

The Penance of Henry II



On the 29th December 1170 Archbishop Thomas Becket was murdered inside Canterbury Cathedral.

The knights who killed him had their own reasons for hating Becket, but the tradition that these fateful words “Who will rid me of this troublesome priest?” were uttered by Henry II is still often repeated. Initially grief-stricken, the king apparently did not appreciate the scale of this disaster, but Becket’s death stunned Europe. Over the next three years, Henry faced revolts, even from within his own family, and to regain control of his extensive lands, he needed God’s forgiveness.

On Friday 12th July 1174 Henry II arrived in Canterbury to undertake his penitential pilgrimage to Becket’s tomb. Approaching from the west, he dismounted at St Nicholas’ hospital at Harbledown and entered the chapel to pray. Afterwards, he granted the hospital 20 marks annually from the tax paid to king by Canterbury city (today £13.33 is still paid).

Having walked to St Dunstan’s church he removed his fine clothes and shoes and dressed only in his shirt with a hunting cape to keep off the torrential rain, he walked barefoot to the Westgate, into the city and to the cathedral. Little survives of St Dunstan’s Church from Henry’s reign, except for the north wall where the quire is located today.

Henry’s route from St Dunstan’s church to Becket’s tomb links two very important medieval archbishops, as well as marking the way taken by countless pilgrims during the Middle Ages and also today.

