

# Pilgrim Badges

by Peter E. Lewis

The ceiling of Canterbury Cathedral. (Wikimedia Commons). Inset: Reverse of a gold-plated silver medallion issued in 1970 (Collection of St John's Cathedral).

**C**URRENTLY in St John's Anglican Cathedral in Brisbane there is a small display of pilgrim badges and souvenirs associated with Saint Thomas Becket. (**Figure 1**) He was the arch-

bishop who was murdered in 1170 in Canterbury Cathedral. (**Figure 2**) Pilgrim badges are rare but more are being found as metal detectorists are covering large areas in England and Europe.

Also pilgrim badges are being found by people searching the muddy banks of the Thames and other rivers.

Although they are often broken and in poor condition they are fascinating



Figure 1 – St Thomas Becket in a stained-glass window in Canterbury Cathedral. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 2 – Canterbury Cathedral on a bronze token issued by the city of Canterbury in 1794. It is 29 mms in diameter. The coat of arms of Canterbury is on the reverse. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)

objects because each one was bought by a pilgrim who travelled a considerable distance to a place recognized as a source of spiritual power. The pilgrim then wore the badge proudly on his cap or cloak to show that he had been to that place. In modern times if the find-spot of the badge

has been recorded it tells us where the pilgrim probably came from. So, not only does the badge tell us about the place he had visited it tells us about the pilgrim. If he was poor he would have bought a small pewter badge. (Figures 3 and 4) Pewter is an alloy of tin and lead, and it was of little value. If he was rich he might have bought a large silver badge. Also the badge tells us what holy objects the pilgrim saw; for example, a badge in the shape of a glove (Figures 5 and 6) indicates that he saw the gloves of St Thomas. They would have been on display in a glass case and the pilgrim would have pressed his badge against it to capture some of its spiritual power. A badge in the shape of a fleur-de-lis (Figure 7) indicates that the pilgrim had venerated the statue of the Virgin Mary in the crypt

under Canterbury Cathedral known as Our Lady Undercroft. It should not be confused with St Mary Undercroft which is a chapel in the Palace of Westminster. In the *Tale of Beryn* written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century the activities of the pilgrims at Canterbury are described:

*They all prayed to St Thomas in such wise as they could. And then the holy relics kissed, each man as he should, while a goodly monk told them the names of every one. . . Then as the usual custom is, pilgrim's signs they bought; for men at home should know what saint the pilgrims here had sought.*

Although the pronoun 'he' has been used for the pilgrim many of them were women. In the band of pilgrims described



Figure 3 – Pewter head of St Thomas probably from the 14th century. The badge is 24 mms in length. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)



Figure 5 – Pewter glove of St Thomas probably from the 14th or 15th century. The badge is 25 mms in length. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)



Figure 7 – Pewter fleur-de-lis probably from the 15th century. It is 19 mms in length. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)



Figure 4 – Pewter head of St Thomas in a circle probably from the 15th century. Originally there were two swords. The badge is 16 mms in diameter and is unusual in still having its pin. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)

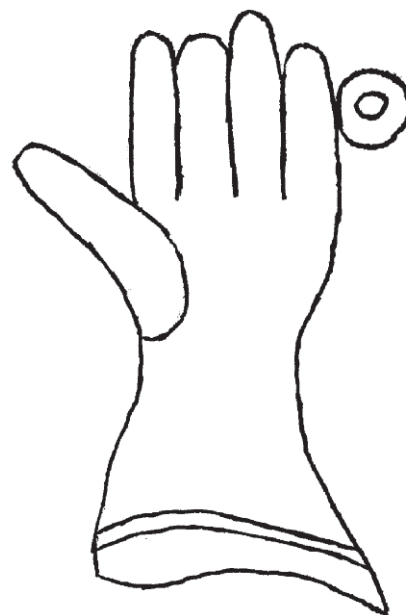


Figure 6 – Drawing of the glove in Figure 5. His episcopal ring is shown on his little finger but he would have worn it on his middle or ring finger over his glove.



Figure 8 – A shell was the sign of a pilgrim.



Figure 9 – Silver penny of King Henry II. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)



Figure 10 – The murder of Thomas Becket illustrated on a manuscript in the British Library. It dates from about 1200 and is the oldest picture of the event. (Wikimedia Commons)

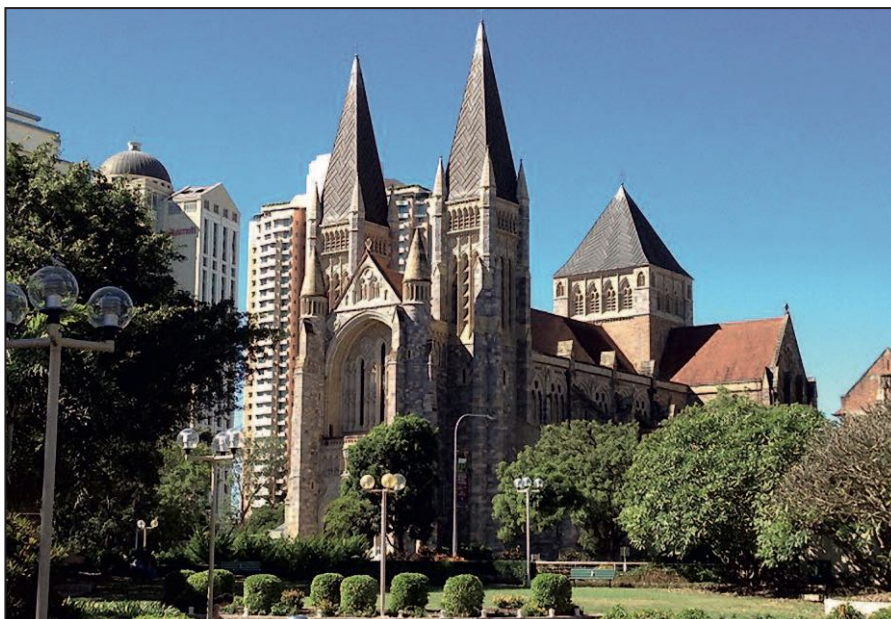


Figure 11 – View of St John's Cathedral in Brisbane.

in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* which was written in the 1390s there was a prioress and the wife of Bath. The pilgrims were all very different as were their reasons for going on a pilgrimage. For some it would have been like a vacation; for others it would have been the camaraderie that attracted them. Some would have been escaping from a situation at home. But all would have been on a quest expecting something more than the mundane world they left behind.

From the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century people commonly made pilgrimages to holy places, and Canterbury, Rome and Santiago de Compostela in Spain were particularly popular destinations. Some adventurous souls even made the dangerous journey to Jerusalem. The tomb of St James, who was one of Jesus' disciples, was thought to be in the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela (Saint James of Star Field) and his symbol was a shell. (Figure 8) Pilgrims who had been there wore shell badges, but the shell became the general symbol of anyone who was a pilgrim.

At some holy sites pilgrims could buy small vessels, usually of lead, that con-



Figure 12 – Front of a pewter ampulla containing the blood of St Thomas Becket, much diluted. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)



Figure 13 – Back of the ampulla in Figure 12.

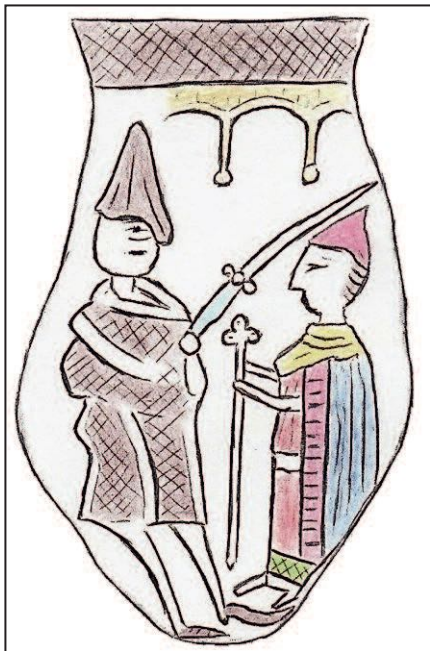


Figure 14 – Drawing of the scene on the ampulla in Figure 12.

tained water from a well on the site or even some of the soil from the site. These vessels are called ampullas. At Canterbury Cathedral a pilgrim could buy an ampulla containing Thomas Becket's blood, much diluted. In 1170 Thomas had opposed the king, Henry II (Figure 9), on various church matters, and when Henry was in his castle in France he

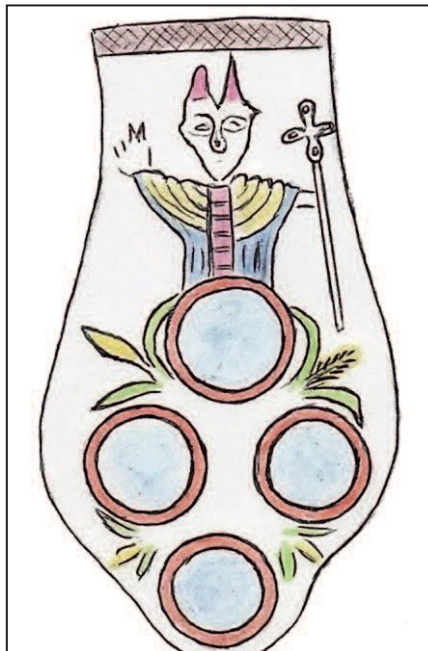


Figure 15 – Drawing of the scene on the ampulla in Figure 13.

remarked, "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" He was overheard by four of his knights who set off for Canterbury. The scene in the cathedral is shown on a manuscript from about 1200 in the British library. (Figure 10) It shows the knights attacking Thomas with their swords. One knight splits open his skull. The knights then leave the cathedral

and Thomas lies dead with his brains and blood spilling out on the stone floor. The monks carefully scoop it all up and put it in a large vessel. Then they dilute it with water so that pilgrims can buy small ampullas containing the holy fluid. To meet the demand they keep topping it up with water.

One of these ampullas is on display in St John's Cathedral. (Figure 11) The ampulla dates from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and was found on the banks of the Thames at London in the 1970s. (Figures 12 and 13) On one side it shows a knight striking Thomas with a sword in the cathedral. (Figure 14) On the other side the resurrected Thomas stands (with his skull split open) and blesses the viewer with his right hand. (Figure 15) These ampullas are found on the banks of the Thames because it was a custom to throw the empty ampulla into the river as an offering to God. The pilgrim might have poured the precious liquid onto a special place or object to make it holy or he might have used it for medicinal purposes. On some ampullas there are the Latin words OPTIMVS EGRORVM MEDICVS FIT TOMA BONORVM (Thomas is the best doctor of the worthy sick) which suggest that only the truly devout could expect to benefit from it.

In 1970 to mark the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Thomas' martyrdom a gold-plated

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Figure 16 – Obverse of a gold-plated medallion issued in 1970. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)



Figure 17 – Reverse of the medallion in Figure 16.

sterling-silver medallion was produced in England. It is also on display in St John's Cathedral. On one side Thomas stands and blesses with his right hand as he does on the ampulla although he wears a mitre to cover his split skull. (Figure 16) On the other side three knights are attacking Thomas (Figure 17) and the style of the picture has been copied from the oldest known picture of the event which is shown in Figure 10.

In England other popular destinations for pilgrims were St George's Chapel in Windsor and Walsingham in Norfolk. Although St George is the patron saint of England little is known about him. He was probably a historical figure, a soldier who was executed when he refused to renounce his Christian faith and sacrifice to the Roman gods during the persecution under the emperor Diocletian in 303 AD. Subsequently a legend developed that he killed a dragon that was about to devour a maiden, and he is usually portrayed on horseback spearing the dragon. (Figure 18) He became very popular during the Crusades because the dragon was perceived as representing the Muslims trying to capture the maiden, Jerusalem. St George was associated with Windsor because relics associated with him were kept there. They included his heart which had been

given in 1416 by Sigismund of Luxembourg who was the Holy Roman Emperor from 1433 to 1437. Many pilgrims travelled to Windsor particularly in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and badges showing St George spearing the dragon are common. Nowadays, of course, St George's Chapel is within the royal castle at Windsor. In the collection of St John's Cathedral there is the right half of a square pewter badge showing St George spearing the dragon. (Figure 19) It is not currently on display.

Also in the collection of St John's Cathedral there is a lead ampulla from Walsingham where there used to be a medieval priory. (Figure 20) On the



Figure 19 – Part of a pilgrim badge probably from the 15th century showing St George spearing a dragon. It is 49 mms in length. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)



Figure 18 – Medallion of Pope John XXIII showing St George killing a dragon. It is 51 mms in diameter and is in high relief. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)



Figure 20 – Lead ampulla from Walsingham probably from the 15th century. It is 45 mms in length. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)

ampulla there is 'the long arrow of Walsingham' with its tip in the form of a double V. The outer V is thought to stand for Virgo, which is Latin for 'virgin' and refers to the Virgin Mary who was venerated at Walsingham. The arrow point in the V represents the conception of Jesus Christ. The ampulla is white because it is coated with lead oxide, and collectors of lead artefacts are reminded that lead oxide causes lead poisoning and they should be careful in handling them. These ampullas are often found discarded in fields in Norfolk because the pilgrim would open the ampulla, sprinkle the holy water on his fields to increase fertility, and then just throw it away.

At Walsingham there are the ruins of the priory, and the shrine (a replica of Mary's house at Nazareth) has been reconstructed; but for no particular reason Walsingham is considered to be one of the 'thin places' of Britain. Pilgrims who go there feel that the barrier separating the material from the spiritual world is weak and they become strangely aware of the presence of God. Consequently thousands of pilgrims still make the pilgrimage to Walsingham every year.

Recently two excellent books have been published on the subject of pilgrim badges and souvenirs, but the large catalogue by Michael Mitchiner, *Medieval Pilgrim & Secular Badges*, published in 1986, remains essential for collectors. In 2010 a new edition of Brian Spencer's *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges* was published. It is a catalogue but also has a wealth of relevant information. Subsequently Michael Lewis' *Saints and their Badges* was published. It deals more with the lives of the saints but a number of badges are illustrated.

Although pilgrim badges are usually broken and in poor condition, this actually adds to their appeal and it means they are more likely to be authentic. Items in good condition should raise suspicion. Being in a sorry state means that each one has a special tale to tell from a time when nobody doubted that there was more to human existence than just the material world. When a Christian holds one of these badges he knows how the wearer felt on his pilgrimage, which was essentially a quest to find the source of what was behind the glorious mystery of creation. For the medieval pilgrim, as for pilgrims today, it was the journey that mattered not the destination, because the journey represented his seeking to be closer to God.

*There you will worship man-made gods of wood and stone. But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.* (Deuteronomy 4:28, 29. NIV)