

Pilgrimage to St Thomas the Martyr



Canterbury became a place of even greater religious significance as the cult of Thomas Becket grew from the late twelfth century onwards.

Early miracles are depicted in the 'Becket Miracle Windows' in the Trinity Chapel of Canterbury Cathedral. Recent research has discovered that the earliest date from the 1180s, which shows that these miracles and the creation of these panels were contemporary with each other. One panel shows pilgrims travelling along a white road to the Cathedral; the white road has the words 'PEREGRINI ST': 'Pilgrims of the Saint'.



Over the centuries, pilgrims used ancient routeways to reach Canterbury, such as Watling Street, which linked London, Canterbury and Dover. In St Dunstan's parish they may have stayed at 'The Star Inn' or 'The Cornish Chough'. Other establishments such as 'The Bull Inn' and 'The Sun Inn' in the Buttermarket (the medieval Bulstake), and 'The Crown Inn' and 'The Cheker of Hope' in Mercery Lane were owned by Canterbury Cathedral Priory and close to the grand Christ Church Gate. However, some poor pilgrims stayed overnight at St Thomas' hospital (now known as Eastbridge).

After 1220, pilgrims could venerate St Thomas at four places in the cathedral: the Martyrdom; the Tomb-Shrine in the crypt, the Corona Chapel and the magnificent Shrine in the Trinity Chapel. The early Becket Miracle Windows show pilgrims visiting Becket's Tomb-Shrine and receiving St Thomas' Water, the diluted blood of Becket within small flasks known as ampullae. Pilgrims might purchase badges and tokens as amulets or souvenirs.



Credits: Text – Miranda Owens

Images: Stained glass panels from Becket Miracle Windows, photographs courtesy of Dr Rachel Koopmans. 13th century pewter Becket token photograph courtesy of Miranda Owens