

History of College Green

There is evidence to suggest that the site now occupied by College Green and the cathedral had long been a sacred site and centre of religious activity prior to the founding of the monastery of St Augustine's Abbey in 1142.

A chapel dedicated to St Jordan (with an open pulpit beside it) existed on the area known now as College Green (then known as St Augustine's Green) throughout the middle ages and until at least 1673. According to ancient tradition, St Jordan accompanied St Augustine to his meeting with British Christians on the banks of the Severn in 603. The saint's shrine and image were a focus of veneration in the abbey. Jordan has always been a popular name in the Bristol area.

Before the reformation, St Augustine's Green had been the triangular precinct of St Augustine's Abbey, and was used as the burial ground for the Augustinian canons until Henry VIII dissolved the monastery. In 1542 St Augustine's Abbey became Bristol Cathedral, but the burial ground underneath the green has remained largely undisturbed ever since, and even to this day influences the use of this ancient green space.

St Augustine's Green was also used as a burial site by St Marks Hospital or the Hospital of the Gaunts (the chapel of which is now the Lord Mayor's Chapel), originally founded in 1220 to feed the poor and care for the sick. It was endowed to the bon-hommes, who occupied land from College Green to Pipe Lane. They gave daily help to 100 poor people. Nearby Orchard Street was named after their orchard.

College Green was also the site of a famous confrontation between two great local landowners – John Young, of the Great House, (on the site of the old Carmelite priory behind Colston Hall) and Hugh Smyth (of Ashton Court). The long and simmering antipathy between these two Elizabethan gentlemen came to a head in an armed confrontation between members of their households in the streets of Bristol and on College Green in mid 1579.

No one was hurt in the affray but an inquiry set up to look into the affair reported on the status of College Green – many witnesses reported on the skulls, bones, stone coffins and coffin lids found there, particularly when trees were blown down by a storm. It also seems that the open air pulpit of St Jordan's Chapel was still in use at that time, although the chapel itself had become part of Bristol Cathedral School, and grazing rights on the green (which had two great dunghills) were being let by the Dean and Chapter of the cathedral for 10/- p.a.

By the 1720's only the chapel remained of the buildings of St Marks Hospital and even that was in poor repair. Around this time, the Mayor fell out with Cathedral authorities, and decided to repair St Mark's and use it as the Corporation Chapel. The Chapel is unique in being the only church in Britain to be owned and controlled by a local authority.

Before College Green was levelled for the building of the Council House in 1950, it was much higher, crowning a low hill with slopes down towards the Centre Promenade and divided from Brandon Hill by a deep gully. During the levelling, any archaeological evidence which might have confirmed the site of St Jordan's chapel was destroyed.