

The History of Barking's Curfew Tower

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The Curfew Tower, as it is known today, is the only remaining gateway to Barking's Saxon Abbey (the ruins are now a protected monument). The tower is Grade II* listed – as The Fire Bell Gate. The original medieval belfry was built in 1370, and the current tower dates from around 1460. The upper storey was largely rebuilt in the late nineteenth century.

The names Curfew Tower and Fire Bell Gate arose from the tolling of the bell from the tower, reminding people to extinguish all fires and lights, before the nightly curfew, which rang until the end of the Victorian period, ceasing in 1900.

'The Abbey Gate', as it is also known, was the central of three gateways to Barking Abbey, and is the only part of the Abbey still standing, after Henry VIII dissolved and destroyed it between 1539-41.

Barking's Holy Rood, dated to between 1125 and 1150, is a rare stone representation of the crucifixion, which resides in the Curfew Tower. This holy relic probably once stood in the open and was visited by many paying pilgrims who were believed to have benefited from this spiritual experience. It was eventually moved into the Curfew Tower and in 1400 the

original roof-loft chapel was licensed for services, which is the earliest known record of the tower. The upper room in the current tower is still the 'Chapel of the Holy Rood'.

Unfortunately, the rood is quite damaged, probably because many Roman Catholic images were defaced during the dissolution and destruction of Barking Abbey...

The Curfew Tower continues to stand proudly as the gateway to the Grade I listed, St Margaret's Church and graveyard, as well as the Abbey ruins. St Margaret's also has ancient Christian origins but was designated as a parish church around 1300, so it survived the Tudor period and was converted to the Church of England.



The old tower is so distinctive that it was used as the motif of Barking's Urban District Council from 1895 and more recently the National Lottery Heritage Fund has proudly displayed its image to promote the project's aims. These are to restore, research and interpret the historic buildings of East Street and surrounding area.

A central part of the project will include improving the public realm around the Curfew Tower, with the aim of making it a more attractive, accessible and useful open space, with a clear focus on promoting local heritage too - including a proposed bronze model of Barking Abbey, with the Curfew Tower and traditional Church Path leading up to it. The project hopes this will more fully engage both residents and visitors with Barking Town Centre's ancient heritage. Community engagement with local schools, B&D college, heritage volunteers and building/business owners is also integral to the project and outcomes will include heritage tours and a new town trail, new historical interpretation and a mural commemorating lost buildings and heritage, in East Street.



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