A Monk’s Life

The story of Canterbury Cathedral began in the year 597 when a group of monks led by St Augustine arrived in Kent. They had been sent by the Pope in Rome on a special mission to spread Christianity across England. Augustine based himself in Canterbury and set down his seat to become the first Archbishop of Canterbury.

Following a fire in 1067, the church and monastery were rebuilt. On this outdoor trail you will be able to explore some of the places where over 70 monks lived, worked and prayed.

Make your way around the outside of the Cathedral in a clockwise direction until you arrive in the Great Cloister.

1 Learning GREAT CLOISTER

The daily routine for monks was organised around doing the ‘work of God’ through prayers and services inside the Cathedral.

Outside in the Great Cloister, monks worked and studied. They would copy documents, teach the younger monks and read the Bible. They would also walk in silent prayer.

What do you notice about yourself and your surroundings if you enjoy some time walking silently through the Great Cloister?

2 Eating REFECTORY

The monks came together for two meals a day in the refectory. They would eat in silence.

The monks were quite self-sufficient. They baked their own bread, brewed beer and grew fruit and vegetables.

Can you find...
this hole in the wall? Bread and beer were passed through from the refectory to monks who needed a snack.

What’s your favourite food?

3 Gathering CHAPTER HOUSE

Each morning the monks met in Chapter House. The Prior – head monk – would read from the Bible, discuss the business of the day and read a chapter of the Rule of St Benedict.

St Benedict’s rules included promises not to marry and that all monks had to work hard. There were also punishments listed too. For example, if a monk was late for their meal too many times, they might have their portion of wine taken away.

Imagine...
sitting on the Prior’s stone chair. What advice or wisdom would you share with the monks about how to live a good and happy life?

4 Medicine HERB GARDEN

The plants in this new herb garden are examples of plants monks would have grown to eat and use for medicine.

Have a look... at the plants without touching them as some are very delicate and others can cause skin irritation. How many of the herbs do you recognise?

Which plants would you find in your kitchen at home?
The Water Tower was built in the 1160s as part of a waterworks system bringing in clean water from a source over 1 km away. Monks lived at the Cathedral until they were sent away on the orders of Henry VIII in 1540. After that date, Dean and Chapter started looking after Canterbury Cathedral and still do to this day.

We hope you had fun discovering the history of monks at the Cathedral with this trail. There is plenty more to do during your visit today. Enjoy exploring.

As you carry on walking around the outside of the building, have a look at the stained glass windows. You’ll be able to see the shapes of the lead and glass, but what about the colour? What difference does it make to be on the outside looking in?

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If you were to become a monk and had to leave your life behind, what would you miss most and why?

The Benedictine Rule required ill monks to be looked after with great care. Sometimes the treatment for ill monks included taking more baths and eating meat. But they would have to go back to their usual simpler diet as soon as they were better.

How do you... look after yourself? keep yourself safe and well?

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An activity trail for young explorers