

## The Chapter House of Merton Priory

900 years ago, where the Sainsbury's and M&S store is now, stood the massive Merton Priory. It had a church as big as Westminster Abbey and was one of England's most important centres of religion and learning.



All that is left of it are the foundations of its Chapter House. This was rather like a modern “board room”, in which the “chapter” or assembly met to discuss business. Meetings opened with a chapter from the Rule of St Augustine, two reasons for the name “Chapter House”.

The life of a monk chiefly consisted of praying for the souls of the living and dead and contemplating religion. They spent much of their time in church - eight services a day, starting with Matins at about 2am and ending with Compline at about 8pm.



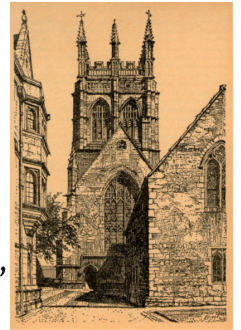
When they were not praying, the monks worked in the fields, in the monastic buildings, or in the scriptorium copying manuscripts.

The monks of Merton Priory, or “canons” as they were known here, belonged to the order of St Augustine, which also had a duty to preach the gospel to the public. Monasteries were centres of learning, and were schools for both novice monks and other boys.

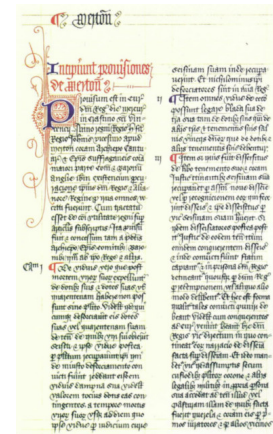
Perhaps the Priory's most famous pupil was **Thomas Becket**. He came to Merton aged 10 and studied here for some years. He went on to become Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162, until he fell out with King Henry II, and was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral by some of the King's knights in 1170 (right).



**Walter de Merton** (1205-77), who became one of the King's most important officials, was strongly linked with the Priory and may also have studied here. He set up an educational foundation at nearby Malden, which in 1274 moved to what was then a small provincial town called Oxford. It became Merton College (right) and, because it was the model for collegiate life in Oxford and Cambridge, Walter could be called the father of English universities.



As well as being a prestigious centre of learning, Merton Priory was where some pivotal events in English history took place.



The civil war and French invasion that ended King John's reign were concluded in a series of peace talks. After these, the leader of the French, Prince Louis, came to Merton for a symbolic penance. The **Statute of Merton** (left), authorised by John's son Henry III in the Chapter House twenty years later and concerning landholding and inheritance, was important in enshrining the rule of law and making sure the King could not act above it. The Statute of Merton was the very first entry in the English Statute Book.

In 1437 Henry VI was crowned at Merton Priory on his sixteenth birthday. This Henry was an incompetent king and had bouts of madness; his reign saw England plunge into the bloody Wars of the Roses.

In the 1530s Henry VIII and his Parliament decreed all monasteries were to be closed and their great wealth and lands seized. Merton Priory was demolished in 1538, and its stones taken to Cuddington near Cheam for the construction of Henry's huge Nonsuch Palace. It wasn't until 1990 that the site of Merton Priory was fully excavated, and the remains of the Chapter House preserved under a new road bridge. The only other relics of the Priory are a beautiful 200 metre length of its precinct wall, just east of the hypermarket, and possibly the Colour House Theatre at Merton Abbey Mills, which was either a Priory outhouse or built with Priory flints.

## THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MERTON PRIORY

- 1114 Gilbert, sheriff of Surrey, establishes a priory church at Merton Park
- 1117 The first (wooden) church is founded at the present site
- 1121 Henry I grants a charter confirming the gift of the manor of Merton to the Priory
- 1125 The first stone church is begun
- c.1130 Thomas Becket is educated here
- c.1196 The enlarged Priory church is completed
- 1217 Louis, Prince of France, does penance in the Priory, following a series of peace conferences
- 1222 The Priory's tower blows down in a storm
- 1236 The Statute of Merton is drawn up in the Chapter House
- 1274 Walter de Merton founds Merton College, Oxford
- 1310 Having lent money to the king, the Priory pleads that it is 'manifestly oppressed with poverty'
- 1347 Royal sports are held here
- 1407 Henry IV's privy council meets here
- 1437 Henry VI has a crowning ceremony here
- 1538 Henry VIII dissolves and demolishes Merton Priory
- 1921-22 Pioneering excavations by Colonel H. F. Bidder
- 1962-63 Further excavations by Dennis Turner
- 1976-83 Excavation of the Chapter House by Scott McCracken
- 1986-90 Full excavation of the Priory site by the Museum of London

*You will find the Chapter House unexpectedly under Merantun Way, between Merton Abbey Mills (SW19 2RD) and the Sainsbury's/ M&S store. The nearest tube station is Colliers Wood. For opening times please consult the website.*



MERTON PRIORY TRUST [www.mertonpriory.org](http://www.mertonpriory.org)

## THE CHAPTER HOUSE OF MERTON PRIORY (1114 - 1538)



artist's impression  
©Wandle Industrial Museum

The excavated remains of one of  
England's greatest monastic houses,  
on the **900th anniversary**  
of its foundation