

Canterbury Cathedral

These steps are more than 800 years old. They are called Pilgrim Steps. They are in the oldest and most important of all English Cathedrals, in Canterbury. There has been a cathedral in Canterbury for 1400 years, since St Augustine came to England from Rome in the year 597. He became the first Archbishop of Canterbury. Since then there have been more than 100 archbishops of Canterbury, some of them very famous.

It was because of one archbishop who was murdered in the cathedral that Canterbury became such a popular place for pilgrims to visit. It was the 29th December 1170 that Thomas Becket was killed by four of the king’s knights.

King Henry II and Archbishop Becket were good friends until they quarrelled over the authority of the Church. The four knights decided to get rid of the archbishop to help the king. They thought it was what the king wanted. They attached Becket with their swords, cutting off the top of his head and spilling his brains out onto the cathedral floor. After the murderers had rushed out, the monks crept in and carried the archbishop’s body to a place in front of the High Altar. Cloths were used to soak up his blood.

All over the country, people were horrified when they heard the news of the archbishop being murdered in his own cathedral. When the cathedral was opened again, almost a year after his death, the place in the crypt where Becket was buried became an important place to visit and people began to come from all over the country to pray there. Amazing stories were spreading far and wide about the sick being cured after a visit to the shrine. The monks knew how precious the martyr’s bones were to them so the coffin was protected by a stone wall which surrounded it but there were two open windows in the wall so that pilgrims could put their heads through and kiss the marble coffin.

In 1173 the archbishop was declared a saint. A new shrine was built later after a fire had destroyed part of the cathedral and that’s when the pilgrim steps were built. For 300 years thousands of pilgrims came from all over Europe to the holy shrine of St Thomas Becket. Some of them walked barefoot to the cathedral and some pilgrims even climbed these steps on their knees to show how sacred the place was to them.