

ART AND ARCHITECTURE

AT

ROCHESTER CATHEDRAL

Teachers' Support Notes

Page 1 – This page is an introduction to the cathedral. Please remind students that they are in a place of worship – please remind them about appropriate behaviour (acting respectfully, no running, eating or drinking in the cathedral and not to use phones please). Photography (including flash photography) is allowed.

The cathedral has been a place of worship for over 1400 years. During that time many hundreds of thousands of people have passed through this place as worshippers and visitors.

Page 2 – The Façade Go out the west door of the cathedral and look at the façade (the front). There are statues on either side of the door (thought to be Solomon and Sheba) and statues of bishops higher up on either side of the door. The building looks imposing. The door is impressive. You can see stained glass windows. Look up to the façade above the Great West Door. In the centre of the façade you can see Christ seated in majesty, surrounded by angels and the four gospel writers – Matthew (as a winged man), Mark (as a winged lion), Luke (winged bull) and John (eagle).

Page 3 – Arches and Pillars Most of the Nave is built in Norman, or Romanesque, style, with rounded arches which have typical Norman decoration. The Norman cathedral, started around 1080, took about 50 years to build. Since the Keep of the castle was built around the same time the same shape of arch and style of decoration may be seen there too.

Each pair of Norman pillars is different. They were necessarily chunky to support the weight of the arches. Each mason working on the cathedral had his own mark or signature and he would mark his work so that the Master-mason could check the quality of work and determine his pay. Some of these marks can still be seen today (see below).

The triforium arches are above the main arches (making a pattern of three arches) and the clerestory is where the windows are (literally “clear storey”). The clerestory was added later which is why the windows and arches don't line up.

Because of the damage done by two serious fires in the 12th century, a new cathedral was started in the early 13th century, in the then new style of building known as Gothic or Early English. New building techniques allowed architects to use more slender pillars and pointed arches, giving a soaring feeling of reaching to heaven. Spires on the outside of cathedrals also pointed towards heaven.

Page 4 – Painting and Decoration The fresco in Rochester Cathedral is the first true fresco painted in an English cathedral for 800 years. It brings back the tradition of telling

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stories through pictures used in the early cathedral. A fresco is painted on wet or “fresh” plaster and the paint sinks right into the plaster making it a very durable painting.

The theme of the fresco is baptism. In the upper half of the picture we see the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. In the lower half, on the left, is the baptism of King Ethelbert, the King of Kent at the time of St. Augustine’s arrival in 597 A.D. On the right we see King Ethelbert looking on as the people of Kent are baptised in a local river. Because of the baptismal theme it is hoped to re-locate the font to this spot and create a new baptistry here.

Point B – When the cathedral was first built most people did not learn to read and write and pictures painted on the walls would help people learn stories about Jesus and the saints.

Point C – Here you can see the outline of guide drawings carved into the stone to help painters of murals.

Page 5 – Painting and Decoration (continued)

Points D and E – Look on the 4th pillar on the right hand-side (as you face the organ) to see masons’ marks. Also on this pillar you can see graffiti or sketches used for the brightly painted scenes of bible stories which would have adorned the pillars and arches at that time. These pictures would have helped the mainly illiterate population learn their bible stories and were sometimes known as “the poor man’s bible”. The pictures were destroyed during the Reformation, when beautiful images and statues in churches were thought to be Popish (too catholic), distracting people from their prayers.

Point F – The Wheel of Fortune The medieval painting of The Wheel of Fortune was re-discovered in the 19th century during renovations. It had been hidden behind a pulpit and was thus saved at the time of the Reformation.

Crypt - Please be particularly quiet in the crypt, because we try as much as possible to keep this as an area for quiet prayer.

The crypt is the oldest part of the cathedral (you start building at the bottom!). The architecture down here is quite plain, and it is easy to spot the older Norman part of the crypt (to the left) and the slightly newer Early English part. In the far north-east corner of the crypt there are remains of ceiling paintings, whilst at the entrance to the glassed in chapel (The Ithamar Chapel) there is more graffiti showing Jesus with His disciples.

Small stone basins (piscinas) can be seen on either side at the far end of the Ithamar Chapel. They were used for washing the hands of the priest before the consecration of the bread and wine, and for washing the sacred vessels after Holy Communion.

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The crypt was used as a burial place. It also had seven chapels where the monks who were priests were able to say their daily Mass.

Page 6 – Windows Standing at the corner of the Lady Chapel and the Nave it is possible to see the three different periods of building (Norman, early English and Tudor) and the differing window styles used throughout that time (Norman, early English, Decorated and Perpendicular).

Go into the Lady Chapel. This was the last part of the cathedral to be built, but even this is over 500 years old! It was started in 1490 at the beginning of the Tudor period. In the Lady Chapel there is a series of windows telling parts of the story of the life of Christ (harking back to those stories originally told in the wall paintings!). The special lady to whom the chapel is dedicated is seen in all these pictures alongside Jesus. It is Mary, His mother.

The events depicted in the windows are important times in the life of Jesus and important elements of Christian faith (Virgin birth, Jesus' death and resurrection). The pictures on the walls and in the windows originally helped largely illiterate congregations to learn about Jesus.

Page 7 – Ceilings and Floors At point G, looking up to the ceiling, you can see the Green Men. Originally the Green Men were a pagan symbol representing fertility. When missionaries arrived from Rome in the 6th century they incorporated the pagan symbol into the Christian religion to help pagans convert to Christianity but gave the Green Men a new meaning more in tune with Christian teachings. They became a symbol of new life, which in Christian terms includes resurrection. In the medieval period it was also believed that the gruesome faces of the Green Men (and gargoyles outside the cathedral) kept evil spirits from the cathedral.

Vaulting – Look up at the ceiling and you will see the rib vaulting above you. It is in two different styles. Some of the ribs are decorated with paint and some are decorated with carvings.

Floors – The area around the medieval tiles is no longer roped off so they can be easily viewed.

The diamond shaped tiles in the presbytery look like this –



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This way round it looks like an animal such as a fox, dog, cat etc.

If you turn it sideways it looks like a bird with a beak, head feathers and wing and tail feathers. So the tiles show God's creation, the birds and the beasts.



A few of the tiles were inadvertently inserted the wrong way round when the floor was laid. This reminds us that mere mortals make mistakes, only God is perfect. (They are quite hard to spot and it could be a little challenge for pupils to spend a few moments seeing if they can spot one or two of the tiles that are the wrong way round).

The last page has a glossary of words and terms used in this workbook.

The richness of history and worship from over 1400 years continues today, as the cathedral is carefully maintained and improved to 21st century requirements (it will be here, hopefully, for at least another thousand years!). There is a vibrant worshipping community associated with the cathedral. It is interesting to note that although the castle and the present cathedral were built around the same time the castle is now a ruin. It is no longer used for the purpose for which it was built (defence / protection) and is an historic monument. The cathedral is still used for its original purpose and is a living, developing building.