the chapel itself, and at what depth, but it was nevertheless a very special moment when I saw it for the first time.



A section of the Friar Lane Chapel catacombs vault plan



A second section of the Friar Lane Chapel catacombs vault plan



A third and final section of the Friar Lane Chapel catacombs vault plan

One more pilgrimage remained – a visit to the General Cemetery to pay my respects to the last resting place of those who were originally interred in the Friar Lane burial catacombs.

An earlier encounter with the vagaries of the General Cemetery records held at Nottinghamshire Archives while researching another matter meant that I was able to locate the burial site on the cemetery plans without too much difficulty. Five plots had been purchased. It seemed likely that there would be some sort of grave marker, and, although the layout and features of the cemetery had changed a little over time, I had a good idea of where I needed to look when I visited.

233	7025	7021	7020	7027	7024	7027	7022	7024	7022	7027	7024
234	7026	7015	7027	7026							
235	7024										
236											
237											
238											
239											
240											
241											
242											
243											
244											
245											
246											
247											
248											
249											
250											
251											
252											
253											
254											
255											
256											
257											
258											
259											
260											
261											
262											
263											
264											
265											
266											
267											
268											
269											
270											
271											
272											
273											
274											
275											
276											
277											
278											
279											
280											
281											
282											
283											
284											
285											
286											
287											
288											
289											
290											
291											
292											
293											
294											
295											
296											
297											
298											
299											
300											

Detail from a General Cemetery plan, showing the five graves that were purchased for the reinterment of the remains from the Friar Lane Chapel catacombs

In the event, on arrival at the part of the cemetery in which I had calculated that the remains lay, it took me only a short while to find the exact site.

It was marked by a modest memorial stone, and the stone's inscription read as follows:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF 91 PERSONS WHOSE REMAINS, ORIGINALLY INTERRED IN THE VAULTS OF FRIAR LANE CHAPEL, NOTTINGHAM, BETWEEN THE

YEARS 1827 AND 1850, WERE REMOVED THENCE IN OCTOBER 1898, AND NOW
REST BENEATH THIS SPOT



The Friar Lane Chapel gravestone in the General Cemetery in 2023 (author's photograph)



An aerial view of part of the General Cemetery, with the approximate site of the Friar Lane Chapel reinterments marked with a red dot (author's addition)

I paused to reflect on the journey that had brought me to this point, and to think about the journeys of the people who lay beneath my feet, drawn together in both life and death by their faith.

I noticed that there was a discrepancy between the mention of '91 persons' on the gravestone and the number of individuals listed in the Friar Lane Chapel burial register (96).

Subsequent consideration of a duplicate entry in the General Cemetery order books, two entries that do not appear in the chapel burial register, several entries in the chapel register that do not appear in the cemetery order books, two bodies noted in the order books as having been taken to Mansfield, and a suggestion that two individuals (including the suicide victim Robert Cross) were buried in the grave of a relative elsewhere in the cemetery, left me no closer to being able to definitively reconcile the difference⁵¹.

The slightly haphazard way in which the records were set down, together with the fact that the reinterments had to take place at all, is regrettable, but at least something remains to remind us of these souls, once part of a vibrant religious community in the heart of Nottingham, who were able to rest in the Friar Lane catacombs for a while at least before their sleep was disturbed by the march of progress.

May 2026.

Select Bibliography

Reverend John C. Weller, *Say to the Wind: The Revival of Religion in Nottingham 1780-1850* (1957)

Reverend John C. Weller, MA, *The Revival of Religion in Nottingham 1780-1850* - Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of Bachelor of Divinity, May 1957

J. V. Beckett (ed.), *A Centenary History of Nottingham* (1997)

Anna Brereton, *Morphinomania in the 19th century* (2020 – accessed at <https://www.nts.org.uk/stories/morphinomania-in-the-19th-century>)

¹ Alfred Stapleton, *The Nottingham Graveyard Guide* (1911), p. 57

² *Nottingham Journal*, 13 December 1833, p. 3

³ Thomas Bailey, *Annals of Nottinghamshire, Vol. IV* (1855), p. 365

⁴ James Orange, *History and Antiquities of Nottingham* (1840), p. 813

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 812

⁶ William White, *History, Gazetteer, and Directory of Nottinghamshire, and the Town and County of the Town of Nottingham* (1832), p. 153

⁷ William Howie Wylie, *Old and New Nottingham* (1853), p. 118

⁸ George Thomas Coster, *Pastors and People: A Centenary Memorial of Fish-Street Congregational Church, Hull* (1869), pp. 53-4

⁹ Josiah Gilbert (ed.), *Autobiography and other Memorials of Mrs Gilbert* (1878), p. 349

- ¹⁰ *Nottingham Review*, 5 October 1827, p. 3. ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *The Nottingham and Newark Mercury*, 6 October 1827, p. 3
- ¹³ Gilbert (ed.), *Autobiography and other Memorials of Mrs Gilbert*, p. 310
- ¹⁴ *Ann Taylor Gilbert's Album* - with an introduction and biographical notes by Christina Duff Stewart (1978), p. 584
- ¹⁵ *The Bolton Evening News*, 10 October 1903, p. 2
- ¹⁶ <https://southwellchurches.nottingham.ac.uk/nottingham-emmanuel/horgan.php>
- ¹⁷ *The Nottingham Journal*, 22 September 1932, p. 4
- ¹⁸ *Nottingham Daily Express*, 9 May 1884, p. 6
- ¹⁹ Gilbert (ed.), *Autobiography and other Memorials of Mrs Gilbert*, p. 387. ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Rev. J. Leifchild, D. D. (ed.), *Original Hymns* (1842), Hymn 95
- ²² *Nottingham Review*, 8 December 1843, p. 5
- ²³ *The Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 20 November 1846, p. 3. ²⁴ *Ibid.* ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ *Ann Taylor Gilbert's Album*, p. 585
- ²⁷ *Nottingham Journal*, 11 February 1848, p. 5
- ²⁸ Gilbert (ed.), *Autobiography and other Memorials of Mrs Gilbert*, p. 414
- ²⁹ *London Gazette*, 5 February 1856 (Issue 21846), p. 422
- ³⁰ *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 16 March 1854, p. 8
- ³¹ *Nottingham and Midland Counties Daily Express*, 9 November 1874, p. 3
- ³² William White, Limited, *White's General and Commercial Directory of the Borough of Nottingham* (1894), p. 258
- ³³ *Nottingham Daily Guardian*, 16 September 1897, p. 4
- ³⁴ Philip Boobbyer, *The City of Nottingham Annual Health Report for 1897*, p. 65
- ³⁵ *The Nottingham Daily Express*, 28 January 1898, p. 4
- ³⁶ *The Co-operative Wholesale Societies Limited Annual for 1912*, p. lxvi
- ³⁷ *The Wheatsheaf*, 1916
- ³⁸ *The Producer*, Vol VIII, July 1924. ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *The Nottingham Journal*, 22 November 1940, p. 5
- ⁴¹ *The Nottingham Evening Post*, 17 December 1936, p. 7
- ⁴² *The Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 13 April 1957, p. 3. ⁴³ *Ibid.* ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ Dr. P. E. Kent, *Sixty Years of Congregationalism in West Bridgford* (1957), p. 8
- ⁴⁶ *The Guardian Journal*, 17 August 1957, p. 4
- ⁴⁷ Kent, *Sixty Years of Congregationalism in West Bridgford*, p. 8. ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11
- ⁴⁹ *Evening Post and News*, 17 February 1968, p. 11
- ⁵⁰ <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/manuscriptsandspecialcollections/collectionsindepth/non-conformistchurches/friary.aspx>
- ⁵¹ The Nottinghamshire Archives catalogue reference for the General Cemetery order book containing details of the Friar Lane reinterments is CA/GC/VIII/21

Newspapers were mostly accessed through the British Newspaper Archive, a notable exception being the *Nottinghamshire Guardian* of 13 April 1957, which was accessed at the University of Nottingham's Manuscripts and Special Collections facility at Kings Meadow.

Special thanks to:

Jean Hudson

City Archaeologist Scott Lomax

The Local Studies team at Nottingham Central Library (Rebecca in particular)

The University of Nottingham Manuscripts and Special Collections team at Kings Meadow
Campus

Nottinghamshire Archives

The Co-operative Heritage Trust

Ann Inscker, Nottingham City Museums & Galleries

The Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Cross

Will at the Bierkeller

IN MEMORY OF ALL THOSE WHO WERE LAID TO REST IN THE
FRIAR LANE CHAPEL BURIAL CATACOMBS