The Trial of Thomas Becket

at Northampton Castle 1164

On Tuesday 6th October 1164 Thomas Becket, Chancellor of the realm and Archbishop of Canterbury arrived in Northampton to stand trial before King Henry II and his Great Council - made up of Nobles, Bishops and Abbots – in the Great Hall of the castle.

Thomas Becket had been King Henry’s best friend and as Chancellor the King’s right-hand man. Henry thought that he would be able to control the Church in England by making Becket Archbishop of Canterbury. He was so wrong.

They argued about the rights of the Church versus the Crown. The trial at Northampton Castle was a final attempt by Henry II to force Becket to submit to the right of the Crown.

Becket lodged at nearby St. Andrew’s Priory for the week-long trial and processed each day to the castle.

The trial did not go well for Becket. Even some of the Bishops tried to persuade him to accept Henry II’s authority and demands. But Becket stood firm for the rights of the Church. By the following Tuesday Becket was worried that he would be imprisoned or even sentenced to death. He decided to leave the castle while he could and returned to the temporary safety of St. Andrew’s Priory.

Before dawn the next day, on Wednesday 14th October, aided by the monks Becket escaped through the town’s north gate and headed for Lincoln and finally to exile in France.

After six years of exile, helped by the Pope and the King of France, Henry and Becket made peace with one another; Becket returned to England, arriving at Canterbury on the 18th December 1170.

Eleven days later, on the 29th December 1170, he was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral by knights who thought that getting rid of him would please King Henry. The Christian world was shocked. Instead of getting control of the Church, Henry II had to show that he was sorry and publicly accept the rights of the Church.

In 1173 Becket was canonised as St. Thomas of Canterbury. During the Medieval period, his shrine at Canterbury was one of the most important places of pilgrimage in the Christian world.

Becket’s legacy in modern Northampton is evident in many place names: park, pub, well, school, retail park, a ward in Northampton General Hospital and also many roads and buildings.

There are also less obvious references to Becket in the town, including:

The Guildhall, where inside and outside the building there are references to people and events at the castle including Becket and his trial.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre has a chapel dedicated to St. Thomas.

St Thomas of Canterbury is co-patron of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton. The Cathedral, situated on land that originally formed part of St. Andrew’s Priory, holds a first-class relic of Becket: his corona (top part of the skull).



**One Week in October 1164**

**A Diary of the trial of Thomas Becket at Northampton Castle**

**Tuesday 6th October**

Becket arrives in Northampton. His ‘usual’ quarters at the castle are already taken so he lodges at nearby St. Andrew’s Priory for the duration of the Trial.

King Henry II is out hawking so Becket cannot see him.

**Wednesday 7th October**

Becket goes to the castle and is rebuffed by Henry who does not allow Becket a customary kiss.

Henry also refuses Becket’s request for leave to visit the Pope in France.

**Thursday 8th October**

All the nobles and prelates (bishops and abbots) that make up a Great Council are assembled.

Becket is charged with Contempt of Court. He protests that he is not legally bound to answer to a secular court.

He is then asked for receipts of expenditure as Chancellor. He has no written receipts only the customary verbal permission from Henry who denies giving permission. It is the Archbishop’s word against the King. All Becket’s moveable wealth is confiscated in lieu of this expenditure.

**Friday 9th October**

Henry piles on the pressure. More suits and threats to seize church property in Canterbury in lieu of penalties if Becket defaults or is bankrupt which he surely would be.

Becket’s request for the Court to be adjourned so he can consult with bishops and clerks is granted.

**Saturday 10th October**

Becket is visited by all the bishops and abbots at St. Andrew’s Priory. Some think he should resign, others that he should hold on so as not to give other tyrant kings free rein.

**Sunday 11th October**

Consults with his clerks all day

**Monday 12th October**

Becket is too unwell to attend the trial.

Henry goes into a rage and threatens to try Becket as a traitor.

**Tuesday 13th October**

Early in the morning Becket meets with his bishops and condemns those who think he should give in as it is not just the English Church at risk. He appeals to the Pope’s authority.

He then celebrates, defiantly, the ‘Votive Mass of St. Stephen’ with the intro. *‘Princes also did sit and speak against me’* before processing to the castle; carrying his own cross into the Great Hall. According to the eye-witness account of William Fitz Stephen, Becket said that he did so to ‘.....preserve the peace of God for my own person and the Church of the English.’

Henry is scared of being ex-communicated, so he watches from an upper gallery. Becket leaves the castle before being sentenced. He is cheered by townsfolk on way back to Priory.

**Wednesday 14th October**

Becket flees before dawn. With help from the monks he escapes through the town’s north gate to Lincoln and finally to France where he spends 6 years in exile.

