

Sevenoaks Arts Society Trip to Clerkenwell November 2025

On a very cold and frosty morning, the Sevenoaks Arts Society set off, firstly, to find out the secrets of St Bartholomew The Great, a 12th century church in Smithfield in the City of London and then on to The Museum of The Order of Saint John, in Clerkenwell.



Gordon Fury, the vergier of Great St Barts, took us through the very complex story of London's oldest parish church, from the main characters that helped to shape its development, to its latest artworks, with some of the curious features that are unique to this very special building. We listened intently, despite the chill, because Gordon was so engaging, with his logical storytelling and confident recall of so many dates, facts and figures, whilst making us smile with his gentle humour.

In 1123, the Church was actually founded by a former court jester, Prior Rahere, who had a vision whilst in Rome, of St Bartholomew telling him to build not only a church in his name, but a hospital too. This was however, no joke and the church grew up out of its semi-rural Middlesex surrounds and for 400 years, was largely untouched. Rahere's wonderful tomb still bears traces of the Medieval paint that once had adorned the whole of the interior of the church, red, green and yellow. This and many other features of the original church clashed with Henry VIII's raging Protestantism and love of whitewash in the 1540s.



St Bartholomew was instrumental then, in the creation of the church and special permission was given by King Henry I for the church to be built exactly where the saint had called for in the vision, such was his powerful influence. He challenges you, as you enter his church in the form of a striking piece by artist Damien Hirst: "Exquisite Pain". An interesting title for an apostle who had preached successfully in India but met his demise in Armenia, where he was martyred by the King's brother, Prince Astyages, death by flaying. As this would likely have taken place over several days, St Bart probably found the pain less than beautiful or excellent. But the statue itself is exquisite, the draping of the epidermis, the musculature revealed and the tools used to torture, create a tension that powerfully draws you in.

The Church was built as part of an Augustinian Monastery, along with St Bart's Hospital which continues the healing work of the monks today. The monks faced great demands from the sick and ill of London especially on 24th August, St Bartholomew's Saint Day. Miraculously the church endured the Black Death in 1665, perhaps because of the strict oversight of the Priors. The imposing Oriel Window had been installed within the church in the early 1500's by the then Prior Bolton, intent on keeping the monks on task by spying upon them and keeping them hard at work, cleaning, as the modern day Verger does today; and praying for the more hopeless cases. The carving beneath the central glass panes of this internal lookout, depicts a barrel or a tun, with a crossbow bolt piercing it. A Tudor wordplay on the Prior's surname and the sort of detail that we might have overlooked without our knowledgeable guide.



The church has obviously changed over time and whilst we huddled on the pews, we learnt about the evolution of the architecture of the building with its various layers of Romanesque arches, Gothic adaptations and Victorian adjustments, the latter made to let in more light. It is quite miraculous how it has survived these esoteric struggles, which all seem to harmonise into one divine space.

The current church services are very well attended, with an ever-expanding number of parishioners. Baptisms of adults as well as babies take place today in the splendid Medieval font, joining the thousands who went before, including William Hogarth, a local man and painter, more of whom later. This well-lit setting has frequently been used by film makers, which brings in very valuable revenue to the church; and curiously one woman, who was found lying in the exact same spot on the aisle floor where Hugh Grant lay in the film "Three Weddings and a Funeral".



We were also introduced to the more mystical side of the church's history, including the ghost of Rahere seeking his stolen sandal, and the weeping statue that was cured by the installation of the heating system. To me though, it was miraculous to find out that on Christmas Eve in 1724, Benjamin Franklin arrived at the church, to start work under the Master Printer, Samuel Palmer. The famous Franklin press is now in the Smithsonian but was, at the time, in the Lady Chapel, one of only two places in England, where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared.



After lunch in the Cloister, we gave Gordon a rousing thank you and proceeded to the next stop on our tour, that replaced the cancelled visit to Charterhouse: The Gate and the Museum of the Order of St John.

Close by to St Barts, in 1144, a rival hospital was set up by a religious order in the extensive Clerkenwell Priory. This was the only base in England of the Knight's Hospitallers, descendants of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, who themselves dated back to the crusades in the Holy Land in 1099. For 400 years they did their healing of locals as well as pilgrims and sent healing Knights to fight in the ongoing unsuccessful wars to regain the Holy Land for the Christians. Today, St John's Gate stands on what would have been the entrance to the Priory estate. It was reconstructed in 1504, 36 years before Henry's dissolution acts of Parliament and is an interesting element in itself. It subsequently changed functionality and has been the home to The Gentleman's Magazine; a coffee shop that inspired William Hogarth, who was born here, and then baptised in St Bart's; as well as the workplace of Samuel Johnson.



The gate was taken back in the 1870s, by the revived Order of St John, in its newer incarnation as the St John's Ambulance Brigade

and a museum of the history of the Order, opened in 2010 in its current form. This small but perfectly formed gallery of stunning artifacts, and information, was the perfect place to complete our chilly day, with tales over 10 centuries from warmer Rhodes, Malta and sunny Jerusalem. Interesting snippets included the origins of the title of the film: "The Maltese Falcon", the unexpected input of Napoleon and the role of Suleyman the Magnificent (who is set to reappear in our next study day).



After a quick look at the tranquil garden, where the monks might have tended similar herbs and flowers to those being grown today, we dispersed home with a richer grasp of the diverse art forms that run through the buildings of Clerkenwell and of the characters who came before us.

