

## Pilgrimage and Canterbury Cathedral Teachers Information

### Canterbury Cathedral Background Information

In 597 St Augustine was sent by Pope Gregory to England together with 40 monks in order to re-establish Christianity. Augustine built a Church and Monastery at Canterbury and he became the first Archbishop.

There is nothing left of this first Cathedral and it has been rebuilt several times over history. However, Canterbury has ever since remained the seat of the Archbishop. The word Cathedral comes from the Latin 'cathedra' which means chair – the seat from which a bishop or archbishop performs his duties



Section of stained glass window showing Thomas Becket. (from the Trinity Chapel)

### A brief history of Pilgrimage

What is pilgrimage?

A pilgrimage is a spiritual journey to a holy place or shrine. People were already embarking on Pilgrimage when this first Cathedral at Canterbury was built. These early pilgrimages were often to the Holy Land.

Why do people go on pilgrimage?

As early as the fourth century some people wanted to see the places made famous by the bible stories in order to make them feel real. They wanted to actually see and touch the places where Jesus had walked, talked and lived.

In addition to wanting to visit the actual place, people visited holy sites as a penance - that is to ask for forgiveness having committed a sin. Indeed in the middle ages undertaking a pilgrimage for this purpose may have been deemed compulsory in order to be forgiven and avoid going to hell. As part of this process, where you went on your pilgrimage may well have been decided for you.

We must also not forget the joy that people in the past received and still receive today from travelling and getting to experience new people and places beyond their normal lives.

Pilgrims from the 12th century onwards wore a distinctive uniform. Men wore a long tunic (sclavein) and carried a wooden staff. They would have a pouch strapped around their waist to carry provisions and money. A century later many started to wear a broad brimmed hat which could then be decorated with pilgrims badges as described below. Women pilgrims wore the typical clothes of a country dweller.

Just as people today often buy a souvenir to bring back from their travels, many pilgrims would buy a badge which could then be pinned to their hat or cloak.

These badges had many purposes. They provided a source of income for the shrines and stopped pilgrims breaking off and stealing parts of the shrines as souvenirs! In addition they helped to advertise the shrine, gave a livelihood to local traders and gave the pilgrim proof that he or she had indeed visited a special holy site and were a true pilgrim.

Perhaps of even more significance, the pilgrims badge itself was considered a secondary relic and therefore had its own special power. It could therefore give saintly protection to its owner.

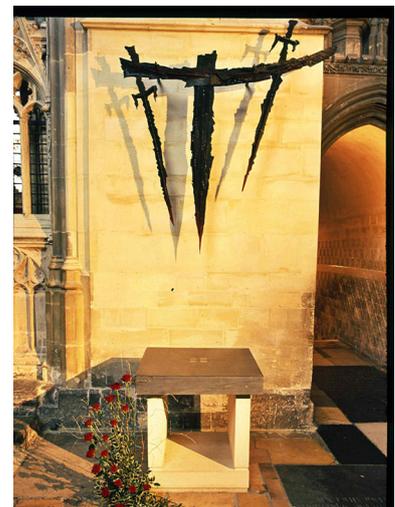
## Pilgrimage and Canterbury Cathedral

Pilgrims had been visiting Canterbury Cathedral in fairly small numbers following the murder and subsequent canonisation of Archbishop Alphege by Viking hands in the year 1012.

It was however, the martyrdom of another Archbishop which took place in the Cathedral on a winter's evening in December 1170 that made Canterbury Cathedral the most popular place of pilgrimage in England. Canterbury was at this time the third most important place in the world for pilgrims to visit, after Jerusalem and Rome.



Pilgrims Badge in the shape of a scallop shell embellished with the Canterbury Cross



The Altar of the Sword Point, found in the Martyrdom of Canterbury Cathedral.

## Murder in the Cathedral

Thomas Becket was made Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162 by King Henry 11. Thomas had previously been the King's Chancellor and great friend. However, once he became Archbishop, Thomas took his position as leader of the church in England very seriously.

Thomas had many quarrels with the king about how priests who broke the law should be punished. Becket believed that church courts should judge priests rather than the king's courts.

Fearing for his safety, Thomas fled to France where he remained for 6 years, returning in 1170. In December of that year, it is thought that four knights overhearing the Kings frustrated outburst following Thomas Becket's latest actions, hurried to Canterbury to confront the Archbishop.

After an initial confrontation in the Archbishop's palace, the knights followed Becket into the Cathedral and attacked him in the area that is now called 'The Martyrdom'. One of them cut off the top of his head, another hit him so hard that his sword broke.

The monks carried Becket's body down into the Crypt. When they took off his outer clothes to wash his body they found he was wearing a monk's habit under his Archbishop's robes. Next to his skin he was wearing a hair-shirt which was full of fleas and lice.

Becket was very soon made a saint and the site of his murder and shrine became very important to pilgrims. Very soon rumours spread that on touching the cloth, miracles could happen and people would be cured of blindness, epilepsy and leprosy. These miracles were recorded by the monks and their stories shown in the stained glass windows in the Trinity Chapel.

Later in 1220 Becket's remains were moved to the Trinity Chapel and placed in a richly decorated shrine. Thousands of pilgrims visited and Canterbury became a famous destination for pilgrimage.



Wax seal depicting the murder of Thomas Becket by the four knights.



An artist's impression of Becket's Shrine in the Trinity Chapel

## Chaucer – The Canterbury Tales

Between 1387 and 1400, English writer Geoffrey Chaucer wrote his famous 'Canterbury Tales'. This book tells the story of a group of pilgrims travelling together to visit the shrine of Thomas Becket. Together they decided that each pilgrim should tell a story on the journey in order to entertain the group and pass the time.

It was fairly common for pilgrims to undertake their journey in groups. As well as providing more safety, it also gave an opportunity for people to make new friends and have company on their journey.

It is interesting to note that the word 'canter' came into use in the English language as a word used for a pace between a trot and a gallop when riding a horse. This was the speed at which the pilgrims on horseback rode into 'Canter-bury'.

In 1538 King Henry VIII sent his soldiers to close the monastery at Canterbury and to destroy Becket's shrine.

Today thousands of people visit the Cathedral, many come on pilgrimage. They are able to see the candle that burns at the site where Thomas' shrine used to be.



The candle that burns today at the site of Becket's shrine in the Cathedral.