

England in Stone - Findings at Canterbury Cathedral

by Nathalie Cohen 13 January 2022

Over the past five years there have been some exciting finds at Canterbury Cathedral as a large project of repair and conservation progressed. Visitors may have been disappointed to find the place covered in scaffolding with areas of excavation blocking the way but to the archaeologists it was a rare opportunity to make quite unexpected discoveries. It was not just the Cathedral but also surrounding areas inside the Roman walls of the old city that were included in the project known as the 'Canterbury Journey'.



The present King's School which is situated on the old Monastic site needed a new building in the Mint Yard. During the preliminary excavation where the remains of an old chapel had previously been removed they unearthed the surface of an old Roman road.

The roof of the Nave had to be replaced as well as the West Towers and the clerestory windows. 18th Century repairers had removed the deteriorated stone gargoyles and replaced them with cast iron drainpipes. These too had deteriorated over the next 300 years. The stone masons at the Cathedral have now carved some new gargoyles to do the job of removing rainwater efficiently. A whole new drainage system has been constructed which involved crossing the old cemetery.



The old pavement of the precinct has been dug up which was exciting for the archaeologists but not so for the visitors or the Archbishop trying to access his Palace! Many coins and tokens were found

giving a good idea of the life lived by these medieval people. The Christchurch Gate (1500-1522) is at the entrance to the precinct. The stone carvings are still in the process of being restored to their early glory. We were assured they will then be very brightly coloured.



Another project has started to install an access lift at one corner of the cloister. Under the tiled floor they have found a tenth century medieval arch. They also found a unique Sundial in good condition. It is a Saxon silver portable sundial that has a gnomon which has to be inserted in the correct month before hanging it up to tell the time. There are numerous replicas around. What was a twelfth century water-tower has now been opened as a museum to display some of the finds.



Inside the Cathedral a walkway was constructed high-up enabling repairs to the vaults and bosses above the Nave. A map was made of the bosses showing Mason's marks which reveals that the masons came from a wide area as well as across the channel. In the Undercroft they have discovered that it was once used as a Masons' workshop. Again, while installing a new organ loft above the choir the wall was found to be covered in monastic graffiti which could be archaeological or astronomical in nature. In the crypt more markings can be seen.

Thomas Becket was murdered in 1170 and buried in the Easter Crypt. Canterbury rapidly became a great pilgrimage centre. A big fire occurred 4 years later destroying the Crypt. This was not considered a total disaster as it gave them a chance to build a bigger and better Eastern Crypt. The tomb was transferred upstairs. However after the dissolution it was all bricked up. In Victorian times there was a restoration, holes being dug in the floor and inscriptions revealed. It is thought that two anglo-saxon bishops had been buried there and there is a possibility that 'decoys' had been buried so as to protect the real tomb of Beckett. A skull was excavated with a hole in it which was re-buried. Now a tooth has been found which is being sent for carbon-dating. Will it be tenth, twelfth or sixteenth century?

Thomas Becket would not recognise much of the current building but some of the stained glass is from the mid twelfth century, the oldest in the world!

This certainly was a talk that made history come alive!