

A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

Episode 3: EARLY MEDIEVAL CANTERBURY

This year we are celebrating our 1200th anniversary and our historic links with Canterbury. With this in mind, I will venture further afield in this episode, before returning to take a final look at the Anglo-Saxon history of Southchurch in a couple of weeks' time.

Thanks to the Venerable Bede, the early history of Canterbury is well known. In 596 Pope Gregory the Great sent St Augustine to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. Augustine landed on the Isle of Thanet, which at that time was truly an island, separated from the mainland by the 600m wide Wantsum Channel. He sent word of his arrival to King Aethelbert of Kent, who received the missionaries under an oak tree and gave them permission to preach to his people. Augustine baptised Aethelbert on Pentecost in 597 and was consecrated bishop of the English in Gaul by the Archbishop of Arles, St. Virgilius. Many of Aethelbert's subjects were baptised that Christmas, and Augustine sent his monks Laurence and Peter back to Rome to report on the mission and to ask for further advice and instructions. Gregory sent them back with the pallium for Augustine and more missionaries, including St. Paulinus, who later converted the Northumbrian, Edwin of Northumbria.

St Gregory had planned the division of England into two archbishoprics, one at London and one at York, but, as a result of St Augustine's success at Canterbury, the southern archiepiscopal see came to be fixed there instead of at London. The beginnings of the diocese are described by Bede in his Ecclesiastical History:

"When Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, assumed the episcopal throne in that royal city, he recovered therein, by the King's assistance, a church which, as he was told, had been constructed by the original labour of Roman believers. This church he consecrated in the name of the Saviour, our God and Lord Jesus Christ, and there he established a habitation for himself and all his successors."



St Augustine of Canterbury; known as the 'Apostle to the English'.

'Canterbury' in the early medieval world could mean a number of different things. There was almost always a clear distinction between the cathedral church and the Archbishop, and there were two churches in Canterbury which were famous in their own right (and today are part of the World Heritage Site):

1. The church of 602, founded by Augustine and dedicated to Our Saviour (hence Canterbury's alternative name, Christ Church), which lies beneath the modern cathedral. Archbishop Dunstan, who died in 988, turned it from a community of priests into an observant Benedictine monastery.
2. St Augustine's Abbey, known originally as the Abbey of St Peter and St Paul, situated east of the Cathedral outside the City Wall. It was, from the first, a monastic Benedictine community, and was clearly intended as the royal and archiepiscopal mausoleum. The site now contains only ruins with some important Anglo-Saxon remains including the 7th century church of St Pancras.

Come back in a couple of weeks' time for Episode 4 "What the Normans Did for Us". Discover:

- Who confessed "Innumerable multitudes perished through me by famine or the sword."
- Why the South Church was built so far from Southchurch Hall.