

Canterbury, mother church of the Anglican community

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# Canterbury's tale

For centuries, Canterbury Cathedral has been a beacon for pilgrims and a target for vengeful monarchs – and wartime bombs. **James Henry** visits one of Christianity's holiest shrines

**R**AISED VOICES echoing through the building, the ring of swords wielded in anger and blood on the flagstones of the north-west transept. This is the story of Canterbury Cathedral that most of us know from school history lessons. The martyrdom of Archbishop

Thomas Becket, gruesomely murdered by four knights of the court of King Henry II in 1170, ensured the cathedral would become one of the most holy Christian pilgrimage shrines. However, the full story of the cathedral that is the mother church of the Church of England – and

Anglicans worldwide – began more than 500 years before that murderous day, December 29, 1170. The cathedral was founded as a Roman Catholic mission to Anglo-Saxon England in 597. Pope Gregory sent Benedictine monk Augustine to the court of King Ethelbert of Kent. There were already Christian

churches in the city but Augustine began the first cathedral, probably on the site of an existing church. He also founded the Abbey of St Peter and St Paul nearby, which is now part of the Canterbury Cathedral World Heritage Site. Augustine became the first archbishop, but his time was short.

He died in 604 and was later raised to sainthood. His shrine was desecrated and relics removed as part of Henry VIII's Reformation. The shrine was finally re-established in 2012 in St Augustine's Church in Ramsgate, close to where his mission first stepped on to Kent soil. That first cathedral's remains are

under the present nave, as much rebuilding has been done over its 1400 years. The Saxons rebuilt but the Normans had to completely rebuild after a fire in 1070. A staircase and parts of the North Wall – in the area of the North West transept also called the Martyrdom – remain from that building. ▶

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Christ Church Gate damaged by Roundheads who destroyed the statue of Christ now replaced by a bronze at the centre of the gate



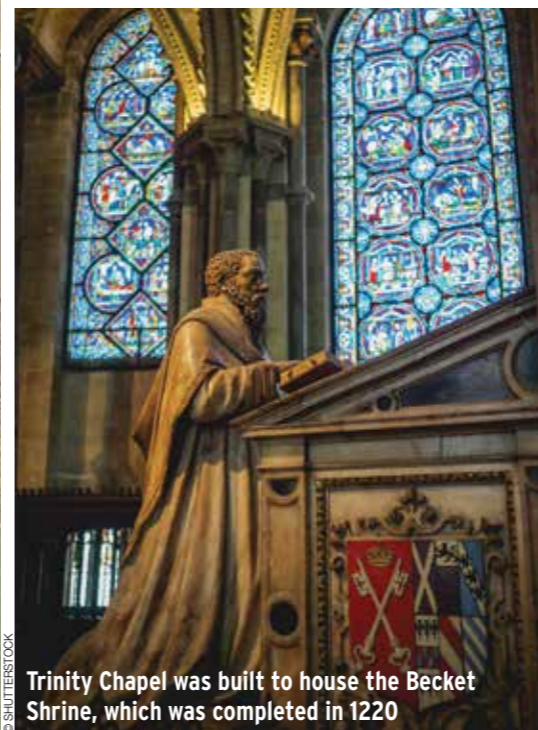
Cathedral cloisters



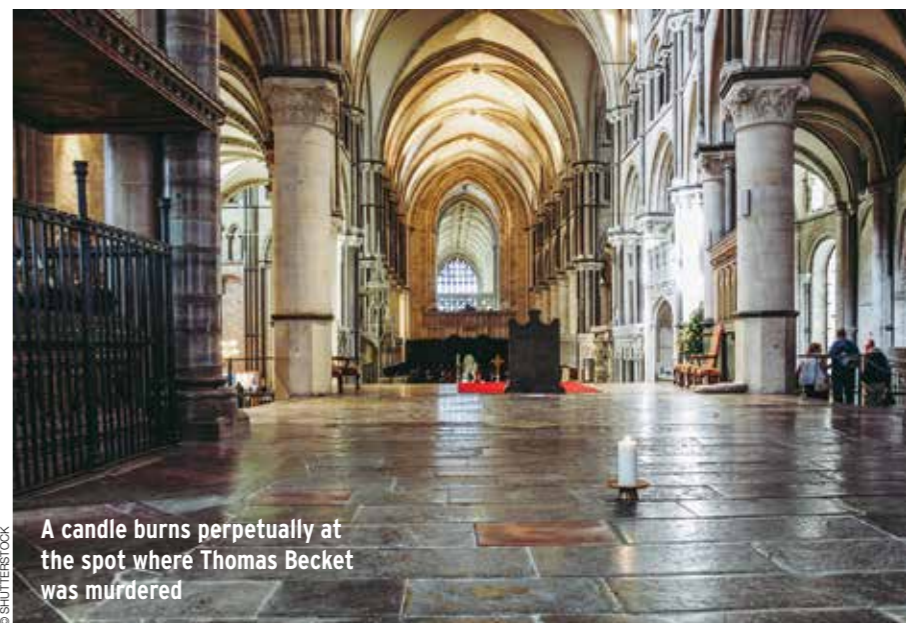
Magnificent choir of the cathedral



Stunning ceiling of the central tower



Trinity Chapel was built to house the Becket Shrine, which was completed in 1220



A candle burns perpetually at the spot where Thomas Becket was murdered

Following the murder of Thomas Becket, his remains were entombed in the crypt but in 1220 they were transferred to a glittering shrine in the newly created Trinity Chapel situated directly above his former tomb.

Spain, secondary only to Rome and Jerusalem.

By 1498 the cathedral was in the form seen today, albeit with much restoration work carried out over the centuries and requiring much more now and into the future.

Four other Archbishops of Canterbury were martyred and, King Henry IV and Edward Plantagenet were both interred in the Trinity

Chapel. However, in 1538 Becket's shrine was destroyed by order of Henry VIII, who bizarrely summoned the dead saint to court to answer charges of treason. Unsurprisingly, he didn't turn up, was found guilty and the treasures of his shrine were seized for the crown and taken away in two coffers and 26 carts. Becket's relics were lost – a further martyrdom at the hands of a king. In 1540 Canterbury,

a Benedictine Abbey since the 900s, was dissolved by Henry.

There was more turbulence 100 years later when the puritans of Cromwell's army occupied the premises during the English Civil War. Statues and some stained glass and other parts of the interior were destroyed and horses stabled in the nave.

In the 400 years up to the present day there have been fires, Second World War bomb damage (the library

was destroyed but vigilant work by fire watchers prevented worse disaster), and always the constant requirement of preservation to fight the ravages of time with a need to repair and protect the ancient stonework and replace the lead roof.

The place where Becket was murdered, so violently that the top of his skull was sliced off, is now marked by a new altar installed in 1986. Mounted on the wall above it, there

is a metal sculpture by Truro sculptor Giles Blomfield depicting a cross flanked by two bloodstained swords which, together with the shadows they cast, represent the four knights who killed Becket.

Visiting the cathedral is now open, although masks are still required and a one-way system is in operation.

■ **Details of opening times and entry prices are updated regularly on the website: ([www.canterbury-cathedral.org](http://www.canterbury-cathedral.org)).**