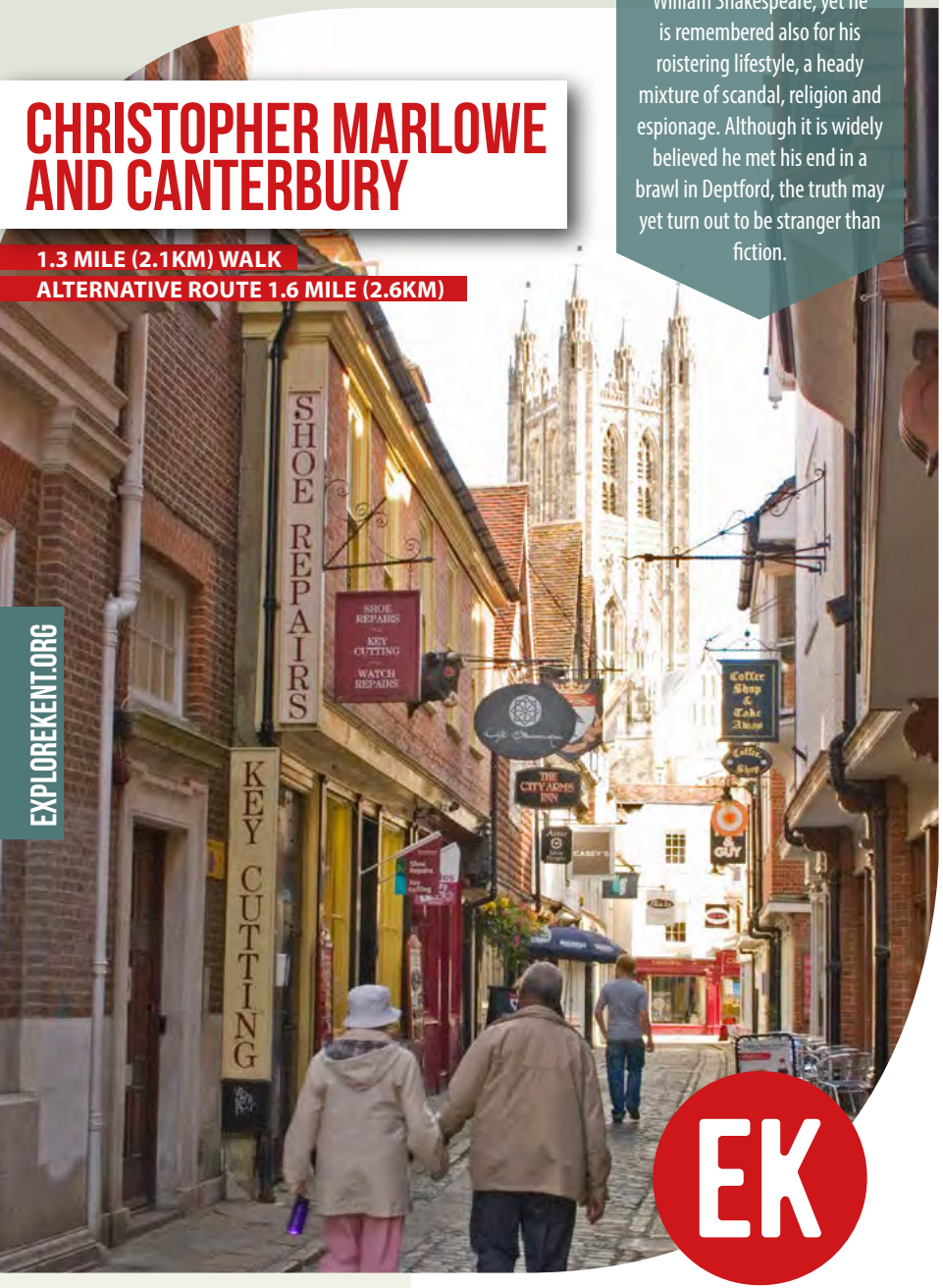
North Downs Way

NATIONAL TRAIL

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE AND CANTERBURY

1.3 MILE (2.1KM) WALK
ALTERNATIVE ROUTE 1.6 MILE (2.6KM)

The playwright and poet Christopher Marlowe was born in Canterbury in 1564, the son of a shoemaker. His groundbreaking use of blank verse and dynamic plotlines paved the way for William Shakespeare, yet he is remembered also for his roistering lifestyle, a heady mixture of scandal, religion and espionage. Although it is widely believed he met his end in a brawl in Deptford, the truth may yet turn out to be stranger than fiction.



ROUTE DESCRIPTION

1 Marlowe's home: St George's Church

Christopher Marlowe was baptised at the church of St George the Martyr on Saturday, 26 February1564; the entry in the parish register is held at Canterbury Cathedral Archives. Christopher's parents, John and Katherine Marlowe, were married here on 22 May 1561, a union that lasted nearly forty-four years until their deaths in 1605.

The house, believed to have been the Marlowe family home and the workshop for shoemaker John Marlowe in the sixteenth century, was where Fenwick department store stands today. John became a freeman of Canterbury in 1564, the year of Christopher's birth, which entitled him to trade in the city. Until leaving Canterbury for Cambridge, Christopher lived here with his parents who had nine children, six of whom survived into adulthood.

From the clock tower, go down the High Street.

After 160 metres, turn right into Butchery Lane towards the cathedral.

Turn left at the end towards the Buttermarket.

2 Marlowe's Canterbury: The Buttermarket and The Sun Inn

At the time of Christopher Marlowe's birth, Canterbury was a small town of about seven hundred households, with wooden framed buildings like the Sun Inn. This was the home of Marlowe's contemporary from the King's School, the writer John Lyly. The city was crowded, dirty and full of disease.

At this point, decide whether to enter the grounds of Canterbury Cathedral, where fees apply. (Visit www.canterbury-cathedral.org or phone 01227 762862 for details.)

If you go into the cathedral precinct, head through the gates and follow the path to the left of the cathedral round towards the cloisters.

Continue straight ahead through the cloisters, where you will find Kent Archives through the third entrance.

If you don't visit the Cathedral, continue down Sun Street, past the Tourist Information Centre and into Palace Street.

Turn left >before the Bell and Crown pub< and you will see St Alphege Church. (Skip ahead to 4.)

3 Marlowe's school days: Cathedral, Cathedral Archives and the King's School

When he was fourteen, Marlowe became a King's Scholar, one of "fifty boys both destitute of the help of friends and endowed with minds apt for learning".

Pupils were expected to speak in Latin at all times, even when playing. The school day began at six in the morning with a psalm and litany and ended at five in the evening with a psalm, a litany and a prayer. As well as learning religion and music, the scholars sang Mass in the cathedral every morning. At the age of sixteen and a half, Marlowe won a scholarship to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, becoming Bachelor of the Arts in 1584.

His time at the King's School is commemorated by a plaque.

Canterbury Cathedral Archives is on the site of the medieval dormitory of Canterbury Cathedral Priory and continues a tradition of record-keeping at the cathedral that dates back at least 1300 years. The collection contains several documents relating to Christopher Marlowe and his family. Visit the web page www.canterbury-cathedral.org/history/archives to plan a visit to Canterbury Cathedral Archives.

Leaving Kent Archives, turn left into the covered walkway.

At the end turn left again, out into the grounds of Kings School.

Continue round the green towards the gate in the far-left hand corner.

Leave the precinct and turn left down Palace Street.

Once you reach the Bell and Crown pub, turn right to find St Alphege Church.

4 Marlowe's influences: St Alphege Church

When Protestant refugees fleeing religious persecution on the continent first came to Canterbury, St Alphege was the church allotted for their use until their numbers became so great they moved to the cathedral crypt.

In 1572, when Marlowe was eight years old, the city would have been abuzz with reports of the Massacre of St Bartholomew's Eve. Over three thousand French Protestants, or Huguenots, were murdered in Paris on the orders of Catherine de Médicis, mother of the king, Charles IX.

"Agent for England, send thy mistress word
What this detested Jacobin
hath done". The Massacre at Paris, Act Five, Scene Five

Continue past St Alphege Church.

At the end of the road turn left.

Take the next road on the right, The Friars.

5 Celebrating Marlowe: The Marlowe Theatre and Marlowe Memorial

Canterbury has a long theatrical tradition. In the early sixteenth century the city's craftsmen could be fined or gaoled for not acting in religious plays. In Marlowe's lifetime, players would have performed in courtyards, inns and private houses.

The Marlowe memorial, fondly known as Kitty, depicts the Muse of Poetry. The pedestal features characters from Marlowe's plays: Tamburlaine, Dr Faustus, Barabas and Edward II.

After the Marlowe Theatre continue to the High Street.

Turn right towards the West Gate Tower.

6 The Marlowe family: The Westgate Tower

Westgate is the only gate to the city that still stands. At one time it had a portcullis and drawbridge, and in Marlowe's time it was the city gaol, imprisoning debtors, thieves and murderers. Marlowe's father John appears frequently in the city archives, taking neighbours to court over petty squabbles and being chased by irate landlords for unpaid debts. Although the family were often forced to move home, John managed to avoid imprisonment here, going on to become warden treasurer of the city's Company of Shoemakers.

Retrace your steps back along the High Street to the Canterbury Pilgrims Hospital.

7 Marlowe's early life: Eastbridge Hospital and The Weavers

In 1569, Archbishop Matthew Parker established a school for twenty boys in the chapel and endowed two scholarships at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. Christopher Marlowe may well have been a pupil here before attending the King's School and becoming a Parker Scholar at Corpus Christi.

The Weavers, built in the early sixteenth century to house Protestant refugees from the continent who brought their textile skills to Canterbury, would have been a familiar sight to young Christopher.

Turn right down Stour Street to the Greyfriars guest house.

Go right through the black gates and into the gardens.

8 Marlowe the heretic: The Greyfriars

The sixteenth century was a dangerous time. People could be executed for heresy – holding religious beliefs that were not sanctioned by the state. Government informers claimed that Marlowe converted people to atheism and made jokes about the Bible. He was arrested on 18 May 1593 and released on bail.

The Franciscan friars built their priory after their arrival in England in 1224. The friary was dissolved in 1538, four years after two of the friars were executed for treason after opposing Henry VIII. The King's divorce resulted in a struggle for England's soul between Catholics and Protestants that dominated Marlowe's lifetime. The Greyfriars returned to Canterbury in the last century and now worship in the Greyfriars Chapel once more.

Take a walk round the Franciscan Garden and relax in this peaceful oasis in the heart of the city.

Upon leaving the priory turn right towards the Museum of Canterbury.

9 Marlowe's signature: Stour Street and the Poor Priests' Hospital

Christopher Marlowe came to Stour Street on 30 of September 1586 as a witness to the will of his aunt, Katherine Benchkin. Marlowe's brother-in-law, John Moore, told how Marlowe read the will aloud:

The will is the only surviving example of Marlowe's signature and is kept at Canterbury Cathedral Archives.

Housed inside a medieval poor priests' hospital, the Museum of Canterbury has an interactive Marlowe exhibition where you can find out more about his life and work and investigate his mysterious death.

Leaving the museum, follow Hawks Lane.

Turn left at the end past The Canterbury Tales into the High Street.

Turning left on the High Street you will see the Queen Elizabeth's Guest Chamber which is now a coffee shop.

Mercery Lane is in front of you, the the site of Chequers of the Hope Inn.

10 Marlowe the spy: Queen Elizabeth's Guest Chamber

Adorned with elaborate plasterwork, this building was the focus of great excitement in 1573 when Queen Elizabeth stayed here for several days, including her fortieth birthday, which was celebrated with a feast at the Archbishop's Palace. Christopher Marlowe was then nine years old and the pageantry and majesty of the Queen's visit would later provide inspiration for scenes of lavish wealth and power in Tamburlaine.

"A god is not so glorious as a king. I
think the pleasure they enjoy in heaven
Cannot compare with kingly joys in earth"
Tamburlaine the Great, Part One, Act Two, Scene Five

The Queen would touch Marlowe's life once again when he was recruited by the English secret service while a student at Corpus Christi College. His work for the government was acknowledged when the college attempted to withhold his master's degree as punishment for mysterious periods of absence.

The Privy Council wrote a letter informing them that Queen Elizabeth did not wish to see her agent penalised for serving his country and Marlowe was awarded his degree.

11 Marlowe the rebel: Chequers of the Hope Inn and Mercery Lane

The vast Chequers of the Hope Inn stretched ninety metres from the corner of Mercery Lane. Built to make money from the influx of visitors to the city, the ground floor contained shops selling all manner of goods. Poorer pilgrims were squashed into dormitories on the top floor, while rich pilgrims took suites on the first floor, overlooking the grand courtyard where players such as the Earl of Leicester's men acted for their entertainment. No doubt young Christopher knew of this and may even have seen plays here that fired his imagination and ambition.

On Friday 15 September 1592, on a visit home to Canterbury, somewhere close to the corner of Mercery Lane, Christopher Marlowe attacked a tailor, William Corkine, with a staff and dagger. Corkine filed a case for assault in the civil court. In return, Marlowe pressed criminal charges against Corkine. Three hundred and sixty-five years after both cases were dropped, Canterbury's Cathedral and City Archivist, Dr William Urry, discovered a rosebud pressed between the pages of the town sergeant's plea book. Could this have been a peace offering between Marlowe and Corkine?

A reckoning in Deptford

On 30 May 1593, Marlowe spent the day with three fellow government agents in a house in Deptford, London. It was said that Marlowe argued with one of these men, Ingram Frizer, over "the reckoning" – the bill for their meal. In the ensuing fight, Frizer stabbed Marlowe in self defence. England's most famous dramatist was dead at the age of twenty-nine.

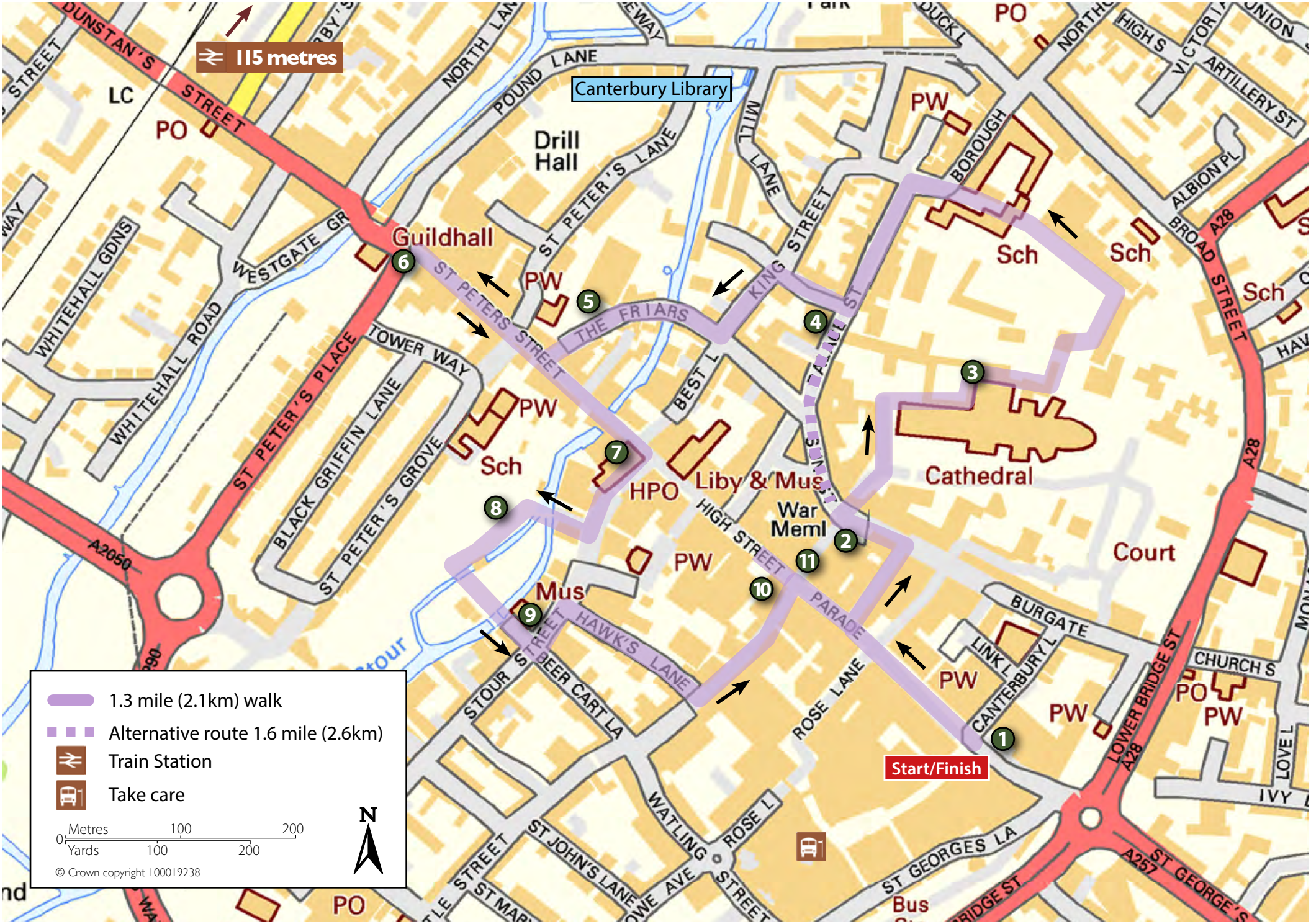
The Shakespeare question

Some people believe that Marlowe did not die in Deptford and that, aided by powerful friends, he fled the country and lived in exile on the continent. He could have continued writing plays and sent them back to England to be published under the name William Shakespeare. It has been suggested that Shakespeare's sonnets are a cryptic account of Marlowe's life in exile.

Marlowe's legacy

Whatever the truth behind the events in Deptford, no-one can doubt Marlowe's tremendous impact on Elizabethan drama and his legacy to the English language.

More than four hundred years after his death, Christopher Marlowe's star still burns brightly in the city of his birth.


115 metres
Canterbury Library
Drill Hall
Guildhall
Cathedral
Court
Liby & Mus
War Meml
HPO
Mus
Start/Finish
1.3 mile (2.1km) walk
Alternative route 1.6 mile (2.6km)
Train Station
Take care
Metres 0 100 200
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