

San Tommaso di Canterbury



San Tommaso di Canterbury is the 19th century church of the [Venerable English College](#), at Via Monserrato 45 in the rione Regola. The dedication is to the archbishop and martyr [St Thomas Becket](#) of [Canterbury](#) in England. It lies within the Collegio Inglese, the English College. The college was founded by Pope Gregory XIII in 1579. Many of the priests who were educated there were martyred in England.

History

There is a tradition that the English presence on this site arose when a pilgrim hospice was founded here by [King Offa of Mercia](#) in 630. There is no evidence of this, and the English actually established their first institution in Rome when the Schola Saxonum was founded in 727 by [King Ine](#) of [Wessex](#). This survived as a pilgrimage hospice and centre for expatriates until the late 12th century. ⁽¹⁾

Some historians suggested that the first church on the site was called Santissima Trinità degli Scozzesi, (Holy Trinity of the Scots), and was built for a monastery in the 8th century. The actual origins of the church here lie in the 14th century, when a Societas Pauperorum Anglorum was founded to help poor English pilgrims. In 1362, this confraternity bought a house from the rosary sellers John and Alice Shephard, and founded the “English Hospice of the Most Holy Trinity and St Thomas of Canterbury”. A purpose-built chapel was erected in 1376 and this is the ancestor of the present church. The building underwent a first restoration and expansion in 1450. ^{(1) (2) (4)}

In 1527, the hospice was looted and damaged in the Sack of Rome and was hardly repaired in time for the English Reformation which began in the following decade. In 1559 Thomas Goldwell, Bishop of St Asaph in Wales, arrived as an exile in Rome with one of his priests, Morus Clynog. The latter became the hospice's chamberlain in 1567. In 1576, the expatriate Cardinal William Allen obtained possession of the hospice with the intention of turning it into an English seminary. He rebuilt the complex, including the church. With a bull of Pope Gregory XIII of 1 May 1579 the hospice was changed to ecclesiastical college for young students of the English nation, today Venerable English College, entrusted to the Jesuits. Clynog was made the first rector in the previous year. The church that Allen built was on the footprint of the present building. ^{(1) (2)}

Clynog left in 1580, and a Jesuit called Alfonso Agazzari was appointed as rector. This settled a dispute about the purpose of the seminary. One faction wished it simply to train Englishmen as priests, while the other wished the training to be specifically to go on mission to England. The latter

view won out. Though it was never officially a Jesuit institution, the English College was administered by the Jesuits since its founding in 1579 until the order was suppressed in 1773, and the administration of the college passed into the hands of the secular clergy. From 1579 onwards students had to adhere to the 'Missionary Oath', promising not to enter into an religious order during their stay in Rome, because this would have wasted the investment of College in their training. ^{(1) (a)}

After the English Reformation in the 1530's, for an Englishman to be ordained abroad as a Catholic priest was declared to be treason, and any such priests in England were hunted down and judicially murdered. The first priest of the college was martyred in 1581, St Ralph Sherwin. The last was Edward Mico, who died in prison in 1678 or 1679. The College has been known as the "Venerable English College" since 1818 because of the 44 students who were martyred for the Roman Catholic faith between 1581 and 1679, as well as the 130 who suffered imprisonment and exile. Forty of these have since been canonized or beatified by the Church. ^{(1) (4)}

In 1583, Niccolò Circignani painted a fresco cycle depicting the Reformation martyrdoms in England of those who had studied at the College. Although these were done on the request of the Jesuits who ran the college, the patron was the Englishman George Gilbert. The fresco cycle was destroyed with the old church in the 19th century. Roman engraver and printer Giovanni Battista Cavaliere published copper plate engravings of the whole cycle under the title Ecclesiae Anglicanae Trophaea in Rome in 1584. The Cavaliere engravings are our main source of knowledge for the frescoes and were used as the basis for a reconstruction of the cycles of frescoes on the walls of the gallery of the present building. ^{(1) (b) (c) (d)}

Until the mid-Seventeenth century, the college and the hospice were in fact a cluster of dilapidated buildings. In fact, the church floor of the 15th century was then collapsed in 1687. But very soon the situation changed. In 1654 the Jesuits in charge of *Collegio Inglese* (the English Seminary) bought Corte Savella, the ancient papal prison, and made some changes there. Then the area occupied by the prison was replaced by an elegant building, designed with a double purposes: as a profitable real estate and as a residence for the Cardinal at the English Court. In 1685 they completed the construction of a new College, which was transformed into a well-structured building, comfortable and modern. The architect was Francesco Massari, who was Borromini's assistant at the time of his death in 1667. The stonemason was Giovanni Giacometti. On this occasion the clock tower was added. The report of an investigation carried out in 1739 comments that the buildings of the college were spacious, bright and clean air, but notes that the Church was still the old original structure. ^{(1) (a)}

The reason for this major effort was due to the action of Cardinal Philip Thomas Howard, known as the Cardinal of Norfolk; he hoped to promote the conversion of his country by increasing the number of English Roman Catholic priests who had the opportunity of receiving an in-depth education. ^{(1) (a)}

In 1799 the church was desecrated during the French invasions when the church roof was plundered for firewood and the lead coffins in the crypt recycled for bullets. The French troops the building turned into a stable and later on it was damaged by a fire. Students returned in 1818, but apparently the church was left derelict for the next fifty years. The College building remained in a ruinous state until 1819 when Cardinal Ercole Consalvio restored it. In 1834 the Rector of the church, Nicholas Wiseman, removed the inscriptions and mortuary monuments from the church, installed them in the college and its corridors, and destroyed the church. In 1864 Cardinal E. H. Manning published an appeal to have the church rebuilt. His plea met success. A rebuilding project was initiated in 1864 when Pietro Camporese the Younger oversaw the clearance of the site and the planning of the new structure. However he was replaced by Luigi Poletti, when Pope Pius IX laid the foundation stone of the new edifice on 6 February 1866. Poletti died in 1869 and responsibility passed to Virginio Vespignani after a pause. He worked from 1873 to 1882 when construction was completed, and the new building was opened to the public in 1888. ^{(1) (2) (c)}

The church was remodeled in the 1970's. The high altar was demolished, and the two side altars were removed. A new altar was erected in the middle of the nave, and consecrated in 1980. This is in the form of a white rectangular box with the two largest sides missing, and a gilded metal chest inserted into it. The chest contains relics of English Reformation martyrs. ⁽¹⁾

The church and the Alberti altarpiece were restored in 2009. ⁽³⁾

Exterior

The aisles and vestibule have galleries over them, which allows the whole structure to be sheltered under one pitched and tiled roof. The ends of the church abut the adjacent buildings, so only the right hand side wall is visible. This performs the function of the church's façade. ⁽¹⁾

Campanile

The church's campanile, the only result of the 17th century project to rebuild the church, is not attached to the building but is over a wing of the college behind it. It was built in 1685 in the style of Borromini, and has two levels over the roof of the wing. The first storey has blank walls. The second level has a clock face on each side, flanked by inwardly curved volutes on the corners and with an ogee-curved cornice. The bulbous cupola, in lead, has a large elliptical piercing on each side. ⁽¹⁾

Façade

The side of the church runs along the Via Monserrato. As the remaining three sides abut exterior building, this side acts as the façade. The brownish-red brick façade, with white stucco architectural details, clashes somewhat with the other buildings of the locality and is obviously 19th century. The design is rather odd, and difficult to describe. ⁽¹⁾

There are four rectangular zones, divided by a horizontal line following the vault of the right hand side aisle inside, and a vertical one separating the entrance bay from the nave. Each of these four zones is framed in white, with the two lower ones having the top edges of their frames incised into little semi-circular pendant arches. The two lower zones and the two upper ones are separated by a string-course with a line of beaded molding. ⁽¹⁾

The largest lower zone, to the right, fronts the nave side aisle. It contains a row of four oculi or round windows, with dished frames each having a circle of twisted cord molding. Below these, near the ground plinth, is a simple string-course. ⁽¹⁾

The right hand upper zone has a similar string course, on which are four round-headed windows within recessed dished frames. These light the right hand gallery. Over them runs a string course with dentillation, which curves over the top of each window and also does an identical blind curve between each pair of them. ⁽¹⁾

The left hand upper zone, the smallest, also has a string course. On this is an arcade of three arched windows separated by little vaguely Corinthian columns, with molded archivolt and a string course to each side from the springers. The roofline has an ornate cornice, with two rows of dentillations sandwiching a row of modillions. ⁽¹⁾

Entrance

The left hand lower zone contains the very impressive no-Romanesque entrance doorway. The broad archivolt has a total of eight moldings of different widths, plain alternating with decorated. The tympanum that it encloses has a small wheel window with twelve spokes, flanked by vine-scroll decoration. ⁽¹⁾

The inner curve of decorative molding continues down the door case on each side. The door itself is a fine example of carpentry, being covered in a grid of little coffers. The piers on either side each have two engaged Corinthian columns, diagonally placed. ⁽¹⁾

Unfortunately, this spectacular entrance is now rarely used. Entrance is through the door to the school, just to the left of the church portal. This door gives access to a passage between the school and the church. The church is entered from this passage.

Interior

Its main entry did not face the street but faced a corridor on the interior of the college complex.

Unusually, there is no structural sanctuary. The interior of the church has three naves, preceded by a narthex, and a women's gallery, which is part of the old room used as a library. The nave arcades have four arches on each side, springing from Corinthian columns in polished grey marble. At the ends of the arcades are engaged semi-columns, the far ones being attached to the back wall and the near ones to two square piers flanking the vestibule. A further single column supports two arches leading from the vestibule to the nave. (1) (2) (c)

Above the arcade arches runs an entablature (which does not cross the back wall), and above this in turn are four arches on each side for the galleries. These have piers without impost, and each contains an arcade of three smaller arches with Corinthian columns in what looks like red granite. Above each arcade, and within the larger arch, is an oculus with a hexafoil aperture. Above the columns are medallions depicting British saints. The portraits on the walls to the right of the altar are those of the national saints, *Helen, Ethelberga, Ebba, Ethelreda, Ermenilda, and Exburga*; those on the corresponding wall to the left are SS. *Juditha, Edburga, Elgiva, Bathildes, Eanfleda* and *Ursula*. (1) (2) (b)

The aisles and vestibule are cross-vaulted with transverse archivolt dividing the bays. The cross-vaulting and the archivolt are gold while the spandrels have gold stars in a field of blue. However, the galleries have flat coffered ceilings. The main roof is open and is in planks, with trusses dividing the bays. It is intricately painted in gold, red and green. (1)

The floor is imitation Cosmatesque work. (1)

All the walls are covered by fresco work, involving superb geometric detail in gold and royal blue with details in red and green. This was by Silverio Capparoni. In the spandrels of the nave arches there are tondi with portraits of saints associated with England. (1)

The gallery walls have a fresco cycle imitating the lost one by Niccolò Circignani. It shows the sufferings of the Reformation martyrs, done rather graphically. Apparently the original cycle was used to test the resolve of the seminarians, by warning them of what might have been in store for them. Also, in the gallery, a painting by Cavalier d'Arpino depicting *St. Gregory the Great*, and a stucco relief depicting the *Crucifixion* by an unknown artist of the second half of the 17th century. (1)

The vestibule has lunette frescoes depicting events from the College's history. The oculus windows in the right hand aisle have stained glass roundels in mediaeval style. (1)

The major artwork in the church is the former altarpiece, a *Holy Trinity* by Durante Alberti, considered to be his masterpiece. This is known as "The Martyrs' Picture", and features St Thomas Becket to the left and St Edmund, King of East Anglia and Martyr to the right. Blood from Christ's wounds is shown falling onto a map of the British Isles, and from this blood fire is springing up. This ties in with the College motto, held by a cherub: *Ignem veni mittere in terram* (I have come to bring fire to the earth). According to tradition, students gathered around this picture to sing a *Te Deum* whenever news reached Rome of a martyrdom of a former student. This custom continues today when the *Te Deum* is sung in front of the painting on 1 December, "Martyrs' Day", and the relics of the Martyrs, preserved beneath the Altar, are venerated by the students. The painting is still mounted on the wall behind the altar and dates from about 1583. (1) (4) (c)

On the left side of the narthex is the fine Baroque tomb of Sir Thomas Dereham (d. 1739). He was a close friend of James Francis Edward Stuart (the Old Pretender, James III of England and James VIII of Scotland). The tomb was designed by Ferdinando Fuga, and the two statues representing *Religion* and *Faithfulness* are a fine work by Filippo della Valle. In the back wall of the narthex is a memorial for Martha Swinburn, daughter of the 18th century travel writer Henry Swinburne. She died at age 9 in September 1778 while traveling in Rome with her parents. (1) (e)

From the previous church was salvaged the superb tomb-slab effigy of Cardinal Christopher Bainbridge, Archbishop of York in England, which is thought to have been executed by Michele Marini in 1514. The slab is along the wall of the left aisle, and is supported on two carved lions. (1) (2)

Embedded into the walls of the aisles, under the oculus windows, are memorial plaques from the earlier church. At the top of the left aisle is a statue of the Virgin Mary. At the top of the right aisle

is the Tabernacle. In the floor is the tombstone of Sir John Weddisbury, prior of Worcester (d. 1518). ⁽²⁾

On the ceiling of the so-called Martyrs' Chapel in the college itself there is a fresco depicting the *Assumption* by Andrea Pozzo of 1701. This is probably the most important artwork in the college. ⁽¹⁾

Access

The church should be open to visitors between 9:30 and the start of the Mass thirty minutes later. It shuts after the Mass, about 11:00.

If you are an appropriately dressed priest or religious, or have a member of the College expecting you, ask at the porter's lodge at the entrance for access. This entrance is just to the left of the church door. Otherwise, serious visitors and groups can try contacting the Administrator who is Barbara Donovan on administrator@vecrome.org

Liturgy

Mass is celebrated on Sunday at 10:00, except in July and August.

1 December is "Martyrs' Day", and the tradition has been to have a ceremony in front of the Durante picture in their honour.

Artists and Architects:

Durante [Alberti](#) (1538-1613), Italian painter of the late-Renaissance period.
Pietro [Camporese](#) the Younger (1792-1873), Italian neoclassical architect
Silverio [Capparoni](#) (1831-1907), Italian painter
Giuseppe [Cesari](#), [aka *Cavaliere d'Arpino*] (1568-1640), Italian Mannerist painter from Arpino
Niccolò [Circignani](#) [aka *Il Pomarancio*] (1520-1597), Italian late-Renaissance / Mannerist painter
Filippo [della Valle](#) (1698-1768), Italian late-Baroque or early Neoclassic sculptor
Ferdinando [Fuga](#) (1699-1781), Italian architect in the Baroque style
Giovanni Giacometti (17th cent), Italian stonemason
Michele Marini (16th cent), Italian sculptor from Fiesole
Francesco Massari (17th cent), Italian architect
Luigi [Poletti](#) (1792-1869), Italian neoclassical architect
Andrea [Pozzo](#), S. J.(1645-1709), Italian Jesuit Brother, Baroque painter and architect, decorator, stage designer, and art theoretician
Virginio [Vespignani](#) (1808-1882), Italian architect

Burials:

Christopher Cardinal [BAINBRIDGE](#), (1464-1514) {also see [here](#)}

Ambassador of King Henry VIII of England to Rome

William Cardinal [ALLEN](#), (1532-1594) {also see [here](#)}

Tomb destroyed during the French occupation

Sir Thomas [Dereham](#), 4th Baronet (ca. 1678-1739)

George [Gilbert](#) (d. 1583)

English gentleman, benefactors of Jesuits

Location:

Addr: 45 Via Monserrato, Rome

Coordinates: [41° 53' 44"N 12° 28' 12"E](#)

Info:

Telephone: 0039 06 6865808

Open Sunday 9.30am-11.00am

Masses

Holidays 10.00am

Links and references:

(1) [Roman Churches Wiki](#)

(2) [Italian Wikipedia page](#)

(3) <http://www.studio3restauro.com/p46.asp> (no longer online)

(4) [Wikivisually web site](#)

(a) Richardson, Carol (2011). "Andrea Pozzo and the Venerable English College in Rome". In: Bösel, Richard and Salviucci Insolera, Lydia eds. *Artifices of Metaphor: Essays of Andrea Pozzo*. Rome: Editorial Artemis Ltd., pp. 116-125.

(b) Donovan, Jeremiah; ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS; 1842

(c) Lewine, Milton; THE ROMAN CHURCH INTERIOR, 1527-1580; University Microfilms International; 1963; pp 489-495

(d) Müller, Kristina; "The English martyrs of San Tomaso di Canterbury in Rome trophies of the Counter-reformation"; *LUSÓFONA MAGAZINE OF SCIENCE OF RELIGIONS - YEAR VIII*, 2009 / n. 15; pp. 109-128

(e) Champ, Judith; THE ENGLISH PILGRIMAGE TO ROME: A Dwelling For the Soul; Gracewing Publishing, 2000, pg. 108