House up-date: Canterbury

Visitors to Canterbury, walking eastwards along the main highway from the Westgate, might be surprised to find themselves on a bridge with a river on the left and an old building, with no view of the river, on the right. The building is Eastbridge Hospital, a hostel for pilgrims built in 1180, soon after the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, and, since the Reformation, an almshouse.

The 'secret' (and it's something which many people who live in the city are surprised to discover) is the large garden which lies behind Eastbridge - a quiet oasis in the centre of the city and beside one arm of the River Stour. This is Greyfriars. It is the site occupied by the first Franciscans to come to England in 1224, two years before the death of St Francis. The garden is only part of the land occupied by the medieval friary, all that is left of which - other than some stones marking the site of the church and some of the friars' living quarters - is a small two-storey building straddling an artificial stream flowing from the river. This dates from 1267. It may at first have been a mill, and later the friary guest house. Since the Reformation it has been used for various purposes. It was a schoolroom in the eighteenth century, and it may well have been used as such earlier - which is, perhaps, why it was not destroyed along with the rest of the old friary.

Some years ago Eastbridge Hospital bought Greyfriars and the garden is now open to the public. When SSF brothers lived at Harbledown in the 1970s and 80s the surviving building at Greyfriars came to be used as a chapel. Since then the Eucharist has been celebrated there every Wednesday at 12.30, with a team of local clergy to preside. It has, in fact, come to be known as 'Greyfriars Chapel.'

In 2003 the Rector of the Inner City parish, who was also Master of Eastbridge Hospital, invited the Society to return to Canterbury, and to occupy two cottages in the Greyfriars grounds. In 2008, after the last Rector of the parish had retired, the Trustees of Eastbridge asked Brother Austin to become Master of the Hospital. So he and the other friars, Colin Wilfred, Kevin and Reginald moved into the Master's Lodge.

Apart from our individual tasks we try to make the Lodge - pro-tem 'The Friary' - a centre of hospitality. We have limited accommodation for guests and have had brothers and sisters, tertiaries and lots of others to stay for retreat, study or a break. Because the Franciscan International Study Centre is not far away we have always hoped to make the Canterbury friary a place where Franciscans can study and a number, some from overseas, have taken advantage of this, including Christopher John who graduated in June 2011 with an MA in Theology: Franciscan Studies. The Friary is a place where various groups from the parish and the city are able to hold meetings. The large courtyard in front of the house and on the high street is a good place for parish sales and we are pleased that the local L'Arche community comes here regularly to sell produce from their gardens and their craft shop.
Colin Wilfred's death in August has deprived us of a gifted brother, but as an aging group of three we try to maintain the life and ministry of the house. Austin's responsibilities as Master of Eastbridge, as chair of the trustees, with care for the indwellers and the oversight of the charity and its property, take much of his time and energy, and completing his MA course at the study centre takes even more. He enjoys bell-ringing and has for many years been a ringer at the Cathedral.

Kevin much enjoys his ministry in the parish. Since St Dunstan's has been combined with the Inner City parish (which includes St Peter's and St Mildred's) not only has he become the Assistant Curate there, but has been given a bicycle to assist him in the job! But his work is more wide-ranging and he is involved in Reader training and spiritual direction. He is also the house bursar - and that's no part-time extra!

Reginald continues to help with preaching and services in the parish. He takes turns as chaplain at the Cathedral and is on the rota for hearing confessions there. He still does some spiritual direction and leads Quiet Days for the Third Order and other groups.

In a city like Canterbury there is so much to do and there seems to be a lot more that we ought to be doing. But to do more we'd need more brothers. We are grateful for your prayers. Please pray too for more to answer the call to become friars!

Greyfriars Chapel has been covered in scaffolding for most of this summer for re-roofing. This has been made possible by the generosity of many. Just over £23,000 was raised through the franciscan appeal, which made an enormously good start to the total of £75,000 that is needed. We were able to start the work and hopefully by the time you read this it will be finished, Greyfriars and future generations have been greatly blessed by your generosity. 

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