Society of St. Francis – Hilfield Friary

Low Carbon DORSET

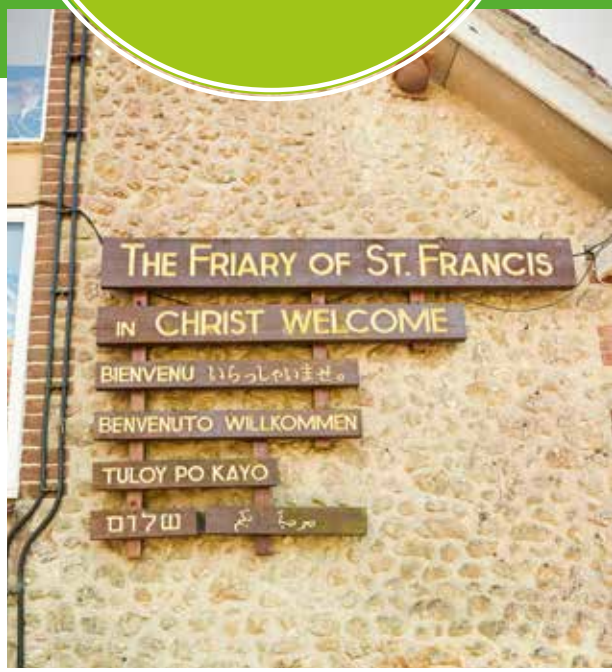
Project cost
£31,612

Estimated Savings
14 tonnes of CO_2e / £ 3,207 per year

Equipment / Installer
29 kWp solar PV (Wessex Eco Energy)

Grant awarded: £12,644

Estimated Annual Savings: 14 tonnes of CO_2e* / £ 3.2K



The Project

In 2020, the Society of St. Francis invested over £18K to install solar panels on their buildings at Hilfield Friary in Dorset. Having already taken significant steps to reduce their environmental impact, these solar panels will reduce the Friary's carbon footprint by a further 14 tonnes of CO_2 a year – bringing them tantalisingly close to their net-zero goal.

Getting started

Franciscan brothers first arrived at the Hilfield Friary site in 1921 to establish a home of refuge and rehabilitation for displaced men in rural England. From this small beginning the Society of St Francis community has grown substantially.

Over the past decade, the Society of St. Francis community has recognised the growing and urgent need for individuals and organisations to reduce their carbon footprints. Not wanting to sit back and remain inactive to what they could see happening in the world around them, they made the decision to take action to reduce (and if possible eliminate) any negative impacts their community was having on the natural world.

Wider work

Since making this commitment, they have made significant changes to their diets, activities, energy-use,

*CO_2e, or carbon dioxide equivalent, is a term used to describe different greenhouse gases in a common unit. For any quantity and type of greenhouse gas, CO_2e signifies the amount of CO_2 which would have the equivalent global warming impact. And allows us to express a carbon footprint consisting of lots of different greenhouse gases as a single number.

and land management practices. And in doing so have reduced the carbon footprint of their Friary by around 80%. These efforts have not gone unnoticed, in 2016 they achieved the first Gold Award in the Ecochurch Scheme. Now, at the time of writing, there are only 21 churches (of many denominations) with gold awards.

The first step they took was to convert all their buildings at Hilfield Friary to biomass heating, this significantly reduced their emissions and their reliance on fossil fuels (specifically LPG). Fuel for the boiler is locally sourced, some coming from the coppicing of their woodlands, some from Dorset Council's own Hilfield Hill woodland which adjoins the Friary's land, and some from a woodchip company.

And they didn't stop there, they went on to install solar panels on the roof of their chapel, moved to a more vegetarian diet, began sowing wildflower meadows in available fields, re-established wetlands on their land, invested in electric vehicles and charging, and improved the insulation of their buildings and spaces.

But, even after all these changes, they found they still had a carbon footprint (around 21 tonnes of CO_2e a year). It soon became clear that most of this footprint came from the electricity they were importing from the grid to power the Friary and its community. So, in their drive to get as close to net-zero as possible, they sought the help of Low Carbon Dorset to decarbonise this demand.

Solar PV

In the late autumn/early winter of 2020, with the support of a Low Carbon Dorset grant and free technical advice, the Society of St. Francis installed 29 kWp of solar PV across three of the buildings at the Hilfield Friary site. The 76 solar panels installed will reduce the

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Society's energy-related emissions by an estimated 75% - increasing their total carbon footprint reduction to around 95%!

Combined, their panels will be generating over 30,000 kWh a year (that's as much electricity as ten homes would use in one year in the UK!). The Friary's community are expected to use around 50% of the electricity generated by their new panels, the remainder will be exported to the grid which they will receive a small income through the SEG scheme for.

This income (around £850 a year) combined with the savings they will make from not having to buy electricity from their supplier will save the Society of St. Francis around £3.2K a year. This means that, with the help of the grant, the panels can be expected to pay for themselves in under six years.

The steps taken at Hilfield Friary to minimise environmental impact really show how even old, hard-to-treat buildings in rural settings can get to net-zero.

In his poem, the Canticle of the Creatures, St Francis called the sun and moon, as well as plants, animals and all living creatures, our brothers and sisters. One verse has been paraphrased …

My Lord be praised by Brother Sun
who through the void makes light waves run,
giving us solar power.
Help us to use you rather than
our Neighbours Coal and Oil to burn.

Hilfield Friary, Society of St. Francis

European Union
European Regional Development Fund