Becket relics to go on show at Canterbury
By Victoria Combe, Churches Correspondent

RELICS of St Thomas a Becket, including bones and parts of his brain, are to be returned from Rome to Canterbury Cathedral for the first time since the Reformation.

A gold-trimmed casket containing a white linen shirt worn by the saint and fragments of his physical remains will be displayed as part of an exhibition in the cathedral from April to October. During the Reformation the relics of St Thomas, who was murdered inside the cathedral in 1170, were sealed in a glass-sided casket and sent to Rome for protection. They are currently kept in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore.

The Dean of Canterbury, the Very Rev John Simpson, said that it was a "controversial" decision for an Anglican cathedral to display relics, the veneration of which become an almost exclusively Roman Catholic practice. Tests done five years ago in Italy proved that the shirt was 12th-century and belonged to a man 6ft 6in tall, the height of the saint. The bone and brain fragments were also found to be of the same era.

The exhibition, called Power to Inspire, will also house Becket's mitre and a gold and enamel chasse, which was recently acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum. While the dean believes the relics to be "important" to the Church as a whole and the cathedral particularly, he will face opposition from many Anglicans. The Prayer Book Society yesterday described the cathedral's display of relics as "unnecessary and irreverent".

Margot Thompson, secretary of the society, which seeks to preserve traditional Anglican liturgy, said:

"Bringing relics back to Canterbury is going back to the theology of pre-Reformation days. If this is being done to aid tourism or pilgrimage the society would not be happy."

The exhibition traces the life of Becket, who was made Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162. Eight years later, after a dispute with Henry II, he was killed by four knights in his own cathedral. It is part of wider celebrations at Canterbury to mark the 14th centenary of the arrival of St Augustine, sent from Rome to convert the heathens, who became the first Archbishop of Canterbury.