

Information for Teachers

Canterbury Cathedral

After the departure of the Romans in the 6th century, the county of Kent fell into the hands of the Saxons and Christianity disappeared nearly completely. In 597AD Pope Gregory sent Augustine and forty other monks to re-establish Christianity. Augustine successfully converted the King of Kent, Ethelbert, and laid the foundation for the spread of Christianity throughout Britain. Augustine built a church and monastery and became its first Archbishop. There is unfortunately nothing left of this first Cathedral, but ever since Canterbury has been the seat of the Archbishop. Today the Cathedral is the Mother Church of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

The Cathedral has a rich variety of architectural styles. In 1067 the first Cathedral was destroyed by fire. William the Conqueror built a new Cathedral in a much bigger style (1070-1077). Later the Quire was built over the Crypt (1098-1130). This new Quire also burnt down by fire in 1174 and needed to be replaced: innovative French architect William of Sens rebuilt a magnificent new Quire in the Gothic style, which was followed by the Trinity and Corona Chapels. The rebuilding of the Nave in perpendicular style by the master mason Yeveley, as well as the addition of the new towers and transepts in the next few hundred years, made the Cathedral into one of the most beautiful and interesting churches of the Christian world.

The murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket made the Cathedral into one of the most important pilgrimage centres of Europe. Thomas Becket, first Chancellor and close friend of King Henry II before becoming Archbishop, was exiled to France for 6 years after a conflict with the King. When he returned in 1170, arguments soon started again, and the King is said to have exclaimed 'Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?'. Four knights took the King at his word and set off for Canterbury. On the evening of 29th December they followed Becket into the Cathedral and murdered him in the area which is now called 'The Martyrdom'. Until 1220 Becket's body and tomb stood in the east side of the Crypt; two days after the murder pilgrims arrived in large numbers and many miracles are said to have taken place.

Thomas was made a saint in 1173, which made Canterbury even more important as a pilgrimage centre. In 1220 the tomb of the Saint was moved to the new Trinity Chapel, especially built to house it, and stayed there until 1538 when it was destroyed by order of King Henry VIII. Two years later the monastery was dissolved; the King removed the Prior and monks and replaced them with a Dean & Chapter as part of his conflict with the Pope - the King wanted to divorce his wife Catherine to marry Anne Boleyn, and this

was obviously opposed by the Pope. The split from Rome was caused by this conflict, but also because of the Evangelical Reformation in Europe.

The western Crypt is the oldest part of the Cathedral, and is all that remains of Anselm's Cathedral. Originally walls and ceilings would have been decorated as can still be seen in the St Gabriel's Chapel. When the Quire burnt down in 1174, the eastern Crypt was extended to form the foundation of the new Trinity Chapel, which would house the new tomb and which offered more space for the pilgrims.

The rebuilding of the Quire and the Trinity Chapel started from the west side. It became a gothic masterpiece, with beautiful vaulting, roof bosses and Purbeck columns. Its architect, William of Sens, fell from the scaffolding during the building work and his work was finished by his assistant, William the Englishman.

In 1498 the Cathedral was completed with a new tower, Bell Harry Tower, named after Prior Henry of Eastry. The tower is decorated with shields of people who contributed to the building

Before the Reformation, almost all windows would have held colourful stained glass. Many were destroyed by the Puritans, but Canterbury still has the most important collection of medieval stained glass windows in the country. The large west window contains some of the oldest stained glass in the world. The figures show Christ's genealogy; two early gothic windows in the north aisle of the Quire describe scenes of the Old and New Testament; they are called the 'Bible Windows' or 'Bible of the Poor'. The windows around the Trinity Chapel tell the stories of miracles in beautiful coloured 13th century stained glass. Many show the old tomb in the Crypt, others show the new tomb, which was later destroyed. The windows in the south east transept were destroyed in the second world war and replaced in the 1950s by a Hungarian refugee, Ervin Bossanyi. They represent Peace and Salvation.

The most famous tomb in the Cathedral is that of Edward, the Black Prince, the oldest son of King Edward III. He would have been king, but died before his father. He was a keen and brave leader in the wars against France and it is said the French called him The Black Prince as they feared his bravery. He asked to be buried in the Crypt, but it was decided he was too important and his tomb was placed close to Thomas' shrine.

Opposite the Black Prince lies the only English monarch to be buried at Canterbury, King Henry IV and his Queen, Joan of Navarre,

In the vaulted ceilings of the Great Cloister you can see some 800 shields from contributors to the rebuilding of the Cathedral and cloisters. The beautiful

Chapter House has the seat of the Prior, and was a daily meeting place of the monks. The two large windows show figures important to the history of the Cathedral. A door in the cloister walls leads to the Palace of the Archbishop. This is a relatively modern building; the old building was destroyed by the puritans.

The monastery had a sophisticated water supply and its 'Water Tower', still intact, is a Romanesque masterpiece. The King's School, founded by Henry VIII, is the oldest private school in England. Famous pupils include Christopher Marlowe as well as Somerset Maugham and Hugh Walpole.

A Cathedral is the seat of a Bishop, but Canterbury Cathedral is more; its Bishop is the Archbishop, Primate of all England. It is not only England's Mother Church, but also of 80 million Anglicans worldwide.