

GEORGE ABBOT ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

Born 1562 – Died 1633

A statue of George Abbot stands at the top of Guildford High Street, an open book in his hand, with Holy Trinity church behind him and The Hospital of the Blessed Trinity in front. The monument and buildings sum up the core elements of Abbot's biography.

George Abbot was born in Guildford, becoming **Archbishop of Canterbury** in 1610. He played a significant part in the translation of the **King James Bible**, published in 1611 and founded the **Hospital of the Blessed Trinity** to provide for poor men and women of Guildford. When he died in 1633, his brother and executor, Morris Abbot, carried out his wish that he should be buried in Holy Trinity, Guildford where his memorial is a notable example of a **renaissance style tomb**



Figure 1 George Abbot School of Paul van Somer 1623; by kind permission of the Master of Abbot's Hospital

Abbot's father was a cloth worker who married Alice Marsh in St Mary's church Guildford in 1548. They lived near the river Wey, at the lower end of the town. The couple had six sons. The whole family is portrayed on a brass plaque in the South east corner of Holy Trinity church. Several of the boys had notable careers: Richard became Mayor of Guildford, Robert Master of Balliol and Bishop of Salisbury and John a lawyer while Morris became a freeman of the Drapers' and the Levant Companies and an MP. He was Sheriff of the City of London in 1627 and Lord Mayor in 1638.



Figure 2 Memorial to Abbot in Holy Trinity church

Having attended the Royal Grammar school, George Abbot followed his brother Robert to Balliol College Oxford. He gained a doctorate in divinity and published several theological works including his thirty sermons preached on the (short) book of Jonah (1600). More surprisingly he also wrote *A Briefe Description of the Whole World* (1599) showing some of the energy and curiosity of contemporary merchants and seamen. As Vice Chancellor of the University in 1603, he went to greet King James when he travelled south on his accession to the English throne. While his brother Robert became the king's chaplain, George was chosen as chaplain by George Home, Earl of Dunbar, a close advisor to the king. Scots Calvinists had radically reformed the Scottish church, but with his increased power and independence, James wished to re-establish episcopal government. When he sent the Earl of Dunbar to Scotland in 1608, Abbot went with him. He was effective in persuading the Scots to accept the consecration of bishops and was rewarded a year later with the bishopric of Coventry and Lichfield. Almost immediately after consecration he was nominated as Bishop of London.

Obtaining agreement to a fresh, scholarly translation of the Bible had been the main achievement of the more puritan clerics at the Hampton Court Conference on church affairs in 1604. Six companies of scholars undertook the work. To these men we owe the vivid richness of the King James Bible. George Abbot served with one of two groups of Oxford men. This company worked on crucially important books: the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the Book of Revelation. The new translation was published in 1611.

The same year, perhaps the high point of his career, George Abbot became Archbishop of Canterbury. He was not a popular choice but Lord Dunbar had recommended him to the king. Initially he had the support of the heir apparent, Prince Henry, who died in 1612. Queen Anne of Denmark continued to support him until her death in 1615. The king however, was pragmatic in his beliefs and increasingly irked by Abbot's rigidity. Abbot sought to maintain Calvinist doctrine and good conduct. He believed that the Church of England should unite the whole kingdom providing belief and practice suitable for all. He was responsible for the last two executions for heresy in England as well as the deaths of fourteen Roman Catholics. However, he also corresponded with the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople and sponsored a monk from Mount Athos to study at Oxford. As archbishop he played a significant part in secular government being appointed a Privy Councillor in 1611 and serving as First Lord of the Treasury for two years from 1618 to 1621.

Abbot sought, through a charitable foundation, to leave some practical legacy of his time as archbishop. His father had been a cloth worker. Although the industry had been and was still important to Guildford, it was in recession in the face of London competition, lower standards of production and the import of new textiles. By 1618 he was confident that he could afford to build both a "manufacture" to give training and fresh employment to those in the cloth industry, and a hospital to provide for 12 men and 8 women who were poor and too old to work. The Hospital of the Blessed Trinity, modelled on a university college, was built and formally opened in 1622. By 1630 the manufacture started to make linen from flax grown locally.



Figure 3 The Hospital of the Blessed Trinity Guildford

The Archbishop's influence was irretrievably damaged in 1621. Abbot killed a gamekeeper, Peter Hawkins, in a hunting accident at Bramshill. He withdrew to Guildford, to the almost fully-built Hospital, while two commissions debated whether he could continue as archbishop. Although he was subsequently pardoned by the king, he continued to fast once a month in penitence for the death, paid £20 annually to Peter Hawkins' widow and left her £20 in his will.

The king drew on Abbot's spiritual support when he was dying in 1625 and the archbishop crowned the new king, Charles I. However George Abbot played less and less part in church affairs or at court. William Laud, the Bishop of London and George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham opposed him and became increasingly powerful. Abbot's health was deteriorating. He died, aged 72 years, at his palace in Croydon on 4th August 1633, having drawn up his will a year before. In the will, Abbot requested that he should be buried in Guildford, naming his brother Morris and Morris' son as executors. His body was taken from Croydon to Guildford, being received by the Mayor on 4th September. It was interred in the chapel on the south side of the chancel in the first Holy Trinity Church.

Morris commissioned a fine renaissance style monument for his brother. The work was carried out by John and Mathias Christmas, who were London wood carvers and sculptors, and completed in 1635. When the church tower fell in 1740, the tomb was one of the very few parts of the building not to be destroyed. It was reinstated in the new church which opened in 1763. In 1888 the memorial was moved a little further east, into the new south or organ chapel, where it still stands.



Figure 4 Tomb of George Abbot by John and Mathias Christmas 1635

With many thanks to Roger Howes for photography