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Remembrance of Things Past: Recreating the Lost World of Medieval Pilgrimage to St. Thomas Becket in Canterbury and the Use of Digital Media in Public Access

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Understanding and Recreating the Shrine of Thomas Becket

The Centre for the Study of Christianity & Culture (CSCC) at the University of York specializes in the creation of research-led, detailed architectural digital modeling as both a research tool and for public engagement. We have recently completed a three-year Arts and Humanities Research Council funded research project, “Pilgrimage and England’s Cathedrals, past and present” (<http://www.pilgrimageandcathedrals.ac.uk/>), which explores the experience of being a pilgrim, in partnership with four case-study cathedrals: Canterbury, Durham, York, and Westminster Roman Catholic Cathedral. The project director, Dr. Dee Dyas built an interdisciplinary team with colleagues from the Open University (Dr. Marion Bowman) and Toronto (Professor Simon Coleman), two post-doctoral researchers (medieval historian Dr. John Jenkins and ethnographer Dr. Tiina Sepp), together with archival, art historical, and digital realization expertise from CSCC.

Within the scope of this project, we have digitally-modeled the four sites associated with St. Thomas Becket within Canterbury Cathedral (**fig. 1**) with which pilgrims would have principally interacted. These are the site of the martyrdom itself, his original tomb, the main medieval shrine in the Trinity Chapel and the head shrine in the Corona Chapel. Drawing on extensive archival and archaeological data research, the modeling has allowed us to test various theories about pilgrimage to Canterbury, — for example, that there was no fixed “route” within the cathedral itself — and explore the peaks and



Figure 1 Canterbury Cathedral. Photo: Wyrdbligh licensed under Creative Commons.

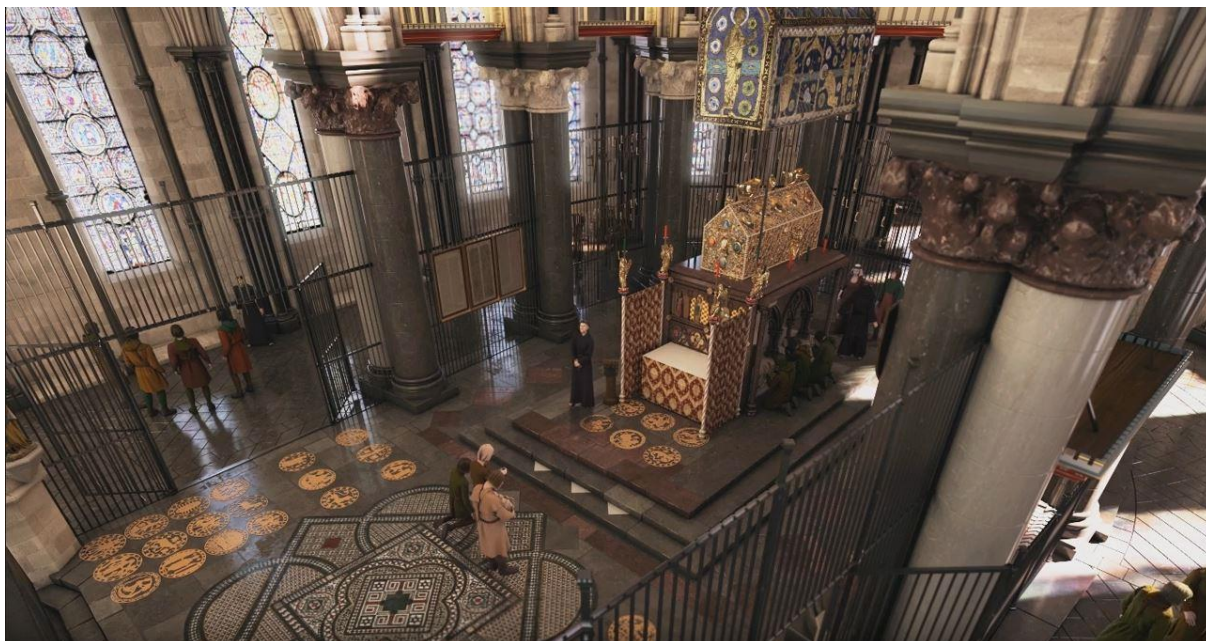


Figure 2 The digital model of the main shrine of Thomas Becket in the Trinity Chapel. Photo: ©The Centre for the Study of Christianity & Culture, University of York.

troughs within the enormous popularity of the cult of St. Thomas Becket. It has also allowed us to recreate as accurately as possible the physical experience of being a pilgrim in that space – what could you see, do, hear, touch at each of these four key sites, and how did their usage vary from one another? How did the monks manage the popularity of the cult alongside their daily routine, and how was the pilgrim experience managed, even “stage-managed”?

The modeling produced included the use of animated human figures involved in a variety of activities, as suggested by Dr. John Jenkins, based on archival and manuscript sources. At the main shrine (**fig. 2**), the animated figures included a couple taking their child to the altar at the west end of the shrine to give thanks for a cure, pilgrims praying in the niches on the side of the shrine base, people being instructed about the miracles depicted in the Trinity Chapel stained glass, and a monk keeping watch. The more exclusive experience offered to the Countess of Kent in the early fifteenth century of seeing and kissing the head shrine in the Corona Chapel (**fig. 3**) depicts her accompanied by kneeling ladies in waiting, whilst the opposite end of the pilgrim spectrum is explored in a model of the tomb in the crypt where it appears it was possible for the chronically sick and infirm to remain for longer periods awaiting a cure. The fourth site depicted is that of the martyrdom itself, shown as the first mass of Thomas’ feast day on 29th December conducted at the small altar erected on the spot (**fig. 4**). Here a few pilgrims, who we have learned would have stayed in the cathedral overnight and been provided with bread and ale, gather in near-darkness to celebrate the mass as Thomas himself was celebrating when he was martyred. These models will be used in the cathedral’s public interpretation programme to offer visitors an opportunity to “fill in the blank” where St. Thomas’ great glittering shrine once stood and have a sense of how that artifact was the focal point to which the rest of the building referred. They will help visitors make sense of the building they are in today, and have some idea of how it has changed.



Figure 3 The Countess of Kent in the Corona Chapel. Photo: © The Centre for the Study of Christianity & Culture, University of York.



Figure 4 The Mass at the Martyrdom altar on 29th December. Photo: © The Centre for the Study of Christianity & Culture, University of York.

The model has also been very valuable as a direct form of research into the lived experience of the medieval pilgrims. The complex spaces and interior geography of the building start to make more sense if viewed as a highly theatrical space entirely constructed to lead up to the culmination of the shrine itself. As part of the modeling process we explored the question of sight-lines, testing out what a pilgrim would be able to see at various points. This showed with great clarity the carefully orchestrated build-up of drama and tension as the shrine was glimpsed from different angles and through railings hung with votives, boards, banners, and other paraphernalia. The management of anticipation and sense of expectation were clearly manifest in the way the shrine was managed and policed, which will be explored by Dr. Jenkins in his forthcoming edition of the shrine-keepers' manual which survives in a medieval customary. Through this process we have also established that there was not (indeed could not have been) a set "route" for pilgrims to follow through the cathedral, as access to the Becket sites not only varied according to the time of day and year, but was also governed by social status and perceived need. Thus, the experience of the Countess of Kent in approaching and accessing the head shrine would have been completely different from the humble peasant seeking a cure at the site of the original tomb in the crypt, by now empty but still imbued with the sanctity of having held Becket's body. The modeling enables us to connect the modern viewer with these lost experiences and allows them to make their own connections between that past and their own experience. They can walk up the same steps from the south aisle and approach the Trinity Chapel (**fig. 5**), but they then encounter an empty space (however potent that may be) which is a world away from the intention of the medieval builders. What they then map onto this experience in terms of their own response will be governed largely by the expectations and prior knowledge they bring on that occasion, but the modeling allows for this encounter to be more informed, for some misconceptions to be corrected, and for some answers to be offered as well as new questions raised.

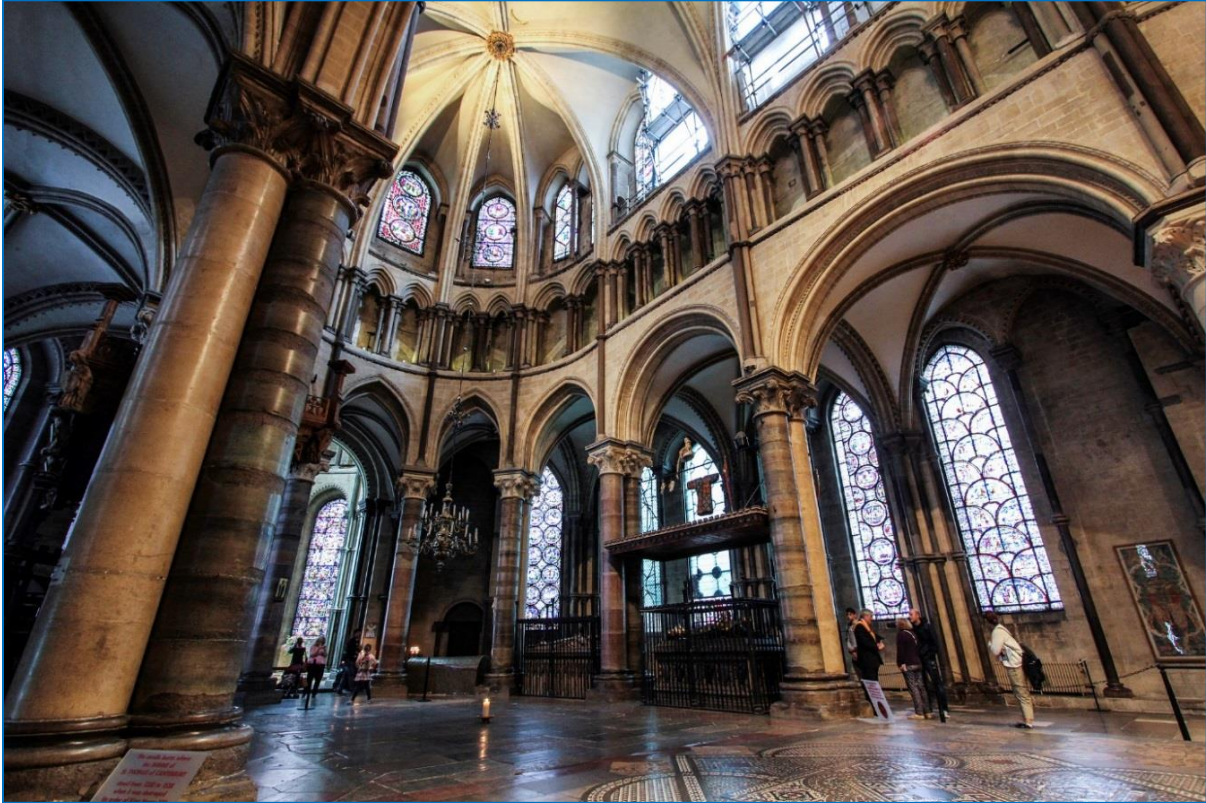


Figure 5 The Trinity Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral today. Photo: Laurence OP licensed under Creative Commons.

Wider Use of Digital Media in Heritage Interpretation

The opportunities offered by digital media to connect visitors more effectively to the sites they are visiting and provoke a deeper, longer, and more meaningful engagement with them has also informed our work with other churches and cathedrals. For sites which are rich in heritage and history (often the initial drivers for the visit), but which are also home to living communities of faith, finding the balance between the provision of information as against inspiration can be difficult. For the majority of visitors who lack the religious or liturgical literacy to “read” the meaning and symbolism of the building and thereby connect with its purpose, access to appropriate and accessible information is essential, but traditional media such as booklets, display boards and guided tours may not fit the bill. Many churches and cathedrals dislike the “visual clutter” which these can

involve and are wary of creating the atmosphere of a museum rather than a church. The emphasis is normally on the historical rather than spiritual story and often a high level of prior knowledge is assumed. Guides typically follow their own script and visitors are often reluctant to ask questions for fear of looking foolish or ignorant. We have found that the provision of material for visitors via touchscreens and mobile phone apps overcomes many of these problems.

Touchscreens can provide very engaging, highly visual, and *layered* information which offers different levels of accessibility. Phone apps deliver relatively small chunks of information, but this can also be layered so the user is in control of the content they access and difficult or unfamiliar terms can be explained via a link to an internal glossary. It is in their own hands on their own device, so if a visitor wishes to click a link — whether to define a word or to read a suggested Bible passage — that is a private experience. They can also take it home with them to share with their friends, to continue to explore, or to use again on a repeat visit. For the church, there is no physical infrastructure required, no spaces are filled with boards or bookstands, no features obscured by displays. Trails can be added for specific themes, areas or events, allowing the visitor to explore the same building in various ways and to build a sense of relationship with it. We have built apps for, amongst others, Worcester and Lichfield cathedrals, which offer not only information about the art and architecture of the building, but also a chance to reflect on the past and present significance of what is being explored (see the App Store or Google Play to download these for free). 🐼