

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 64: Geoff's Meadow, Stoford, near Yeovil, Somerset

Until 2003 Paul and his lifetime partner Geoff were living contentedly in the New Forest. Then - "on a whim", as Paul describes it - they bought a beautiful old building, Court House, together with 2 dilapidated barns and a cottage and 26 acres of farmland. Set in the rolling Somerset countryside of small, hedged fields, steep little valleys, wooded hills and very narrow lanes, its in the village is Stoford, close to Yeovil to the north and Sherborne to the east. After some years together, enjoying retirement in this beautiful rural area after a busy business partnership, Geoff contracted cancer and died in 2017.

From this bereavement Paul developed a vision for the buildings and fields around Court House. In the autumn of 2017 he founded a charity, the Geranium Trust, so named because Geoff was a botanist whose favourite flower was the humble Herb-Robert, a member of the Geranium family. The aim of the Trust was to use the house and the renovated buildings, gardens and land to provide friendship and support to others in need, and in particular those who had lost loved ones.

When I visited, I found Paul in the building that had originally served as a sizeable barn. It has now been attractively renovated, with a sitting area, kitchen and 3 B&B bedrooms.

This has become an accommodation space and meeting place for all sorts of individuals and groups, including people visiting the nearby hospice. The large kitchen is used regularly for tea parties and Sunday roast dinners for elderly residents from Yeovil and the local villages. I noticed the large dresser stacked with rows of attractive blue-and-white china, that regularly graces the long dining table. The sitting room is a venue for various community events including an LGTB support group to meet. Paul often hosts curry nights to which he invites a great diversity of folk from all walks of life. His aim is to create a welcoming, safe and inclusive atmosphere for all his guests.



Flower borders in a corner of Geoff's Meadow



Paul (centre) with a group from able2achieve

Paul took me across the driveway to Geoff's Meadow memory garden, a two- acre grassy field with a pond and flower borders including a physic garden, enclosed by hedges and scattered with young trees. These have been planted in memory of loved ones, including Geoff. Paul told me of another tree planted in memory of a cot death baby; it is frequently visited by members of the family. Dotted around the garden are several benches where visitors can pause, relax and reflect. The whole area exudes an atmosphere of calm and peace with a view of St. Mary Magdalene church to the west and the folly, Jack the Treacle Eater, to the north.

Next to Geoff's Meadow are more fields, now a wildlife haven, where many hundreds of trees have been planted, and where visitors can walk and explore. There is also a vegetable garden where we encountered a group of young people who had come to do some gardening, bird watching and nature study. They belonged to the organisation Able2Achieve, which supports adults with learning differences, mental health issues, and other associated disabilities.

Back in the sitting room at the barn, I met Keith, who cares for the gardens and wildlife haven. Over a cup of coffee, we talked about the many visitors to the gardens and the buildings and who find a warm welcome here. In just a short visit I could see how the place - and Paul himself - live out the vision of the Geranium Trust to offer friendship and support to anyone regardless of age, faith, ethnicity, status or sexual orientation who is living with bereavement, loneliness or feelings of isolation.



The renovated barn that now offers hospitality to visitors

T

The kitchen has plenty of space for large groups to eat