



Photo: John Lawrence

THE PRIORY RUINS

A park with a mission

A little while ago a radical transformation took place in that no man's land between Lewes proper and the bypass. The Priory ruins, which had clearly been there for generations, suddenly became worthy of a detour, and some of us got very excited and actually went to visit. All of a sudden, as well as the sports club, the football ground, the tip – sorry, recycling centre – and the sewage works, we discovered that just beyond the town as we knew it there was a quite magnificent testament to a time of monks, priors and other old-fashioned personages.

Then life got in the way again, and the monks faded into the background. Or at least they did for me.

But last week I set out for the ruins, guide book in hand, to check they were still there. And of course they were, because after what they've been through they're not going to dwindle to dust just because I've turned my back.

Actually, they're thriving. The Lewes Priory Trust is clearly doing a grand job of protecting the site while making it as welcoming as can be, and, happily, the ruins have lost that worryingly pristine look of a spruced-up monument that has yet to settle into its new skin. Instead, here's a place that's comfortable with all the attention it's getting (even from the occasional overly enthusiastic child) and is here to be enjoyed. In fact, it's another little park to add to the

list of Lewes places to visit on a sunny day.

But add the remains of an eleventh-century priory to the expanse of grass and sense of space, and it becomes a park with a mission. So often my imagination fails me in these kinds of situations, but here I was in my element. The information panels are like a guiding hand through the history of the site, with text and drawings supplying exactly the kind of information the brain – or at least my brain – needs. And you get a sense not only of what was where but also of just how much actually went on in an eleventh-century priory (a great deal), how the monks went about their lives (eating, drinking, sleeping, praying, defecating), and how important this settlement was to the town.

But, if it's dates and real historical detail you want, the panels will give you plenty of those too. And there's always the guide book if you're the sort of person who likes to do things properly. It's £5.95 from the Tourist Information Office, the Barbican Museum or Anne of Cleves House. But take heed: I'm told by the Museum shop that every time they get more in, they get snapped up, and it was only on my third attempt that I managed to get hold of a copy. I'm obviously not the only one who's decided to re-appreciate the charms of the place.

Juliette Mitchell