



Thomas, 1119* to 1170

by Barbara Hammond

850 years ago Thomas Becket, Chancellor of England, Archbishop of Canterbury and erstwhile friend of King Henry II was murdered. Why? What happened?

Extracts below are from Barbara Hammond's 2020 booklet that accompanied Emsworth Museum's September exhibition in the David Rudkin Room. The exhibition, Thomas à Becket: the Man and the Church, was curated by parishioners of the historic Church in Warblington dedicated to his memory.

The chaos of civil war ended in 1154 when Empress Matilda's son seized the crown of England as Henry II. Henry needed a trusted assistant and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Theobald, recommended his Archdeacon and protégé, Thomas, as an excellent Chancellor and Keeper of the Great Seal.

"Young Henry, aged 21, and Thomas, who was considerably older, became bosom friends and happy companions, not only at 'work' but also in the pleasures of hunting, hawking, feasting and many other activities which were new to Thomas."

Thomas's responsibilities began to increase and when the King was absent in France Thomas 'ruled' England for Henry. "Commentators of the time described Thomas as a 'sparrow become a peacock' and 'more regal than the King'." He was even appointed tutor and much-loved foster father to the King's heir.

The see of Canterbury fell vacant with the death of Archbishop Theobald in 1161 and after a hiatus of two years, Henry sponsored Thomas to be the new Archbishop of Canterbury.

"First, Henry assumed that with Thomas as both Chancellor of England AND Archbishop

of Canterbury, he could achieve the major triumph of harmonising the two existing systems of justice [Customary (Common) and Church (Canon) Law] in the country. Then, secondly, Henry felt sure he could rely on Thomas to establish an orderly succession to the throne for his son, young Prince Henry, and thereby avoid the possibility of another civil war... and to crown him prematurely at Westminster Abbey."

The realisation struck Thomas that he had competing loyalties, either support the King or God and he chose God, resigning from his post as Chancellor.

"Friendship disappeared ... and it was not long before Henry demanded that 'criminous clergy' should be tried and punished in the civil courts whenever they committed civil crimes. Thomas refused, maintaining that they should be tried in the Church courts no matter what their crimes ... the matter became public at the Great Council of Clarendon, near Salisbury, in 1164. Henry published his new 'written' Law, the 'Clarendon Code', and demanded compliance from everyone, both barons and bishops. Thomas refused, partly because it was introducing a written Law Code in place of Customary Law and partly because it challenged the authority of the Church courts."

* Probable birth year

Dispute continued and eventually Thomas fled into exile in France under the protection of King Louis. Prompted by the Pope, the French King brokered a reconciliation between Thomas and King Henry in 1169.

“Henry agreed, because he still wanted Thomas to crown young Prince Henry at Westminster. They met at Montmirail. Henry offered to restore Thomas to Canterbury if he would change his opposition to the Clarendon Code of Laws. Thomas pleaded for mercy on his knees, and again agreed to everything, ‘saving the honour of God’. Everyone was appalled. Louis felt humiliated, and Henry was furious. They met and tried again in November, but Thomas was obdurate. Henry left for England, determined to get his son crowned – without Thomas! Early in 1170 Thomas heard of Henry’s plans. He quickly threatened excommunication on any bishops who co-operated with the King but, at the King’s determined insistence, his son was crowned on the 14th June at Westminster, by the Archbishop of York, supported by several others. This time the Pope was angry, and ordered Henry and Thomas to resolve their quarrel.

In July, again in France, Henry begged Thomas to renew their old friendship. He admitted he was wrong about the coronation, and begged Thomas to return to England and re-crown young King Henry. Thomas agreed.”

Jubilant crowds greeted Thomas on his return to England in December, but on Christmas Day Thomas publicly denounced

the offending bishops and excommunicated them. On the same day in France Henry’s festivities were interrupted by the Archbishop of York and the Bishops of London and Salisbury with complaints against Thomas. Henry’s furious denunciations were heard by four of his knights who quietly left the court. They met Thomas on 29th December at Canterbury Cathedral. An acrimonious meeting ensued between Thomas and Reginald FitzUrse, William de Tracy, Hugh de Morville and Richard de Brito. Later that day at Vespers the four men followed the monks into the Cathedral and used their swords to kill Thomas.

“The whole of Christendom was horrified by Thomas’s murder, and Henry himself was genuinely overcome with remorse. He quickly realised that he might have ‘won the battle, but lost the war’ Henry was refused entry into any Church until he made a public penance. In 1173, he was duly flogged on the steps of a French Cathedral, in the presence of the Archbishop of Rouen.”

Thomas became more famous in death and his faults were largely forgotten. Just three years later he was declared a saint. Interestingly, though, while the Pope may have excommunicated the four murderers, those men were neither tried nor punished for their crime.

Many Churches were founded in Thomas of Canterbury’s memory including Ss Thomas, the Roman Catholic Church in New Brighton Road, Emsworth, whose name also commemorates the martyrdom of St Thomas More.



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Above, opposite page: Thomas as depicted on a stained glass window in the Church of St Thomas à Becket in Warblington

Above: Exhibition logo

Right: Warblington Church

