

Thomas Becket, Pilgrimage and Dover Town Hall

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850 years ago this year on 29 December 1170 Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, was murdered in his own cathedral. Born in London in 1118, he was educated from 10 onwards at Merton Priory and then in Paris. His Norman father, Gilbert Becket, used his contacts to find a place for Thomas with Archbishop Theobald whom he impressed and was sent abroad to study law. In France he met the dying King Stephen who appointed Thomas as chancellor to his heir, Henry II.

Thomas and Henry, 15 years younger, became great friends despite their different characters. Thomas was calm, handsome and intelligent, whilst Henry was restless and lecherous with a nasty temper who bore grudges against anybody who displeased him. Henry, nevertheless, recognized Thomas's qualities and Thomas was devoted to the young, lively king.

On his deathbed Archbishop Theobald named Thomas as his successor, which Henry supported, but it would highlight the differences between them and the objectives of Church and State. These grew worse and Henry even believed that loyal Thomas was plotting against him, requiring Thomas to answer various charges. Becket fled to France for six years. Henry seized Canterbury's revenues and detained all Becket's relatives and colleagues. Becket made several attempts to resolve the situation, but it took the Pope to bring them together. Becket was restored to Canterbury and his possessions.

Despite this, Becket prophesied that Canterbury would soon have another martyr as some of the barons continued verbal attacks and made Henry angry with Thomas. The story is well known that four

of these knights assumed that they had orders from Henry to murder Becket. He met them in the cathedral, but refused to cancel the excommunication of bishops that had opposed him or to apologise to Henry. All four then savagely attacked him, leaving his body where it fell. On hearing the news Henry is said to have cried for three days. Within a few days three miracle cures were claimed after praying to the martyr. The Becket cult began.

Crowds started visiting the tomb in the crypt of the cathedral and in 1172 Becket was canonised as St. Thomas. Pilgrims would be greeted by a monk, offered food and drink, guided to where Becket was killed, then up the steps on their knees to the high altar where his body had rested for one night and finally to the crypt and the marble tomb. Following a fire in 1174 a new purpose-built chapel housed the tomb behind the high altar. In 1220 Thomas's bones were removed from the crypt, witnessed by Henry II, Archbishop Stephen Langton and many bishops, and placed in a gold-plated chest upon a pink marble pedestal with a tomb canopy. The shrine was adorned with many expensive gifts.



Murder of Thomas Becket

Apparently 26 wagons were needed to take away these treasures when Henry VIII destroyed the shrine in 1538. Monks guarded the shrine day and night with its perpetual burning candles. Mass was celebrated daily at the shrine's altar.

Pilgrims were travelling to the Holy Land as early as the 3rd century and played an important role in Christian life throughout the Middle Ages, leading to increases in travel and trade. Originally it was a pious act of faith with the reward of a place in heaven. Visiting the shrine of a saint would reduce guilt for committed sins – not just the shrine but the journey too. Enduring the hardships and dangers were likened to the suffering of Jesus.

Monasteries and monastic houses accommodated weary pilgrims; assisting the pilgrim was seen as sharing in the virtue of their journey, honouring Christ in every stranger. This included medical attention with many having infirmaries. Evesham Abbey even washed their feet – required by the Church, but rarely observed. The popularity of shrines was reinforced by the belief in the powers of remains of saints and holy images. This led to some corrupt use of fake items to fool pilgrims.

With increasing numbers of pilgrims many hospices (from *hospes* = guests) were founded to shelter pilgrims, including Dover's *Maison Dieu* in 1203, catering primarily for those arriving from and going to the continent on pilgrimage. In most hospices guests would sleep on straw-covered floors; how often the straw was changed is debatable, although some medieval wills do mention mattresses,



Thomas Becket Window

sheets and pillows being left to hospices.

Later, pilgrims also used inns, which varied in quality and in what was provided other than a bed. Chaucer's fictional pilgrims set off from the Tabard Inn at Southwark en route to Canterbury. Men and women would often be in separate quarters even if married and you would expect to share a bed with at least one other person. The Great Bed of Ware,

10 feet square, could sleep 20!

Some saw pilgrimage as an excursion, to meet new people, new cultures, new places, even to indulge in vice; Chaucer, writing 1380-1400 describes it as enjoying fellowship with others. There was a 'pilgrimage industry' involving inn keepers, souvenir sellers, hostel and ship owners; the Church also benefited financially from pilgrims' gifts.

In the 15th century the Church's teaching was questioned, leading to the rejection of relics, images, indulgences and pilgrimage; the Becket cult declined, culminating in the destruction of his shrine in 1538 during Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries. With pilgrimage banned at least 563 monasteries and other religious institutions, in England, broke the pilgrimage tradition.

Today, many people, not only Christians but of other faiths or none, still go on pilgrimage and not only to shrines of saints for an uplifting and inspiring experience. Many visit Shakespeare's birthplace, Hitler visited Napoleon Bonaparte's tomb, not to mention those visiting Graceland to revere Elvis.

Source: *To Be A Pilgrim* by Sarah Hopper, Sutton Publishing 2002.