

REVIEW – The Franciscans of Medieval Bury St Edmunds (SIAH, 45:4 2024).

The Franciscans in Medieval Bury St Edmunds (Suffolk Charters XXII). Edited by Francis Young, xv + 174pp., maps, figures. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press for the Suffolk Records Society, 2023. ISBN 978 1 837 65 1016. Price £40 hb.

The Franciscans (Friars Minor or Greyfriars) reached England in the late summer of 1224, when nine penniless friars stepped ashore at Dover. By c.1255–57 there were 1,242 friars living in forty-nine friaries. They made foundations the length and breadth of England, with small clusters of friaries in Wales and Scotland. They were an urban phenomenon; they went wherever there were people, settling in the cities and the major boroughs. Their principal purpose was to preach the Gospel by word and by example. They lived in groups ranging from twenty-five to forty-five and they preached in their own churches, in the local parishes and in the adjacent towns and villages; pairs of friars were sent out on preaching tours, taking them to parishes as far afield as thirty or thirty-five miles from their base. They also took the Gospel to the streets and open places. Each friary had a school headed by the lector, who was responsible for the continuous education of the entire community and for the programme leading to ordination. The friary belonged to the custody of Cambridge with its friaries at Cambridge, Dunwich, Great Yarmouth, Ipswich, King's Lynn, Norwich and Walsingham. The friars made three attempts to obtain a foothold in Bury St Edmunds between 1233 and 1263, but they were thwarted by the monks.

Dr Francis Young has introduced and edited two types of document: one, the monastic records pertaining to its disputes with the friars. The second group is miscellaneous and concerns the friars' presence at Babwell, just outside the north gate between 1263 and 1539. This group of miscellaneous documents illuminates aspects of the friars' lives and ministry. While the monastery's muniments were teeming, the friars' archives did not survive the religious upheaval of the sixteenth century and only disjointed fragments remain. For instance, Gervase of Canterbury recounts the dramatic episode of Thomas de Weyland, the disgraced chief justiciar of Edward I, seeking sanctuary at the friary on 1 November 1289 and even taking the Franciscan habit; he was eventually starved out of the friary and abjured the realm. There is evidence of good relations between the two religious communities with reciprocal access to the respective libraries. Henry of Kirkstede, formerly novice master of the monastery, transcribed a copy of St Francis's Rule (British Library, MS. MS.Royal 8 F.xiv, fols. 132r, 161r–162b) at Babwell. Henry Costesy (Cossey), the forty-sixth regent master in theology at Cambridge, was a well-known commentator on the Bible and a student of Hebrew. He was especially interested in discovering the literal and historical senses of the Scriptures. He died in 1336 and was buried at Babwell, as was Robert Windell, a friar and bishop of Ely and suffragan in the diocese of Norwich, who compiled his will on 30 June 1441. Parishioners at Glemsford, Brockley and Stanstead enlisted the intercession of Richard Morall, a friar of Babwell on 5 February 1460, 26 November 1461 and 8 October 1462. Peter Brynckley was one of fourteen friars of Babwell dispensed from their vows on 10 March 1539 at the Dissolution of the friaries. Readers will be immensely grateful to Dr Young for his translation of the Latin and French texts and his introduction of the disparate materials.

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