

Chaucer's World at the Ashmolean

- Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343–25 October 1400) was an English writer, poet and philosopher, best known for writing *The Canterbury Tales*.
- Most of the objects linked to Chaucer and his world are on display in Gallery 41: England 400-1600. They relate to themes including pilgrimage, romance, clothing, taverns and religion.
- Pilgrimage was a key feature of medieval society. Although the main destination was Jerusalem, Canterbury was a popular place for pilgrimage in England. Pilgrims travelled to cathedrals that preserved relics of saints which they believed held miraculous powers. Saint Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral by knights of Henry II during a disagreement between Church and Crown. Miracle stories connected to his remains sprang up soon after his death and the Cathedral became a popular pilgrimage destination.
- *The Canterbury Tales* is presented as a story-telling contest by a group of pilgrims as they travel together on a journey from London to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. The prize was a free meal at the Tabard Inn at Southwark on their return.

Other galleries containing relevant objects

Gallery 7: Money, Edward III coin (1312-1377). Chaucer worked as comptroller of the customs for the port of London for twelve years from 1374.

Gallery 30: Mediterranean World, pilgrimage items and astrolabe. Chaucer composed a scientific treatise on the astrolabe for his 10 year old son, Lewis.

Gallery 66: Pre Raphaelites, large painted wardrobe showing scenes from the Prioress's Tale.

Gallery 41: England 400-1600

1. Reliquary casket of Saint Thomas Becket, gilt copper alloy, enamel and wood, about 1200, Limoges, France



This reliquary casket, depicting Saint Thomas Becket's assassination at Canterbury Cathedral and subsequent entombment, was intended to hold a relic of the saint.

AN2008.36

Gallery 41: England 400-1600

2. Pilgrim badges, lead alloy, 1270-1400, London



The left hand pilgrim badge depicts the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket, the right one commemorates his head reliquary, both in Canterbury Cathedral.

AN1988.937 , AN1986.2

Gallery 41: England 400-1600

3. Puzzle jug, Brill/Boarstall ware, 1250-1350, from the Town Hall site, Oxford



Puzzle jugs were made for drinking games. The 'puzzle' was how to drink from the jug without getting drenched from the spouts at the side, which connect to a chamber at the bottom. It was filled through the hole at the top of the hollow handle. The face masks around the rim are a typical Oxford decoration.

AN1921.202

Gallery 41: England 400-1600

4. Floor tiles, ceramic, 1300-1400, Godstow, Oxfordshire



Portion of tile floor excavated from a possible chapel in Godstow Nunnery. The irregular pattern is thought to be because the tiles were bought from another religious foundation and re-used. The Nunnery was founded in 1133.

AN1974.30 30-33

Gallery 41: England 400-1600

5. Posy ring, gold and enamel, 1500-1700, Finstock, Oxfordshire



This gold ring, likely to have been given as a love token by a man to a woman, is inscribed on the inner band with the words, 'Kindly take this for my sake.' Items like this would have been exchanged as part of courtly love rituals.

AN2011.32

Gallery 41: England 400-1600

6. Casket panels, ivory, 1350-1400, unprovenanced



These panels show romantic scenes relating to courtly love. In the scenes, a couple plays backgammon, a knight carries off a woman, a woman receives a floral garland from a kneeling man, a woman rides into combat against a mounted knight and two lovers embrace in a garden.

AN2008.27

Gallery 41: England 400-1600

7. Chalice and paten, lead alloy 1100-1400, Sandford-on-Thames, Oxfordshire



The Mass, the sacrificial rite of the Eucharist, was at the centre of medieval religion. It was carried out at the altar by a priest using a chalice and paten to hold the wine and bread. They were consecrated and believed to become the body and blood of Christ. Until the 1400s, unconsecrated pewter chalices were buried with their priest owners. AN1836P.133.349

Gallery 41: England 400-1600

8. Archangel figure, wood, around 1450, Ewelme, Oxfordshire



This carved archangel was part of the roof of St John's Chapel in St Mary's Church in Ewelme. The church was founded by the Duke and Duchess of Suffolk. The Duchess was the granddaughter of Geoffrey Chaucer. Originally it would have been painted and decorated. AN1957.180

Gallery 41: England 400-1600

9. Carved panel 1400-1500, alabaster, gilding and paint



This panel and the adjacent panel on display, show the scenes of the Annunciation and the Adoration of the Magi.

LI1978.2

Gallery 66: Pre-Raphaelites

10. Prioress's Tale Wardrobe, designed by Philip Webb, painted by Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898)



This wardrobe, said to have been given as a wedding present to William Morris and Jane Burden, is painted with scenes from the Prioress's Tale.

WA1919.2

Literature in context: English & history

- Research Saint Thomas Becket and explore his significance in medieval England.
- Pilgrimages were journeys to saints' shrines or other holy places. They were undertaken as an act of piety, or by people who had made a promise to visit a shrine in return for good luck or protection from God or a saint. People often bought souvenirs at pilgrimage centres, often in the form of ampullae, little flasks for holy water, or badges to wear. These small portable objects were used for prayer and private devotion. The objects often depict Christ, the Holy Family, saints or religious texts, and were thought to provide personal protection.
- What can objects tell us about the significance of pilgrimage in medieval England?
- What can we learn about everyday life from objects? Consider food and drink, taverns and hospitality, costume and clothing.
- Explore the role of monasteries and the Church in medieval English society.
- Find out about chivalry, a way of life practised by knights and members of royal courts in the later medieval period. Skills in physical activities, such as horse-riding, hunting, jousting and other tournament events, as well as intellectual pursuits, such as chess, were regarded as essential.
- Images of knights and chivalric activities are found on many medieval objects and reflected in literature from the time.
- Find out about courtly love and its conventions and significance in medieval literature.

Working with objects: key questions

- Who made it?
- Where and when was it made?
- What materials is it made from?
- How was it made?
- What was it used for?
- How was it used?
- Who used / owned it?
- What was its significance at the time it was made?
- How might it be interpreted by different people at different times?
- Why is it on display in a museum?



Casket panels, ivory, 1350-1400, unprovenanced
AN2008.27

Further resources

Ashmolean Education Learning Resources:
www.ashmolean.org/learning-resources

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