

# Da Vinci DECODED

London plays a starring role in the millennium's first blockbuster bestseller. **Simon Hardeman** goes out on location.

**F**or an instant, Rémy felt a surge of fear, but the Teacher simply slipped it in his trousers pocket.' *The Da Vinci Code* has brought an extraordinary mystery into the open: how can such bad writing sell so many books? Millions around the world have overlooked the fact that surges of fear can't be slipped into 'trousers' pockets and been enthralled by the bestseller's promise of a paperback-priced epiphany wrapped up in the biggest conspiracy theory ever, located in real streets they can wander themselves. And the phenomenon shows no sign of slowing down: more than 20 million copies of the book have been sold world-wide; Tom Hanks is now starring in the movie tie-in, and dozens of *Da Vinci Code* tours are on offer in London alone.

In Dan Brown's book, the mysterious Teacher supposedly slips said surge of fear into his pocket in St James's Park. The novel's heroes have come to the capital on the trail of the Holy Grail, spurred by cryptic clues that first take them to Temple Church, where one of them is kidnapped. The remaining two then go, via Temple tube station, to a library at King's College, and then to Westminster Abbey, where they run into the person who was abducted, along with one of the St James's Park villains, for a set-piece climax. In the interim, a killer albino priest finds sanctuary at the London headquarters of a shadowy Catholic group bent on world domination (no, not the Roman Catholic Church itself – another one).

The effect of the *Da Vinci Code* mass hysteria is most evident outside Temple Church ([www.templechurch.com](http://www.templechurch.com)), in the Inns of Court south of Fleet Street, where Brown's 'deserted alleys' echo to the sound of guides lecturing gaggles of late- to middle-aged tourists. Inside the building, the very personable Reverend and Valiant Master of the Temple (basically the vicar), Robin Griffiths-Jones, is in no doubt that visitor numbers have more than doubled, and he's not complaining. Quaintly, when a visitor asks, 'Have you read the book,' the verger still thinks they mean the Bible. Griffiths-Jones is happily capitalising on the numbers – he offers an entertaining free talk at 2pm every Friday on *The Da Vinci Code* and the history of Temple Church, during which he affects a pretty good approximation of a Monty Python-style cliché vicar. Before publicising the (excellent) music concerts and Sunday services, he genially rebuts most of the 'facts' in the book – but you don't need him for that. Even without the tourists, the area

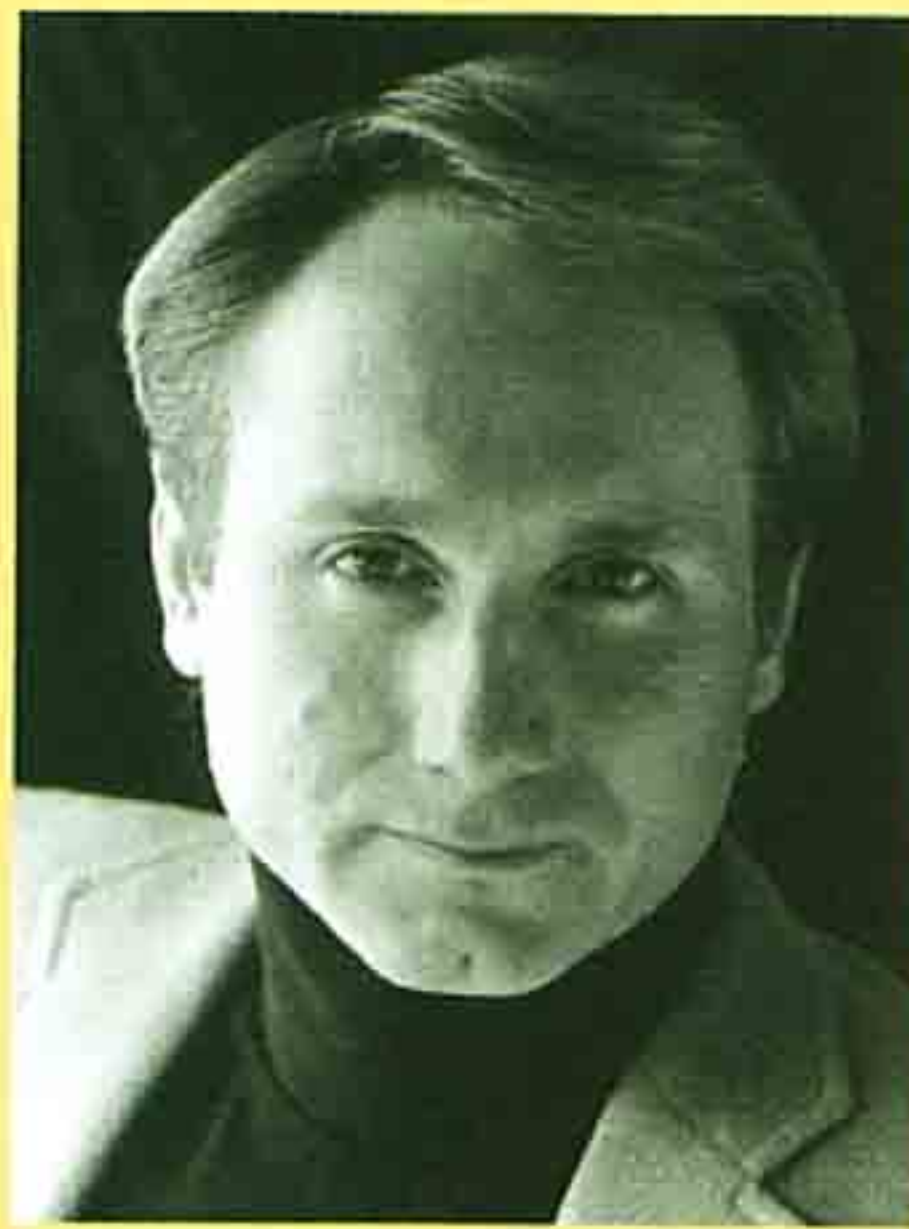
wouldn't be deserted – it's a mass of legal chambers with people ambling around all the time, even in the early morning when our heroes drop by. The church is not made from 'rough-hewn stone' – indeed, the central section is as smooth as a new-born infant's rear. And there are few 'doves cooing in the architecture'; instead a few pigeons threaten strategic defecation. The building is no more 'bleak' than the average Anglican church (the blue stained-glass windows are actually rather spectacular) and the circular structure is not 'pagan', it's just modelled on an original in Jerusalem.

There are no (nor have there been for 15 years) turnstiles for our heroes to hurdle at Temple tube station. There are instead plastic barriers. And there is no 'grimy labyrinth of tunnels and platforms', unless your idea of a labyrinth is to turn left for westbound and right for eastbound before going down a short flight of stairs. But our heroes needn't have come here anyway. Kings College's theology department, is not, as Brown claims, next to the Houses of Parliament. It's

exactly 240 footsteps and two and a half minutes away from Temple Church, in Chancery Lane. The 'Research Institute in Systematic Theology' does not meet here, but the octagonal library mentioned in the text does exist. Unfortunately, visitors without student ID cards are firmly repelled by stony-faced security guards. Rough-hewn stony-faced guards, who, when asked if one can go in to look for the Holy Grail, answer: 'Why? Have you lost it?'

But they are veritably garrulous compared to the mysterious occupants of 5 Orme Court, near (but not 'overlooking') Kensington Gardens, which Brown lists as London's Opus Dei Centre. In the UK the organisation's profile has been heightened by the revelation that the Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly, is involved with it. Brown has his fugitive monk push on a door and find it open. But the door has now been stripped of its bell, letterbox, and even its number, and it does not give way to even the heaviest shove. To complete the picture, heavy curtains block all attempts to see if there is a man in a cloak waiting for Opus

## COVER STORY



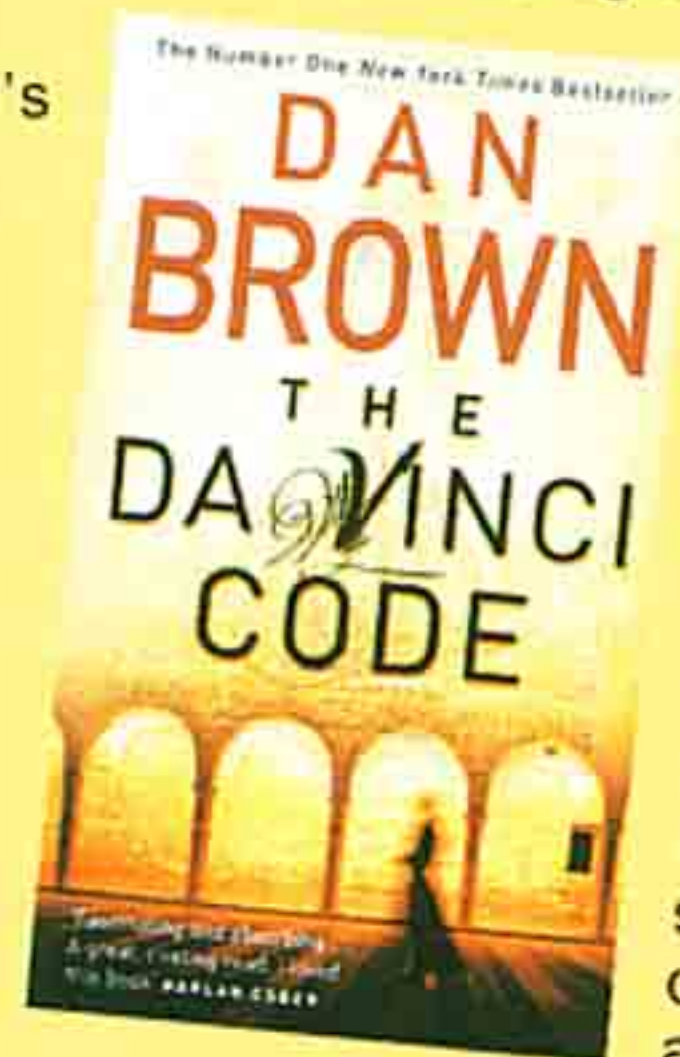
Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, published in 2003, is possibly the only bestseller genuinely deserving of the description 'publishing phenomenon'. Not only has it achieved record sales – over 20 million copies

worldwide – and profits – Brown is reckoned to have made over £140 million – but it has created waves of commerce and controversy worthy of headlines in their own right.

Its heretical plot, claiming that Jesus's descendants are alive today, caused international offence (the book is banned in the Lebanon) and a cultish mass interest much explored on the internet. The authors of *The Holy Blood & The Holy Grail*, which posited the holy bloodline theory two decades ago, are suing Brown's publishers for plagiarism; their

defence is unlikely to be helped by the fact that a principal *Da Vinci* character is named Leigh Teabing – which, in an ironically cryptographic twist, bears a striking

anagrammatic similarity to the surnames of *Holy Blood* authors Richard Leigh and Michael Baigent. Meanwhile, such mass sales and interest are having an effect on world tourism. Visitor authorities in London, Paris and Scotland are citing it as having a significant impact on visitor numbers, and there is evidence that it contributed to Eurostar's busiest year ever in 2004. *Ruth Jarvis*



### Westminster Abbey.

Dei numeraries in need of somewhere private to rip into their own flesh. Ironically, this anonymity now makes it quite the most mysterious location mentioned in the book.

More welcoming is St James's Park and the adjacent Horse Guards Parade. That is unless you want to park your car on it, as one of the book's characters does. Its proximity to royalty, government, and military installations means parking is a risky business. One policeman suggested that any vehicle left there would be in danger of meeting its maker in a controlled explosion. And the cameras and heavy police presence mean it would be a particularly bad place to carry out a 'secret killing', as happens in the book. Maybe Brown is relying on the Dickensian 'morning fog' he mistakenly thinks still afflicts the capital. And perhaps this would have some special refractory effect that would

allow those parked here to enjoy 'splendid views of the Houses of Parliament'.

Surprisingly, staff at Westminster Abbey claim to have noticed no *Da Vinci Code* effect – in fact, they would quite like one. The building is not supported by the Church, nor by any other public money. It is a 'Royal Peculiar', which has to fund itself via entrance fees (£8 per adult) from the million-plus visitors it gets every year. These numbers mean that it is highly unlikely ever to be, as one of the characters observes, 'practically empty'. Its communications supremo John McAngus says there has been no increase in visitor numbers and staff have hardly been bothered by questions relating to *The Da Vinci Code*. A few may have had to field enquiries about Brown's (non-existent) complimentary brass-rubbing supplies for those wishing to emulate one of the villains and leave a note below Sir Isaac

Newton's tomb.

This note leads to the Chapter House, which Brown conveniently closes for renovation to allow his final confrontation to take place in the building's (non-existent) 'vast'ness. Thankfully, it hasn't been renovated. It's been left pretty much as it has been for centuries.

On the way out of the Abbey, visitors visit a shop that offers for sale many Abbey-related books (with, curiously, the *Ultimate Motorcycle Encyclopaedia*). There are histories, guides, and novels by Austen, Dickens, and, even, er, Ellis Peters. But no *The Da Vinci Code*. Staff can't say why. But, at the bottom of the shelves of books, is the answer – a copy of Sellars and Yeatman's cod-history textbook '1066 And All That'. If you're selling the classic of the history-got-wrong genre, why would you bother with anything else? ●

