

## Grey Friars Architectural Tour Hillcrest and the Hall

Having passed through this minor entrance to the north we turn left along a concrete path. The area to our right is the remains of the original garden and the wall on our left which adjoins the path along which we are walking is the north wall of the nuns' chapel. This was part of the western extension constructed by the nuns. The County High School used it as a gymnasium and assembly hall and the Adult Community College used it for physical activities ranging from Scottish country dancing to flower arranging. Historical documents on the history of this corner of Colchester give conflicting evidence of the exact date that occupation of Grey Friars by the Sisters of Nazareth took place. We are told from an article written and researched by P. Manley aged 12 in the CCHS school magazine of 1946/47 that the nuns, whilst building proceeded, directed the builders through an iron grille. The only man allowed into the building was Dr Nicholson from Gate House, and only the lay sisters were allowed out. We also are told from research by the late Enid Bishop, Principal of the Adult Community College from 1973 to 1982, that whilst the building works were in progress the nuns are thought to have settled first at the Minorities, before eventually moving to Grey Friars when they opened the school.

However, there can be no doubt that the chapel whose northern wall we are now passing had its stone laid (or perhaps was consecrated) in 1904 because a stone plaque set into the brickwork here on the outside is inscribed JMJ (Jesus, Mary Joseph) 1904 and has a Greek cross above (fig 166).



fig 166



fig 167

Looking up we now see two elaborate and colourful Edwardian stained glass windows with the letters JMJ repeated and incorporated into the pattern. More of these will be seen inside. A few more paces along the path is the back entrance to the adjoining small house, Hillcrest (fig 167). The rampant ivy here partly obscures the commemorative plaque and one of the stained glass windows. The first of the two doors leads into the northern end of the Hall where there is a slightly raised stage. This was obviously the altar end of the chapel. But we will take the second door which marks the position of the former right-of-way between Grey Friars and Hillcrest. And as we open the door and walk along the rather gloomy corridor we are following the former boundary between the buildings which were joined together by the nuns.

Fig 168 shows the area prior to 1904, and fig 168b shows it as it was in 2008.

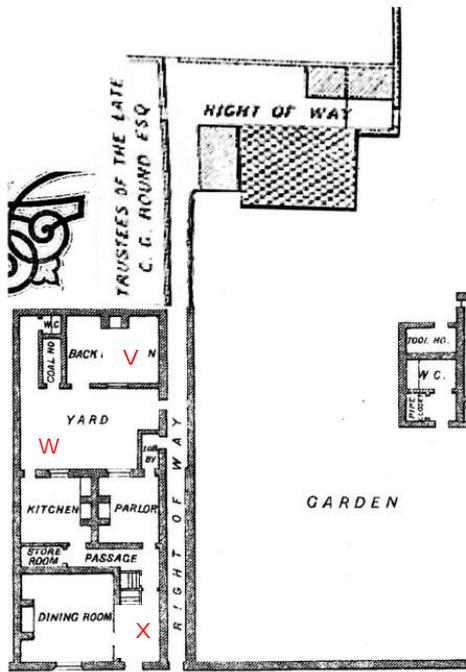


fig 168

^  
North

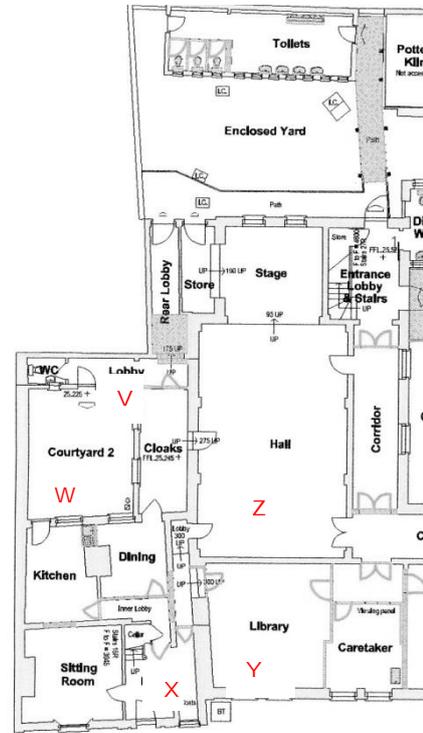


fig 168b

The corridor we are now following runs alongside the western wall of the chapel and it is therefore no surprise when on the right we see a piscina (V) – a holy water basin in which the chalice was washed (fig 169). This was appropriately placed near the altar end of the chapel. It also suggests that perhaps the nuns lived mainly in the building of Hillcrest and used Grey Friars as their workplace, school and religious centre – the chapel being the first room to pass through, participating in their morning service on their way into the main school.



fig 169



fig 170

We move out of this dark corridor once more into the open air and enter (W) a small completely enclosed back yard (fig 170) with the back door of Hillcrest in front of us. From here we can see more clearly the original position of the right-of-way and how it has been skilfully covered and incorporated into the two buildings (figs 171/2).



171 fig 172



Two windows added into the brickwork on the ground floor give this corridor more light and the very slight differences in the shade of bricks indicate the junction between ground and first floors.

Having viewed this covered right-of-way from the outside it is time to retrace our steps and go inside again. Ignoring the passage to the north down which we came as we entered, we turn to the south and follow the right-of-way to the entrance hall of Hillcrest, immediately behind its front door (X). It is obvious that the window on the left beside the front door has been added to give additional light (fig 173). This is in the exact spot where the original right-of-way would have joined the High Street. The corresponding two 'windows' on the first and second floors are false (see fig 2).



fig 173

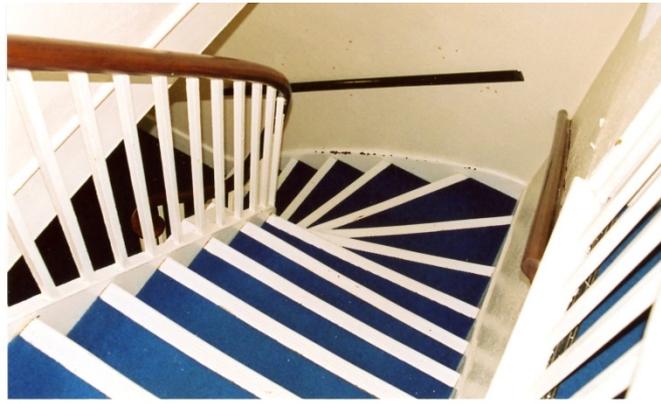


fig 174

In this hallway we notice the small but very fine quarter-turn staircase with winders (fig 174) which leads to the first floor landing. The plain wooden bannister with its white-painted balusters ends in an attractive spiral snail shape at its base (fig 175). Surprisingly, another door which appears to be a cupboard leads to a narrow dark staircase which emerges in the middle of the room adjoining the large art room on the top floor - as we have already seen.

Upstairs in Hillcrest the rooms are small, plain and insignificant, but in plan match those on the ground floor. Several alterations involving the joining together of rooms took place in order to convert the house into a crèche during the occupation of the Adult Community College.

One of the fireplaces on the first floor is however worth some attention. The cast iron grate is small and ornate and the surround plain (fig 176) but the vertical strips of tiles on either side are elaborate (figs 177 and 177b).

It appears to be a typical Victorian fireplace, perhaps added later after the building of Hillcrest in the late C18th. The use of tiles in an English domestic setting was rare in the C17th and C18th, but by the middle of the C19th they were becoming a major decorating feature. The variety of subject matter is far greater than that of any earlier or later period. Naturalistic flowers (as in the upper and lower tiles on each side of the fireplace) were common, as also were stylised flowers surrounded by a geometric border (as in the middle tiles on each side).



fig 175



fig 176



177 figs 177b



The first thought is that the installation of this fireplace might have coincided with the period when the Botanic Gardens were in operation (1824 to 1849), and interest in all things botanical was at its peak in Colchester, but the inclusion of the stylised sunflower within a border suggests the Aesthetic Movement of the 1870s and 1880s when the sunflower and peacock were dominant symbols of this era. Alternatively, they may be a very usual and common Victorian flower design.

However, they are of high quality, low relief and glazed, but it is very difficult to establish who manufactured or designed them. They are likely to be dust-pressed wall tiles, which are thinner and more porous than floor tiles. They may, or may not, be signed on the back, and we can only toy with a few names as influences or manufacturers.

During the middle 1800s, the firms of Pilkington, Minton and Morris, Marshall and Faulkner were producing tiles designed by Christopher Dresser (1834-1904), William de Morgan (1839-1917) and William Morris himself (1834-1896). Other manufacturers in this period included Copeland and Garrett, Maw and Co., Craven Dunnhill and Co. At this time, hand-crafted products were very desirable, mass production was frowned upon as was anonymity – but cheaper and inferior copies were also on the market. So the origin of these tiles in Hillcrest is very uncertain, but we can however, be certain that the designers of the day carried out extensive botanical studies of flowers and the underlying geometry of different specimens.

Many flower prints were also produced in this period because of the growing interest in gardens and the fashion for conservatories. It has already been established that the Rev John Halls' gardens at Grey Friars in the latter part of the C18th were magnificent and well-tended, and that

there was an impressive conservatory. It is possible that those gardeners (famous or unknown) who followed in his footsteps during the C19th and early C20th might have been moved to commission a celebration in floral art on the tiles surrounding a fireplace. Did this happen here at Hillcrest? Ellen Willmott (1858-1934) a woman gardener and gatherer of foreign plants was a famous contemporary of Gertrude Jekyll. Willmott lived not far away at Warley Place in Essex and was widely known – could she have been an influence?

Flowers in this period were often depicted as botanical jewels and valued for their rarity by plant collectors, and here on these four tiles at top and bottom either side of the fireplace the representation is so accurate that an expert could easily identify these specimens - woody stems, large white flowers with six petals, protruding stamens and leathery leaves rust brown on the underside. The details suggest that this is a variety of the evergreen magnolia (*Magnolia Grandiflora*) which was a well-known foreign import (fig 177c) having been brought to Britain from North America by the plant collector Mark Catersby in 1726. The number of petals (always a multiple of three) is often symbolic, and white represents the Virgin's

purity – very appropriate as a decorative feature in part of a Franciscan nuns' residence at the beginning of the C20th. A similar spray of flowers appears in the O'Brien Thomas tile manufacturer's catalogue of 1891.



fig 177c

Having diverged into the world of botany we leave the small front entrance hall of Hillcrest by making an about-turn around a recent partition so that we are still within the covered right-of-way. A few steps northwards bring us to a door on the right and what appears to be the open framework at the rear of a cupboard. As we stand adjacent to the partition, we are level with the southern end of the large Hall of Grey Friars – previously the chapel. What appears to be the partially-dismantled back of a cupboard is, in fact, the nuns' confessional box – the door of which opens into the chapel – to be visited shortly.

Opening the door which we previously noticed adjoining the back of the confessional box, we mount two steps and find ourselves back in the main building of Grey Friars. The large room (Y) which we now enter was a workshop for the nuns, alongside which was a narrow mosaic-floored corridor forming an internal walkway from Hillcrest into Grey Friars for the nuns.

The combination of these two spaces made a science laboratory for Colchester County High School which had rows of hardwood benches, inset sinks and Bunsen burner taps. It later became a typing room for the Adult Community College and even later a library dedicated to the memory of Councillor Derek Lamberth, a good friend of the College and long-standing Chairman of Governors. A small part of this room was partitioned off at this time and together with a former fume cupboard became a caretaker's office.

At this point, double doors lead us into the junction of two corridors. Looking eastwards along the first one we can see in the distance the inner front entrance hall and the base of the main staircase which is where we started our tour. Looking straight ahead we see another identical corridor running alongside the eastern wall of the chapel. At the far end we see the small back entrance hall and the base of the spiral back staircase. This corridor has large sash windows on the right looking out to a courtyard. The wall on the left has six high-level windows with lead tracery which give additional borrowed light to the chapel (fig 178). The two corridors have the same mosaic floor with Grecian crosses and fret borders as we have already seen, and whichever way you look doorways are surmounted by semi-lunar windows to give even more light (fig 179).



fig 178



fig 179

We now enter the main hall (Z) through double doors at the rear which are on our left. We are immediately struck by its size and height (fig 180) achieved by elevating the rooms and corridors above on the first and second floors.



County High School Colchester - Hall. (Greyfriars)

fig 180

As a chapel for the nuns this hall served its purpose admirably, and for an assembly hall for Colchester County High School it was more than adequate for the numbers on roll at that time.

It was adapted for a gymnasium by adding rib stalls at the southern end and on part of the west wall where a further panelled door led into an equipment cupboard. It was also ideal for Keep Fit and Dance classes when the building was occupied by the Adult Community College classes.

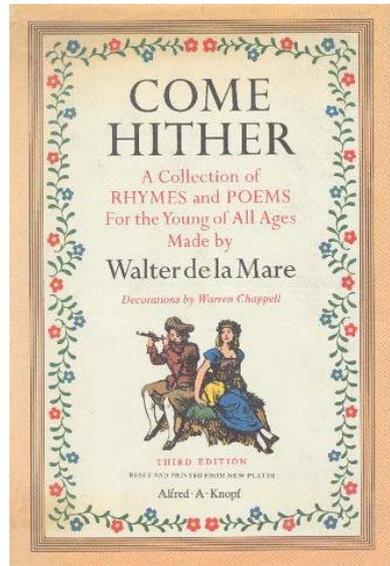
Joan Watson, Pat Grainge and Delia Bloom recall that CCHS often had visiting speakers and concerts by well-known musicians, and the assembly hall was where these took place.

Some time during 1943/44 Walter de la Mare came, and Pat says "I seem to remember sitting on the floor in the assembly hall listening to an elderly gentleman reading some of his poems to us. We had to be quiet and only clap at the very end." Joan adds of the visit, "I thought all famous poets were dead poets."

De la Mare (1873-1958) would have been about 70 at this time. 20 years earlier he had collected other people's poetry into a volume entitled *Come Hither*, widely used in schools, so he may have read some poems from this to the High School girls. In his own work he wrote about the English sea, coast and nature, as well as some supernatural subjects, which would have had an appeal for children at the time.



Walter de la Mare



Several ex-pupils of CCHS have been inspired to write. One of these was Pamela Brown, CCHS 1936-39, author of *The Swish of the Curtain* (see Appendix).

The high level windows on the eastern side which we saw from the adjoining corridor are matched by high level windows on the west side of the hall. These again are decorated with lead tracery forming the shapes of flowers in bud. All of these high level windows have a complex metal winding system (still in place) for opening them (fig 181). The floor has the original hardwood parquet blocks – now over 100 years old (fig 182).



fig 181



fig 182



fig 183

In the south-eastern corner of the hall it is now possible to see the small panelled door to the nuns' confessional box (fig 183), the back of which was visible as we re-entered Grey Friars from Hillcrest. If this door is opened it emerges that the original glass panel with its tracery matching that of the high-level windows has been boarded over and is now hidden from view (fig 184).



fig 184

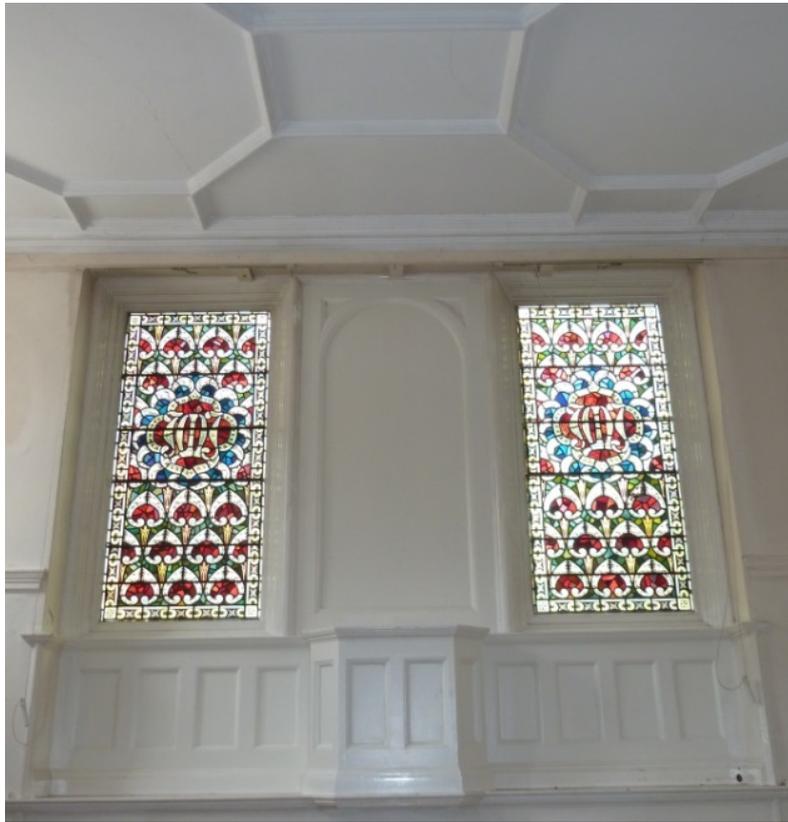


fig 185

Looking up, the chapel ceiling is far from plain. Raised ribs divide the area into sections – squares, rectangles and octagons to form a coffered ceiling (fig 185). It is pleasing to think that possibly when the nuns designed this they were always intending to decorate each panel with a mural as many famous chapel ceilings were enhanced.

Beyond a wide archway, and elevated on a low platform, the north end is the highlight of this former chapel. This would have been the altar end which is close to the door into Hillcrest where the piscina is situated.

The two Edwardian stained glass windows (which, like the plainer ones, owe much to the art nouveau designs of the period - fig 186) earlier seen from the outside can now be seen in all their glory with the light shining through them. Red, blue, yellow and brown stained glass is divided by lead tracery and the curvaceous pattern is repeated extensively. Between the two windows there is a tall arched alcove with a lower panelled three-sided projecting plinth shaped like an oriel window which would originally have held a religious figure (fig 186).



186 LPP

Centrally in each window JMJ appears enclosed by a stylised flower shape (fig 187).

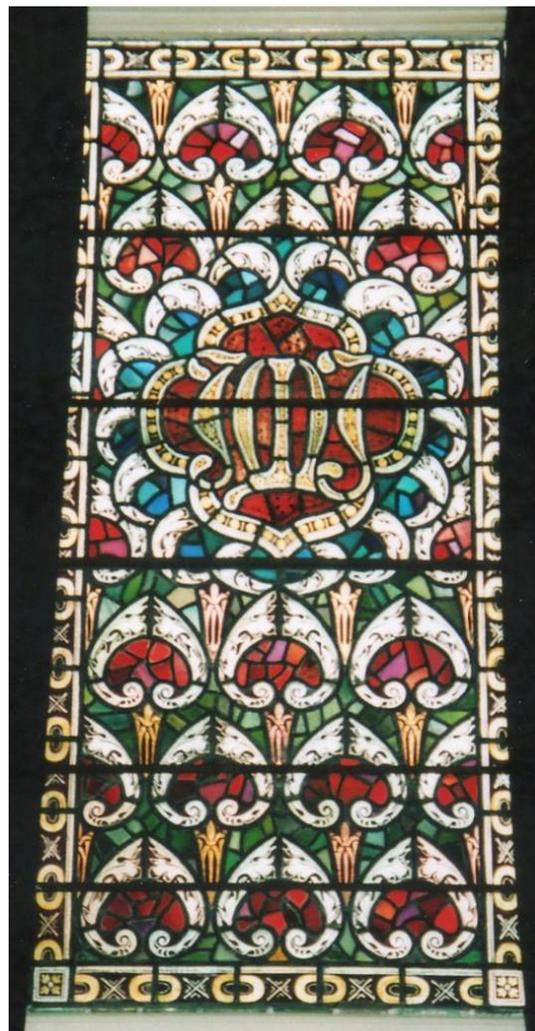


fig 187

And so we reach the end of our tour. But it is appropriate that we finish here in the hub of the building. How many thousands of feet have passed this way along the three mosaic-floored corridors which bear the signs of the nuns' occupation in the Greek crosses scattered within the design underfoot. One corridor (covered at the time of writing by carpet) leads eastwards from Hillcrest, one leads westwards from the imposing front door, and one leads southwards from the back door and the garden. All converge on the former chapel at the heart of the present building.

Here the nuns would have celebrated their last religious service in 1920 before the building was handed over to Essex County Council who allocated it to Colchester County High School. The girls and staff of CCHS assembled here in 1957 for the last time as they sang the school hymn "God Be in My Head" before moving on to their new building in Norman Way.

And finally the students, tutors and support staff of the Adult Community College gathered in here in 2007 to pay tribute to the history of the building over a Heritage Open Weekend when guided tours gave many people the opportunity to say goodbye to a much-loved establishment.

Now in 2014, after a careful and sensitive restoration it is about to enter another life, its eighth; but like many other old buildings, its fascination lies not only in what it reveals to us, but also in what it conceals from us.

Here within these pages, we, the authors, have presented you with what we have discovered. We hope that you will join us in the ongoing project by visiting [www.greyfriarscolchester.org.uk](http://www.greyfriarscolchester.org.uk) where more information and memories can be found, and you can contribute.



**From "Grey Friars – Colchester's Forgotten Corner"  
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**For further information on the site and its buildings, see the printed book.**

**For additional information, updates,  
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