



V&A reminds Paris of our medieval marvels

England may have severed its ties with the EU, but it has not always been so cut off from the Continent (Adam Sage writes). For centuries its rulers spoke French, its tastes were European and its craftsmanship was admired on the other side of the Channel. Now an exhibition of medieval treasures from the Victoria and Albert Museum has opened in Paris in an attempt to show that the English are not quite as backward and isolated as the French sometimes imagine.

The exhibition, *When the English Spoke French*, underlines not only the strength of medieval cross-Channel bonds but also the sophistication of English craftsmen at the time.

"I think [the exhibition] shows how close England and France have been for centuries and how they

have a shared culture," said Amin Jaffer, director of the Al Thani Collection, which is displaying the objects at its museum in the Hôtel de la Marine in central Paris. "We thought it was very timely to have an exhibition about England and its relationship with continental Europe."

After the Norman Conquest in 1066, French became the language of the court and upper classes in England. Four hundred years later, the rings worn by the ruling class still had inscriptions in French. Several, mostly dating from the 15th century, have been lent by the V&A. "Bone joy



[Good end, good joy]," says another in what is thought to be a wish for a peaceful death and a

an [In good year]," says one probably given to mark the new year. "Bone fine, bone joye

happy afterlife. "Pense de moy [Think of me]," says a third in a reminder that French was long the language of love for the elite in England.

At a time when English possessions included swathes of what is now France, notably after the marriage of Eleanor of



Items on show at the Hôtel de la Marine, far left, include fine examples of embroidery, glassware and a casket depicting Thomas Becket's murder, below left

throughout Europe, for instance. Some 50 reliquaries were made in Limoges, the city in central France that was then an English possession, and one is in the exhibition in Paris. It shows the killing and funeral of Becket, who was Archbishop of Canterbury, and is said to be testament to his saintly reputation on the Continent.

The exhibition runs until October and shows how the continental queens who were sent to England to marry the monarch, often as girls, helped to shape the national culture. Dr James Robinson, keeper of decorative art and sculpture at the V&A, is also keen to show that English artefacts were viewed as pinnacles of sophistication. Opus Anglicanum, as English embroidery became known, was particularly appreciated.

Robinson said the talents of English medieval craftsmen had largely been forgotten because much of their work was destroyed in the Reformation; some of the items in the exhibition survived only because they had been taken across the Channel beforehand. "The exhibition helps to discredit the idea that the medieval period was primitive and barbaric," he said.

Aquitaine to Henry II in 1152, and when English monarchs sometimes spent more time on the other side of the Channel than at home, the ties were not only linguistic. When Thomas Becket was murdered in 1170 after Henry II asked to be rid "of this turbulent priest", there was shock

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