



King Henry II – dramatic royal adventures in Kent

On the trail of castles and curses, murder and martyrdom

Henry II, one of England's most powerful kings, reigned (1154-89) over truly dramatic episodes in the country's history. Come to Kent and visit the evocative locations where crucial scenes played out – from the newly transformed Great Tower at Dover Castle to magnificent Canterbury Cathedral, as well as towns and villages waiting for you to unlock their royal secrets.

Tall, brave, charismatic – and with an explosive temper – Henry inherited a country torn by civil war. He ruthlessly set about destroying the illegal castles of the rebel barons who had plagued his predecessor, King Stephen, and systematically built or strengthened his own. Through his Angevin birth, as well as family marriages and conquest he became western Europe's most influential leader, with an empire that stretched from Scotland to the Pyrenees. His Plantagenet dynasty – the name came from the flowering broom (*planta genista*) that Henry's father had worn in his helmet – spanned the Middle Ages.

Yet his power struggles with the Church led to the notorious murder of Thomas Becket. He fell out with his hot-tempered wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and his sons rebelled against him – including the subsequent kings, Richard the Lionheart and, his favourite, John.

Find out more on a tour through Kent in the footsteps of princes and pilgrims, saint and sinners. Your days are filled with enthralling choices.

Day One

Our first stop is **Dover**, known as the 'Key to England' for its historic role as guardian of the coast. When Henry II came to power he lavished money building or improving no less than 90 fortifications in England – and his grandest, most expensive project was at **Dover Castle** (www.english-heritage.org.uk).

Explore the curtain walls and inner bailey buildings constructed by the king's innovative engineer, Maurice. Then step into the thick of royal family and court life in the castle's **Great Tower**. Re-opened following its £2 million-plus transformation by English Heritage, it bristles with atmosphere: wander rooms presented in authentic period style where king and guests stayed, meet costumed characters (court jester Roland the Farther will amuse the kids), and experience the latest film technology.

Dover was a significant stepping-stone for Henry between his vast properties in England and France. And it served his sons on their travels, including Richard the Lionheart as he embarked on the third of his famous crusades. Following the murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket in 1170, the castle's key role was to receive high-status visitors on their way to the saint's shrine in Canterbury – and to impress lower-born pilgrims who passed by.

Many people blamed Henry for the murder. He had made his friend archbishop in 1162 and expected him to do his bidding. But they constantly argued over the respective powers of Church and Monarchy. Eventually Henry exploded: "Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?" Four knights took him at his word and killed Becket. Yes, Henry was remorseful and, yes, the Great Tower at Dover served pilgrims to the saint's shrine, but the king's imposing building was also a dynastic statement that trumpeted his supremacy and wealth, undiminished by events – 1179-88 alone he spent nearly £6,000 enhancing Dover's splendour.

From Dover, options beckon in two directions. Travel south to the towns of **Hythe** and 'Capital of the Marsh' **New Romney** (www.discoverfolkestone.co.uk). Like Dover, these are original members of the Confederation of the **Cinque Ports** (www.visitcinqueports.co.uk): strategic south coast ports that supplied ships and crew for the king's use, in return for special privileges. The tradition dates back nearly 1,000 years; certainly in Henry's reign, the name Cinque Ports was used and some of the Confederation's important charters were issued. An energetic traveller (he ruled nearly half of France) Henry was no doubt glad to be able to call upon the ports' services.

Enjoy a relaxing stroll through the towns and maybe explore mysterious **Romney Marsh**. Thomas Becket frequently used **Romney** when he travelled to France – he tried to sail from here to flee an early outburst of Henry's wrath, but was prevented by a fierce storm. For a breath of fresh air, follow the circular **cycling trail** from New Romney: across the marsh to the **church at Fairfield** named after the saint and **Brookland church** which has a wall painting commemorating him.

Then, keep your eyes peeled around **Hythe**: it's claimed that the ghosts of two of the four knights who murdered Becket haunt the area! The knights had stopped en route to Canterbury to plot at **Saltwood Castle** (not open to the public), the hq of Becket's enemy Ranulf de Broc. Two guilt-ridden restless spirits remain tied to the locality.

Alternatively, if you travel north from Dover, you come to the village of **Eastry** and the Cinque Port of **Sandwich** (www.sandwichtowncouncil.co.uk). It was here that Becket eventually fled in 1164 to escape that early royal temper. He hid for eight days at Eastry, perhaps in the church you see, where excavations have revealed tantalising traces of a buried window to an undercroft, or maybe he holed up in an old house nearby. When it was safe, he jumped onto a ship at Sandwich and spent six years in exile in France.

Pick up the tale in **Sandwich Guildhall Museum**. Eventually Henry and Becket made a fragile truce, and the archbishop was greeted like a returning hero by cheering crowds in Sandwich, December 1170. The town's maze-like pattern of **charming streets** has changed little since, and as you amble you can imagine another joyous scene when Richard the Lionheart disembarked here in 1194. He had been imprisoned in Austria on his way back from crusading, then released for a ransom. The March sun shone so brightly in Sandwich that people believed it an omen of his return.

Before you depart, follow the town trail to **St Bartholomew's Hospital**: founded in 1190 as a resting place for travellers and pilgrims to Becket's shrine, it points you on your way to Canterbury and the very scene of the blackest episode in Henry's reign.

Day Two

Begin the day in **Canterbury Cathedral** (www.canterbury-cathedral.org.uk), at the heart of the city's cobbled streets. The site of Becket's brutal murder 29 December 1170, known as the Martyrdom, is marked by a simple altar below a sculpture of jagged metal shards – one knight's sword sliced off the crown of Becket's skull and the blade shattered on the pavement. The crime sent shockwaves through Christendom. Within days, tales of miracles began to circulate – view some of them depicted in the cathedral's glorious medieval stained glass – and in 1173 Becket was made a saint.

Picture Henry, appalled by his knights' actions, coming to Canterbury in 1174 to do penance, clad in sackcloth and walking barefoot. He was whipped by 70 monks from the **cathedral priory**, to which he granted annual alms of £40. You can glimpse traces of the priory still, and it's here that one of the great chroniclers of the age, Gervase of Canterbury, lived. Visitors sometimes criticised the monks for their lavish hospitality and lifestyles – maybe a manuscript c. 1165 showing an apple garden including apples for cider making gives a clue – and in the 1180s they fell out big time with the ascetic Archbishop Baldwin; on this occasion, wary of precedent, King Henry took the archbishop's side.

Pilgrims flocked to Becket's shrine, which greatly enriched cathedral and priory. Henry came several times, including with Louis VII of France in 1179, when the French king gave a cup of pure gold, a giant ruby, and an annual allowance of 1,600 gallons of wine. Other visitors were more humble – the word 'canter', from 'Canterbury pace', is a reminder of their ambling gallop along the **Pilgrims' Way** from Winchester to the city (today it makes a superb walk, if you've plenty of time!). Relive the humour and horror of Chaucer's famous story of medieval pilgrims in **The Canterbury Tales** attraction (www.canterburytales.org.uk).

Then share sights that the pilgrims would have admired: **St Augustine's Abbey** (www.english-heritage.org.uk) and **St Martin's Church**, and the ruins of **Canterbury Castle** (www.canterbury.co.uk). It's recorded somewhat intriguingly that in 1169 Henry II agreed to pay one Adeliza Fitz Simon 15 shillings for three years for the rental of her land inside the castle!

Your afternoon is filled with choices. Perhaps make for the pretty village of **Chilham** on the Pilgrims' Way. Here, beside the medieval square, you'll find **Chilham Castle** (www.chilham-castle.co.uk), where Henry's master mason Ralph added the great stone keep in the 1170s. The castle is open only for private, pre-booked group tours, but the gardens can be enjoyed on the second Tuesday of each month, April to September, and they open certain days as part of the National Gardens Scheme.

Or head straight for the market town of **Faversham** (www.faversham.org) and follow the blue plaques trail around a wonderful gallery of picturesque buildings. In **Abbey Street**, one of the country's finest medieval streets, you'll read about **Faversham Abbey** (demolished at the Dissolution) and find the **Abbey Guest House**, now Arden's House. King Stephen founded the abbey in 1147 and was buried here with his queen. Afterwards Henry, despite his troubles with the Church, continued Stephen's benefactions to Faversham, just as he remained a steady patron to religious houses across Kent.

Then step back in time at **Maison Dieu** at neighbouring Ospringe: once a medieval staging post for pilgrims to Canterbury, with luxurious rooms for royalty on their way to or from the continent via Dover. Although later rebuilt, significant fragments remain and it's believed to be the oldest village museum in the country.

Alternatively, take a break from architecture and tour the orchards of **Brogdale Farm** (www.brogdalecollections.co.uk), home of the National Fruit Collection. Among nearly 4,000 varieties of luscious apples, pears, plums and other fruit, you can taste the type of pear that Henry II is known to have enjoyed – the original warden pear. Kent, the Garden of England, has been renowned for centuries for its fruit and in Henry's time the county was noted for its strong, spiced cider.

Day Three

Enjoy a hearty breakfast, before you climb the massive Norman keep of **Rochester Castle** (www.medway.gov.uk/tourism) – with the reward of superb views across the River Medway. The mighty castle was yet another point for dispute between Henry and Thomas Becket, the latter arguing that it belonged to the Church not the Crown. He had a point – Gundulf, Bishop of Rochester, began work on the stone castle in the 11th century and the huge keep was added by William de Corbeil, Archbishop of Canterbury, to whom Henry I granted custody of the castle in 1127.

Henry II, more concerned about maintaining a power base beside the river, simply busied himself with repairs on the fortress from 1166. Family strife later spurred him on, too. He argued with his sons and was estranged from his wife (no doubt his notorious affair with 'Fair Rosamund' Clifford played its part). They rebelled against him and the king boosted spending on Rochester to £100 in 1172-73 and £126 in 1173-74. Little did he know that his sons had promised the castle, along with Dover Castle, the Earldom of Kent and £1,000 a year in revenues to Philip of Alsace if he would help them overthrow their father.

Henry survived the episode, though he would die in 1189 cursing his sons, broken-hearted on learning that his favourite, John, had become involved in the family rebellions. When John followed his older brother Richard as king in 1199, he was able to test Rochester's defences: driving out forces that held the fort for enemy barons in 1215.

Our next destination is a secret gem – **Temple Manor** (www.medway.gov.uk/tourism), across the river from the castle at **Strood**. Henry gave the lodging house over to the Knights Templar, and it provided them with food and fresh horses on their crusades to the Holy Land. Today's 13th-century house with 17th-century brick extensions provides a fascinating clue to the original complex that included kitchens, stables and barns.

Strood is also the location of a curious legend. During the bitter squabbles between Henry II and Thomas Becket, the local men sided with the king and are said to have cut off the tail of the archbishop's horse as he passed through (some say it was the horse of an archiepiscopal servant). Becket declared that the descendants of the pranksters would be born with tails...

Inspired by legends, carry on south to the delightful village of **Otford** (www.otford.info). The Pilgrims' Way runs through the centre, where there's also a conspicuous tower – the remains of the splendid **Archbishops' Palace**, remodelled in the 16th century to rival Hampton Court Palace. Otford was one of Becket's favourite residences, but one day there were problems with the water supply: he struck the ground with his crozier and a spring leapt up which became known as **Becket's Well** (inaccessible/on private land). Legend also says the archbishop was disturbed in his devotions by nightingales and banished them from the village.

You'll find a model of the palace in the **Heritage Centre**. Or pick up a **village walk** leaflet from the parish office on the High Street and explore this historic settlement, which has welcomed many kings and queens through the centuries.

Our next highlight, a little further south, is **Tonbridge Castle** (www.tonbridgecastle.org), dominating the market town on the River Medway. More quarrels! Becket claimed the noble de Clare family held castle and lands from the Archbishops of Canterbury, not from the king, and therefore owed homage to him not Henry. In 1163 Roger de Clare rejected the claim and forced the messenger to eat the demand 'parchment, seals and all'!

Explore the gigantic 13th-century gatehouse and discover how Henry's son, King John, sent to Tonbridge for 40 pigs – he wanted their fat to set fire to the tunnel he had made beneath Rochester Castle in the siege of 1215.

Round off your tour in rather more peaceful style, a short hop west at the lovely village of **Penshurst** (www.penshurstplace.com). A few steps away from the beautiful medieval manor house of Penshurst Place, half-timbered Leicester Square leads to **St John the Baptist Church**. This dates from the 12th century and in 1170 Thomas Becket granted the licence for the first rector. Shortly afterwards, following Henry II's fateful explosion of temper, the archbishop lay dead in Canterbury Cathedral. It's thought provoking to wander this quiet corner of Kent and turn the clock back to a time just moments before Henry's rash words unleashed mayhem.

For more information see www.visitkent.co.uk