

10 Things You Need to Know about The Becket Affair

1. Thomas Becket was born in 1120 in a house on London's Cheapside, near St Paul's Cathedral. He was born on **St Thomas the Apostle's day**, 21st December, and named after that saint. His parents were middle-class Normans, who prized knowledge and learning.
2. He was a clever and energetic man, who got a job working as a clerk for Theobald, the current Archbishop of Canterbury. In 1155, on Theobald's recommendation, King Henry II made Thomas **Lord Chancellor**, the chief administrator of the state, at the age of 35. Thomas and Henry soon became **firm friends**, and Thomas lived extravagantly.
3. Henry wanted greater control over the church, so in 1162 appointed Thomas to be **Archbishop of Canterbury** as well. Thomas accepted, but angered Henry by resigning as Lord Chancellor, abandoning his extravagant lifestyle, and devoting himself to the Church.
4. Thomas and Henry's friendship ended, as Thomas resisted the king in his attempts to exercise power over Church matters, mainly in the matter of **'benefit of clergy'** (priests who committed crimes were tried by the Church rather than the king); the **appointment of clergy** to churches and bishoprics; and the **considerable amounts of land** held by the Church.
5. In 1164, Henry **summoned Thomas to a trial** at Northampton to answer charges that he had, effectively, impeded the king's authority. Shortly after the trial, Thomas fled to France where he remained until 1170.
6. With Thomas in exile, in 1170 the bishops of York and London crowned Henry's son, Henry the Young King, marking him as the king's heir. This was traditionally performed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, so Thomas placed England under **'interdict'** (effectively excommunicating the whole country), forcing the king to seek a resolution to the conflict. Excommunication meant that people were not allowed access to the services of the Church. This was very serious in a world where people believed the Church was necessary in order to serve God and get to heaven on the Day of Judgement.
7. An agreement brokered by the Pope allowed Thomas to return to England in early December 1170.

8. Thomas was still angry at the bishops of London and York for usurping his authority, and **excommunicated** them, along with the Bishop of Salisbury. When the king heard this news, at his Christmas feast in Normandy, he was furious, and exclaimed: “**Will no-one rid me of this troublesome priest?!**” (The priest being Thomas Becket). Seeing this, four knights decided to arrest Thomas and bring him as prisoner before the king.
9. The four knights arrived at Canterbury on 29th December 1170. Thomas refused to submit to them, and instead goaded and insulted them. Angered, the knights chased Thomas into the Cathedral as the evening service of Vespers was taking place and brutally murdered him.
10. Almost immediately as the news of Thomas’ murder spread, **miracles** were attributed to him by the people of England, including the belief that his blood could be mixed with water and drunk as a medicine. Some popular myths about his childhood emerged: that his mother had been a Saracen princess who followed his father home from Crusade, and that he born to a poor family and grew up with nothing. Thomas swiftly became the most popular saint in England and was **canonised** (formally made a saint) in 1173.

Why was Thomas Becket Killed?

- It is important to note that surviving evidence from the Becket Affair is fragmentary.
- Henry was angry with Thomas, but there is no evidence that Henry directly sent the knights to Canterbury at all, let alone with the intention to kill Thomas.
- Henry’s knights may only have gone to Canterbury to convince Thomas to accept the king’s authority.
- In the cathedral, Thomas annoyed the knights by teasing and mocking them, and this might have goaded them into killing him.
- It is possible that Thomas may have actually intended to be killed because of a desire to become a martyr (someone who died for the Church). He may have believed he would gain a significant religious legacy if he was killed by the king’s men in a holy space.

- It is also possible that Thomas was not expecting the knights to kill him in a cathedral. Indeed, he may have believed the cathedral was a safe space where the knights would not intend to harm him.
- Thomas may have entered Canterbury Cathedral *because* it was full of visitors near Christmas time. The publicity could have offered him either witnesses to the event or protection from slaughter.
- Regardless of motives, it became harder for Henry II to take action against the Church after Thomas' murder, as people across Europe were horrified by the news.

NOTE: This gives a good opportunity to make clear to students that the fragmentary nature of the evidence means that there will never be certainty on this point. Historians often reach different opinions using the same evidence, and this is a case in point. Students will have their own views based on what they have heard, but should use phrases such as 'it may be...', or 'it's possible that...' to express themselves.