

Small Pilgrim Places 16: Greyfriars Chapel and Gardens, Canterbury

The first ever Franciscans to settle in England arrived by ferry, landing on the south coast in 1224 and spending their first night near Dover. Five of them subsequently established a house in Canterbury, from where they served the local people and offered lodgings for weary travellers.

Over the next century the community erected friary buildings and acquired some agricultural land. One of these buildings, albeit much altered from its 13th century beginnings, survives to this day, and this was the 29th destination for my ongoing journey round the Small Pilgrim Places Network.

My first stop was at Eastbridge Hospital, Canterbury, a 12th century place of hospitality for pilgrims visiting the tomb of St Thomas a Becket, murdered in the cathedral in 1270. Entering through a low Gothic door in a dark flint-built façade on the busy High Street, I found myself in a low-ceilinged room that now serves as a reception area and display space for the many visitors who come to look around



The chapel stands in a corner of Greyfriars Gardens

the ancient building. Here I met Franciscan Brother Kevin, one of the community who now look after the buildings and gardens. He took me the short walk along the crowded street, then round to the back of the building, into the sudden peace and greenery of the Greyfriars Gardens. This was originally the site of the large friary, and is now an area of wildflower meadow, trees and flower beds bisected by the River Stour. In one walled part of the garden a play was being performed as I arrived, whilst the other section, across the river, was dotted with visitors walking around the uncut wildflower meadow or lying under the trees and enjoying the summer warmth and sunshine.

Greyfriars Chapel, straddling the narrow river, has been put to many uses over the centuries, including probably a lockup. These days the ground floor houses an exhibition about the Franciscans, while upstairs there is a vestry and chapel, where an Anglican Eucharist is celebrated weekly. Br Kevin changed the altar frontal ready for the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, then left me in peace in the small, simple chapel, furnished with benches around the walls, decorated with an icon each side of the east window. The unhurried, contemplative space invited stillness and prayer, and the frequent visitors climbing up the stairs all sat quietly to pause and take in the atmosphere, saturated with hundreds of years of prayerfulness, welcome and hospitality.



Brother Kevin changes the altar frontal