



THE CHURCH OF
ST THOMAS A BECKET

CAPEL, KENT



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

89 Fleet Street · London EC4Y 1DH

Registered Charity No. 258612

PRICE: £1.50



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO
THE CHURCH OF
ST THOMAS A BECKET
CAPEL, KENT

Many years ago Christians built and set apart this place for prayer. They made their church beautiful with their skill and craftsmanship. Here they have met for worship, for children to be baptised, for couples to be married and for the dead to be brought for burial. If you have time, enjoy the history, the peace and the holiness here. Please use the prayer card and, if you like it, you are welcome to take a folded copy with you.

Although services are no longer regularly held here, this church remains consecrated; inspiring, teaching and ministering through its beauty and atmosphere. It is one of more than 320 churches throughout England cared for by The Churches Conservation Trust. The Trust was created in 1969 and was, until 1994, known as the Redundant Churches Fund. Its object is to ensure that all these churches are kept in repair and cared for, in the interests of the Church and Nation, for present and future generations.

Please help us to care for this church. There is a box for donations or, if you prefer to send a gift, it will be gratefully received at the Trust's headquarters at 89 Fleet Street, London EC4Y 1DH (Registered Charity No. 258612).

We hope that you will enjoy your visit and be encouraged to see our other churches. Some are in towns; some in remote country districts. Some are easy and others hard to find but all are worth the effort.

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EAST PECKHAM, ST MICHAEL
2½ miles N of East Peckham off B2016
(exterior accessible only)

THE CHURCH OF ST THOMAS A BECKET

CAPEL, KENT

by ROY TRICKER

This small Wealden church is dedicated to the Kentish saint, Thomas à Becket (also known as Thomas of Canterbury), who was much venerated in the Middle Ages. He was Archbishop of Canterbury and was assassinated in his cathedral in the late afternoon of 29 December 1170. During the years that followed a tremendous devotion developed amongst English people to their murdered archbishop and the site of his martyrdom in Canterbury Cathedral became a great centre of pilgrimage.

The church almost certainly existed before 1170 and may have stood here, upon its knoll, for at least 900 years. It appears that it was never a parish church, but was a chapel of ease in the parish of Tudeley, where a church was known to have existed in Saxon times. Hence the community around this chapel became known as 'Capel'.

As pilgrimages to Becket's shrine developed and increased, the chapel appears to have been rededicated to St Thomas. It was some 10 miles (16 km) south of the main 'Pilgrims' Way' to Canterbury, but stood near the well-trodden pilgrimage route from Chichester to Canterbury. During the Middle Ages the rectory and chapel at Capel were held in the care of the Knights Hospitallers of St John of Jerusalem – a military religious order, first introduced into England c.1144, but originally founded just after the building in 1070 of a hostel in Jerusalem which provided hospitality for poor pilgrims to the holy places there. In England, the Hospitallers' main centre at Clerkenwell in London had about 65 dependent houses. Capel was annexed to and held under the jurisdiction of the Hospitallers' preceptory at nearby West Peckham, which provided its parish priest, who would probably have been skilled in ministering to pilgrims and also in the care of the sick.

We know little about the development of the building in mediaeval times, except for works paid for by the bequests of generous people. In 1502, William Towne contributed towards a new 'sawnts bell' in the tower and also gave a new vestment for use in the church. In 1527, John Wynter

left money for the 'mending of the stepill of Capel'. Richard Wrynge of Tudeley, in 1512, bequeathed 20 pence 'to the paynting of ouer ladie in Capell church' (and also a further 20 pence for the repair of 'Whetstede Cross'). Three years later, John Penyale bequeathed 6s.8d. towards the same new statue of Our Lady in the church. In 1514, Thomas Stone requested 'to be buried in the myddle pace of the church of Capel before the roode' and left money 'for my sepulture there'. In 1491, William Tebb provided for 'a priest secular, honest & weldisposyd to syng and to rede in the church of Capell for the helth of my sowle'. A bequest in 1554 by William Wynter 'towards the coveryng of the church of Capel' suggests that the roof was being re-tiled at this time.

After the dissolution of the Knights Hospitallers in 1541, the patronage of the living passed to the Fane family, who held it until 1762, when it passed to the le Despencers. In 1587, Capel was officially united with Tudeley to form one parish, with St Thomas's as the chapel of ease. The parish church of All Saints Tudeley, famous for its remarkable stained glass by Marc Chagall, stands just over a mile (1.6km) away, near the road to Tonbridge. As the hamlet of Five Oak Green (about ½ mile (0.8km) to the north-east) developed as a centre of population, the mission church of St Luke was built there in 1894. This ceased to be used in 1992, since when the Anglican and United Reformed congregations have shared the former United Reformed Church, designed by C H Strange and built in 1908.

In 1986 the ancient church of Capel, having retired from full-time parish use, was vested in what is now The Churches Conservation Trust, to be maintained and conserved as a sacred and historic building. As one of more than 320 English churches in the Trust's care, it is preserved by and for the Church and the Nation, and it continues its ministry as an act of worship in craftsmanship and art, made sacred by 900 years of prayer and care.

EXTERIOR

The church has a delightful **setting**, in a slightly elevated position on the southern side of the Medway valley and in a beautiful English country **churchyard**, of which the northern section, around the church, is vested in The Churches Conservation Trust, whilst the parish still owns and uses the rest. Parts of the churchyard are shaded by yew trees and tradition has it that Thomas à Becket himself may have preached beneath the massive



Exterior looking from the north-east, showing the vestry of 1815 and the tiny Norman window in the nave

(ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND)

yew to the east of the church. This is of tremendous age and, although the heart of its trunk has been eaten away, it is still very much alive and flourishing. There are several attractive 18th century headstones and chest-tombs, and also delightful views. Thomas Hubble's (1740) headstone, to the east of the chancel, has a carving of the Good Samaritan, whilst the adjacent headstone to Thomas (1773) and Elizabeth Hubble (1764) has a carving of the Resurrection.

The **church building** itself is small and simple in plan, comprising a tower, nave, chancel and north vestry. The tower and the south wall of the nave are built of local golden-brown Wealden stone; the masonry of the chancel and north nave walls is covered with protective render and one wonders what features of interest may be hidden beneath it.

The western **tower** rises 37 feet (11.3m) to the top of the battlements and is crowned by a tiled pyramid roof, surmounted by a gold-painted vane. Between 7pm and 8pm on the evening of 15 January 1639, this tower suffered the effects of 'a sudden and terrible tempest of thunder and



lightning' which struck the 'pynacle' at the top. A report of 1641 states that, in a very short time, fire 'consumed the two loftes and all the woodworke of and belonging to the said steeple, melted 3 bells therein and much wasted the mettle thereof, and so shaked and rent the stoneworke of the said steeple that it is conceived the same will not be serviceable for use unless it be pulled downe and newly built'. The upper stages were rebuilt shortly after 1641, using old materials, but the lower stage is mostly mediaeval (and maybe 14th century work), its small west window having two ogee-headed lights. The west doorway is mostly mediaeval, although its arch has been reshaped.

The report of 1641 stated that the fire had 'also burned downe and wasted the one halfe part of the church at Capel' and this resulted in the total rebuilding of the south wall of the **nave**, apart from a small section at the west end. This was done rather cheaply in brick and there were three round-headed Classical windows, to the west of which was the original 15th or 16th century window in the remaining section of mediaeval wall. Near the west end was a small dormer window in the roof. It was not until c.1915–17 that this south wall received its present sandstone facing and was provided with Gothic windows, in the late Perpendicular style and square-headed, like the mediaeval window to the west of them. The architect for this work was Mr John W Little of Tonbridge.

The north wall of the nave is Norman, as can be seen from its small window of the early 12th century. Late 15th or early 16th century restorers inserted the larger single window to the east of it.

The **chancel** is rather short and may well once have been longer. It has no side windows and is lit only by the east window – a triple-lancet window which dates from 1905, when the chancel roof was renewed and put back to its original pitch. An earlier photograph shows the chancel with a more shallowly-pitched roof and a single Classical east window, which was described by Sir Stephen Glynne in 1863 as 'wretched'! On the south side

Above: Exterior view c.1905 or just after, showing the brick south wall of the nave with its classical windows

Below: The south nave wall, after J W Little's transformation (c.1915–17), preserving the mediaeval western window, but with a new wall and windows to the east of it

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

is a rather domestic-looking 18th century door, which later restorers fortunately did not dispose of.

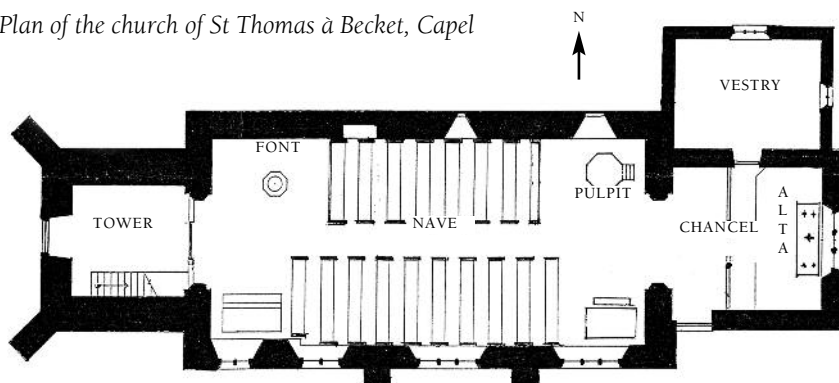
The brick-built **vestry** on the north side has equally homely timber-framed windows. A brick in its east wall, inscribed 'D. Fry, 1815' records builder and date, adding that Mr Fry died in 1835.

INTERIOR

The west door leads into the base of the tower. Here hang three **framed boards with texts** in 18th century lettering, proclaiming Our Lord's two great Commandments, and also two verses exhorting the faithful to worship. In the bell-chamber above hangs the church's single **bell**, cast in 1670, by John and Christopher Hodson of London and St Mary Cray, to replace the three destroyed in 1639. A simple and rather domestic-looking late 18th century **door** leads into the bright and homely little church, which contains work of several periods, reflecting a variety of Christian traditions, and also has the atmosphere generated by 900 years of prayer.

Interesting mediaeval woodwork may be seen in the **nave roof**. Two sturdy cambered tie-beams, strengthened by arch-braces, straddle the nave. Their wall-posts rest, although not always entirely centrally, upon stone corbels. These may well be 15th century and from them central crown-posts rise to support the earlier (14th century) open timber roof. The **chancel roof** was entirely renewed in 1905 at the expense of Edwin and Horace Martin.

Plan of the church of St Thomas à Becket, Capel



Capel's ancient font
(RCHME)

On the west wall of the nave, above the tower arch, are the **royal arms** of King George II, which were painted on wood in 1739 and were originally fixed above the chancel arch. Flanking them, on framed boards, are inscribed the **Lord's Prayer** and the **Apostles' Creed** and each side of the tower arch are the **Ten Commandments**; they too are 18th century. These were usually positioned on the east wall, above the altar, although after 1905 they were placed each side of the chancel arch on the north and south walls of the nave. They were fixed in their present position in 1970.

The **font** stands at the west end, its position near the entrance symbolising our entry, through baptism, into the family of the Church. Its circular stem supports a small octagonal 15th or early 16th century bowl, which



Interior looking east

(RCHME)

is uncarved, but may originally have had painted panels. It is crowned by a pretty 17th century **font cover**, which rises like a small spire. There are also 17th century timbers in the simple hexagonal **pulpit**, although its southern panel has clearly been renewed at a later date, when the pulpit was completely reconstructed and almost certainly modified from a two- or three-decker arrangement. On the wall near the font are **War Memorial plaques**, commemorating 33 people who perished in the First World War and a further 19 who died in the Second World War. The former was dedicated by Archdeacon Scott on 11 November 1923.

The church was closed during part of 1868 for restoration and it may have been then that much of the present **seating** was introduced, replacing what Glynne described in 1863 as the 'hideous pews' that filled the nave. The **priest's stall** was given in 1927, probably in memory of a member of the Martin family. The small single-manual pipe **organ** has five speaking stops and an octave coupler.

The 14th century **chancel arch**, like the **tower arch** rests upon half-octagonal responds with moulded capitals. A plaque at its foot informs us that the nave **floor** was renewed with red tiles in 1930, in memory of Thomas William Delves; the floor was modified and relaid with quarry tiles in 1970. These form a contrast with the 18th century pavements in the chancel floor and the brick floor on which the altar stands.

The **communion rails** are a beautiful example of the 17th century woodcarvers' craft. Their central entrance-gate, which retains its old hinges and latch, is inscribed 'Michael Davis, 1682'. Rails such as these were originally encouraged by Archbishop Laud in the 1630s to prevent dogs from defiling the sanctuary. A marble **plaque** on the north chancel wall commemorates Thomas Martin (d.1834), his wife Elizabeth (née Hubble, d.1831) and their grandson, Captain Leslie Martin of the 12th Lancers, who died in 1888. Leslie is also commemorated in the stained glass of the **east window**, which was given by his brother and sister-in-law in 1905 and shows Christ the King, reigning from the cross and flanked by his Mother and St John.

The simple stone **altar** was made in 1979 to replace the 17th century communion table, which had been stolen. Like mediaeval stone altars, its top slab has the five incised crosses, symbolising the five wounds of the crucified Christ.

WALL PAINTINGS

Having been hidden by plaster for hundreds of years, evidence of these treasures was first discovered in 1868. They were uncovered by Professor E W Tristram in 1927 and were conserved by Mrs Eve Baker and Mr John Dives in 1970. The 1970 work also involved new drainage along the base of the north wall, new flooring with underfloor heating, modification of the seating and the removal of a flue and chimney from the north nave wall, under the direction of Miss Pamela M Cunnington, ARIBA.

The north wall is a reminder of the colour and artistry which adorned England's mediaeval churches before the Reformation. These paintings provided a kaleidoscope of visual aids to teach the Christian faith to ordinary people, who could neither read nor understand the Latin of the services and scriptures. With the Reformation in the mid 16th century,



The north wall, showing some of the wall paintings

(RCHME)

when English was used for services and the English Bible was introduced, the old visual aids were plastered or whitewashed over and were often replaced by godly texts from Holy Scripture. Presumably, had the south wall survived after the fire of 1639, even more wall paintings would have been discovered here. It is thought that these paintings were executed in two stages – the first c.1200 or just before and the second about 50 years later.

There were two tiers of scenes on the north wall. A **horizontal frieze of zigzag riband pattern**, about 4 feet (1.2m) from the floor, marked the bottom of the lower tier, and a **frieze of scroll-work** further up, divided the two tiers. These friezes, together with the lines which cover the wall and also the wide splay of the Norman window and the arch of the blocked doorway, with a **masonry pattern**, are thought to be the work of c.1200. The two **consecration crosses**, the western one only a faint fragment, mark the places where the consecrating bishop anointed the wall with holy oil.

Most of the **upper tier**, which is thought to have shown scenes (c.1250) of the death and burial of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of the apostles, has been obliterated. Some of the lower parts remain, however, including fragments of people and scenes.

Of the subjects in the **lower tier** there is much to see. These were also painted c.1250 and, looking from west to east, the following scenes may be identified:

1. (West of the Norman window). **The Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem**, showing the gateway to the city and its battlements.
2. (In the splay of the Norman window). **Cain, slaying his brother, Abel** (west) and **God reprimanding Cain for this dreadful act** (east). This Old Testament act of violence may well have also reminded Capel people and passing pilgrims to Canterbury of the murder of Thomas à Becket in 1170.
3. Beneath the Norman window is a **figure passing a pot to another** – maybe depicting the Old Testament story of the prophet Elijah and the widow of Zarephath.
4. (East of the Norman window). **The Last Supper**, with six people still visible in the scene.
5. **The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus**, with Peter cutting off the ear of Malchus, the High Priest's servant.
6. (To the east of the eastern window). **The Risen Christ appearing to Mary Magdalene in the Garden**. She is on the right and Jesus on the left, with his arm outstretched to her.

On the north side of the chancel arch are some **16th century patterns**, above which is a **16th century text**, now faded away, although its elegant painted frame remains. Further traces of colour may be discerned to the south of the chancel arch.

The parish church of **All Saints, Tudeley**, also welcomes visitors, many of whom travel from afar to see its remarkable set of stained glass windows by Marc Chagall. An illustrated guidebook has been published recently.

Beside the main road, at Five Oak Green, is the **Hoppers' Hospital**, once the *Old Rose and Crown* public house, which was purchased in 1910 by Father Richard Wilson – curate and then Vicar of St Augustine's, Settles Street, Stepney, from 1893–1922 – who did so much to improve conditions for the thousands of East Enders who migrated to this area each year during the hop-picking season. The 'Little Hoppers Hospital' was equipped with a children's ward, containing six cots, an outpatients' department and dispensary. There were also a canteen, a room for letter writing, and a place where people could go to see Fr Wilson for advice. Entertainments took place here and meals were available. It was very much a 'public house', but without alcohol. In 1922 a three-sided 'cloister', with a large open-air fireplace, was built around a brick courtyard. It was erected, as a plaque states: 'In happy memory of old friends who loved hopping and who loved this place very dearly, who gave their lives for old England and for us 1914–1818. Lord all pitying, Jesu blest, grant them thine eternal rest'. The entrance is like a mini-gatehouse, with a pyramid roof and containing a bell. Fr Alexander Asher – Fr Wilson's curate and later his successor – carried on his work here until 1946. It now provides underprivileged London children with hospitality and a taste of the Kent countryside.

The lonely hilltop church of **St Michael, East Peckham**, also in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust, is about 5 miles (8 km) north (as the crow flies) from Capel and over 2 miles (3.2 km) north of its village. Sadly, because its remarkable site has made it one of our most vulnerable and vandalised churches, we cannot lend out its key at present. It is well worth a visit however; its exterior is delightful and visitors are rewarded with one of the most magnificent panoramic views from a country churchyard to be seen anywhere in England.



The interior, shortly after the east window was installed in 1905.

Front cover: Exterior from the south-west (RCHME).

Back cover: The view westwards from the chancel, taken before the church had electric lighting (RCHME).

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