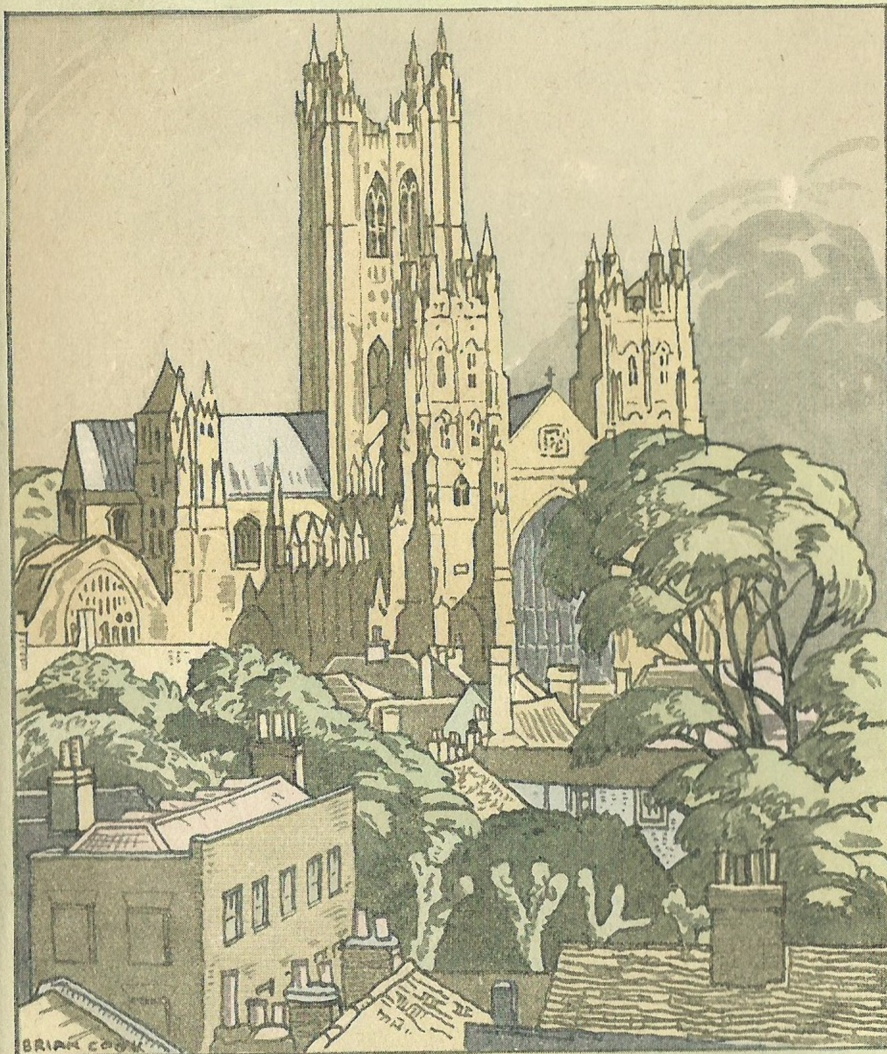
CANTERBURY



William Townsend

CHAPTER I

CANTERBURY SCENERY—ANCIENT AND MODERN

With the High Street of Canterbury, its traffic and its architectural furnishings, the newcomer will feel an almost domestic familiarity. The two-decker buses are red with white tops, and while buses in other places may be brown or green, the shop-fronts of branch stores of all the well-known firms do not admit even this regional variation; they line the streets with their set expressions wherever they go. It would be hard to identify the place if this were our first view of it; it might be any old-established country town grown into the business and shopping centre of a wide area.

Yet the main thoroughfare, of which the High Street is but the middle section, does at times reveal its unmistakable ancientness and particularity. The times are those when there is no traffic or so little that it can be seen from end to end. From the south-east, where St. George's Gate once stood, it drops away slightly, not evenly, as far as the hump made by King's Bridge as it crosses a branch of the river, and beyond that the roadway looks to rise the merest fraction over the island on which a part of the city stands, until it reaches the Westgate and the further branch of the Stour. The street is not straight either, but is like a way that was meant to go straight but has wobbled over small obstacles, and the alignment of the shops and houses is hesitating and irregular; they sway together in places, one side draws away in a shallow curve to make a kind of bay, and then past a crossroads, a straight fifty yards, the other side opens slightly; they come close at the bridge and so waver the whole distance. One begins to see that this is a very old route that has never been planned by anyone, where men and pack animals made their way, as directly as they could over marshy land to ford or bridge, and that the small hazards of the

ground, turning them this way and that, have survived in the disposition of all the generations of succeeding buildings (4).

From the same end of the main street, in these years after the war, we command also a view of a very different kind. This is the centre of the area destroyed in the Baedeker raids of 1942 and, though bombed ruins are common to many places, this is a unique view into which the most individual features of Canterbury are drawn and where its special characteristics combine into a scene both melancholy and romantic. The combination of bustle and of ruin is nothing new in first impressions of Canterbury, rather the rule at turning points in her history. St. Augustine saw the ruins of the Roman town crumbling within the walls of the Kentish capital when he arrived in 597; the first Norman archbishop, Lanfranc, looked with dismay at the ruins left by fire and the Danes; the ruins of the religious houses abandoned at the Dissolution were still decaying among the innumerable workshops of the weavers when Defoe visited Canterbury in 1728. "The houses are truly antient," he recorded, "and the many ruins of churches, chapels, oratories and smaller cells of religious people, makes the place look like a general ruin a little recover'd." Of the area within the walls about a quarter was devastated, in 1942.

We can survey it all from the terraced top of the city wall, above the cattle market (3). It is a new view for anyone less than a hundred years old. There used to be a row of pretty early Victorian houses all the way along on the inner side of the wall; not one is left and the town is spread out in a close but extended view with the cathedral delivered to us in flank. Its immense level roof line makes a new horizon on the right, too long for its upright features to compose a harmonious group when seen from this direction, but it rides over the whole scene with an unforgettable majesty. Spread out towards the cathedral is a tufted wilderness where small trees, surviving the bombs in walled gardens and courts, have grown into fair-sized trees, shrubs have pushed up from exposed cellars and overtopped them, weeds have sprung from the mortar and plaster of broken walls, and tangles of buddleia stems spread and cross

into netted thickets bright with purple plumes. The smell of the buddleia is sweet and stuffy and seems only a cloying part of the summer's dust, but the masses of pale purple spikes lay a new dominant colour over this scene; in effect the buddleia has provided us with a clothing for ruins, that Defoe did not know, to replace the ivy that wherever possible has been cut down from monuments of antiquity. Narrow lanes wander half hidden through all this growth, and the main street, with only a scattered and diminished survivor here and there of its shops and houses in two hundred yards of its length, reaches towards the centre of the city between chestnut fences and low edges of wall. It leads past rows of open cellars where former proprietors have set up notice boards to give their new addresses and past the gutted ruin of St. George's church, whose jagged gable ends, flint and blackened stone, clustering together suggest a crown of grimy points and whose battered clock still projects far over the street. Christopher Marlowe was baptised in this church and his birthplace used to stand just across the way with several pleasant 16th- and 17th-century shops. These have all gone, too, and so has the lane of old houses which led, behind the church, into Burgate Street past the Quaker Meeting House where the silent meetings were punctuated by the Roman Catholic sanctus bell from one direction and terminated from the other by the booming hour bell of St. George's clock. In front of us we look over the site of Whitefriars, school playgrounds with a hutted camp of classrooms, to the blank site of the great Fountain Hotel and the apse of St. Margaret's church on the far side of St. Margaret's Street. Beyond the corner of the school there used to rise the high Victorian spire of St. Mary Bredin's church. Canterbury is a city without spires since this has gone; bombs brought it down and the gutted octagon of the upper stage of the tower gave for a time an exotic flavour to the view—imitating an ancient minaret of Cairo—until it was pulled down.

Passers-by taking short cuts through the bushes, going by meandering new tracks over rubble patches that were houses, churches and inns, all have a holiday air; disappearing and

reappearing among the remnants of walls, their heads bobbing up and down between the buddleia clumps as though they were looking for picnicking places ; they have all the poetry of people in a landscape by Claude Lorraine, walking enchanted and inexplicable among the debris of classical antiquity. It is difficult, without walking over the spot to remember just what stood here or there, but in time all this will be built over again and an old stone set in a new wall will be pointed out to the visitor as a fragment of some memorable building. But the reconstruction has not gone far yet and what there is would justify Ruskin in his opinion of the building style of south-east England. When he got back from his old church in Calais he complained that everything in this part of the country was built by frogs and mice, so mean and pitifully small, and yet he cannot have seen anything quite so modest in scale as the lane of temporary shops ; a real doll's-house avenue, neatly arranged by a tidy child, yet by our current standards of utility building to be accounted admirable. They stand on the site of the vanished Corn Exchange through which by three arches one could penetrate into the green gloom of the Long Market discreetly revealing rows of second-hand wardrobes, stacks of bric-à-brac and fruiterers' stalls. This was one of the several characteristic Regency and Georgian features of Canterbury that disappeared in the blitz ; another was the long terrace where the Dover Road enters the town at the cattle market—no more than basements and overgrown gardens with rotting summerhouses ; *Ingoldsby* Barham's birthplace in Burgate Street was another. These were buildings of no more than local interest. Canterbury was no leader in anything in the 18th century, and, for all its comfortable Georgian houses in brick-walled gardens, its main building activity was covering the fronts of old-fashioned houses with façades of mathematical tiles and sash windows and parapets to hide the dowdy steep-pitched roofs.

The effect of the raids has been to emphasise rather than to diminish our sense of the medieval greatness of the place ; although so many towers and spires are gone we can now more

easily construct the medieval panorama. Wide spaces opened in built-up quarters make the surrounding houses seem lower, the mass of the cathedral more overwhelming in scale; the fenced paddocks and walled orchards of the friaries, that made such large gaps in the city of the middle ages, can better be imagined; the now revealed untidyness of builders' yards and garden outbuildings in the centre of the town, the lean-to's contrived against broken walls and the tumbledown stables of hotel yards can recall the farriers' shops and masons' shelters dotted on the trodden earth between the unpaved alleys of an older town. Down by the river was a public washing place, and by the King's Bridge the wharves of the dyers, crammed between the precincts of the friaries, hospitals for pilgrims and the abbey mills; on the island between the bridge and the city wall the Blackfriars and the Greyfriars gates facing each other across the rutted roadway and, still within the city, the hayfields and osier beds of the Christ Church monks. Clustered in the centre, huge pilgrim inns with basement crypts below and projecting signs above, spreading yards for horses and donkeys, wooden-shuttered shops, the fish market by the Cathedral gate, the cloth market by St. George's; and the wall going round it all, seven gates, some with churches built across them, the moat, and inns for late travellers just outside. Almost a city within the city, lay the walled "villes" of the cathedral priory and the Archbishop's Palace; outside the gates another embattled liberty almost as great, and almost as great a church in the towered abbey of St. Augustine. The outskirts were a ring of priories, nunneries, hospitals, with their orchards, vines and fish ponds, domestic buildings and cemeteries; between which would pass those innumerable processions of the middle ages of which Canterbury saw so many, on great occasions led by the vaulted coaches of a king or queen, progressing from one estate to another to eat up its produce, accompanied by seneschal and chamberlains and falconers, followed by the springless carts borrowed from the peasants on either side of the route and by a rout of petitioners, beggars and loose women, arriving for some immense feast at St. Austin's or Holy Trinity. There were

lesser processions, too, of the abbots touring their estates or passing to Dover on a mission to Rome, and the more disorderly companies of pilgrims with singing and bagpipes, trains of pack animals bringing the corn to the abbey granaries or mills, the impounded jury on show in a tumbril brought in for the sessions, and all that stream of restless people shuttled back and forth on the high roads and the country tracks who brought news and entertainment, goods, pardons and trouble; pedlars, tinkers and wandering labourers out of bond, pardoners licensed and unlicensed, tumblers and bear-wards, friars, cripples and sturdy rogues, old women gathering in wood from the outskirts of the forest. At nightfall the curfew sounds, as it still does, from the cathedral tower, the gates are shut and the terrifying outside world full of unknown wayfarers is kept away. In the inns travellers sit drinking round the embers of the fire, listening to stories and the marvels of pilgrims—after a pilgrimage, said Piers Plowman, a man was licensed as a liar for two years and Truth was a pilgrim never met on the roads. Huddled in the half-dark none have books and few could read and all who are honest go early to bed. They sleep two or three to a bed in the inns; many, not so fortunate as to have any bed at all, dressed in their daily clothes, wrapped in a rug beneath the stairs, in attics or among the rushes and rubbish of the floor. Then, with the mist from the river, would rise up the abominable exhalations from stagnant water in roads and courtyards, from the mounds of domestic refuse and heaps of rushes swept from the floors, and the odour of unwashed bodies, lying in filth and vermin in the shuttered houses and shops; that fearful stench that most of all things would have made the middle ages physically intolerable to us.

Yet how enchanting we can imagine the summer mornings to have been when the bells rang from the monastery and from twenty parish churches and a breeze blew the night mists away and, whichever way you looked, you could see the trees on the hills and gardeners at work and could smell hay and hear the streams running to the mills.

Inevitably to us Canterbury in the Middle Ages is Canterbury

in its greatness. The Archbishops of the centuries from the Conquest to the Reformation take up a lot of space in the history books; the buildings everyone goes to see are medieval buildings and the city is inhabited for ever in our minds by Chaucer's pilgrims; yet the history of the city for a thousand years before the Normans came is an even more important part of English history, as full of dramatic and romantic occasions and as alive with remarkable characters. This earlier history, too, has left a number of monuments, fragments it is true, but fragments before which no visitor can stand unmoved.

Looking from the main street we see above the Westgate a water tower and the Victorian pile of St. Edmund's school on a hill beyond. Behind this ridge, which once marked the borders of the Forest of Blean, wooded hills roll away northwards and westwards. Out of the town in the opposite direction the Dover Road rises less steeply to a similar crest, the first in the smooth undulations of chalk downs, the more open "champaign" land that ends in the cliffs of Dover and the beaches of Deal. A couple of miles separate these two hills; between them Cæsar found a Belgic settlement, the Romans built their town, and the site of Canterbury was established in the lowest part of the valley. Both upstream and downstream, about a mile away on either hand, the hills approach each other from the sides of the valley turning the site into a shallow saucer rather than a trough. In this hollow was the ford and the end of the tidal water of the River Stour, to it came roads before the Romans built their converging system—from Lympne, Dover, Richborough, Reculver and Whitstable—that coincides with to-day's network of bus routes to the coast. The Pilgrims' Way, much more ancient than the pilgrims, follows the mid-slope contour of the hills on the north side of the valley and separates into two branches, one crossing the river, through Canterbury to Dover, and another that probably went on to Thanet and that some suppose to have been the route by which tin from Cornwall was carried for shipment to France. Up in the woods, three miles off it ploughs a deep way through the

earth ramparts of Bigberry Camp, an Iron Age fortress now obscured by brushwood and ages of deposits of leaf-mould, and broken by roots of trees.

Cæsar described Kent as a comparatively prosperous and well-farmed country and probably Canterbury was rather more than a village, but there is too much on top of it for us to know a great deal about it. Of the Roman town of Durovernum some eight feet below the present pavements such fragments come to light every now and then as the mosaic floors lately unearthed in Butchery Lane, walls of buildings and hoards of pottery. One of the gates of the walled Roman town, if we may conclude from descriptions and sketches that it was indeed of Roman construction, survived into the 19th century—a simple brick arch—and since the war a long-standing controversy as to whether the medieval wall was built on Roman masonry has been settled for at least a part of the circuit. A bomb breached the 14th-century fortifications in a corner of the Dane John gardens and an underlying section of Roman stone work was cleared by excavation.

Tradition declares there were Christian churches in the Roman town, probably on two identifiable sites—where St. Martin's church stands and where St. Augustine first established the cathedral; and in and around the city thin red Roman bricks that are the scraps of many other buildings have found their way into one wall after another and still form part of the fabric of the place. Gathered up and scraped and relaid, generation after generation, Gothic fragments and Roman tiles alike find themselves embedded at last even in the garden walls of 19th-century villas.