

## Small Pilgrim Places Journal: Prior Crauden's Chapel, Ely

The footpaths between the Cambridge railway line and the Great Ouse as it crosses the fens near Little Thetford provide a quiet and peaceful semi-rural approach to Ely. From the river banks, Ely cathedral dominates the flat far horizon to the north. On this spring day, the air was heavily scented with May blossom and alive with the sounds of birdsong. Swallows darted overhead, Great Crested Grebe and Shoveller Ducks nosed along the waterways, a Tern with its wings sharp as a pair of crossed scimitars swooped past, and to my great delight a cuckoo flew within a few feet, landed in a Crack Willow and sang his heart out in search of a mate.

Close to the cathedral the semi-rural feel persisted as I walked past handsome chestnut cattle in a fresh meadow that reached almost to the cathedral's walls. At the west door Andrew, one of the team of vergers, took me through the nave where, under the great lantern, the choir was rehearsing – a stunning aural pleasure, particularly as it was the first time I had heard a live choir since the beginning of lockdown.

I followed Andrew out of a side door and around the cathedral towards school accommodation housed in what had been the bakery and other working parts of the medieval monastery. Unlocking a small gothic door, he led me up a steep spiral staircase where we trod carefully to avoid the rudimentary nest and single egg of a pigeon that had sought refuge here out of range of local peregrines. Swinging open a further ancient door, Andrew showed me into a stunningly light and beautiful chapel. It was built in the Decorated gothic style in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Prior Crauden over an earlier undercroft. Now used as a chapel by the King's School, it was, Andrew said, a smaller-scale model for the cathedral's Lady Chapel.



Ornate stone carving around the chapel windows



The encaustic tile floor

A highly carved stone aumbry and piscina stand each side of the altar and underneath is a rare medieval encaustic tile pavement depicting Adam and Eve, still clearly visible. Above the altar is a highly colourful stained glass window acquired from France, according to Andrew, after the French Revolution, showing the figures of five of the Apostles, including St Peter and St Paul. He also showed me where, in Prior Crauden's time, a wooden bridge crossed from the chapel to the guest accommodation and hall, alongside the monastic buildings, so that those attending the chapel had no need to walk at ground level through the busy kitchen and other busy working areas. This has been known as the Queen's Hall ever since Prior Crauden's friend Queen Philippa of Hainault stayed here in the fourteenth century.



Pictured left:  
The Queen's hall on the left and Prior Crauden's chapel on the right.

Pictured below:  
The east window, aumbry and piscina, Prior Crauden's Chapel

The following morning I was the first person to enter the cathedral as the doors were opened once again to the public following the long lockdown. Heading to the Lady Chapel, I was interested to see any likenesses with Prior Crauden's little chapel. I was surprised at what a huge space it was. At one time it had been the most richly decorated chapel in Europe, colourfully painted and furnished with hundreds of carvings and statues, all destroyed, along with the stained glass, during the Reformation. Prior Crauden's little jewel of a chapel, perched above an undercroft and narrow spiral staircase, seemed a more intimate and private refuge. But the intricate stone carving and ogee curves in the niches around the Lady chapel walls were stunningly beautiful and very similar in style to those in the small chapel, and both bore the faint traces of the rich colours that Queen Philippa would have seen and admired when she stayed here nearly eight hundred years ago.



Ali Green