Visit to The Charterhouse

On a lovely sunny Wednesday 11th October, Local History 3 visited The Charterhouse. Founded in 1371 on the site of a medieval Black Death burial ground, it became a Carthusian Monastery until its dissolution in 1537.

In 1348, Walter de Manny rented the land from St Bartholomew’s Hospital. This land was to be used as a burial ground for the victims of the Black Death, which was sweeping through London. A chapel and hermitage were also built on the site. In 1371, the land was granted for the foundation of a Carthusian Monastery (Grande Chartreuse) anglicised to The Charterhouse. Here 25 monks lived, each with their own building and garden. However, during the dissolution of the monasteries the monks of Charterhouse were treated very harshly. Their Prior John Houghton, was hang, drawn and quartered at Tyburn. One of his severed arms was displayed on the outer wall of the monastery as a warning to others. Of the other ten monks removed, nine were starved to death in Newgate prison and the remaining one was executed.

In 1545, Edward North bought the land. He kept the parts of the monastery that were of use to him and set about building a Tudor home for himself. On his death, the house was bought by Thomas Howard, 4th Duke of Norfolk. In 1570, he was placed under house arrest for his part in a plot to marry Mary Queen of Scots. During this time he further extended the building including the construction of the cloister. He was executed for treason in 1572 and the house passed to his son.

In 1611, Thomas Sutton acquired the house. He had made his fortune from coal. Having no heirs, he endowed a chapel, alms houses and a school along with the money to maintain these. The alms houses provided homes for 80 male pensioners and the school educated 40 boys. The occupants of the alms houses were called ‘brothers’. To this day it remains home to 40 ‘brothers’, and women have been admitted since 2017.

The school was known as Charterhouse and the small museum contains articles from this period and there are plaques to famous past pupils on the walls of the hallway and chapel. Charterhouse school moved to Godalming in 1872, and was replaced by Merchant Taylor’s school until 1933. The buildings were then used by St Bartholomew’s Hospital Medical school.

During the Blitz of 1941, the building was hit and suffered extensive damage. Restoration took place between 1950 and 59. This gave an opportunity for archaeologists to work on the site. At this time the grave of Walter de Manny was found buried in front of what had been the high altar of the medieval chapel. Within the coffin was found the lead bulla (seal) belonging to Pope Clement VI that had been on a document sent to Manny and buried with him.

We had the opportunity to visit the small museum and chapel before taking part in a very interesting tour of the beautiful building. It was a very enjoyable visit.