

Walk Awhile

Briefing Paper 20

Canterbury, the Burgate and Early Christianity

Introduction

Canterbury was established in the 1st Century by the Romans – named Durovernum - it developed as an administrative and residential centre rather than a garrison town and grew up around the ford where Watling Street crosses the River Stour. The town had arterial roads leading to London, Ricborough (the Roman gateway port to England, 14 miles away in Thanet) and Lympne. Walls were not needed to defend the town until circa 270-290 AD when Saxon pirates menaced the town.¹

Christ Church Gate

Sun Street leads into a square, which for the last 200 years has been known as the **Butter Market**. An oval building supported on columns once stood in the square and as the name suggests this area was used for market trading. Prior to that it is believed bulls were tied to stakes and baited with dogs before being slaughtered. This was thought to improve the quality of the meat.

To the north side of the square is the **Christ Church Gate** and entrance to the precincts of Christ Church Cathedral Canterbury. Most of the cathedral building that we see today was built on the site of the Saxon and Norman buildings. The construction of the present nave was started in 1377 and the Bell Harry Tower was completed in 1498.² The elaborate Christ Church gate was built in the Tudor period by Prior Goldstone between 1502 and 1519.³ The large wooden doors were restored in 1662,⁴ after being destroyed in the English Civil War in 1643.⁵ These wooden gates bear the arms of the Cathedral.

¹ Christopher John Wright, *A Guide to the Pilgrims Way and North Downs Way* 4th edition 1993 p 299

² *Canterbury cathedral*, Keates and Hornak 1998 edition, p46-50.

³ *Canterbury City Trails No.2 A Pilgrimage to the Cathedral*, produced by Canterbury Urban Studies Centre 1996

⁴ *ibid*, CCT No.2

⁵ Kent Resources; *Canterbury cathedral*, The Unofficial pages, www.digiserve.com/pweter/ccgate.htm

A number of heraldic features are to be found on the front gate including the shield of Thomas Becket, the Tudor Rose and crown and the shield of Prior Goldstone. There are also signs relating to the crucifixion to be found in a frieze including the crown of thorns and the cock that crowed when Peter denied Jesus. Along the bottom tier of the gateway are to be found the heraldic shields of King Henry VII (Henry VIII's father), Prince Arthur (Prince of Wales) and Katherine of Aragon (who Henry VIII married after the death of his eldest brother Arthur)⁶. On the tier above can be seen the shields of other prominent Tudor families of the period supported by angels. These include Sir Henry Guildeford; Sir William Scott; Sir John Fyneaux; Sir Edward Poynings; Sir Thomas Howard (Duke of Norfolk); Sir George Neville and Sir Charles Summerset (Earl of Worcester).⁷

The present statue of Christ in the centre of the gate is a very recent addition and replaces the statue destroyed by the Puritan Richard Culmer at the time of the Civil War. The two turrets on the top of the gateway were rebuilt in 1937-39, having been pulled down in the 18th Century so as to enable a bank situated on the corner of St Margaret's Street to have sight of the Cathedral clock.⁸

Mercery Lane and the 'Chequers of the Hope' Inn

The narrow lane leading from the High Street to the Butter Market is Mercery lane. If you look towards the Cathedral entrance from the High Street, the shop on the left is part of the 'Chequers of the Hope' Inn. The Inn was built by Prior Chillendon in 1390 to provide accommodation for pilgrims.⁹ It is mentioned in a supplement to the Canterbury Tales. The Inn had a 90 metre frontage on the High Street and two 34 metre wings behind it. The western block of the southern façade burnt down in 1865.¹⁰ It is believed there were individual rooms on the first floor and a large communal dormitory on the top floor.

Burgate and the City Walls

Before Burgate Street reaches the city walls the perpendicular tower of what was once the Church of St Mary Magdalene¹¹ can be seen on the right. The tower was built in 1502. The church was demolished in 1871.

⁶ **A medieval Trail of Canterbury No.10 published by the Canterbury Environment Centre, chapter 9 the Christ Church gate.**

⁷ **Kent Resources; Canterbury cathedral, The Unofficial pages, www.digiserve.com/pweter/ccgate.htm**

⁸ **op cit, Canterbury City Trails No.2**

⁹ **ibid,**

¹⁰ **ibid,**

¹¹ **Christopher John Wright, A guide to the Pilgrim's Way p.3181993.**

We leave the city via what was the Burgate or Borough gate. The gate was rebuilt of brick in 1475. Most of the gate was demolished in 1781 and the tower in 1822. As one leaves Burgate the line of the flint city walls rebuilt in 14th and 15th centuries can be seen. This is the most impressive section of the city walls and they follow exactly the lines of the original Roman walls. A few hundred metres to the left (looking due north along Broad Street) an arch of Roman bricks can be seen. The arch is the remains of the Roman Queningate to Canterbury.¹²

St Augustine's Abbey Church

At the far end or the east end of Church Street, where it meets Monastery Street stands the Cemetery gate leading into the precincts of St Augustine's Abbey. The Abbey lies at the centre of the development of the Christianity in England. The gate was built in 1391 and restoration work was undertaken in 1839.¹³ As part of the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII, the monks were dispersed with pensions in 1538 and much of the building eventually demolished to provide stone for fortifications in Calais 1541.¹⁴

Augustine arrived in Kent in 597, sent from Rome by Pope Gregory to bring Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons. The King of the Kentish Kingdom, Ethelbert granted Augustine's monks permission to preach in Canterbury and provided them with food and accommodation. Ethelbert's tolerance of Augustine's mission may be explained partly by his marriage to Bertha, a Frankish woman whose father had been a former King of Paris. Queen Bertha herself had already converted from paganism to Christianity. Ethelbert's benevolence may well have been because he had an eye on fostering closer links with post-Roman mainland Europe, much of which was Christian.¹⁵

The Abbey was founded in 605, which may have also been the year of Augustine's death. Augustine was buried outside the Abbey's walls and upon completion of the church his body was moved to a chapel on the north side of the building. Queen Bertha was also buried in the Abbey on the south side and King Ethelbert was buried in the Abbey upon his death in 616.

The ruins that survive today, to a large part are those of major re-building work undertaken in the 11th century started under Abbott Scolland, (until his death in 1087) continued by Abbot Wido, (until his death in 1093) and was completed under Abbot Hugh at the beginning of the 12th

¹² **Elham Valley Way Guidebook – p74**

¹³ **ibid p320**

¹⁴ **St Augustine's Abbey, Richard Gem English heritage 1997, 143-143.**

¹⁵ **ibid p.34**

century. Today it is the long stretch of the north aisle wall that can be seen above surviving above ground level.

St Martin's Roman Church

Just a few hundred metres further east along Church Street is found the ancient church of St Martins, which is 'the oldest church in continuous use in Britain', pre-dating Augustine's arrival in England.¹⁶

Similar to the Abbey, St Martin's church is central to the early history of Christianity in England. The church was originally built in the Roman period and had been restored by Queen Bertha for Christian worship.¹⁷ Bede describes Bertha using the church for worship in 562, five years before Augustine's mission.¹⁸

The present church consists of a number of periods of construction and includes sections of Roman bricks in the chancel dating back to the 6th century. It has been suggested that the nave dates back to the 7th century. Stained glass windows from the 15th century depict Augustine landing in Kent, entering Canterbury and baptising King Ethelbert.¹⁹

Walk Awhile Ltd
April 2003

¹⁶ Op cit, A Guide to the Pilgrims Way, p322.

¹⁷ Op cit, St Augustine's Abbey, p.93

¹⁸ Op cit, A guide to the Pilgrims Way , p322.

¹⁹ Ibid, p322.