

Signs and symbols

Teachers' Support Notes

Page 1 – This page is an introduction to the cathedral. Please remind students that they are in a place of worship – please remind them about appropriate behaviour (acting respectfully, no running, eating or drinking in the cathedral and not to use phones please).

The cathedral has been a place of worship for over 1400 years. During that time many hundreds of thousands of people have passed through this place as worshippers and visitors.

A “who’s who” on this page helps the students appreciate the scale of work that is involved in running a cathedral.

Page 2 – The Nave

The first cathedral, started in 604 A.D. by the Saxons, was a very small, plain church compared with today’s cathedral. Evidence of the first church can be seen on the road immediately outside the west front (two strips of cobbles mark where the walls were) and, inside, two brass strips in the floor just to the right of the small west door as you come in mark the position of the apse (east end) of the original church. A photo on the notice board by the Welcome Desk shows a picture of a church in Bradwell, Essex, built around the same time as the original church in Rochester and thought to be similar.

Students should sit quietly in the Nave for a few minutes and think about where they are and what it means to be in a place of worship (of any faith).

The cathedral itself is built in the shape of the most important Christian symbol – the cross. In fact Rochester Cathedral is built in the shape of a double cross, with the Nave and its transepts forming one cross and the Quire and its transepts forming a second cross. This can be seen on the plan on the front of the workbook.

Sitting at the back of the nave (west end) think about what happens each day in the east and the west – the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. The west (dark) end of the cathedral may symbolise the darkness of ignorance, or sinfulness or death, whilst the east (light) end may symbolise the light of knowledge, forgiveness and ultimately resurrection. Each day’s dawning light spilling through the east window onto the high altar symbolises new life and resurrection.

The Nave is the largest “room” in the cathedral, and is used for large services, King’s School Assemblies, concerts, leavers’ services, award and degree ceremonies.

Page 3 – The Font

The font is near the West Door (at present, although there is a plan to re-locate it by the North Door where the fresco is situated). Fonts are usually near the door of the church because during the ceremony of baptism (or christening as it is also known) the person is being welcomed to a new family (the family of God, or Christian family). At home people are usually welcomed into your family at the door.

Signs and symbols

Water is used daily for drinking (for life – if we / animals / plants didn't have water we would die) and washing. In baptism the symbolism of water being poured over the head of the person being baptised is that of ever-lasting life (Christians believe that when they die they will live for ever in heaven with God) and washing away the bad things in that person's life, making them a "clean" new person. People may be baptised (christened) at any age.

The Fresco – The fresco is near the North Door. It is the first true fresco painted in an English cathedral for 800 years. It brings back the tradition of telling stories through pictures, as used in the early cathedral, when most people were illiterate and would learn their bible stories from pictures painted on the walls – "The Poor Man's Bible". A fresco is painted on wet or "fresh" plaster and the paint sinks right into the plaster making it a very durable painting.

The theme of the fresco is baptism. In the upper half of the picture we see the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. In the lower half, on the left, is the baptism of King Ethelbert, the King of Kent at the time of St. Augustine's arrival in 597 A.D. On the right we see King Ethelbert looking on as the people of Kent are baptised in a local river. Because of the baptismal theme it is hoped to re-locate the font to this spot and create a new baptistry here.

Page 4 – The Pilgrim Steps

Pilgrimage is a journey to a holy place. All major faiths have a tradition of pilgrimage. Pilgrims undertake what is often a hard or hazardous journey as a way of showing their faith, of giving thanks to God, or maybe asking for something such as forgiveness or healing.

Rochester's popularity as a place of pilgrimage was very high at the beginning of the 13th century following miracles said to have occurred at the tomb of William of Perth. William was a baker who set out in 1201, from his home in Scotland, on a pilgrimage to Canterbury and then on to the Holy Land. He took advantage of the hospitality offered by the monks of Rochester to pilgrims, and stopped for a night or two at the monastery. When he recommenced his journey he was murdered in woods to the south of Rochester. A "mad" woman living in the woods discovered William's body (at the time people with mental illness were considered to be inhabited by the devil, and didn't live in the town with other folk). She made a garland of flowers for his head and was miraculously cured of her illness through this act of kindness. The stone steps are worn away by the many thousands of pilgrims who visited the tomb of William, ascending the pilgrim steps on their knees as a sign of their sinfulness. The gifts of money they gave helped pay for the rebuilding of the cathedral in the 13th century.

The scallop shell became associated with pilgrimage. It was often used as the sign of a pilgrim because of the popularity of pilgrimage to the shrine of St. James at Santiago de Compostella in Spain. This was near the coast and pilgrims often brought a scallop shell home with them as a souvenir / proof that they had been there.

Signs and symbols

Today Christians visit places such as Canterbury Cathedral – the “mother” church of the Christian church in England and the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket; holy places in Israel because these are the places where Jesus lived and worked; and Lourdes, where Mary, mother of Jesus, appeared to St. Bernadette in the 19th century.

Page 5 – The Quire and Presbytery

The Quire is a more private part of the cathedral. During the time when the monastery was here, this was where the monks would hold their services – they didn't want to be disturbed by the ordinary people of Rochester. In fact, during the 14th century, relations were so poor between the monastery and the town that another church was eventually built (in the 15th century) beside the cathedral for the people and they were only allowed in the cathedral for special services such as at Easter or Christmas. St. Nicholas' church is still there beside the cathedral, but today it is used as offices for staff working for the Diocese of Rochester.

The Quire is where the monks used to sing their services and where, today, one of the four choirs at Rochester cathedral sings during services. Around the Quire are the coats of arms of many bishops since Norman times including John Fisher, who was martyred by Henry 8th in 1535 for refusing to agree to the formation of the Anglican Church and Nicholas Ridley, martyred by Queen Mary in 1555 for refusing to revert to Catholicism.

The Bishop's throne (Cathedra – Greek word for throne) is what gives the cathedral its designation. Beside the cathedra is the bishop's Crozier (like a shepherd's crook) reminding us that the bishop is a successor of Jesus, and like Him, shepherd of the people. By happy co-incidence the shape of the hook at the top of the crozier can be made into the shape of the letter R for Rochester!

The brass lectern, shaped like a golden eagle, holds a copy of the lectionary of bible readings used during services (for the students it is sufficient to say “bible”). The golden eagle is such a strong bird that it is strong enough to carry the word of God (the Bible) on its back, and it flies very high in the sky near to heaven.

At the east end of the cathedral is the High Altar, the most special of several altars in the cathedral. It is called “High” because it is the main altar in the cathedral, but also it is physically the highest altar in the cathedral. It is at the east (or light) end of the cathedral and each day the light of the dawning sun reminds us of resurrection.

The colour of the altar cloths will tell you which season of the church's year we are in:

Season	<i>(On a special saint's day a red or white cloth is used)</i>	Colour
Advent	Starting at the end of November, this is a time of preparation for Christmas	Blue / violet
Christmas	Starting on December 25th, this season celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ	White or Gold

Signs and symbols

Epiphany	This season starts in January, twelve days after Christmas	Green
Lent	Starting in February or March with Ash Wednesday, this is a time of preparation for Easter	Blue / violet
Easter tide	Starting on Easter Day, this season celebrates Jesus' rising from the dead	White
Ascension	Starting 40 days after Easter Sunday, this season celebrates Jesus' return to God	White or Gold
Pentecost	Starting 50 days after Easter Day, this season celebrates the time when God sent his Holy Spirit to the followers of Jesus	Green

Page 6 – The Garden

Out in the garden you can see the remains of the Priory of St. Andrew where the monks lived and worked, from the foundation of the monastery by Gundulf in about 1083 to its dissolution by Henry 8th in 1540. You can see three big window apertures in the Chapter House, where the monks met each day to read a chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict and discuss the running of the monastery. The cathedral is still run by the Chapter (along with the Dean, the senior priest) but they now meet once a month.

The sculpture of the Virgin Mary and Jesus reflects the present dedication of the cathedral – The Cathedral Church of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Before the Reformation (when Henry 8th broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and founded the Church of England / Anglican Church) the cathedral and monastery were dedicated to St. Andrew, because St. Augustine, who came to England in 597 A.D. to spread the word of God, had come originally from the monastery of St. Andrew, Rome.

The Crypt

Re-entering the cathedral and going down the steps you come to the crypt. Please ask students to be particularly quiet in the crypt, because we try as much as possible to keep this as an area for quiet prayer.

The crypt is the oldest part of the cathedral (you start building at the bottom!). The architecture down here is quite plain, and it is easy to spot the older Norman part of the crypt (to the left) and the slightly newer early English part. In the far north-east corner of the crypt there are remains of ceiling paintings, whilst at the entrance to the glassed-in chapel (Ithamar Chapel) there is graffiti (sketches for medieval wall paintings) showing Jesus with His disciples.

The crypt is much smaller, plainer and darker than the “upstairs” part of the cathedral (students may observe other differences as well). The Ithamar Chapel in the crypt is enclosed to keep it as a quiet place of prayer.

The crypt was used as a burial place. It also had seven chapels where the monks who were priests were able to say their daily Mass.

Signs and symbols

Page 7 – The Lady Chapel

This was the last part of the cathedral to be built, but even this is over 500 years old! It was started in 1490 at the beginning of the Tudor period. In the Lady Chapel there is a series of windows telling parts of the story of the life of Christ (harking back to those stories originally told in the wall paintings!). The special lady to whom the chapel is dedicated is seen in all these pictures alongside Jesus – Mary, His mother.

The windows tell these stories

- ⊖ the Angel Gabriel telling Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus (top window on left)
- ⊖ the nativity (bottom window on left)
- ⊖ and working along the rest of the bottom windows – the visit by the three kings / wise men
- ⊖ the presentation of the baby Jesus in the Jewish temple (not his baptism – that was as an adult)
- ⊖ the crucifixion
- ⊖ and the ascension to heaven after Jesus rose from the dead at the first Easter.

Candles are used to help people focus on their prayer. They remain alight long after the person has stopped praying. This is because God is still listening.

Just as we need water for life, we also need light for life. Jesus was a light showing people the way to live. A lighted candle is also one of the symbols used in baptism, with the flame being taken from the Easter candle which is a large, new candle lit at the celebration of Jesus' resurrection each Easter.

The Tapestries – The tapestries bring colour to the Lady Chapel, and the converging arrows in their patterns symbolise “meetings” as people meet together to pray. Pupils may interpret the symbolism in the tapestries in their own way.

Page 8 – The Cross

The cross is the most important symbol in the Christian faith because Jesus died on the cross to save everyone from their sins. Christians believe that if they are truly sorry for the bad things they have done, and try to be good people, they will live in heaven with God after their death. Sometimes the cross has an image of Jesus on it, and sometimes it is empty. The empty cross is a symbol of the risen Christ.

Crosses are also used as symbols for other purposes, for example to warn of danger, or in the highway-code to indicate a crossroads.

Memorials – There are many memorials in the cathedral – ledger stones in the floors, sculptures, mosaic memorials like those to the Royal Engineers by the West Door, plaques and tributes in the stained glass windows. These memorials show that the people who died, and their families, believed in God and life after death and wanted people to pray for them and remember them after they had died.

Signs and symbols

The richness of history and worship from over 1400 years continues today, as the cathedral is carefully maintained and improved to 21st century requirements (it will be here, hopefully, for at least another thousand years!). There is a vibrant worshipping community associated with the cathedral. It is interesting to note that although the castle and the present cathedral were built around the same time the castle is now a ruin. It is no longer used for the purpose for which it was built (defence / protection) and is an historic monument. The cathedral is still used for its original purpose and is a living, developing building.