



Introduction

Nestled by the tree-lined River Medway near Aylesford is the principal house of the Carmelite religious order that came to Kent in 1242.

The compelling story of the Friars and the Carmelites of Aylesford who were forced from their priory in 1538 only to return 400 years later in 1949, is told in the artworks and buildings discovered on a short walk through the grounds. Here you'll come across one of the finest intact medieval courtyards in England, 17th-century thatched barns and a hostelry for pilgrims dating to the late 1200s.

In its 750-year history, this venerable oasis has changed use many times. In the centuries after the Reformation, the monastic centre was converted into an opulent stately home.



The Prior's Hall

Merchant bankers, Royalists during the Civil War, Second World War servicemen and even the leader of a Scout group have all left their mark.

When the Carmelite family returned in the mid-20th century, they restored the tranquil gardens, built chapels and adorned them with distinguished ceramic artworks. Father Malachy Lynch who spearheaded the reconstruction, memorably described the Friars as 'a prayer in stone'.

During weekends in summer, thousands of pilgrims fill the main piazza in prayer and song, but at other times the Friars becomes a sanctuary for quiet reflection and somewhere for families to enjoy a picnic in the leafy surroundings by a lake. Aylesford Priory has a resident community of friars, but you'll also find a working pottery and upholstery, seasonal fairs, a popular tearoom and even classic car shows.

Entry and orientation

It is free to visit the Friars. Allow around an hour to walk around the grounds, taking your time to visit the chapels and gardens. There are three key areas: the medieval courtyard; the 1950s piazza, surrounded by the Main Shrine and chapels, and the Rosary Way and gardens.



The Pond

How to get here

The Friars is a short walk west of Aylesford. There are car parking spaces on site. From Aylesford railway station a pleasant riverside path through woods leads to Aylesford village and the Friars beyond. Turn left out of the station and left down Mill Hall, crossing the train tracks. You will soon reach the River Medway. Turn right and follow the trail for 1km until you reach the village's 14th-century stone bridge. Cross the river, turn left onto the High Street and continue for 500 metres to the Friars.

The Friars

It costs £13,000 a month to heat the priory and thousands of pounds are spent every year on the upkeep of the buildings. It is free to enter and enjoy the priory but donations (and volunteer help!) are welcomed. Accommodation at the Friars can be booked for retreats or conferences.

Opening times
Summer (May–September) 9am–5pm
Winter (October–April) 9am–4pm
Tearoom and shop open at 10am in summer and 11am in winter.

Contact details
The Friars, Aylesford, Kent ME20 7BX
01622 717272
www.thefriars.org.uk
enquiry@thefriars.org.uk

This trail is part of the Valley of Visions Community Trails project, encouraging people to enjoy, explore and learn about their local area and surrounding landscape. Why not explore one of the other community trails in the Medway Gap? Just visit www.valleyofvisions.org.uk for further information.



Adam Kossowski

Celebrated Polish artist and ceramicist, Adam Kossowski, devoted much of his working life to places of Christian worship following his release from Soviet labour camp. He said: '...When I was so deep in this calamity and nearly dead I promised myself that if I came out of this subhuman land I would tender my thanks to God.'

At the Friars, he certainly did that. Kossowski spent the last 20 years of his life, until he died in 1986, narrating important Christian events and the history of the Carmelite Order through his craft. His modernist style is fitting for the age of the piazza and brings a tremendous sense of unity to the monastic buildings.



The job of restoring and repairing Kossowski's artworks is painstaking and costly. Every few years each tile must be coated with linseed oil. 'It is difficult to find specialists able to repair tiles damaged by leaking roofs and damp air, now that Kossowski has died and his students have retired,' says the Friars manager, Steve Hayden.



The Friars

HERITAGE TRAIL



The Friars at Aylesford

The Golden Age of the Carmelites

Following the dedication of the first Carmelite church at Aylesford in 1248, the Order flourished, filling their library with manuscripts, constructing guest houses to accommodate pilgrims and establishing priories elsewhere in the country (almost one a year in the first 50 years).



St Joseph's Chapel

Conversion into a country house

This golden period continued for a few hundred years, until King Henry VIII's Commissioners entered Aylesford. The Friars was dissolved and the Crown gave the buildings to a wealthy owner who demolished the church and converted the remaining buildings into a private mansion.

A Dutch merchant banker bought the estate in 1633 and used it, not only as his home, but to store arms for the Royalists during the Civil War. By the mid 17th-century, the Friars was under the ownership of a wealthy businessman, Sir John Banks, who made lavish alterations and constructed a fine dining room, ballroom, walled garden and orangery.

Samuel Pepys visited in 1669, commenting: 'He keeps the grounds about [the old priory] and the walls and house, very handsome. I was mightily pleased with the sight of it.' Sadly



the ballroom and its ornately carved ceiling and wood panelling were destroyed by fire in 1930. The walled garden (and its orangery) survived and can be seen through gates as you begin the walk along the Rosary Way.

For the next few hundred years, the estate prospered and declined at different times under the Finch family and their various tenants.



The fire of 1930



The war years

In the early 20th century, the Woolseys and their descendents the Copley Hewitts spent much money and time restoring many of the buildings back to their original medieval style, though some were destroyed by fire in 1930. Dances were held during the war years and Lord Baden-Powell, founder of the Scouts, once visited when Mr Copley Hewitt was involved with the Scouting movement.

Restoration of the Aylesford Priory

The Carmelites had returned to Kent in 1926, but it wasn't until 1949 that their old home came on the market and they were able to raise the necessary funds. On 31 October 1949, a poignant procession of 50 friars made its way along Aylesford's streets and through the Friars gatehouse.

Seven hundred years had passed and many of the original buildings had been demolished or had changed use. Under the direction of the new prior, Father Malachy Lynch, new buildings were constructed and a community of Carmelite friars flourished once again. Today the Friars fulfils its original function in welcoming pilgrims and visitors from around the world.



Watergate

Pottery to Lake

From the car parks, walk towards the river until you reach the pottery and workshop buildings.

When the friars returned to Aylesford in 1949, they established a working farm, pottery and even a printing press. Vegetable gardens were tended to and pigs, goats and chickens kept in the workshops you see here today (now privately rented).

A **pottery** ① has operated at the Friars for a long time, but the current building was founded in 1954 by David Leach, son of Bernard Leach, sometimes referred to as the father of British studio pottery. He taught the friars and developed distinctive glazes that were handed down to successive owners. The green-brown oatmeal glaze is an old Aylesford Priory classic. Potters Billy Byles and Alan Parris run the shop and teach pottery classes (01622 790796; www.aylesfordpottery.co.uk). See them making pots in the workshop. In 2009 Billy entered the Guinness Book of World Records for the most number of pots ever thrown in an hour (he managed 150).

Leaving the pottery, turn right passing the Malachy Lynch meeting rooms and more old workshops, then turn left past the Main Conference Centre. The lake is ahead.

When the sun is out, families and pilgrims enjoy the serenity of the picnic grounds and sit by the lake watching the coots and mallards under the weeping willow. In the days when the Friars was a private mansion, this **lake** was once part of a moat that made a loop around the estate. The striking black swans came from Leeds Castle and help keep the Canada geese at bay. Most summers, the female swan takes a two-week holiday, but she always returns to her mate.

Look out for the annual **summer fair**, held in June. It's a lively event with dance groups, birds of prey displays, live music, coconut shies, classic cars and much more.

Great Courtyard and the Pilgrim's Hall

Don't enter the Main Shrine just yet, but turn immediately right at the lake and enter the enclosed medieval courtyard.

It should be immediately apparent that you are entering the oldest part of the Friars. If the buildings of the **Great Courtyard** ② feel more Elizabethan than medieval it's because many of the windows were replaced in the 17th century. There's one building that is much younger than all the others, though it's difficult to spot. The **kitchen** (between the Prior's Hall and Pilgrim's Hall) dates to the 1950s.

Hospitality is an important part of the Carmelite culture and goes back to the origins of the Order when hermits living on Mount Carmel in the Holy Land offered shelter to pilgrims. The friars at Aylesford continue that tradition in the Pilgrims' Hall – the building above the river with the oldest walls and most colourful history. In the centuries after its construction in 1280, the **Pilgrims' Hall** ③ became a barn, then a brewery, alms house and even the headquarters for a Scouts group. Originally there was a fireplace in the middle of the room where pilgrims travelling to Canterbury would gather around, eat and rest. Today, hot meals and a roaring fire once again invite visitors in from the outside, though the hearth is now set into the wall.

In past centuries, those who travelled by boat would enter the Friars by the Watergate. As part of flood defence work in the 1990s the windows were sealed with aquarium grade glass and a doorway to the river had to be bricked up!

As you exit the Pilgrims' Hall, note the clever use of recycling as you walk towards the Prior's Hall ④ : the mechanism that operates the **bell** is made from an old bicycle wheel.

The two huge **urns** on the green are Venetian and date to the 17th-century. The odd delivery van and bakery lorry has left cracks in the pots, but nothing too severe that the on-site pottery couldn't patch up.

Two venerable rows of houses form an L-shape around the west side of the courtyard, providing **guest room** accommodation. Above each door is a modern stone-carved statue, crafted by Michael Clark. Most depict Carmelite saints.



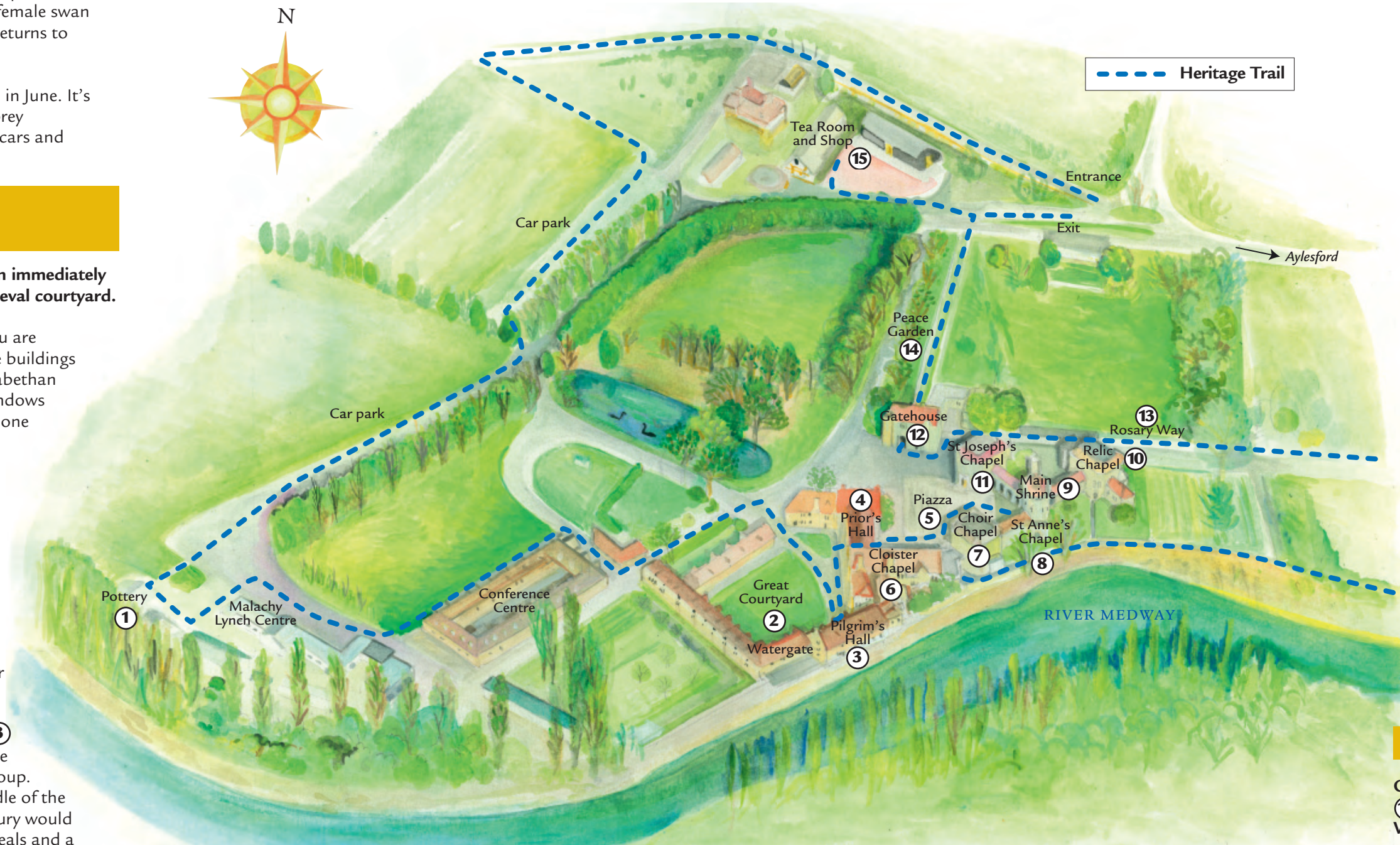
The Friars Heritage Trail



The Main Shrine



The Cloisters



The Pilgrims' Hall



The Bellpull



The Great Courtyard



The Rosary Way

Prior's Hall and the Cloisters

The Prior's Hall ④ and cloisters are entered by a stone horse mount on the east side of the Great Courtyard. Pass through the cloisters and into the Main Shrine.

Polish artist, Adam Kossowski (see box), is best known for his distinctive ceramic tile work in the chapels, but in the 15th-century **Prior's Hall**, you see his skill as a painter. The panels tell the story of the Carmelites from the hermits on Mount Carmel and their arrival in England, to being driven out by Henry VIII's Commissioners and eventual return in 1949.

A devastating fire in 1930 gutted the adjoining **cloisters**. Also destroyed was the sumptuous ballroom on the first floor, which was built by a wealthy banker in the 1660s during the conversion of the medieval priory into an opulent country house.

Main Shrine and Chapels

From the cloisters, continue ahead, visiting the priory's chapels and the Main Shrine.

Open-air mass is held throughout summer in the spacious **piazza** ⑤, which was built in the 1950s, along with most of the chapels, by the friars, local tradesmen and volunteers. It's a huge space, yet embracing and can accommodate thousands of pilgrims. Every weekend in summer, groups from Poland, the Caribbean, Portugal, Tamil and the UK fill the arena with music, prayer and song. The magnolia tree spreading along the wall on your left is thought to be 300 years old.

The first chapel you come to is the **Cloister Chapel** ⑥. Midday mass is held every day during winter. In summer, the **Choir Chapel** ⑦ – perhaps the most simply decorated of all the chapels at the Friars – becomes the community chapel. Tucked in the corner before you reach the Main Shrine, is **St Anne's Chapel** ⑧, memorable for its green walls and simplicity. The scraffito work and ceramics are all by Kossowski. Behind the altar you'll see a 15th-century statue depicting the mother of Our Lady, Anne.

The **Main Shrine** ⑨ is dominated by the sculpture of the Virgin Mary, carved by Michael Clark in 1960. Its original gold paint has worn away but this does not detract from the arresting form which is the focal point of the shrine.

At the left side of the Main Shrine altar is the entrance to the **Relic Chapel** ⑩ – the largest of all the chapels and celebrated for its Kossowski ceramics. Behind the altar is the reliquary containing the skull of the 13th-century Carmelite Prior General, St Simon Stock. Kossowski created the reliquary which is designed to evoke the cells where the hermits lived on Mount Carmel. As you walk around the chapel, you will see that the ceramics tell the story of Christ's last days in a series of moving and harrowing scenes.

St Joseph's Chapel ⑪ flanks the far side of the Shrine. Here, Kossowski is at his very best. The scenes are dramatic and on a scale not seen elsewhere in the priory. Of particular importance are the scenes from the life of the prophet Elijah, an inspirational figure for the Carmelites.

Rosary Way

On exiting the Main Shrine area, you come to the gatehouse ⑫. Turn right along a paved path leading to the Rosary Way. Follow the trail round to the riverside and go through a gated walkway that leads back into the piazza.

The Rosary Way ⑬ is the most peaceful part of the Friars where visitors come to pray and reflect. As you wind your way through the wooded grounds towards the large shrine of the scapular vision, you are following in the footsteps of hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who have walked this trail in prayer, stopping at each of the Fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary displayed along the wall.

Peace Garden to Tearoom

Enter the Peace Garden ⑭ through the medieval gatehouse. At the end of the walkway, turn left in the direction of two barns where you'll find a tearoom and shop.

The late 16th-century **gatehouse** was originally built as a defensive structure and dates to the time when the Friars was a private mansion. On entering the **Peace Garden**, you will find yourself in the most recently landscaped area (laid out in 2012), which has been thoughtfully designed to instil a sense of calm with its fountains, seating areas and plants. The word 'peace' is translated into 300 languages on tiles at your feet.

The thatched barns ⑮ are 17th-century and only just survived the great storm of 1987. Sandwiches and a cream tea await.