

The Canterbury Environment Centre

City Trail No. 10



A Medieval Trail of Canterbury



CHAS SCANS

Between 1977 and 2002 Canterbury Urban Studies Centre and Canterbury Environment Centre published around 30 guides and city trails describing various aspects of Canterbury's past. Both organisations were based in St Alphege church.

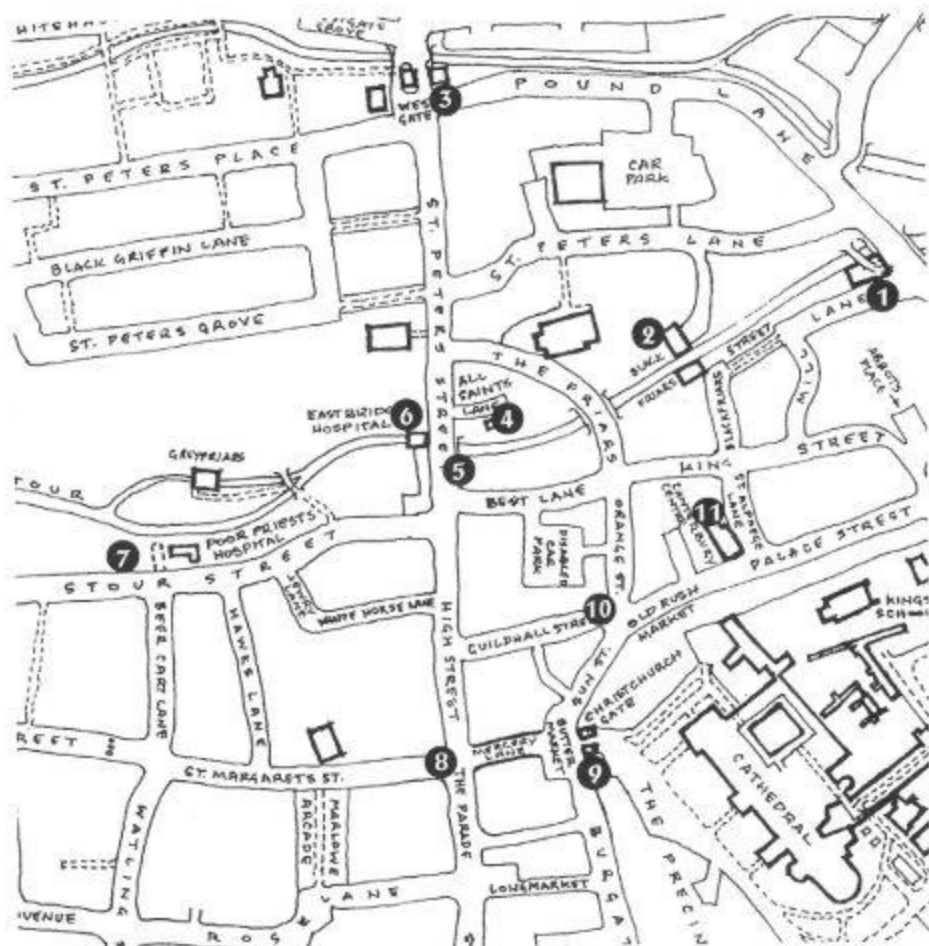
Between them they produced 14 titles in the 'Trails' series, and a further 16 titles outside the main series. All are now out of print and many are difficult (a few impossible) to find through normal second hand sources. Many contain information that is not readily available in other printed or on line sources.

CHAS (Canterbury Historical and Archaeological Society) is scanning a selection of these publications for uploading to the CHAS website as PDFs. In this way a new generation of readers and researchers can have access to this unique resource.

A full list of these publications appears on the CHAS website:

<http://www.canterbury-archaeology.org.uk>

The Medieval Trail Map



click numbers to
see relevant page

Introduction

Seven hundred years ago Canterbury was a very important City. Throughout Europe people had heard the story of Becket's murder and every year thousands of pilgrims came to his shrine to pray or hoping to be cured of illness.

Canterbury has changed a great deal since that time, but parts of the medieval city still survive. This trail will help you to discover the old streets and buildings, what makes them special and to see how they are used today.

The trail, with the route shown on the map (opposite) is about a mile (or one and a quarter kilometres) long and takes about an hour to complete. It includes buildings which were major features of religious, secular and military life in the medieval period. The cathedral is not included as it deserves a visit of its own.

Some of the buildings along the way are open to the public, including the Westgate and its museum where a small charge is made - it is open from 11.00 to 12.30 and 13.30 to 15.30.

Admission to the Eastbridge Hospital is free and it is open from Mon. to Sat. 10.00 to 17.00 and Sun 11.00 to 17.00.

The Poor Priests' Hospital now houses the city council's Canterbury Heritage Museum which charges an entry fee and it opens from Mon. to Sat. 10.30 to 17.00 and June to end October on Sunday 13.30 to 17.00. (last entry 16.00)

It is suggested that visits to the museums mentioned above should be made separately where the wealth of material and information displayed will help you piece together a much fuller picture of the medieval city.

We hope that you enjoy our trail.

① Riverside Garden

The River Stour played an important part in the life of the medieval city as it was used for drainage, transport and power. At one time there were more than a dozen mills in the city and at this location there had been a mill for at least 860 years.

Water power itself used to be extremely important in Canterbury. Mills were used for grinding corn and to drive machines in the wool, silk and paper industries. When refugee weavers arrived from France and the Netherlands (low countries) in the sixteenth century they settled in the riverside parishes where they could obtain power for their looms.



Throughout the medieval period this mill belonged to St. Augustines Abbey, but it was bought by the city in the 1540's. The most recent mill on this site was designed in 1792 by the engineer John Smeaton, just before his death. He is best known for the design and construction of the Eddystone Lighthouse and was also responsible for building parts of Ramsgate Harbour.

The mill was a very large building with six storeys and was a hundred feet high. It had a brick base, walls clad in weather boarding and was finished off with a small octagonal lantern on the roof. There were two pairs of mill stones driven by breast-shot wheels which explains why there are two mill-races. Sadly, the mill was burnt to the ground in a spectacular fire in 1933 and the site has since been turned into a public garden.

The remains of Smeaton's mill can still be discerned and you can see the old mill pond, mill races, sluices and wheel axle.

In addition to the Millers Arms pub, Mill Lane and the weather boarding and lantern on top of the more recently built Mill House serve as reminders of the history of this part of the city.

About a mile downstream from the city centre is Barton Mill which dates from the eighteenth century. It is still in use and belongs to a company which produces animal feedstuff.

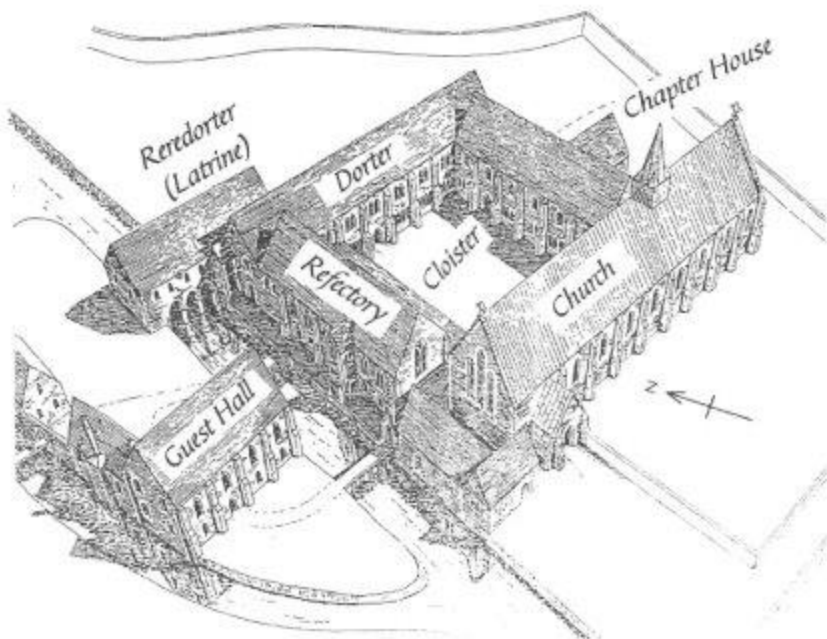
② The Blackfriars



The Blackfriars, whose name derives from the black robes that they wore, were members of the Dominican order. They were keen preachers and teachers, so when a group of thirteen landed in Britain in 1221 few people could have imagined the importance the order was to assume in subsequent centuries. The original group passed through Canterbury, but fifteen years later King Henry III granted the Friars a small island on the River Stour and, with the aid of Royal patronage, they soon extended their holding and erected a church and other buildings on the site.

Thus, before the end of the thirteenth century, they were firmly established in Canterbury.

Despite this dramatic beginning, the Friars continued to rely on gifts and donations for their livelihood throughout the middle Ages, and even sold land that they did not need. By this time they owned a modest five acres which was roughly bounded by Mill Lane, The Friars and St. Peter's Lane. The entrance was through a gateway in St. Peter's Street leading down a curved road - The Friars - to their church. The site included orchards and meadows as well as the usual buildings and was enclosed by fences and a wall, of which the one running along the east side of St. Peter's Lane is a seventeenth century replica.



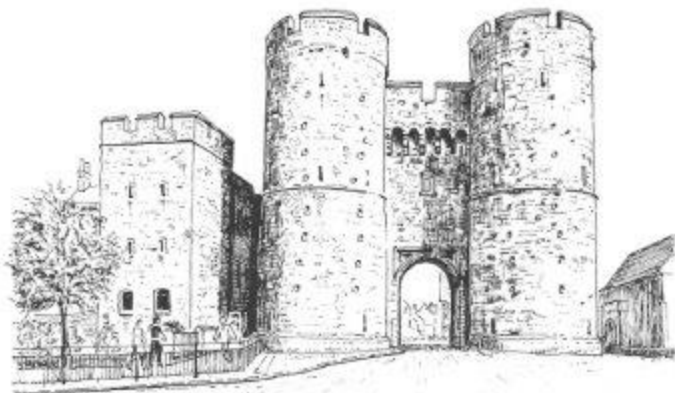
The aerial view showing the complex is taken from a sixteenth century map and shows that the Friary once consisted of a range of buildings, but now only two remain. You will notice that this map shows that the Guest House or Infirmary was built up on an island but today the arm of the river that created this island no longer exists, nor do the bridges which are shown spanning that part of the river.

On the near (west) side of the river as viewed, is the old guest house or Infirmary. In the seventeenth century it was turned into the Weavers Guildhall, later it served as a depository for chairs and furniture and it has suffered in more recent times from neglect and alteration. Subsequently it has passed into private ownership and in 1995 a small but well designed extension has been added to the west end and sympathetic repairs to the existing fabric carried out.

On the other, east, side of the river stands the Frater or Dining Room which dates from the middle of the thirteenth century. Notice the small projection which interrupts the line of the wall beside the riverbank. Originally this housed a pulpit from which one of the Friars read passages from the scriptures during mealtimes. After being the home of many non-conformist religious denominations in the last centuries, the building now has a secular use, being owned by the Kings School and used as their art and craft studio and for exhibitions; it is sometimes open to the public.

③ The Westgate

In the Middle Ages there were six city gates in use on the line of the City Walls. The Westgate was the most important as it controlled the road to and from London and would have been used by a great number of Pilgrims visiting the City. The very first gate is thought to have been built in the third century. In the late Anglo-Saxon period the Holy Cross Church was built over the top of the gateway. In 1421 it was rebuilt next to the gateway and is now used as the city's Guildhall. The present gateway dates from 1381 and almost certainly stands on the site of a Roman entrance to the town.



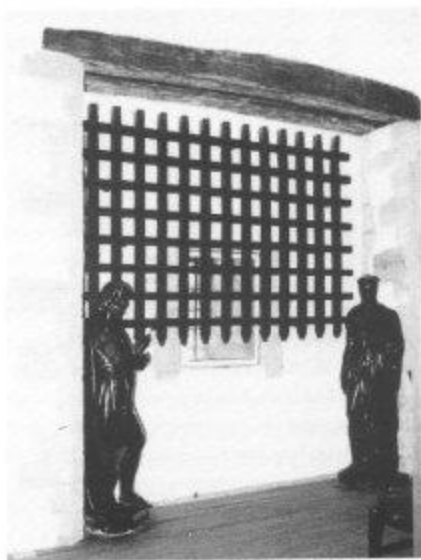
Its original purpose was as part of the city's defences. Together with the city walls it provided security at night and in times of civil unrest. Pilgrims who were late reaching the city would find themselves locked out and therefore have to stay in one of the large inns, some of which are still to be found beyond this gate, in St. Dunstons. Those who were fortunate enough to have horses might well have spurred them on at a "Canterbury pace" which is how the term "canter" evolved. Between six and nine o'clock in the evening, animals were allowed into the city to forage and clear up garbage in the streets. Those that had not been collected by the allocated time were rounded up and put in a pound near the gate, the road running from the north side of the gate on the line of the city wall is still called Pound Lane.

The Westgate is probably the work of Henry Yevele who, together with a team of masons, was also responsible for extensive additions to the Cathedral. The gate's construction was paid for by Archbishop Simon of Sudbury who was murdered in 1381 during the peasants revolt - his head was displayed on London Bridge for 6 days and for many years afterwards the Mayor and corporation offered annual prayers at the Westgate and his tomb in a gesture of appreciation.

In 1648, during the Parliamentary Riots, the medieval gates were burned down on Christmas day, to be replaced in 1660.

All the other city gates have, at one time or another, been removed but the Westgate survives, possibly because it was used until 1829 as the city gaol. In 1473, Henry VI granted the "mayor and commonality of Canterbury" the keeping of the gaols at Westgate. It was used for debtors and criminals and was the execution site - fine ladies would secretly watch from the windows of Holy Cross Church. It was the first gateway in England to be built with facilities for guns. The gunparts at the rear are false, put in during the nineteenth century after the removal of the city walls.

In the early nineteenth century, complaints were made about the size of the entrance which was said to be too small for "a wagon loaded with Hop bags". As a result an alternative route was provided around the south side between the gate and the chapel which is how vehicles exit the city now. To gain access to the city most modern vehicles, including double decker buses, still manage to squeeze through the main archway even though it is a tight fit.



The gate has changed very little since medieval times. Although the original approach, drawbridge and wooden gates have gone, you can still see the groove for the portcullis and the fixing points for the drawbridge chain. The twin drum towers with the whole built in Kentish Ragstone make a distinctive landmark and the gate is considered to be one of the finest of its type in England.

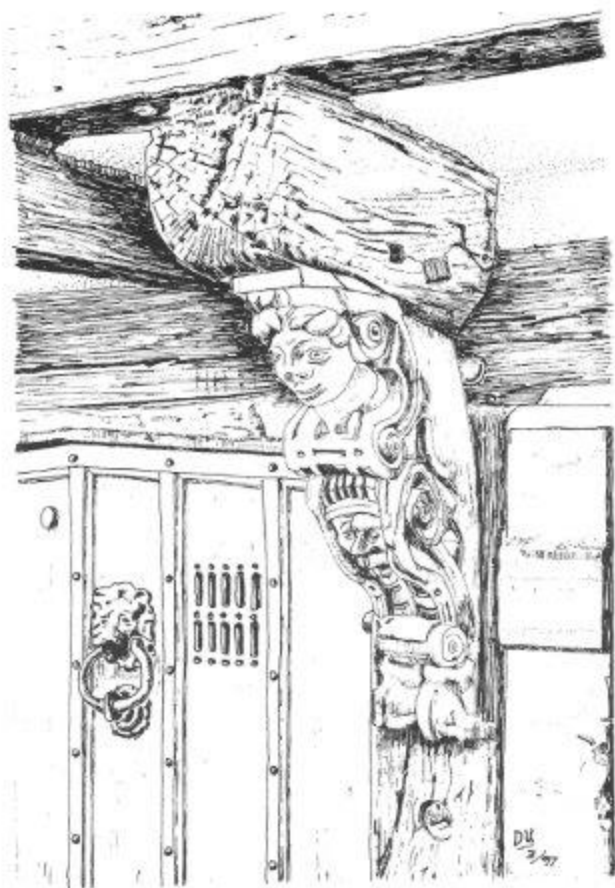
Since 1906 it has been used as a Museum and details of admission charges can be obtained by phoning (01227) 763763. Opening times are Mon to Sat 11.00 to 12.30 and 13.30 to 15.30. Closed Good Friday and at Christmas.

④ All Saints Court in All Saints Lane



All Saints Court dates from the fifteenth century and is a typical Kentish Merchants House. The main structure is a timber frame with the walls infilled between the timber structural members with wattle and daub, the wattle being a panel of woven split laths and the daub, a kind of plaster reinforced with animal hair and finished with a white limewash. The roof is steeply pitched and covered with small, hand made, clay tiles. Originally, the upper floor consisted of three chambers.

Most of the old houses of this period in Canterbury have the floors above the ground floor jettied, or overhanging. From a structural point of view this stabilises the wall beneath by creating a cantilever of the floor over. It also makes the most of a restricted city site giving about 20% extra floor area to the upper storey(s) and, at the same time, creates a pleasant visual effect.



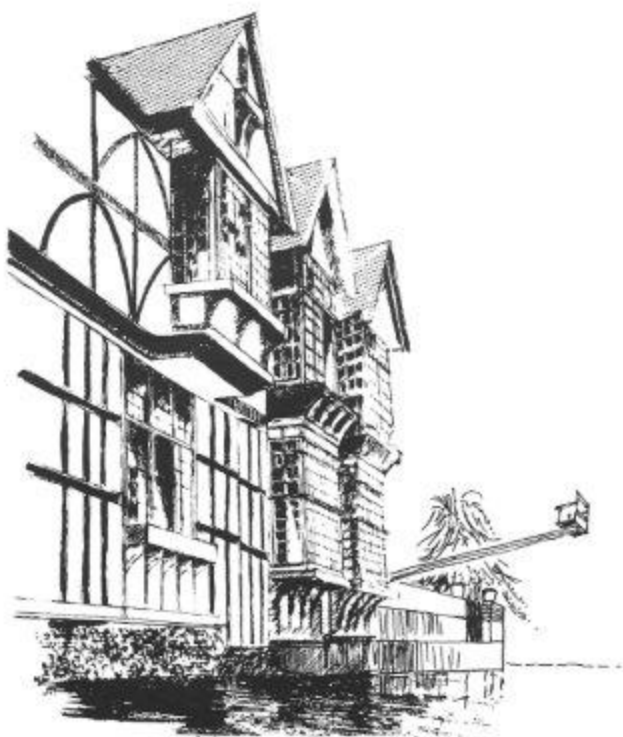
With regard to external decoration, the grotesques which adorn All Saints Court are its outstanding feature. There are about eight of these and they show a variety of human and animal faces. Bizarre designs are a characteristic of medieval carving and it is thought that these represent the old Celtic Gods that are associated with fertility rights, ancient fears and superstitions.

It is interesting to note, however, that the carvings on this house are not original but were brought from Lady Wooton's Priory in 1931. In fact, All Saints court might have been demolished had it not been for the enterprise of Mr. Cozens, a local builder. The entire court had been condemned as unfit for human habitation in the 1930's, but he decided to restore it and it is to his foresight that we owe its preservation.

⑤ The King's Bridge

On leaving All Saints Lane the trail leads to the King's Bridge. This got its name because it carried the once named King's Street, now St. Peters Street/High Street, over the River Stour.

If you look to the left, downstream, from the bridge, a Ducking stool can be seen just beyond The Weavers building. It is a modern replica of one that was used in



Medieval times. Apparently, it was restored in 1660 and served as a punishment for "nightwalkers" and "Women of evil fame", as well as for scolds.

Thankfully, nowadays it is merely a tourist attraction!

go to map page

⑥ The Eastbridge Hospital

The Eastbridge Hospital is one of the oldest buildings in Canterbury, its name deriving from the fact that the structure spans the eastern branch of the River Stour. It was founded by Edward Fitzodbold, a merchant, at the end of the twelfth century and endowed soon after this with land and the tithes from mills.

The Hospital was designed "to lodge the flood of poor sick pilgrims sleeping rough" and it succeeded in fulfilling this function throughout the middle ages. It was a hospital in the old sense of word - a place giving hospitality contrary to the popular story that it was an operating hospital where amputated limbs and spare parts



were disposed of into the river!

The building's full name is the Eastbridge Hospital of Thomas the Martyr. Almost immediately after Thomas's death in 1170 pilgrims came to visit his tomb, hence the hospital's foundation, as accommodation for these pilgrims. Feeling guilty about the murder of Thomas Becket, Henry II gave Thomas's sister the Eastbridge, then a toll bridge, so that she could collect the money. It was her son, Thomas a' Becket's nephew Ralph, who was the first master. Since its foundation the Archbishop of Canterbury has been patron. From the mid nineteenth century the master has also been Rector of the City Centre Churches, now consisting of St. Peter's and St. Mildreds.

The building consists of a small entrance hall with a chapel on one side. Note the stairs at the entrance - the road was raised in 1769 when the bridge was rebuilt. Before that people had to climb a couple of steps to get to the entrance door. From here further steps lead down into the stone built undercroft. Here, male pilgrims slept on beds of straw with beer and bread supplied by a woman who had to be aged over 40 to keep them from temptation. During a recent archaeological dig, fifteen layers of straw were found so health and hygiene were clearly not priorities!

Upstairs there is a dining room, and a larger Chapel which was also used as the school room. Doors lead from the undercroft and the dining room into the old people's flats.



After the Dissolution, the Hospital began to fall into disrepair but was saved by the intervention of Archbishops Parker and Whitgift who gave it a wider charitable status. An act of 1584 required the Hospital to provide accommodation for five elderly men and five elderly women, who were to be selected according to need by the Mayor, and to pay a Dole to ten more.

A little earlier in 1569 a school for twenty boys had been established. The school was closed in the late nineteenth century, but the Hospital still provides accommodation for the elderly, thus maintaining an almost unbroken tradition.

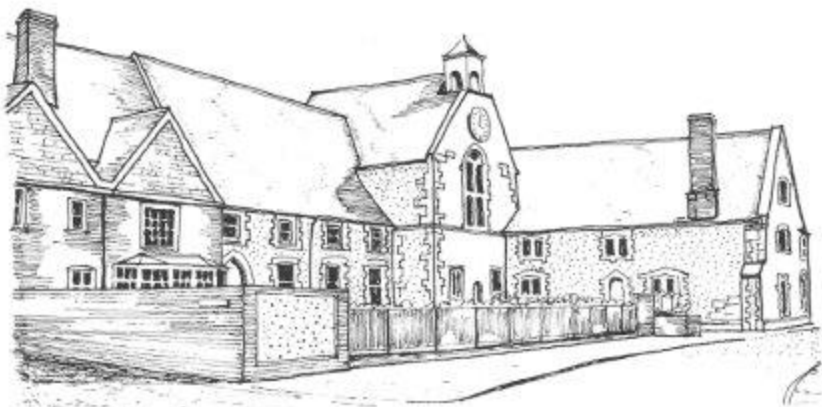
The list of Masters in the upstairs chapel shows this almost unbroken record. You can see that between the late 1340's and early 1380's three or four Masters followed each other in quick succession. These were the years when the plague and disease struck the city and the riverside areas were particularly vulnerable.

In the early years of this century a medieval wall painting was discovered on the north wall of the dining room. This, the construction of the undercroft and a tile on display on a wall are just some of the notable features of this building.

The Hospital is open from Mon. to Sat. 10.00 to 17.00 and Sun 11.00 to 17.00 and entry is free of charge, although donations help to maintain the building and are always gratefully received.

For enquiries phone (01227)471688.

⑦ The Poor Priests Hospital



This is another one of Canterbury's buildings which dates from the thirteenth century. It was originally the home of a rich moneyer named Lambin Frese and is built in the vernacular style. This means that it was built to a traditional design of masonry walls and a steep pitched roof by local craftsmen using local building materials. The stone lintols and dressings to the windows and flint walls some chimneys and some brick, small plain tile cladding, the roof and the wooden clock and bell tower are easily recognisable as local.



The wooden roof spanning the interior is well worth seeing and a separate visit to the building, which has recently been converted into the City's Heritage Museum, will allow you to see a wealth of material about the City's continuing history. Please refer to the introduction for details of the opening times. Note that the companion Royal Museum and Art Gallery and the Regimental Museum in the High Street charges no admission fee.

⑧ Mercery Lane

The view of Mercery Lane from the High Street is one of the most famous in Canterbury. This narrow street with its jettied houses on either side is as medieval in character as anywhere in the city and, with a glimpse of the Cathedral beyond, makes a fine approach to the main Cathedral gate fronting onto the Buttermarket.

Mercery Lane takes its name from Solomon the Mercer who sold cloth and silks here in the twelfth century from a corner shop where Boots now stands.

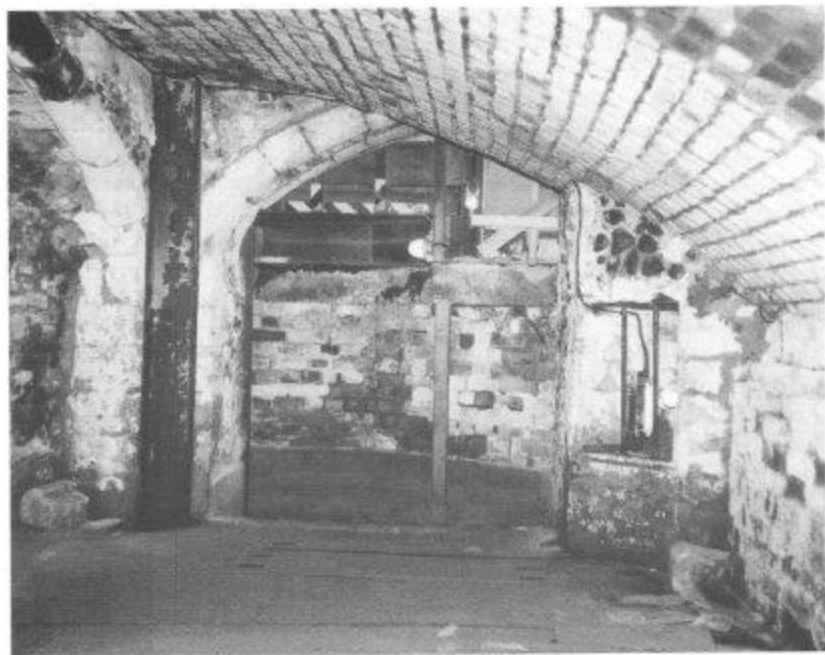
The next street along, between Mercery Lane and the Longmarket, is Butchery Lane and would have been the only place to buy meat in the City.



In the middle ages most of the left hand side of the Lane was occupied by an inn. This was the famous 'Chequers of the Hope' which was built by Prior Chilenden in 1392 specially for pilgrims and which is mentioned by Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*. It was a massive timber framed building with a ninety foot (approx 30 metres) frontage onto the High Street and two wings, each of a hundred and ten feet (approx 34 metres) behind it. The first floor contained individual rooms, the doors to which were marked with symbols for the illiterate, and the upper storey was a large communal dormitory.

In Medieval times vast numbers of pilgrims came to Canterbury from all over Europe and numbers reached a peak in 1220 when a hundred thousand are said to have celebrated the anniversary of the building of Becket's new shrine in the Cathedral's Trinity Chapel. Like modern visitors many of them would have wanted to take some souvenirs of their journey and Mercery Lane would have contained shops and stalls selling lead medallions of Becket, badges, bottles of healing water from St. Thomas's well and other items. A selection of these pilgrim tokens can be seen in the Heritage Museum at the Poor Priest's Hospital. They come from shrines throughout Europe thereby showing how widely the cult of St. Thomas had spread.

A local carpenter was asked to carve a pair of corbel twins, which you can see in the eaves of the Boots shop. They were to commemorate the demise of the house owners wife and children from the Black Death and the infestation of his house with rats. Two weeks after the hideous, half human, half animal carvings were installed, the rats left the house.



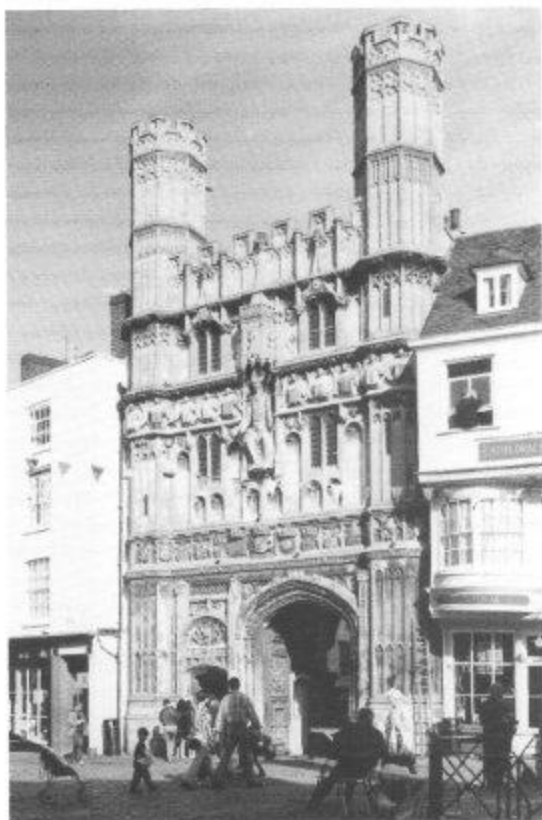
Although the level of Mercery Lane has risen two or three feet since Becket's time you can still see some of the old Norman undercroft, from one of the departments in Boots, steps lead down to an empty cellar. In the corner there is a shallow well which is lined with stone and illuminated by a carefully placed lamp. The entrance is rather restricted but you might obtain permission to see this part of the building by contacting the manager in advance.

Another worthwhile separate visit in this area can be made to the Roman Museum in Butchery Lane open Mon to Sat 10.00 to 17.00 plus June to end Oct Sun. 13.00 to 17.00. It is not open on Good Friday or at Christmas, and an admission charge is made.

⑨ Christchurch Gate

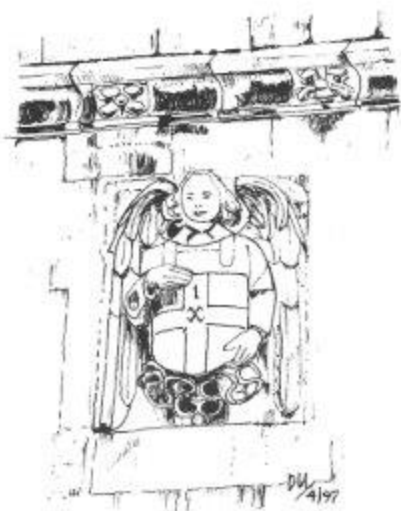
Mercery Lane leads down to a square outside the Cathedral Precincts which in the Middle Ages was known as the Bullstake. The reason for this name is obvious, as there was a strong pole in the middle of the area to which Bulls were tied to be baited before slaughter. In the eighteenth century this barbaric activity gave way to more civilised ones.

An oval building supported on columns with open sides was erected on the site and a market for farm produce was established. The present name of the Buttermarket refers to those times. At the centre of the square is the city's war memorial.



Christchurch Gate itself stands in the northern corner of the Buttermarket and is the main entrance to the Cathedral and its Precincts. It was built in 1517 to commemorate the marriage of Prince Arthur, eldest son of King Henry VII to Catherine of Aragon. A large Tudor Rose forms the boss to the vaulted ceiling of the archway. There are many rich heraldic features adorning the front of the gate including the shield of Thomas Becket, The Tudor Rose and crown, the shield of Prior Goldstone and a frieze of the signs of the crucifixion including the crown of thorns and the cock that crowed when St. Peter denied Jesus. Also can be seen the arms of King Henry, Prince Arthur, Catherine and leading Tudor families displayed on the bottom row immediately above the main archway.

At the back of the gate there are two tiny carved heads, well worth looking for, which probably represent the young Prince Arthur and Catherine.



If you are particularly interested in heraldry make a special visit to the Cathedral cloister where the decorated bosses to the roof vaulting show the arms of the families who contributed towards the building expenses: they are some of the finest in the country.



⑩ Palace Street/Rush Market



Canterbury has always been an important trading centre. The cattle market was held outside the city wall near the present Bus Station. Wine was bought and sold in Win(e)cheap and there was a corn and hop exchange in St. Georges Street. The Rush Market occupied the area formed by the junctions of Sun street, Guildhall Street, Orange Street and Palace Street. The Longmarket was a large indoor market in a building which fronted both Burgate and St. Georges Street, sadly it was destroyed in the Second World War in the Baedeker Raid of June 1942. The name, however survives, and still covers an area with many different types of shop. The present Cattle Market is now well outside the City, just north-east of Kingsmead Road.



At the bottom of Sun Street on the corner of Orange Street and Palace Street you will see a pump halfway up the wall. It used to draw water from a flint lined well in the middle of the street. It is said that the spring that fed the well once produced scarlet water, coloured by the blood of the murdered Thomas Becket. In addition to public water sources like this, many houses used to have their own wells but nevertheless, water supply has always been a problem in Canterbury. The Cathedral Monks built a special supply system in the late Norman period which was a model of its kind and still works today. This system is shown in detail on a contemporary plan of Prior Wiberts waterworks stored in the Cathedral archives.

In recent years the local water authority has proposed building a barrage and reservoir in the Broad Oak area but the scheme was rejected at a Public Enquiry.

⑪ St Alphege Church

The Canterbury Environment Centre

St. Alphege was Archbishop of Canterbury in 1011 when the Danes invaded Kent and sacked Canterbury. Although he was very old, he successfully led the defence of the city for three weeks. It is said he was only forced to yield when a traitor opened one of the gates, Alphege was taken to a Danish camp at Greenwich, refused to ransom himself and after some months in captivity on 19th April 1012, was pelted to death with beef bones during a drunken orgy following a feast.

He was first buried in St Paul's Cathedral, London, then moved by King Canute in 1023 to a shrine in Canterbury Cathedral where it remained until the destruction of all the shrines and relics of the Saints in 1538.

In the last few decades the numbers of people worshipping in the city's parish churches has dwindled. The number of people living in this parish has reduced, due largely to slum clearance, the pattern of modern housing and smaller families. It became impossible for the church of England congregations within the ancient city walls to support three major medieval parish churches, namely St. Mildred's, St. Peter's and St. Alphege's. There was also the "rival" attraction of the Cathedral with its finer music, architecture and general grandeur.

The first church on this site is thought to have been built by Archbishop Lanfranc as part of his replanning of the Palace Street area when, in the 1070's, he moved the old Roman street westwards in order to provide a long north-south site for his new palace buildings. Nothing definite is known of this early church but there does seem to have been a churchyard, although the parishioners had the right of burial in the Cathedral cemetery. The Priests house then is now no. 8 Palace Street.



An entirely new church was built at the end of the twelfth century, unusual in Canterbury, where more makeshift alterations were the norm. However, there was a great fire in the city in 1198 and this rebuilding may have been due to fire damage. The main nave was on the south side with the old church area forming the north aisle. The basic plan survives, as does much of the flint walling.



The church underwent a major overhaul and modernisation in the late 14th century, with larger windows inserted into the old walls and the present roofs built up.

In the 1460's there was a major rebuilding of the main central arcade together with the addition of a rood screen and an upper loft. In the early 16th century the whole tower was modernised with the addition of a north-west door, but in the late 1540's the screens and statues were torn down under an Act of Parliament, replaced in the mid 1550's under Mary I and removed for the last time under Elizabeth I after 1559.

In 1888 the church was thoroughly "restored". The north-west tower was demolished and rebuilt in the style of the 1200's. Boarding was added to the roof, the interior whitewashed and most of the stained glass replaced with Victorian glass.

The bells remain in full working order and are now rung from the floor above the office at least four times a year, particularly on St Alphege day, 19th April, at Christmas, Easter and for the Canterbury festival.

The Urban Studies Centre, founded in 1972, was looking for a permanent home and, after much discussion it was proposed that St. Alphege church be officially made redundant on condition that it was taken over by the Centre as a base for its educational and community activities.

Much debate followed to decide what was required to successfully convert the building, as the nature of the historic fabric dictated that nothing could be done which would destroy its architectural quality and "wholeness". Detailed plans were drawn up to show what was needed in a sympathetic conversion and, after a final service, the organ and pews were sold and the work of conversion and repair began in 1982. The Centre raised the money for the work by a major appeal, and also ran a community programme employing a team of people to do most of the conversion, and, later, to also prepare for the educational work and exhibitions of The Centre. Finally, The Centre opened to the public in July 1984.

Recently renamed The Canterbury Environment Centre, the building is used for a variety of local interest events and exhibitions. It houses a unique library of resources available to the public for the study of Canterbury in all its facets, architecturally, historically and socially with a special slant on urban environmental issues. The role of the organisation, which is a registered charity, is laid out in its 'mission statement' which is

- "The Canterbury Environment Centre exists to advance environmental education and action for sustainable living at all levels in our city and its rural surroundings. Its aim is to promote environmental awareness, change and development, to co-ordinate the activities of individuals, community groups, local authorities and businesses in the activities of Local Agenda 21."

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