

# Rochester Cathedral and Pilgrimage



Rochester is a fascinating spiritual and historical case study of the rise and fall of pilgrimage.

Rochester Cathedral is the second oldest cathedral in England founded by St Justus, one of St Augustine's companions – he beat St Mellitus who founded a cathedral in London by a few months. Actually, in some ways Rochester has a claim to be the earliest new cathedral building, because Augustine's first cathedral was converted from Ethelbert's royal palace in Canterbury, whereas Justus founded an entirely new building (part of the floor plan of which can still be seen on the ground at the west end of the present Cathedral).

Rochester was on the pilgrimage route from London to Canterbury (it was where all travellers – pilgrims included – had to cross the Medway on their way from London to Canterbury and/or Dover).

There were two major shrines of two key figures in early English Christianity in Rochester – one on either side of the High Altar at the East End of the Cathedral:

- **Paulinus** – first bishop of York, then translated to be bishop of Rochester where he died in AD644. His shrine was reputedly covered in silver.
- **Ithamar** – Paulinus's successor, he was the first native bishop in England (i.e. all the previous bishops had been from the Roman missionaries sent by Gregory the Great or Irish missionaries in the Celtic tradition) – he died in AD655. We have what is believed to be the shrine statue of Ithamar (currently on display in the crypt exhibition).

Following the martyrdom of Thomas Becket in 1170, when pilgrimage to Canterbury increased exponentially, Rochester's prominence also increased as it was on the principal route.

There was a third major shrine in Rochester. In 1201, a pilgrim (a baker) from Perth in Scotland was on pilgrimage to Canterbury and then on to the Holy Land. He stayed at the Priory of St Andrew (i.e. the Cathedral) and as he journeyed on the next day he was robbed and killed by his servant (some versions of the story say he was his adopted son). A local woman was apparently cured of her mental illness by festooning the body with honeysuckle and

pressing the flowers to her head. The monks at St Andrew's knew a good thing when they saw it and recovered the body and brought it back to the Cathedral. This was during the time when St Thomas of Canterbury's shrine was becoming increasingly popular and the shrine of St William of Perth (he was canonised in 1256) effectively paid for the rebuilding of the magnificent vaulted Quire and Presbytery. Legend has it that it was the second most visited shrine in England (after St Thomas of Canterbury). Edward I visited and left a donation.

No one outside Rochester seems to have heard of Ithamar (despite his key historical position as the first English bishop) or William of Perth (despite the popularity of his shrine) and there is little or no trace of the shrines (or Paulinus's, although he is still remembered in York, of course) in Rochester today. Their significance for pilgrims and in the story of Christianity in this country have been almost completely erased. Why? Three reasons:

- Obviously, the Reformation. The shrines were destroyed. Rochester had a number of particularly fervent Protestant bishops. We think we might have some bits of some of the shrines at various places around the precincts, and there are clues in things like the graffiti left by pilgrims.
- The Victorian restoration of the Cathedral by Giles Gilbert Scott removed any remaining traces of the sites of the shrines and the way they shaped the building's use and layout.
- The M2! Now, travellers through Kent to Canterbury or Dover can just speed over the Medway on the motorway bridge with no need to go through Rochester at all.

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