Canterbury in the 19th Century

One of the more surprising features of Canterbury is that, despite the cathedral being the home of the Church of England, no Archbishop of Canterbury was enthroned there until John Bird Sumner in 1848. In fact, until 1901, every Archbishop permanently resided in Lambeth Palace, close to the seat of power in Westminster, although this was somewhat ameliorated by the actions of Victoria’s last Archbishop, Frederick Temple (1896-1902). Archbishop Temple oversaw the rebuilding of the palace in the cathedral grounds, which initiative allowed subsequent primates to spend more time in the city of their cathedral. It should also be noted that Queen Victoria, the second longest serving head of the Church of England, only once visited the city during her reign, and did not grace the cathedral with her presence.

Such examples demonstrate that Canterbury, particularly in the first half of the 19th century, was very much seen as a provincial city, resembling, in effect, a relatively quiet market town, with a collection of small, family owned industries consisting of paper making, leather manufacture and a host of small breweries. One notable feature of Canterbury social life, involving the entrepreneurial and middle classes, was the [Canterbury Catch Club]( /music/19c-catch-club). This was a musical society that brought together its members, usually on licensed premises, for the performance of song and, as portrayed in an 1826 lithograph, represented a male dominated, patriotic and provincial middle class. Chris Price has demonstrated that the [Catch Club]( /music/19c-catch-club) combined a conservative middle class with a libertine element that distinguished the provinces from the metropolitan.[[1]](#footnote-1)

An important cultural figure of the period was the artist Thomas Sidney Cooper. Having started his working life as a coach and stage painter, Cooper trained at the Royal Academy and went on to become a famed painter of animals, specialising in the depiction of cows and sheep. He became a Royal Academician in 1867, and was a generous philanthropist to the poor of Canterbury, later creating a School of Art in the City. Many of his paintings can be seen today in the Beaney House of Art and Knowledge.

The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars with France gave Canterbury an established military presence, with the construction of several barracks and depots around the edge of the city. In addition to the headquarters of the local infantry regiment, known colloquially as ‘The Buffs’, accommodation was built for both horse and artillery throughout the period. The military presence consisted of both transitory and residential elements, with soldiers marrying into the local community and contributing to the city economy. Around the Northgate area, the Northgate Community Centre, which was formerly the Garrison Theatre, and the deconsecrated Garrison Church of ‘St Albans’ remain intact. The Northgate development was the property of William Baldock (c1750-1812), who made a fortune by leasing the barracks to the War Office ‘at the rate of 6d per week per soldier’. [[2]](#footnote-2) With well over 2,000 soldiers accommodated in these buildings, it is easy to see how he died a millionaire.

The transitory nature of the military population reflected the changing demands for defence in the 19th century, and the decline following demobilisation after Waterloo was commented upon by William Cobbett, in his rural ride through Kent in the 1820’s.

‘…considerable as the City of Canterbury is, that city, within

its gates, stands upon less ground than those horrible erections, the barracks of PITT, DUDDAS and PERCEVAL.

They are perfectly enormous; but thanks be unto God, they begin to crumble down… …Here are horse-barracks, foot-barracks, artillery-barracks, engineer-barracks; a whole

country of barracks; but only here and there a soldier.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Victorian era will always be associated with the railways, and the present station of Canterbury West lies close to the terminus of the first railway to the City. This was the Canterbury and Whitstable Railway – or Crab and Winkle Line – which was opened in 1830. The line was developed to give Canterbury access to the ‘new’ working port at Whitstable, as navigation on the River Stour had become very restricted by heavy silting. The C & WR was the first railway in Britain to run a scheduled passenger service and offer season tickets to its regular travellers. It was joined to the South Eastern Railway at Canterbury West in 1846.

Article by Martin Watts

1. Price, Chris, *The Canterbury Catch Club 1826: Music in the Frame,* Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Canterbury Historical & Archaeological Society Notebook pages at www.canterbury-archaeology.org.uk [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cobbett, William. \_*Rural Rides\_.* ed George Woodcock. Penguin: London, 1985. 207-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)