Information for visiting Canterbury Cathedral

Welcome to Canterbury Cathedral.

The Cathedral is 1400 years old and has witnessed many changes and events throughout our history. This leaflet is intended to help guide you through our new one way system, but also provide some historical facts and information to help you enjoy and understand some of our significant spaces.

Visitor safety is paramount to us particularly during these difficult times so please ensure you follow the route signs; maintain physical distancing and avoid touching surfaces as much as possible. There are hand sanitiser stations located around the Cathedral so do utilise them. For everyone’s safety, please do not enter if you have any Covid symptoms.

You will enter the Precincts through the Visitor Centre. The entrance is in the Buttermarket. Inside the Precincts you will enter the Cathedral through the South West porch. This was built to celebrate Henry V’s victory at the Battle of Agincourt. As you pass under it, look up and you will see the Coats of Arms of influential families who fought beside him.

The Nave
Pass through the doorway to enter the Nave. This is the newest part of the building constructed between 1377 and 1405 and built in a style called English perpendicular. The stone is from Caen in Normandy. The Cathedral has three different types of architecture and you will see them all as we pass through the building. Directly above you is the safety deck. This was installed as part of “The Canterbury Journey” project which has allowed us to re-lead the Nave roof and clean the roof bosses whilst keeping visitors below safe from falling debris. It is in itself a feat of modern engineering, 53 metres long and 11.5 metres wide. It weighs 33 tonnes. The space is the equivalent of three tennis courts and can take the weight of 5.5 African Bush Elephants. Both sides of the Nave are lined with war memorials, and those of archbishops and notable citizens of Canterbury through the centuries.

You will leave the Nave from the south aisle. You will always know when you are on the south side as that is the sunny side, much lighter than the north. This aisle will lead you down into the Crypt.

Please follow the directional signs and maintain physical distancing. There is a handrail and if you need to use it please remember to avoid touching your face and use the next available hand sanitiser.

The Crypt
The Crypt is much darker and is the oldest part of Canterbury Cathedral. This architecture is called Romanesque or Norman and was completed around 1100. As you walk through it, you will pass other smaller Chapels. On the right is the Huguenot Chapel, originally constructed as the Black Prince’s Chantry. In 1575, Elizabeth I gifted the Western Crypt to the Huguenots who fled to England during religious persecution on the continent. As the community moved away from Canterbury, the need for the space reduced, so in the late 19th century the Black Prince’s Chantry became the place for the Huguenot community to meet for worship. A Service still takes place, in French, every Sunday at 15.15, although these Services are currently suspended due to the Corona Virus.
The other Chapel on this side is St Gabriel's Chapel. It is very small, so do not enter if others are already there. The sanctuary has a beautiful early medieval wall painting depicting the story of Zacharias, and the thick central column and the four sides of its capital are richly carved with fantastic beasts playing musical instruments.

As you leave the Chapel, make your way to the Eastern Crypt. This was completed around 1181 and was the original resting place for the murdered Archbishop Thomas Becket. The architecture is early gothic or transitional and there is much more light than in the Western Crypt. If you look up and to the left, you will see two windows. This is where two monks, Benedict and William, would sit to watch over Becket's tomb. They recorded the miracles that happened at the tomb, and these were the transcripts for the stories that are represented in the Miracle windows you will see later. In the centre, suspended between two Purbeck columns, is a sculpture by Antony Gormley. It is called Transport and is made from medieval nails that were removed from the roof of the South East Transept when it was last repaired. The sculpture was originally hung East to West to reflect the position of the Cathedral, but as he is made of iron, he is inclined to move to find magnetic North.

As you reach the curve of the ambulatory, you will see the Jesus Chapel. This forms the foundation for the Corona Chapel upstairs. The M and I decoration in the ceiling stand for Mary and Jesus.

As you move back into the Western Crypt on your right, you will pass the Chapel of the Holy Innocents, and the smaller Chapels of St Mary Magdalene and St Nicholas. The stairs at the end will lead you to what we call the Martyrdom.

The Martyrdom

Please take particular care when entering, as this area can become very congested. It is a small space and the tunnel on your left will be used by our visitors who cannot negotiate the stairs. Please pass through this area as quickly as possible to prevent blocking access, remembering to ensure physical distancing of 2 metres. The markings on the floor will help to maintain that distance.

The Martyrdom is the place where the murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket took place on 29th December 1170. Four knights, Reginald FitzUrse, Hugh de Morville, William de Tracy and Richard le Breton, believing they were carrying out the wishes of Henry II, burst through the door shouting Becket's name. When Thomas descended the staircase to confront them, he was brutally murdered in front of the altar. His name is now written in red letters on the floor.

The modern sculpture that hangs above the new altar is by Giles Blomfeld of Truro; the centre is shaped like the jagged end of a sword with a red tip to represent the sword that broke in two when Thomas was first struck and on either side a sword, with the light casting two shadows, represents the four knights who killed Thomas.

Leaving the Martyrdom

Making your way up the steps you will find yourself facing the pulpitum screen; the screen of the six kings built approximately 1450/58. Before you climb the steps, and ensuring both your feet are firmly on the ground, take a moment to look up. 126 feet/ 38 metres above you, is the great fan vault of John Wastell. The big circle in the centre with the arms of Christ Church Priory on it is actually a trap door. Directly above it is a great treadmill, used to bring up building materials. It would take two people to walk inside it and a third to act as anchor man.
This location is also a good vantage point to look back down into the Nave and to look through the centre Quire door. This will give you an idea of the scale of the Cathedral from end to end.

Please remain aware of people who may be around you and ensure physical distancing is maintained, even if it means waiting a short while.

The Quire
As you enter through this central doorway, you pass a stone chair on your right. This was the seat of the Ostiarius. He ensured it was only members of the Priory who entered this space. Originally the Quire was for the sole use of the monks. You will notice empty spaces in the door surround. These would once have held statues of Saints which were destroyed by the Iconoclasts during the mid-17th century.

In 1174 the central Quire was destroyed by a great fire and William of Sens, a master mason from France, was commissioned in 1174 to rebuild it. The building went well, but in 1178, whilst on scaffolding under the Lamb and the Flag ceiling boss that you see above you, the scaffolding collapsed and William was mortally wounded. His work was continued by his young assistant, known as William the Englishman.

Some of the things to look out for here include:
- The lectern - completed in 1663 showing the eagle, the King of the Birds, carrying the Bible, spreading the Word of God;
- The Cathedra - the Archbishop’s chair behind the High Altar. Known as St Augustine’s chair it is used for the enthronement of Archbishops, most recently Justin Welby in 2013;
- The Throne of the Archbishop- with its ornate gothic canopy, is a more recent addition to the Cathedral, given to Archbishop Howley in 1844.

As you leave the Quire, you will enter the North Quire Aisle. Immediately on your right is the elaborate tomb of Archbishop Chichele. He was the Archbishop of King Henry V and welcomed him to the Cathedral on his victorious return from Agincourt. It is called a cadaver or transi tomb and depicts the Archbishop as in life, resplendent in his robes and underneath, as in death. The inscription around it serves as a reminder that for all of us no matter how important we are in life, in death we are all the same. This was installed some years before Chichele’s death in 1443 so would have served as a constant reminder to him when he walked past it daily.

Chichele founded All Souls College in Oxford and they undertook the maintenance of the tomb. It is surrounded by many key figures but one that is instantly recognisable is on the top right hand side. Another Archbishop; if you look closely you will see the sword sticking out of his head. No prizes for guessing who this is.

As you leave Chichele you begin to climb the steps to Trinity Chapel. This is where Becket’s shrine stood from 1220-1538. Today as a modern visitor you are able to walk up the steps. But in the days of pilgrimage you would have been expected to go up on your knees. If there is space here you can stand and admire the Opus Alexandrinum, the mosaic floor, and the roundels, symbols of signs of the zodiac. If there isn’t any space to stand there will be other opportunities to look from the other side.

Please be aware that the aisles from this point are quite narrow so ensure you are two metres away from others. There is no limit to the amount of time you can spend in the Cathedral so we ask you to be patient and respect those other visitors around you.

Henry IV
Continuing on, you will find the tomb of the only king buried at Canterbury Cathedral—Henry IV and beside him his Queen, Joan of Navarre. The alabaster effigies are believed to be a good likeness of the royal couple. There had been doubt that the body of Henry IV was actually in the tomb. A story had evolved that the sailors bringing the King’s body down to Canterbury had been caught up in a storm. Being superstitious they had cast his body over the side and then merely acquired another corpse when they arrived in Canterbury. In 1832 the tomb was opened to determine once and for all whether or not the body of Henry IV was indeed buried in this tomb. As it was opened, the air rushed in and the body was destroyed, but it was clear that the features, including a fine red beard, were those of the King.

The Shrine of St Thomas
As you round the ambulatory you are tracing the steps you followed in the Eastern Crypt, but above ground. The candle that burns where the Shrine of Thomas Becket once stood is directly above the place where Thomas’s body was first placed in the Crypt. The Shrine which stood on that spot since 1220 was destroyed on the orders of Henry VIII along with the shrines of St Anselm, St Alphege and St Dunstan in 1538. It is said that 20 cartloads of precious stones and metals were removed including the Regale de France, a ruby the size of a duck egg, left at the Shrine by King Louis VII of France.

The Corona Chapel
This Chapel, completed by William the Englishman in 1184, once held a box in which the top part, or crown, of the Martyr’s head was kept. If you were a pilgrim or visitor wealthy or important enough you would be offered the opportunity to look at and even kiss it. This was destroyed at the same time as the Shrine and the Corona is now known as the Chapel of Saints and Martyrs of Our Own Time.

The Miracle Windows
These are a series of windows, six on the North side and six on the South. They recount the stories that William and Benedict, the two monks that watched over the Tomb of Thomas Becket in the Crypt, recorded as miracles. Although some of the glass has been replaced over the centuries, most of it still dates from the early 13th century.

Hubert Walter
As you round the corner to the south aisle you will see on your left the tomb of Hubert Walter, Archbishop to Richard I, or Lionheart as he was known. During the long absences of the King, Walter managed the kingdom, raised taxes and was instrumental in obtaining the payment of ransom when Richard was held captive. When Richard died, his successor King John named Walter Chancellor, a post he held until his death in 1205. This is the oldest tomb in the Cathedral to remain intact and has six heads carved on the front and sides. In 1890 his tomb was opened. He was inside a Caen stone coffin with his name engraved on a leaden plate. Some of his vestments were removed and are now held within the Cathedral archives. It is hoped that they will be one of the treasures displayed in the new exhibition spaces that are being created as part of “The Canterbury Journey”. We hope that you will return to see them in the future.

The next Tomb is that of the Black Prince. Here the aisle is very narrow and his tomb is of such magnificence that many visitors stop to admire it. Please take extra care regarding physical distancing.

The Black Prince
Edward of Woodstock was the eldest son of Edward III. He was born in 1330 and won his spurs at the Battle of Crecy in 1346. He was an icon of his age and renowned as a great warrior and military tactician. On October 1361 he married Joan, known as the Fair Maid of
Kent, and, when Edward died before his father, their second son Richard inherited the throne as Richard II.

The shields on his tomb represent his coat of arms for war and for peace. The three ostrich feathers signify peace. There are two stories about why the feathers were chosen. The first is that they were part of the family crest of his mother Philippa of Hainault. The second that at the Battle of Crecy, Edward was so impressed by the bravery of the King John of Bohemia that he adopted his crest. We do know that he took his motto Ich Dien (I serve) from John, but there is no evidence that Edward also took his crest; however it is a nice story. To this day, the three ostrich feathers remain the emblem of the Prince of Wales and Ich Dien his motto. Cathedral guides would have shown you a two pence piece to regale this story to you and then turned it over to reveal the three feathers on the back. Recently this design was changed by the Royal Mint, so if you have one in your pocket, take a moment to check if you have one that still bears the emblem of the Prince of Wales.

The other coat of arms displays the Lions (Leopards) of England and the Fleur de Lys of France. The Black Prince’s father Edward III claimed the throne of France through his mother, Isabella, and this was the catalyst for the 100 Years War.

Edward the Black Prince died in 1376, shortly before his father. He had a special affinity for Canterbury Cathedral and had written a Will detailing everything about his funeral and where he wished to be buried. Although he requested to be buried in the Crypt, this location was deemed to be a far more suitable place for a hero of his age.

Above the tomb you can see the 1954 replicas of his “achievement”. They include his jupon, helmet, cap of maintenance, shield, gauntlets and scabbard. The originals hung there for centuries but were removed first to a display case near the South East Transept and more recently took part in the Opus Anglicanum embroidery exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum. They will be returned to public display upon the completion of a purpose built display case that will be housed in the Crypt.

When you reach the bottom of the next steps, you will see St Anselm’s Chapel on your left. Please enter through the door nearest to the steps and exit through the other door. This is a small Chapel, so be aware of other visitors who might be in there.

The Bossanyi Windows.

You are now approaching the end of your tour around Canterbury Cathedral. You cannot fail to notice these bright colourful windows that were commissioned in the late 1950s and created by Ervin Bossanyi. Bossanyi was a Hungarian Jew that who escaped from Nazi occupation. The windows are full of symbolism and you will find a description on the left and right hand columns.

As you come down the steps to exit through the south door, you will reach the junction for the exit point. This is a crossroads and will be monitored to ensure physical distancing is maintained.

Now you have completed your walk through the Cathedral building, please take the opportunity to enjoy some of the outside spaces around the Precincts; the Great Cloister, the Herb Garden and the Memorial Gardens.

We would like to thank you for visiting Canterbury Cathedral. We hope you have enjoyed your visit today despite the restrictions we have had to implement. Your feedback on your experience today would be much valued as we strive to continue to provide a safe but enjoyable environment. Please take a few moments to email christine.pascall@canterbury-cathedral.org
If you would like to join the Cathedrals “fan club” and help us sustain this building please go to https://www.canterbury-cathedral.org/support-us/friends/ to find out how to become a Friend of Canterbury Cathedral.