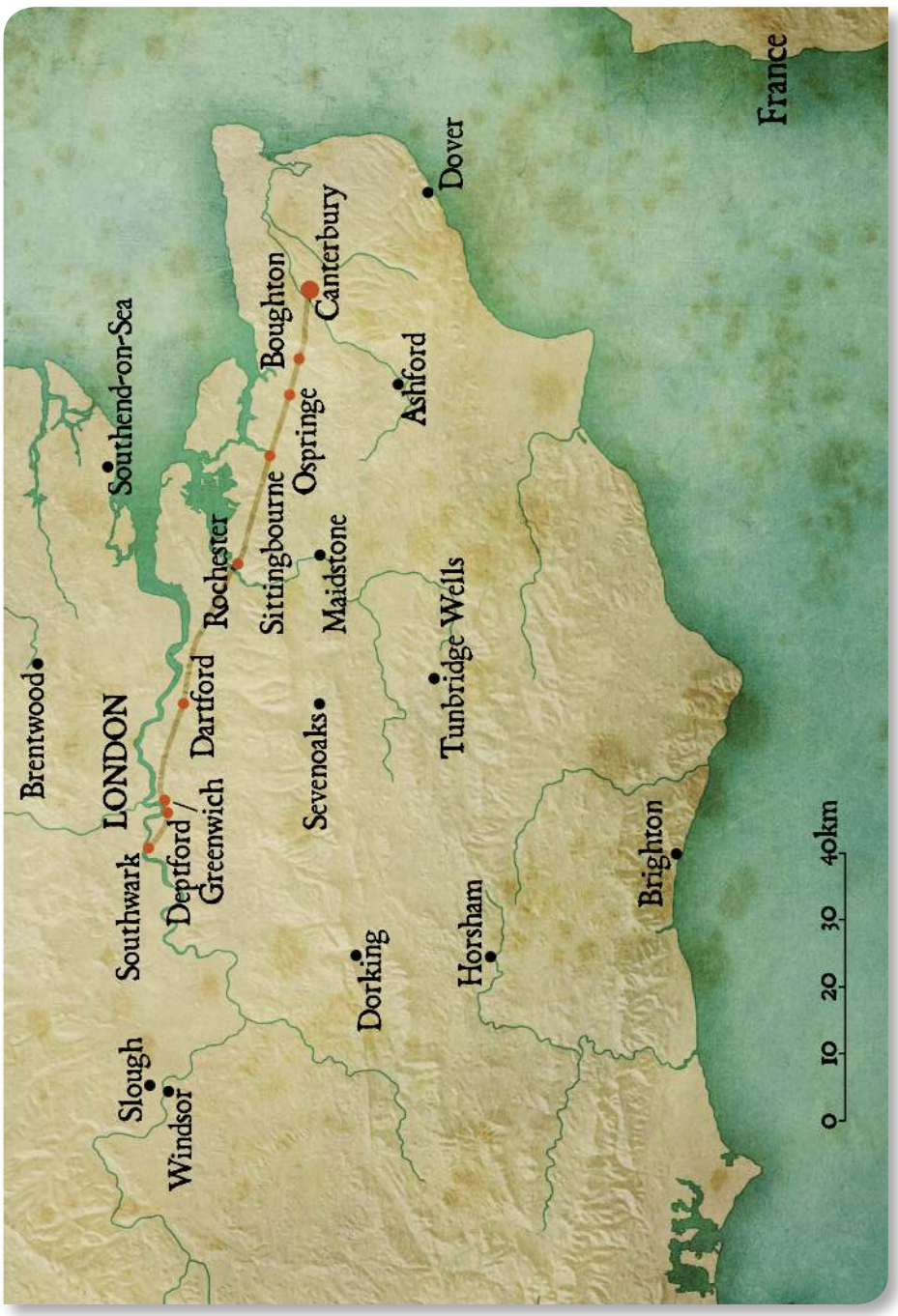


▲ The traditional pilgrim route from London to Canterbury: 'from every shires ende of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende'.

What are The Canterbury Tales?

The tales are a collection of stories, loosely linked together, apparently told by a variety of storytellers with very different characters and from different social classes. In fact, both the storytellers and the tales are the creation of one man, Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer imagines a group of pilgrims, setting off from the Tabard Inn one spring day on the long journey from London to the shrine of St Thomas à Becket in Canterbury–a journey that on horseback would take about four days.

To make time pass more pleasantly, the pilgrims agree to tell stories to one another. Chaucer begins by introducing his pilgrims to the reader, in descriptions which do much to reveal the characters, vices and virtues of each individual. We learn more from the way each person introduces their tale, still more from the tales themselves and the way in which each one is told, and even further information is offered by the manner in which some pilgrims react to what others have to say. By this means, Chaucer provides a witty, penetrating insight into the attitudes, weaknesses and preoccupations of English men and women of the fourteenth century. Some of their behaviour and interests may seem strange to modern readers; at other times they seem just like us.

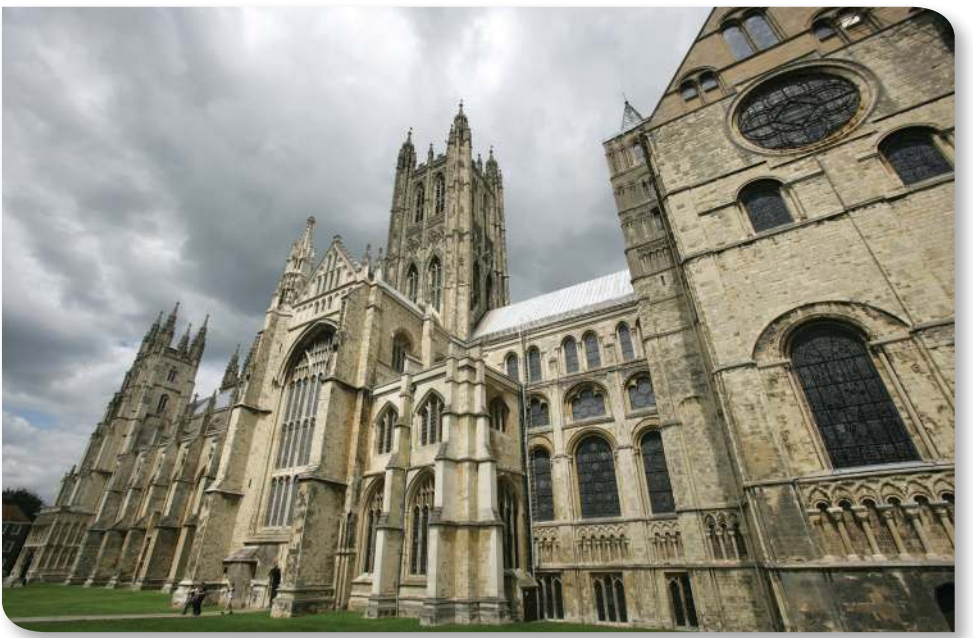
Chaucer's view of the pilgrims

Chaucer's view of his pilgrims is often complex, although characters such as the Knight, the Parson and the Plowman are clear examples of deep virtue, without reservations of any kind. Some characters–for example, the Prioress–are shown as having weaknesses that they themselves do not realize. The Friar is an example of a deeply corrupt man who is very affable to those from whom he makes his living. Other characters are described straightforwardly as unattractive physically (the Miller) or morally (the Shipman).

Chaucer uses several 'voices' in *The General Prologue* (and throughout all the tales that follow it). The first is his own, in that every word is the work of Chaucer the poet. Second comes the voice of Chaucer the narrator or pilgrim. He puts himself among the pilgrims–indeed, he tells two stories later on–and makes some direct and indirect judgements on the characters he is describing. At times he makes himself seem almost a simpleton in this voice, but at other times he can be blunt or subtly ironical about the characters he is describing.

Chaucer's third voice can be heard when he speaks through one of his characters. There is a good deal of talk–often fiercely quarrelsome–during and between the telling of the tales in the main body of the work, but in *The General Prologue* we hear Harry Bailey, the landlord of the Tabard Inn, speaking with confidence and authority to the pilgrims, not worrying about the shyness of the Clerk or the Prioress, organizing them and (later in the work) keeping the peace very effectively. What he says to and about the pilgrims is firm and downright, and contrasts with the subtlety, artlessness, irony and diffidence of Chaucer the narrator.

A fourth voice is more a structure than a voice, but it has a similar effect. The world of Chaucer's time was firmly structured, socially, religiously and morally. How people were supposed to live, in theory at least, was generally known. Any departure from this ideal was therefore obvious to people of the time. This difference between life as it was supposed to be lived and as it was lived in practice gave Chaucer a framework, a device of great flexibility: he could describe his characters, relate



▲ The destination of the pilgrims – Canterbury cathedral today.

their actions and words, and his listeners would draw appropriate conclusions about the difference between the ideal and the actual. The Knight, the Parson and the Plowman are presented as ideals and are to some extent a point of comparison against which other characters can be judged.

The fourth voice is heard in the changes in society that are described by Chaucer. The Prioress and the Monk, for instance, are, in their different ways, rather surprising people. Where we might expect an unworldly spirituality we see people self-consciously engaged with the world. They seem to see no contradiction between their vows and their enjoyment of the good things of life; they are not monsters of evil but they are out of their cloisters and there is not much poverty about their way of life. To what extent can we see them as typical?

Other clerical characters are more clearly at fault. The Pardoner and the Summoner are corrupt, using their functions within the Church to make a good living from poor believers. Yet they do seem aware of their badness; indeed, they boast of what they do. But how far are they aware of any implicit judgement of them? To what extent might the apparent tolerance of their faults arise from a weary acceptance of widespread corruption of this sort?

Some of the lay characters are similarly not ideal. The Franklin is a wealthy man with no idea that his pleasant, self-indulgent life might be seen as less than perfect. He is what he is, and he does what he does; questions of how he might, or should, live do not seem to arise. The Merchant, for all his expensive clothes and brave talk, is in debt; the Sergeant of the Law is an able but slippery man, ready to turn his skills to account for his clients and for himself. The ideal lives alongside the real in this work, but the judgement is left for the readers to make, if they have eyes to see.

Chaucer's language

The unfamiliar appearance of a page of Chaucerian English often prevents students from pursuing their investigations any further. It does no good telling them that this man used language with a complexity and subtlety not found in any writer of English anywhere before him. They remain unimpressed. He looks incomprehensible.

In fact, with a little help, it does not take very long to master Chaucer's language. Much of the vocabulary is the same as, or at least very similar to, words we use today. On page 96 there is a glossary of the unfamiliar words most frequently used in this text, and these will quickly become familiar. Other words and phrases that could cause difficulties are explained on the pages facing the actual text of the tales.

The language of Chaucer is known as Middle English–a term covering English as it was written and spoken in the period roughly between 1150 and 1500. It is difficult to be more precise than this, for Middle English itself was changing and developing throughout that period towards 'modern' English.

Old English (Anglo-Saxon) was spoken and written until around 1066, the time of the Norman Conquest. This event put power in England into the hands of the Norman lords, who spoke their own brand of Norman French. Inevitably this became the language of the upper classes. The effect was felt in the Church, for speedily the control of the monasteries and nunneries was given to members of the new French-speaking aristocracy. Since these religious houses were the seats of learning and centres of literacy, the effect on language was considerable. If you were a wealthy Anglo-Saxon, eager to get on in the world of your new overlords, you learned French. Many people were bi- or even trilingual: French was the language of the law courts and much international commerce; Latin was the language of learning (from elementary school to the highest levels of scholarship) and the Church (from parish church services to the great international institution of the papacy).

Gradually, as intermarriage between Norman French and English families became more common, the distinction between the two groups and the two languages became blurred. Many French words became absorbed into Old English, making it more like the language we speak today. In the thirteenth century, King John lost control of his Norman lands, and, as hostility between England and France grew, a sense of English nationalism strengthened. In 1362 the English language was used for the first time in an English parliament. At the same time, Geoffrey Chaucer, a young ex-prisoner of war, was sharpening his pens and his wit, testing the potential for amusement, satire and beauty in this rich, infinitely variable, complex literary tool.

Although some tales are partly, or entirely, in prose, *The Canterbury Tales* are written largely in rhyming iambic couplets. This form of regular metre and rhyme is flexible enough to allow Chaucer to write in a range of styles. He uses the couplet form to imitate colloquial speech as easily as philosophical debate. Most importantly, he wrote poetry 'for the ear': it is written for the listener as much as for the reader. Rhyme and alliteration add emphasis, and link ideas and objects together in a way that is satisfying for the audience. The words jog along as easily and comfortably as the imaginary pilgrims and their horses jogged to Canterbury.

Pronunciation

Chaucer spoke the language of London, of the king's court, but he was well aware of differences in dialect and vocabulary in other parts of the country. In *The Reeve's Tale*, for instance, he mocks the north country accents of two students. It is clear therefore that there were differences in pronunciation in the fourteenth century, just as there are today.

Having said that Chaucer wrote verse to be read aloud, students may be dismayed to find that they do not know how it should sound. There are two encouraging things to bear in mind. The first is that although scholars feel fairly sure they know something about how Middle English sounded, they cannot be certain, and a number of different readings can be heard. The second concerns the strong metrical and rhyming structure Chaucer employed in the writing of his tales.

Finding the rhythm Follow the rhythm of the verse (iambic pentameter), sounding or omitting the final 'e' syllable in the word as seems most appropriate. In the line

And yet he hadde a thumbe of gold, pardee.

it would add an unnecessary syllable if the final 'e' in 'hadde' and 'thumbe' were to be pronounced. An 'e' at the end of a word almost always disappears if it is followed by a vowel or a word beginning with 'h'.

In the case of these examples:

As leene was his hors as is a rake,

and

His table dormant in his halle alway

the best swing to the regular ten-syllabled line is achieved by sounding the 'e' (as a neutral vowel sound, like the 'u' in put, or the 'a' in about) in the words 'leene', 'table' and 'rake', but not in 'halle'.

Other points In words beginning with the letter 'y' (e.g. 'ywet', 'yknowe'), the 'y' is sounded as it would be in the modern 'party'. Many consonants now silent were pronounced–as in 'knight', 'wrong'. All the consonants would be given voice in words such as 'neigheboures' and 'knight', and the 'gh' would be sounded like the Scots 'ch' in 'loch'. The combination 'ow' (e.g. 'yow', meaning 'you') is pronounced as 'how', and the 'ei' in 'streit' would be like the 'a' sound in 'pay'.

For more ideas of what the language might have sounded like, listen to the tapes of Chaucer published by Cambridge University Press and by the 'Chaucer Man' (Trevor Eaton).

- Choose a long, self-contained section from the text: lines 19–42 of *The General Prologue* are a useful example. After a brief explanation of the content, if considered necessary, students can work in pairs, speaking alternately and changing over at each punctuation point. It should be possible to develop a fair turn of speed without losing the sense of the passage.
- Again in pairs, choose about 10 lines of text; as one of the pair maintains a steady beat [^/^/^/^/^/] the partner does his or her best to fit the words to the rhythm.
- Choose a long self-contained unit from the text. Students walk round the room, speaking the script, and turning left or right at each punctuation mark. An alternative to this might be to use one 'speaker' to four or five 'listeners', representing Chaucer's audience. Each time the speaker

reaches a punctuation mark he/she should switch to a new member of the audience, who should respond by looking alert and animated, only allowed to sink back into apathy when he/she moves to the next one.

Grammatical Points

Emphatic negatives Whereas a person who stated that they 'weren't going nowhere, not never' might be considered grammatically incorrect nowadays, Chaucer uses double or triple negatives quite often to give a statement powerful added emphasis. One of the best known is in his description of the Knight in *The General Prologue*:

He never yet no vilenye ne sayde

In al his life, unto no manner wight.

Another occurs in the Wife's prologue:

...may they nat biquethe for no thing

To noon of us hir vertuous living.

In both cases the multiple negatives strengthen the force of what is being said.

Word elision In modern written English words and phrases are often run together (elided) to represent the spoken form of these words: 'didn't', 'can't', 'won't', 'I've', and so on. Chaucer uses short forms of words too, especially in forming the negative. In his time it was usual to form a negative by placing 'ne' before the verb. Often this elided into the verb. Thus 'ne was' is the Chaucerian form of 'was not', but it was often written as 'nas'. Elsewhere in *The General Prologue* Chaucer writes 'noot', short for 'ne woot', meaning 'did not know'.

The 'y' prefix The past tense of a verb sometimes has a 'y' before the rest of the verb, particularly when the verb is passive:

his halve cours yronne	has run half his course
a man is wel yshrive	a man is fully absolved
he sholde ypunisshed be	he should be punished

The 'possessive' form of nouns In modern English we indicate possession by means of an apostrophe: 'the hat of the man' becomes 'the man's hat'. Middle English had a particular formation that is still used in modern German. Where we now use an apostrophe followed by an 's', Chaucer uses the suffix 'es': 'the man's hat' becomes 'the mannes hat', with the 'e' indicating that the word has two syllables.

Introduction to The General Prologue

The work opens with a moving evocation of the world waking up from winter, of life returning, and of people's longings for life and for change. It is this longing–religious and non-religious in origin–that makes people gather for their journey. Before they set out, Chaucer tells us that he is going to describe them as he saw them ('so as it semed to me', l. 39). The description of each pilgrim follows, occupying most of *The General Prologue*.

The Knight is travelling with his son, the Squire, and a servant, the Yeoman, as his retinue. The Knight has just returned from the holy wars on the fringes of Christendom. They are followed by the Prioress, the Monk and the Friar, all members of religious orders.

The Merchant, the Clerk, the Sergeant at Law and the Franklin are professional men. The Haberdasher, the Dyer, the Carpenter, the Webbe (weaver) and the Tapicer (tapestry maker; accompanied by their wives and their Cook) are a group of skilled and prosperous guildsmen with social ambitions. The Shipman is a rather sinister figure, set apart, as perhaps befits a seafarer. The Physician is next, but he fits in socially with the Merchant and the Franklin.

The Wife of Bath is a glorious exception to every rule and category. She is followed by the Parson and his brother, the Plowman, both of them examples of deep Christian goodness. They are followed by the Miller, a coarse and unpleasant man; the Manciple, an enigmatic domestic bursar for one of the inns of court; the Reeve, who manages his master's estates; the Summoner, a repulsive lecher who uses his position to satisfy his lusts; and the Pardoner, an ambiguous creature who preys upon people's fears of damnation to make a good living for himself.

Chaucer declares that he is describing these characters because it is 'acordaunt to resoun' (l. 37). *The General Prologue* is evidently to be more than a literary amusement; it is also to be a rational account of the pilgrims, their lives and their motives. Nearly 700 lines later he completes his descriptions. He gives a conventional disclaimer (p. 77) that the blunt or uncouth speech used by some of the characters should not be blamed on him but on the need to tell the story properly. This convention becomes a device behind which he can withdraw as a poet and as narrator. The pilgrims will, apparently, speak for themselves, untroubled by social, moral or ecclesiastical disapproval.

The Host, Harry Bailey, suggests that they tell each other tales during the pilgrimage, and offers a prize for the best one. This device introduces the idea of a game, which further distances the pilgrimage from conventional piety. The rules of this game are Chaucer's own. He can use them to digress from his declared purpose and from the accepted norms of religion, society and literary forms to present his ideas and characters. A detail about one character in *The General Prologue* contrasts with something said by, or about, another, and Chaucer the narrator takes a different stance to Chaucer the poet when it suits him. The result is a picture of a group of people whose characteristics, earthy and ideal, express the chaotic individuality of ordinary life.

The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales

- Read through the first 18 lines, aloud, in small groups. Do not worry about the pronunciation; just read the words to understand the general meaning. It will help to watch the punctuation.
- In groups of four or five, read through lines 1–18, looking for references to either a worldly or a religious mood. Read these lines aloud, trying to bring out the different moods. Does Chaucer imply that something is stirring in man's spiritual nature? What sort of journey do these readings suggest?
- In the same groups, write your own version of lines 1–18 in one long sentence, trying to imitate Chaucer's tone.

1 **shoures soote** sweet showers

2 **droghte of March** [March is in fact a dry month.]

4 **Of which vertu engendred is the flour** whose power brings flowers into bloom

5 **Zephirus** the west wind [bringing warmth and life-giving rain]

eek also

6 **holt** copse

8 **Ram** the sign of Aries [The sun passes through this sign in spring. It also suggests sexual power. There was a sophisticated knowledge of astrology in Chaucer's time; dates and times were often measured by the system of the zodiac.]

10 **That slepen al the night with open ye** amorousness in spring makes birds [probably nightingales] sing for nights on end

11 **(So priketh hem nature in hir corages)** so nature urges them in their desires

13 **palmeres** pilgrims

14 **ferne halwes** distant shrines

[**Halwes** means hallows or saints, as in All Hallows Eve (Hallowe'en)–All Saints Eve.]

kowthe known, familiar

15 **every shires ende** from every part of every county

17 **seke** seek

18 **seeke** sick

Chaucer paints a picture, in one long sentence, of the world waking up to spring: he talks about the season itself, plants, Zephirus the warm west wind, the sun in its progress through the zodiac, and birds, all before he mentions people and their springtime wish to visit foreign parts on pilgrimage. Finally, he narrows the focus to a particular place, Canterbury, where St Thomas the martyr is buried.

Here biginneth the Book of the Tales of Caunterbury
Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veine in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodie,
That slepen al the night with open ye
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.