

Thomas a Becket: a prominent English Augustinian

2020 will mark the 850th anniversary of the murder of Thomas a Becket, the 12th century Archbishop of Canterbury. Born in 1118, Becket came from a wealthy family in London, who sent him to be educated by the Augustinian canons at Merton Priory in what is now south London. He continued his education at university in Paris, before returning to England in 1140. Two years later in 1142 he was introduced to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Theobald, who took him into his household.

Between 1143 and 1148 Thomas went to Bologna to study under John Gratian, a specialist in canon law. He then continued studying in Auxerre, Normandy. Back in England, Thomas increased in wealth and honour and held the livings of St. Mary le Strand and Otford in Kent.

Thomas then succeeded Roger de Pont l'Eveque as Archdeacon of Canterbury in 1153, aged 35. Whilst in Canterbury, Thomas lived next to St. Gregory's, a daughter monastery founded by the Augustinian canons of Merton Priory, where he had been educated. It was set up as a twin foundation - on one side of Northgate Street was the hospital of St. John the Baptist and across the road was the monastery for the Augustinian canons who served the hospital.

Archbishop Theobald, as an influential member of the royal court, introduced Thomas to King Henry II, who appointed him as Chancellor in 1155. Thomas persuaded the king to complete the building of Merton Priory and Thomas had a Holy Week retreat there.

Archbishop Theobald died in 1161 and the See of Canterbury remained vacant for nearly a year whilst Thomas was in Normandy. Then Henry decided to send Thomas back to England as he intended him to become the next Archbishop of Canterbury. On June 2nd 1162 Bishop Walter of Rochester ordained Thomas to the priesthood and he was consecrated Archbishop the next day. In order to satisfy the objection of the Canterbury monks to his secular training, he returned to Merton Priory to receive the black habit of a canon regular of St. Augustine of Hippo and always wore it over his hair-shirt.

On the fateful night of 29th December 1170, when Thomas was finishing Vespers, four of the King Henry's knights burst into the Cathedral and began to accuse him of being a traitor. One of the canons who stood between Thomas and the knights was Robert de Merton. But he and two other priests could not protect Thomas from those knights intent on murdering him. So Thomas a Becket was martyred for his faith and his body buried in a new marble tomb in the crypt. On February 21st 1173, Pope Alexander canonized Thomas a Becket and a shrine was made over his sarcophagus so that pilgrims could pay their respects. Some years later, in 1220, his mortal remains were "translated" to a new location behind the high altar in the cathedral. This location is now marked by a candle.

2020 marks the 850th anniversary of Becket's violent death, and the 800th anniversary of his "translation." Brinkburn Priory was established by fellow Augustinians during the 12th century, but we have no records to link Thomas a Becket directly with Brinkburn.

RWH

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