John de Stratford and the Holy Trinity Chantry Chapel dedicated to St. Thomas Becket

Before Shakespeare, John de Stratford was without question Stratford's most celebrated son.

1. Building the chantry chapel
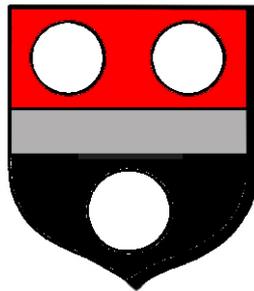
2. John de Stratford's crest

3. Archbishop John

4. Henry II arguing with Becket

John de Stratford was born c.1270 and was educated at Merton College, Oxford, graduating as a Doctor of Civil and Canon Law c.1311. He entered royal service in the reign of the ill-fated Edward II and rose through the clerical ranks from Rector of Holy Trinity and assistant to the Bishop of Lincoln to become Archbishop of Canterbury in 1333, during the subsequent reign of Edward III. In many ways, his career had echoes of the challenges to Henry II's royal authority that had led to the murder of Thomas Becket at Canterbury in 1170, and it was no doubt in acknowledgement of this that de Stratford founded the Becket Chapel at Holy Trinity.

*5. Edward II
(ruled 1284-1327)*

At that time he was Bishop of Winchester, having been appointed directly by Pope John XXII in 1323 against the express wishes of the king, who preferred a rival candidate. Edward II initially refused to accept the appointment, making the new bishop's life very difficult. Unlike Becket, however, de Stratford weathered the king's displeasure, and continued to be involved in risky political alliances; he played a part in the deposition of Edward II in 1327 and went on to become Chancellor of England and the king's most prominent advisor under Edward III, who rewarded him with the see of Canterbury.

*6. Edward III
(ruled 1327-1377)*

7. John de Stratford's tomb

He once again came into conflict with royal authority, over the issue of who should be able to try peers of the realm on criminal charges. He was accused of treason in 1341, but he held his ground and, unlike Becket, was given the opportunity to speak in his own defence before the king in parliament. Having survived the ordeal, he spent his final years concentrating on his spiritual duties as Archbishop of Canterbury, until his death in 1348. He is buried in the south aisle of the Choir at Canterbury Cathedral close to the site of Becket's shrine.

John de Stratford was a generous benefactor to Holy Trinity, paying for the rebuilding of the south aisle of the nave, in which he then established the chantry chapel of St. Thomas the Martyr, the remnants of which survive today as the Becket chapel. The building of chantry chapels was prompted by the medieval belief in Purgatory, where all saved souls were required to endure the purgatorial fires until they were cleansed and could be released to enter the heavenly Jerusalem. This suffering could be shortened by the prayers of the faithful on earth and by Indulgences issued by the Church, granting reductions of time spent in purgatory for good works and prayers offered before death.
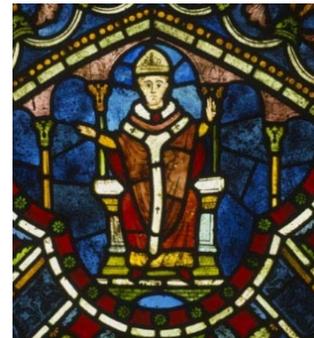
8. St. Thomas Becket

Those who could afford to pay for the building of a chantry had an obvious advantage; priests would pray in perpetuity for the souls of the benefactor and any others named by him or her. As with John de Stratford, the list could be extensive; the Holy Trinity Becket Chantry initially employed five priests who were expected every day to:

Celebrate Divine Service to the Honour of God in the Chapel perpetually at the Altar of St. Thomas the Martyr for the good estate of John himself and Robert De Stratford his brother, and for the souls of Robert and Isabella, their parents, also for Edward the Third, the Bishop of Worcester and his successors. Also for all the Kings of England, and Bishops of Worcester deceased, with the Souls of the Brethren, Sisters and Benefactors to the Bishop of Winchester, and all the departed faithful.

Because it was dedicated to Thomas Becket, one of the most popular medieval saints, the chapel attracted many pilgrims from the Stratford locality and much further afield, which placed a strain on its resources and created a great deal of work for the priests.

9. The Ecclesiastical College

In 1353, after John's death, his kinsman, Ralph de Stratford, Bishop of London, built the College opposite the church to provide accommodation for the increased number of eleven priests required to serve the chapel. He is recorded in the earliest surviving account of the Guild of the Holy Cross, covering 1353-54, as the tenant of a property on Bridge Street, possibly used while he was overseeing the completion the building. Eventually the College he founded became so powerful that it took over the whole church, receiving the tithe money from parishioners and appointing its priests.

The College grew in wealth and prestige until the November 1538 edict of Henry VIII, which de-canonised Thomas Becket and declared that Becket was not:

to be esteemed, named, reputed, nor called a saint ... his images and pictures …. shall be put down and avoided out of all churches, chapels and other places.

10. Defaced picture of Becket's murder

Having broken with the Pope in Rome and declared himself
Head of the Church in England in 1534, Henry was obviously very nervous about the continuing veneration of Becket, who had challenged Henry II's authority and asserted papal power over him. It is unclear when changes were made to the Becket Chapel in response to this edict, but it seems to have survived only to come under fire again through Henry's *Act for the Dissolution of Chantries and Colleges Chantries,* passed shortly before his death in January, 1547, and reinforced by his son Edward VI in his own 1547 *Act for the Dissolution of Colleges, Chantries and like institutions*.

This last act saw the demise of the College: seven of its remaining nine priests were pensioned off and turned out of their home; the other two, Dyos and Smart, were re-appointed as curates of Stratford and Luddington respectively, to provide clergy for the parish.

11. Becket mensa on high altar

We don't know exactly how or when the medieval Becket chapel was dismantled, but in 1889, when the new organ was being installed at the east end of the south aisle in the nave, the massive marble *mensa*, or altar table-top, was discovered buried under the floor. It now has pride of place on the high altar in the chancel sanctuary and is again integral to worship at Holy Trinity.

A simple modern Becket chapel now replaces its magnificent medieval ancestor; it houses a memorial recording the names of the fallen in WWI.

12. Becket Chapel today

13. Canopied sedilia on south wall

14. Stained glass window above sedilia

Sandra MacDonald, September 2020

Illustrations

1. The labours of John de Stratford in Holy Trinity St. Peter's Chapel American window (south); photograph by Lindsay MacDonald

2. John de Stratford crest, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_de_Stratford

3. John de Stratford chancel window (north) Guild Chapel, Stratford-upon-Avon; detail from photograph by Lindsay MacDonald

4. St. Thomas Becket faces King Henry II in a dispute, from Peter of Langtoft, *Chronicle of England* (1307-1327)

5. Detail from Edward II receiving the English crown, as depicted in a contemporary manuscript © British Library Board (Royal MS 20 A II, fol 10)

6. Portrait of Edward III (NPG 4980[7] National Portrait Gallery, London)

7. The tomb of Archbishop John Stratford, Trinity Chapel Canterbury Cathedral, (photograph in Ecclesiastical History Society article 'The English bishops, the deposition of Edward II and the Articles of Accusation')

8. St. Thomas (detail from stained glass windows, Trinity Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral); photographer unidentified

9. R.B. Wheler's drawing in *History and Antiquities of Stratford-upon-Avon* (1806) of the Ecclesiastical College, Stratford upon Avon

10. Caxton *Golden Legend* Folio 105r: detail showing martyrdom of Saint Thomas à Becket – image defaced (Glasgow University Library Special Collections Dept.)

11. High Altar in the chancel sanctuary, The Collegiate Church of the Holy and Undivided Trinity, Stratford-upon-Avon; photograph by Ronnie Mulryne

12. Becket Chapel in south aisle of nave, Holy Trinity; photograph by Lindsay MacDonald.

13. C19 replicas of original medieval sedilia (priests' seats); detail from Northernvicar's Blog photograph, 14 March 2016

14. C19 south window in Holy Trinity Becket Chapel, depicting John, Robert and Ralph de Stratford at prayer in the medieval chantry chapel; photograph by Lindsay MacDonald