M4C Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA)

Project Title
Almshouse, Guild and Town Community: The Lord Leycester Hospital in its Urban Setting

LEAD INSTITUTION
Name of HEI institution: University of Warwick
Lead regional city: Birmingham ☐ Coventry ☒ Leicester ☐ Nottingham ☐

PARTNER ORGANISATION
Name of organisation: Lord Leycester Hospital
URL for organisation website: https://www.lordleycester.com/

THE RESEARCH PROJECT
This PhD project focuses on the Lord Leycester Hospital, a Warwickshire Almshouse, founded by Robert Dudley in 1571. It explores how this elite philanthropic organisation operated within local, regional, and national frameworks over its first century, questioning how far its relationship to the town of Warwick was reciprocal, complementary, contested?

The history of the Lord Leycester Hospital and its buildings stretch over 700 years. Its buildings are one of the most intact examples of medieval buildings in England, and thus carry with them a huge cultural significance and architectural value that attracts tourists and visitors to Warwick every year. In 1571 it was founded as an almshouse for former servicemen, who continue to live in the Hospital's apartments and benefit from its philanthropy. However, it was intended to be independent of the town, with only some Warwick residents as its beneficiaries. As a result, relations with the town corporation, Warwick Castle (owned by Dudley's brother), and the churches of St Mary's and St Nicholas were often strained. It was not only a rival institution to local parish poor relief, but also founded by an external patron with radical Protestant leanings. The connection of the Hospital to ‘Puritanism’ would have sat uncomfortably alongside the more moderate Church of England course adhered to by the majority of the town’s residents, not to speak of those retaining Catholic beliefs. This project therefore sets out to investigate the relationship between this almshouse and its urban setting at a time of fundamental religious and socio-economic change.

There is a considerable body of research into the nature and scale of poverty in early modern society, and many studies have investigated the experiences of the poor who found themselves in need of relief from their parishes. We also know much about the negotiation of rights and obligations, not least through (formerly) Warwick-based scholars like Steve Hindle (On the Parish) and Angela Nicholls (Almshouses in Early Modern England). But historians have only recently turned their attention to the material lives and living conditions of the poor at this time. Although the Lord Leycester Hospital is often discussed in wider literature on almshouse provision, its history, especially its place within local, national, and imperial contexts, merits further archival research.

Within the project there is plenty of scope for the student to follow their own interests. For example, they may want to focus on the architecture of this former Medieval Guild building as a status symbol for the town, or on the cultures of philanthropy within Warwickshire and England more broadly, or the religious tensions that emerged from its ‘Puritan’ associations. Equally, the successful candidate may wish to focus on the question of gender and the place of local women within the space of the almshouse.

The project is based on the integration of the artefacts and archival records related to the Lord Leycester Hospital with contextual materials held at Warwickshire Record Office and other institutions. In 2020, the Hospital secured a 3.8 million National Lottery Grant for restoration of the Grade I and II listed buildings, along with other improvements and engagement activities. This will
include the creation of four new museum and exhibition spaces exploring and showcasing the Hospital's rich and vibrant history. In making the estate more accessible and public facing, the Lord Leycester Hospital plans to engage with students and researchers at schools and Higher Education Institutions in the Warwickshire area.

The student will benefit from the expertise of the staff at the Lord Leycester Hospital as well as from the construction of four new dedicated exhibition spaces as part of the Hospital’s programme of renovation works. The PhD student will have access to the Hospital's collections and will benefit from the supervision provided by Warwick staff with complementary expertise in early modern English religious life (Pullin) and communal organisation (Kümin). They will analyse Hospital records, writings of local residents, records of poor relief, books of assessments, admittance papers, parish registers, and records relating to other Warwickshire almshouses (e.g. Eyffler's and Oken's).

The student will also benefit from the online My-Parish platform and wider support from the Warwick Network of Parish Research led by Kümin. This will provide the student with opportunities to present their work (at annual Symposia) and collaborate with an international body of scholars on projects relating to parish history, heritage, and culture.

**HOW TO FIND OUT MORE**

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