

The Abbey Grounds

The last 500 years

This exhibition looks at what happened to Cirencester's Abbey Grounds following the destruction of the town's Augustinian Abbey. It tells the story of the development of the Chester-Master estate and the Grounds' more recent history as a public park.

The Abbey Grounds is now a much-loved public space. The tranquil oasis belies a turbulent and fascinating history reflecting a split between church and state. In 1539 the Abbey of St Mary, which had stood on the site for over 400 years, was surrendered to the crown as part of Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. Twenty-five years later the site of the monastery was granted to Richard Master, physician to Queen Elizabeth I, and some years later a house was built. The Chester-Master family continued to own the land until 1965 when it was presented to the town as a public park.



The surrender of Cirencester Abbey, by Abbot Blake to the Commissioners of Henry VIII, December 29th, 1539

Painted by John Beecham. The painting can be seen on the nearby wall

This exhibition looks at the use of the land, as a formal garden with agricultural features by the Chester-Master family and also its wider use for public events, from carnivals to cricket. Not just history, the exhibition also looks to the future, how do you decide what to plant, what uses could the space have? The exhibition is a live project and the results of an archaeological geophysical survey (showing what remains of the past beneath the ground) planned as the exhibition opens will become part of it.

The exhibition includes photographs and pictures kindly loaned by Will Chester-Master, of Abbey Home Farm, from the collections of the Bingham Library Trust and from private collections. We are also grateful for the help of Deborah McCarthy whose MA on the Abbey Grounds for the University of London (2016) has helped considerably with exhibition research.

This exhibition links to Abbey 900, the Festival which marks the 900th anniversary of the founding of the Augustinian Abbey of St Mary, in Cirencester, by King Henry I in 1117.

Timeline

1536

Henry VIII orders the dissolution of the monasteries and sets up the Church of England. This is the outcome of his battle with the Church after his first divorce and his desire for the crown to have power over the church.

1539

The Augustinian Abbey of St. Mary, founded in 1117 in Cirencester is dissolved and demolition of the religious buildings begins.

1564

The site of the monastery is granted to Richard Master, Physician to Queen Elizabeth I.

About 1600-1625

The Masters build a house, 'The Abbey', on the site.

1774-76

The house is demolished and rebuilt by Thomas Master probably designed by the architect William Donn.

1817-25

Alterations to 'Abbey House', with ground floor bow extended in Greek Revival style.

1823-1839

Planting of trees on the estate and the pleasure ground, the area surrounding the house.

1870

Further alterations to house.

1890s

House let to tenants, and access to grounds allowed for camps, carnivals and shows.

1964

House demolished and replaced by flats (1966-70).

1965

The Norman Arch is gifted to the town by the Chester-Master family. The Grounds become a public park.