

The consecration of the Abbey church, 1164

Painted by Stephen Reid (1873 - 1940), 1920

Object no. 1931. 278. 1

Location - Bayeux Gallery, Museum of Reading



Reading Abbey was founded in 1121, but work on the abbey church was not completed for over forty years. On 19 April 1164, Archbishop Thomas Becket hallowed the church in the presence of Henry II, several bishops and other lords.

In the foreground of the painting stands Archbishop Thomas Becket, with his cross-bearer Alexander Llewelyn just behind. On the steps of the chancel, holding the sword of state, is King Henry II, the grandson of the founder Henry I. On the left stands Roger, Abbot of Reading.

In the dim background beyond the high altar is seen the tomb of the Founder of the Abbey. Other features are the banners of trade guilds of the abbey builders, and on the altar is the casket containing the hand of St. James.

Thomas Becket became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162. Henry's disagreement with the Archbishop of Canterbury over Church-State relations was at its height at the time of the consecration of the abbey church.

After six years of exile Becket was murdered in 1170. His death shocked the whole of the Christian world, and his tomb in Canterbury became an immediate shrine. He was canonized in 1173, and in the following year Henry was forced to do penance at the saint's tomb.