

Time travellers in Rochester cathedral

Teachers' Support Notes

Page 1 – This page is an introduction to the cathedral. Students are reminded 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).

There is also a reminder that 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

Point A – 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 may be seen on the road immediately outside the west front (two strips of cobbles mark where the walls were). 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.

In pairs, the students may gauge the size of the first church. To check their findings they could look at the Lady Chapel, which is probably roughly the same size as the original church.

Point B – At the far end of the Nave is a screen dividing the Nave from the Quire, a more private part of the cathedral. Statues of eight people important in the development of Rochester Cathedral are shown there. They are:

- ⌘ St. Andrew, from whose monastery St. Augustine departed when, in 597 A.D., he brought the word of Christianity to Kent
- ⌘ King Ethelbert – King of Kent at the time of St. Augustine’s arrival
- ⌘ Justus – first Bishop of Rochester from 604 A.D. to 624 A.D.
- ⌘ Paulinus – Bishop of Rochester 633 A.D. to his death in 644 A.D.
- ⌘ Gundulf – the Norman Bishop of Rochester (1077 – 1108) responsible for the Norman Nave
- ⌘ William of Hoo – Prior of the Monastery elected in 1239. Before that he was Sacrist and during his time at the monastery was responsible for building the new quire in the 13th century
- ⌘ Walter de Merton – Bishop of Rochester from 1274 to 1277 and Chancellor of England in 1261 and again in 1272. He also founded Merton College, Oxford
- ⌘ St. John Fisher – Bishop of Rochester from 1504 until Henry 8th martyred him in 1535.

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Bishop Gundulf, 5th statue from the left, was not only responsible for building the Norman cathedral but also parts of Rochester Castle and the White Tower at the Tower of London. He also founded the monastery at Rochester and St. Bartholomew's Hospital, Rochester, which is still here today.

Point C – Most of the Nave is built in Norman, or Romanesque, style, with rounded arches which have typical Norman decoration. The Norman cathedral, started around 1080, took about 50 years to build. Since the Keep of the castle was built around the same time the same shape of arch and style of decoration may be seen there too.

Because of the damage done by two serious fires in the 12th century, a new cathedral was started in the early 13th century, in the then new style of building known as Gothic or early English. New building techniques allowed architects to use more slender pillars and pointed arches, giving a soaring feeling of reaching to heaven.

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Point C (cont). – Each pair of Norman pillars is different. They were necessarily chunky to support the weight of the arches. Each mason working on the cathedral had his own mark or signature and he would mark his work so that the Master-mason could check the quality of work and determine his pay. Some of these marks can still be seen today. Look on the 4th pillar on the right hand-side (as you face the organ) to see masons' marks.

Point D – Also on this pillar you can see graffiti or sketches used for the brightly painted scenes of bible stories which would have adorned the pillars and arches at that time. These pictures would have helped the mainly illiterate population learn their bible stories and were sometimes known as “the poor man's bible”. The pictures were destroyed during the Reformation, when beautiful images and statues in churches were thought to be Popish (too catholic), distracting people from their prayers.

Page 5 – North Transept

Point E – The Fresco The fresco in Rochester Cathedral is the first true fresco painted in an English cathedral for 800 years. It brings back the tradition of telling stories through pictures used in the early cathedral. 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.

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High up on the walls in this area are carvings of many faces. These are decorative, and may have been faces of masons or other local people. There is one new face here (to the left of the fresco), that of Edward Shotton, Dean of Rochester until 2003.

Point F – The Pilgrim Steps 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 baker who set out in 1201, from his home in Scotland, on a pilgrimage to Canterbury and then on to the Holy Lands. 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) and made a garland of flowers for his head. She was 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 climbing 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.

Page 6 – The Quire and Prebystery

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 and 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 service 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.

Point G – 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 those for John Fisher, who was martyred by Henry 8th in 1535 for refusing to agree to the formation of the Anglican church and those of Nicholas Ridley, martyred by Queen Mary in 1555 for refusing to revert to Catholicism.

Heraldry has a very complicated code of meanings, but in some coats of arms, such as those of John Fisher (fish and ears of corn) or Thomas Spratt (small fish) it is possible to see a degree of humour in their punning use of images.

The medieval painting of The Wheel of Fortune was re-discovered in the 19th century during renovations. It had been hidden behind a pulpit and was thus saved at the time of the Reformation.

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!

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Point H – The Presbytery 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 special, but also it is physically the highest altar in the cathedral. It is at the east (or light) end of the cathedral. Each day 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 story carved behind the High Altar is that of the Last supper, the meal during which Jesus blessed the bread and wine and asked for this to be done in remembrance of Him. This is done each day at the altar during the service of Eucharist or Holy Communion.

Page 7 – The Crypt

Point I – Please 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 (The Ithamar Chapel) there is more graffiti showing Jesus with His disciples.

Small stone basins (piscenas) can be seen on either side at the far end of the Ithamar Chapel. They were used for washing the hands of the priest before the consecration of the bread and wine, and for washing the sacred vessels after Holy Communion.

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.

Point J – 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) today, 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.

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Page 8 – The Lady Chapel

Point K – 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. It is Mary, His mother.

Standing at the corner of the Lady Chapel and the Nave it is possible to see the three different periods of building (Norman, early English and Tudor) and the differing window styles used throughout that time (Norman, early English, Decorated and Perpendicular).

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 hopefully be here 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 today a ruin. It is no longer used for the purpose for which it was built (defence / protection) and is now an historic monument. The cathedral is still used for its original purpose and is a living, developing building.