



Pilgrimages from Scotland by the Douglasses in the 14th Century - to the Martyrdom of Thomas a Becket (Becket) at Canterbury Cathedral, Kent.

Canterbury's role as one of Europe's most important pilgrimage centres is inextricably linked to the murder of its most famous Archbishop, Thomas Becket, in 1170. When after a long lasting dispute, King Henry II is said to have exclaimed 'Who will rid me of this low born priest?', four knights set off for Canterbury and murdered Thomas here in the place we now call the Martyrdom.

Pilgrimage was probably at its most popular in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when people from every class of society took the pilgrim route to some centre of holiness - perhaps the tomb of a revered saint or the site of a beatific vision. In conquering the physical challenge and facing the dangers and privations of the route they would hope to receive some grace at the end of their journey, but they would also be escaping the narrowness of their everyday world and having fun and adventures on the way. Certainly in Chaucers Canterbury Tales, the Pilgrims were a merry band as the undertook the not too

onerous pilgrimage from London to Canterbury to venerate the tomb of St Thomas à Becket.

Within this remarkable veneration of Thomas a Becket who was murdered in 1170 (12th Century) at the age of 51, there was a sustained Scottish interest in this pilgrimage venue and the potency of its chief saint. Scholars have shown that there was a profound interest in Becket by Scotland's Crown, leading nobles and churchmen in the periods of William I (1165-1214), Alexander II (1214-1249) and Alexander III (1249-1286).

This devotion to Becket was not only about pilgrimages to Canterbury but also the foundation and support of a monastic house dedicated to Becket at Arbroath, Angus. This devotion to Becket was also by 'lesser Scots'.

Scholars have also shown that there was a revival in this interest after the Scottish wars of Independence or Succession (1296-1357). After October, 1357 when Bruce's son David II was released by the English, there was a 'striking and regular traffic in safe conduct requests by notable Scots' seeking to undertake pilgrimages to or through England and very often the destination was Becket's tomb. But this traffic reduced after the death of Edward III in 1377 due to border hostilities. Later in the 14th and 15th Centuries there was also a decline in the Scottish interest in Becket due to the interest in Scottish saints.

The question has been asked - was this devotion to Thomas a Becket by the Scots for piety, penance, politics, diplomacy or personal gain? (Scottish Pilgrimage to Canterbury - University of Stirling).

After 1237 the Douglas family held lands in Essex England, at Stebbing and Woodham Ferrers. Was it natural for them besides other Scots who held land in England to want to establish ties and devotion to Canterbury? (Scottish Pilgrimage to Canterbury - University of Stirling).

- 1330

It has been questioned that Sir James Douglas, Lord of Douglas may well have passed through England and Canterbury on his way route to the Continent? (Scottish Pilgrimage to Canterbury - University of Stirling).

- 1362

It is proposed that a large group of Scots including William Douglas, 1st Earl of Douglas and Thomas Earl of Mar may have sought safe passage to Canterbury in November, 1362 as part of the 'funerary tributes' to Queen Joan. (d 7 September, 1362). (Scottish Pilgrimage to Canterbury - University of Stirling).

- 1363

Canterbury Cathedral - William Douglas, 1st Earl of Douglas made a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas-a-Becket in the year 1363; but, unlike some others of the great Scottish barons, who made such pilgrimages a pretext for treasonable intrigues with the English Government, Douglas continued steadfast in his adherence of his country's cause, and resolutely opposed the attempts of the unworthy son of Robert Bruce to betray it to the enemy...

- 1358, in 1373 and again in 1375

Eleanor Douglas, the many time widowed sister of William Douglas, 1st Earl of Douglas sought to enter England to 'visit the shrines of the saints' and specifically Becket's Tomb in 1373 and 1375. (Scottish Pilgrimage to Canterbury - University of Stirling).

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