

St Thomas Becket Chantry Chapel

In 1331 John de Stratford, then Bishop of Winchester (formerly Rector of Holy Trinity and later Archbishop of Canterbury), paid to rebuild the south aisle and establish a chantry chapel for priests to say masses in perpetuity for the souls of himself and his family. The chantry was dedicated to St Thomas, and became an important destination for pilgrimage.



This painting, by local artist Janet Hall, visualises how the chapel might have looked, based on documentary and surviving physical evidence:

- Depth to back wall recessed by 8 feet (now occupied by organ);
- Light admitted through southern window (behind organ case);
- Altar top (mensa) of Purbeck marble (later buried, now on high altar);
- Three steps up to altar (still there in 1806, according to Wheler);
- Candles and Latin missal book open on altar (as per Guild altars);
- Reredos depicts Becket's brutal murder by four knights;
- Painted statue of Our Lady of Pity on left of altar (will of 1465);
- Painted statue of St. Dominic on right of altar (ditto);
- Aumbry (cupboard) and piscina (wash-basin) set into walls;
- Carved wooden screens between nave arches (left);
- Squint hole through top of walled-up arch (as per North Transept);
- Pattern of encaustic tiles on floor;
- Gilded plaster bosses on ceiling (still there);
- Three sedilia (seats) for priests (on right, now Victorian replicas);
- Banners showing crests of town, Becket and John de Stratford;
- Painted colourful decoration on walls, arches and pillars.

The chapel would have been in use throughout the day, with masses said or sung by priests from the nearby Ecclesiastical College. The laity, visitors and pilgrims were probably required to remain behind a barrier, where they could kneel to pray and light votive candles. These candles signified coming into the light of God and offering prayers with the light of faith; the saints (here St Thomas, the Blessed Virgin and St Dominic) were petitioned to pray with and for the supplicant to the Lord Jesus Christ. A votive candle stand is still a focus of prayer in the present Becket chapel in Holy Trinity Church.

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