

A Tour of medieval cathedrals and abbeys in England

Organised by History Department, CUHK

Led by Father Louie Ha

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1. Introduction

In the 8-day tour with the M.A. students from the History Department, I had an opportunity to visit medieval cathedrals in Canterbury, Ely and York, churches in Cambridge and Thaxted, abbeys in Hemsley, museums in Canterbury and Cambridge; and walked on the dilapidated city walls in York and Canterbury; strolled in alleys and the battlefield in Hastings; visited a house of a local celebrity in Thaxted and city gates which were also used as a prison in Canterbury.

It was a well-planned trip as it gave us a chance to learn more about the life, religion and culture in the medieval time. In this essay, I shall discuss an important figure - **Henry VIII**, under whose reign England had much change, and **Chaucer's Canterbury Tales**, both reminded me of the medieval past.

2. Henry VIII (1509 – 1547)

King Henry was a strong-minded and ambitious monarch. In the first 18 years of his reign, he supported the Roman Catholic church and was conferred the title "Defender of the Faith".

A Portrait of Henry VIII



At first, Henry VIII
Protestantism and

leaders. However from 1527 onwards, he turned against the Roman Catholic church as he wanted to divorce Catherine of Aragon after an 18-year marriage in order to marry his new lover Anne Boleyn and to get a male heir. When he failed to get papal approval of the divorce, he turned against the Roman Catholic power by appointing two protestants, Thomas Cromwell as Chancellor and Thomas Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury.

suppressed
executed its

With the introduction of the **Act of Supremacy** (1529), Henry made himself the Head of the Anglican church (the Church of England) so that he could divorce Catherine, marry Anne and confiscate the properties of the monasteries. In doing so, the ruling royal family not only had political power but it had supreme religious power, too. Henry VIII, for the sake of his own ambition and marriages, changed from



persecuting Protestants to suppressing catholic churches in England. Many lives were lost

in his hands. The people persecuted by him included those who assisted him in his rule (Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell), those who were religious (first the Protestants and later the Catholics) and those who were close to him, such as his wife, Anne Boleyn who was ruthlessly beheaded. By the time he died in 1547, the practice of royal supremacy in religious matters had gradually faded.

The 15th century and 16th century is known as the [Tudor period](#). It is the time when the Tudor family ruled England. In fact, [Henry VIII](#) is the most famous Tudor king. There are a lot of Tudor houses in England today, many of them are well over 500 years old. Most ordinary homes in Tudor times were built with timber and clay. They had wooden frames and the spaces between the frames were filled with small wooden sticks and wet clay.

A Tudor House – the one with black and white colour

3. **Significance of Canterbury Tales**

As the first English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer (1345 – 1400) is considered to be the model and inspiration for the grand history of English poetry that followed him. Born in London to a vintner, he was branded a great achiever as he is a renowned **English poet, author, translator, diplomat and courtier**. He served the son of Edward III called Lionel and was favoured by the Crown.

In 1360, he joined Edward III's army to go to war in France and was captured. The King paid the ransom (16 pounds) to save him and he was very much under the protection of John of Gaunt. Chaucer enjoyed Gaunt's patronage as his wife Philippa Roet was the sister of Gaunt's wife.

Even though Philippa passed away in 1387, Chaucer was protected by Gaunt for the rest of his life.

His fame stemmed from his being the first significant poet to write in the English language, as opposed to Italian, Latin, or French, which were the languages favoured by educated people in the late 14th century. He wrote in vernacular English and is named "***the father of English poetry***".

Chaucer had several books published. They include "**Book of the Duchess**" (published in c.1370), "**Troilus and Cressida**" (1385), and from 1378 to 1400, the year of his death, he devoted his time to writing "**The Canterbury Tales**".

Canterbury Tales uses the overall narrative structure of the pilgrimage to hold all of the individual tales together. It is considered to be ***the first English novel***, with sharply defined characters that remain consistent throughout. The narrators came from all sorts of backgrounds – a knight, a miller, shipman, a monk, a nun, a wife, a clerk, a merchant, to name but a few. The stories reflect the diverse social strata and life in medieval time. Some of the stories are considered to be "low-browed" by educated people. Nevertheless it reflects the lives of people from all walks of life and through their personal experiences and observations, they depict the facets of reality they are familiar with. It is an invaluable account of the history in medieval time.

4. An exemplary tale

In order to show the interesting content of the 24 tales, I am going to discuss one of them in detail. The story chosen is called "The Wife of Bath's Tale". It is a typical story to show the creativity and the social norms of the people of the 14th century.

The story depicts a knight who had raped a young maid in King Arthur's time. The queen begged the King not to execute him and King Arthur spared his life. The queen sent the knight to find out "what is the thing that most of all women desire". He had to return after a year to report to her.

The young knight went to a lot of places to search for an answer. Different people gave him different answers: wealth, jollity, position, sport in bed; or to be wifed and to wed; to be pleased and flattered; or to be praised for being wise; or to keep a secret. In the end, he met an ugly old woman who told him the answer: "a woman's greatest desire is "to have sovereignty over her husband and to have way in love". Later the queen accepted this answer and his life was spared.

However he had to marry the old woman despite his reluctance. His newly-wed

tries to convince him that inner beauty and loyalty count more than external cl
However the knight does not want to touch her as he is not attracted to her at

The ending of the story is trite -- that after much argument and misery, the kn
finds out that the "old" woman, after all, is a charming maid. They live in joy e
after.

5. Interesting findings in modern times

In 2004, Professor **Linne Mooney** was able to identify the **scrivener** who worked
for Chaucer as an **Adam Pinkhurst**. Mooney, then a professor at the **University of
Maine** and a visiting fellow at **Corpus Christi College, Cambridge**, was able to
match Pinkhurst's signature on an oath he signed to his lettering on a copy of *The
Canterbury Tales* that was transcribed from Chaucer's working copy.

6. Middle English versus Modern English

When I read the first story of Canterbury Tales, I needed to depend heavily on the
notes which translated the wordings and spellings of Middle English into modern
expressions and orthography. After reading several verses, I found that I could
guess the meanings based on what I have understood about the Middle English
expressions. By simply cutting out one or two letters or by remembering the
common words like "go" = "wenden" (to wenden on his pilgrimage);
"also" = "eek"; "hearts" = "corages"; "sick" = "seke"; "y-
cleped" = "called", I can decode the meaning of the sentences.

Be careful with words like "Nice" (it means "foolish"), **"Sin"** meaning
"since" and **"outher"** meaning "either". These words have taken on a
totally different, even opposite meanings in modern English.

Can you guess the contemporary spellings of the following medieval words?
When these words are put in context, you may be able to figure out their meaning
more easily.

"showres soote", "swich licour", "whilom", "stenten", "starf"

"his yonge suster sheene", "dight", "hir wone", "hem"

(The answers can be found on the last
page.)

7. Names of religious positions in medieval time

Apart from some common nouns used to describe the religious
status of people like "nuns, monks, priest, father, brother and
sister", I have also learned some posts like **abbot, prior,**
scrivener, friar, pardoner and parson, each of which shows
us the type of work the position carries.

- **An abbot** is the head monk who leads the monks and is in
charge of a monastery or abbey.
- **A prior** is the abbot's deputy and he is also in charge of a

priory where a small group of monks live and work together.

- **A parson** is a vicar or parish priest in the Church of England; a clergyman.
- **A pardoner** is, I guess, a monk whose main duty is to listen to confessions.
- **A friar** is a member of one of several Catholic religious orders; a brother.
- **A scrivener** is the note-taker who is entrusted with the job to write down all the important decisions and events.

8. Internet materials on The Canterbury Tales

There are a lot of print and electronic resources on the Canterbury tales in the form of CDs, audio links and electronic books on the Internet. A large number of books related to the Canterbury Tales can be found. From the figures on print and non-print materials, we can see how important this 14th century classic is.

www.canterburytales.org ·

www.canterburytales.org/canterbury_tales.html

www.bookrags.com/The_Canterbury_Tales

www.luminarium.org/medlit/chaubib.htm

In fact, the Canterbury Tales can easily be retrieved in Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia consisting of a lot of texts and audio links. The readers can listen to selected tales using the audio clips.

For people who can afford to go to England, they can pay a visit to the **Museum in Canterbury**, one of Kent's most popular attractions. They can experience its stunning reconstruction of 14th century England. It is just like stepping into the Middle Ages.

To conclude, though it is a very short trip, I find that it is eye-opening. Not only did I enjoy the historical sites, I had also had a chance to learn more about the life and activities of religious people in medieval times. It has enriched my knowledge of that period and in future, if there is any chance, I would certainly participate in similar activities.

Answers for Section 6:

“showres soote”= sweet showers

“swich licour” = such (liquid) moisture

“whilom” = once upon a time

“stenten” = stop

"starf" = died

"his yonge suster sheene" = his young fair sister"

"dight" = dressed

"hir wone" = her habit

"hem" = them

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