



by Alanna Fraser

The dramatic death of Thomas Becket – the humble priest slain at prayer by the patrician henchmen of the king – is surely one of the most famous historical stories associated with East Kent.

Most local residents will no doubt be acquainted with the medieval clergyman's biography: a close friend of Henry II, the king appointed Thomas Becket to the position of Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162 (the day after he was ordained as a priest), hoping that this would secure him a staunch ally of the Crown at the apex of the Church. Becket was, in fact, reluctant to take up the post, writing in a prophetic letter to the king that he feared that it would cause, 'our friendship to turn to hate'. His time in office as Archbishop did, indeed, create a sharp divide between the king and his erstwhile friend, as Becket showed in his actions that his first loyalty was to the Church. This culminated in the Archbishop fleeing to France, where he remained in exile from 1164-1170.

On his return to England at the start of December 1170, Becket continued to clash with the royal court by excommunicating a number of bishops loyal to the king, which Henry took as an act of betrayal. The result was Henry's infamous outburst – "will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?" (although the exact words are heavily disputed) – which four of his knights, Reginald fitz Urse, Hugh de Morville, William de Tracy and Richard le Breton took as a royal command. The men ventured from France to Kent to assassinate the Archbishop in a bloody and gruesome attack inside Canterbury Cathedral on 29th December 1170, some 845 years ago this winter.

SALTWOOD AND THE CHURCH

So far, so familiar... But might it be the case that the dastardly plot to murder the Archbishop was hatched rather close to home, in Saltwood? Saltwood Castle had a long

association with the Church: originally built as a in 1026, Earl Haldane, in the presence of King Canute, granted the manor of 'Saltwuode' to the monks of Christ Church, Canterbury and, following the Norman Conquest, William I bestowed Saltwood upon Archbishop Lanfranc, whereupon it was kept as a fief of the See of Canterbury, to be let as an honour to loyal knights by the Archbishop.

Saltwood Castle came into the hands of one of these noblemen, Henry d'Essex, during the reign of Henry II, but was seized by the king after d'Essex was accused of cowardice and treason in the Welsh wars. Becket had sought to restore the castle as an ecclesiastical palace, but Henry instead granted the castle to one of his loyal barons, Ranulf de Broc, who held the nearby Brockhill Estate, in return for stewardship of the See of Canterbury's land whilst Becket was in exile.

SALTWOOD'S PART IN THE MURDER

Ranulf de Broc was no fan of Thomas Becket – and the feeling was mutual. Henry's decision gave de Broc licence to run roughshod over the Archbishop's estates: Becket accused him of plundering his land, hunting his deer, and drinking his wine. After an uneasy peace with the King, Becket returned from exile in December 1170 and promptly excommunicated de Broc and his brother, Robert, on Christmas Day 1170, alongside a number of bishops. When the King voiced his frustration at Becket's insolence in his feverish outburst – apparently imploring his loyal knights to silence the Archbishop for good – it was to Saltwood Castle, and the de Broc's, that four knights – intent on obeying the king's

'order' – rushed from France on 28th December 1170.

We can only speculate about what happened that winter's evening in Saltwood; was Becket's fate sealed whilst the men rested for the night? Did they plot their deadly mission whilst cloistered within the castle's silent walls? Many historians think this to be a highly plausible explanation. Whether Ranulf de Broc was complicit in the knights' action is unknown, but his guilt is certainly implied by association.

The following morning, 29th December 1170, Fitz Urse, de Morville, de Tracey and le Breton set out with a kinsman of de Broc, along Stone Street and into Canterbury. They made their way into the cathedral, and it is believed that they initially hoped to force Becket to rescind his excommunications, but the Archbishop remained unmoved. The group then briefly left the cathedral, which Becket had refused to secure, only to return with their weapons declaring their intention to find the Archbishop, upon which Becket calmly presented himself to the four knights. FitzUrse and de Tracy struck him glancing blows which laid him prostrate, before le Breton completed the deed by administering a fatal strike to Becket's head. An eyewitness to the attack, monk Edward Grim, goryly described the final assault as causing the crown of Becket's head to cleave from the rest of his head, the resultant heavy blood loss staining the floor of the cathedral.

BECKET'S LEGACY

Becket became an instant martyr, but the brutality of the attack, his venerable status and courage in the face of mortal danger also served to cement his murder in English consciousness right up until the present day, weaving his legend into the fabric of our history. de Broc forbade the monks to bury the Archbishop alongside his predecessors, and so the monks interred him in the Crypt of the cathedral. Almost immediately, miracles were reported at Becket's tomb and in 1173, he was canonised by Pope Alexander III.

The assassination provoked widespread condemnation, at home and abroad, of King Henry and his knights; the Pope swiftly excommunicated and exiled Becket's murderers whilst the bloody incident irreparably harmed the King's reputation, despite numerous acts of penance and formal absolution in 1172.

Meanwhile, Saltwood Castle was restored to control of the See of Canterbury by King John, and remained under the archbishops' command until the reign of Henry VIII. It has belonged to the Clark family since 1953, and was the beloved home of the Rt. Hon. Alan Clark MP until his death in 1999, upon which his wife, Jane, inherited the castle and with it, took up the mantle to preserve and conserve the rich history embedded within its medieval stone walls.

The story of the murder of Thomas Becket is entrenched as a central part of Canterbury's history but, it seems, we should remember that it is part of Saltwood's as well.