

News

Prior tried to buy body for a shrine

Lewes Priory was an important pilgrim site on the route to Canterbury, says a former Mayor of the town.

Historian Dr Graham Mayhew was responding to the Sussex Express story (August 17) that plans are in hand to mark the southern route taken by pilgrims from Southampton.

Dr Mayhew, author of *The Monks of Saint Pancras*, a study of Lewes Priory, writes: "Medieval historians have known for a long time about the pilgrimage route through Sussex from Southampton to Canterbury.

"The Gough Map, produced for Edward III in about 1360, but based on earlier versions, now lost, shows most of the major towns in England and the distances between them, including the route many pilgrims would have taken from Southampton via Chichester, Arundel and Shoreham to Lewes and onwards through Rye and Appledore to Canterbury.

"Both Chichester and Lewes sought to cash in on the pilgrims travelling this way, through the promotion

of the shrine of St Richard in Chichester Cathedral and the healing miracles associated with it and similar stories of miracles which took place at the Priory of St Pancras in Lewes, one of which survives in the Priory's Annals for 1250 which recorded the healing of a paralytic at the altar of the Holy Cross on July 2.

"The Priory of St Pancras was well known as a place 'where divers relics of saints are buried' which pilgrims 'visit and give alms for the repair of the church'. The offerings left by pilgrims was always an important consideration for any large monastery or cathedral, so promoting pilgrimages by spreading stories of miracles and building up important collections of saints' relics was a key activity.

"It was no doubt this consideration which prompted Aimar, Prior of Lewes in 1144, while attending a diocesan synod in Norwich, to try to buy the body of William, a 12-year-old boy found murdered in the woods, reputedly the victim of a ritual crucifixion. His grave,

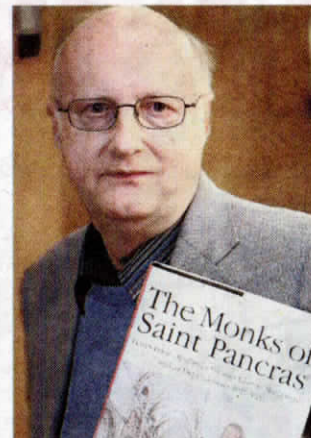


Detail from the Gough Map of c1360 which features Lewes, right

originally in the cathedral burial ground, was already becoming a focus for pilgrims and miracle stories were already circulating. Norwich Cathedral refused to sell, erected their own shrine and St William of Norwich became a major site for pilgrimages until it was destroyed by

Henry VIII's orders during the Reformation.

"Lewes itself, from soon after its establishment, was a focus for pilgrims and visitors, including almost every English king from Henry I to Richard III. Each year at the Feast of St Pancras on May 12, the priors of Lewes's



Top: Dr Graham Mayhew



"It was, of course, for one of these feasts that Henry III and his son Prince Edward came, with the royal army in 1264, while in pursuit of Simon de Montfort and his rebels, leading to the Battle of Lewes two days after the Feast of St Pancras, on May 14 1264.

"It was to accommodate such large numbers of ordinary pilgrims as well as to house the sick and infirm, that the enormous Hospital of St James was built, 160 feet long, next to the Winterbourne stream at the bottom of St James's Street and just outside Lewes Priory's main gate - better off pilgrims probably found accommodation in The Star Inn, now the Town Hall, built by Lewes Priory in the 13th century, while important visitors were housed in the priory itself.

"The clue is in the names - St James is the patron saint of pilgrims and the Star refers to the Star of Bethlehem which guided the wise men safely on their pilgrimage to Bethlehem. It is an important part of Lewes's history which should not be forgotten."

eight subsidiary monasteries and many other dignitaries came to Lewes, both for the religious celebrations and for the three-day fair which took place outside the Priory's gates in Southover High Street - there is still a house on Southover High Street called Fairhall.