

## BOOK REVIEW

Nicholas Orme, *The History of England's Cathedrals*. Yale University Press, New Haven & London. 2024. Pp.306. ISBN 9780300275483. £20.00 pbk.

doi:[10.1017/S1740355324000056](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000056)

Nicholas Orme is one of the most distinguished ecclesiastical historians of mediaeval and early modern England: he is a master of the historical and historiographical panorama. His recent work, *Going to Church in Mediaeval England*, is a perfect example of this genre. This present book too is an amazing 'tour d'horizon', beginning as early as AD 314, with a reference to a bishop in Lincoln in Romano-British times, and stretching forward to the year 2,000 and a little after. This is a revised edition of his 2017 book of the same title. In ten chapters, we are introduced not simply to a bald history of the buildings – indeed he makes it clear that this is not just one more book on English cathedral architecture – instead we are made to engage with the changing cultural, political and ecclesiastical landscape of the nation. The plenitude of this volume is enhanced also by reference to the Roman Catholic cathedrals, established since the restoration of the hierarchy in the mid nineteenth century.

Early on, Orme establishes the nature of these great buildings, noting that primarily each is the 'bishop's church' the home of the diocesan bishop's teaching office, symbolised in his chair, throne or *cathedra*. From earliest times, there was a mixed economy of monastic and non-monastic foundations (often dubbed slightly ironically as 'secular cathedrals'). Following his excursion into the Romano-British period, perhaps one of the thinner sections is that covering the period of the two pronged re-evangelisation of England – from Rome under Augustine and Paulinus to Aidan, Cuthbert, Chad and others from the Irish tradition. There were distinct ecclesiological differences at that time as was made clear in the controversies aired at the Synod of Whitby in 664.

Orme is in no doubt of the sharp changes which followed the 1066 conquest and the impact of the new Norman overlords (of course even here there is a paradox, for the Normans too were migrants from Scandinavia, as were the Danes before them and the Anglo-Saxons from slightly further south). William I established the principle of moving cathedrals to key centres of population. Selsey moved to Chichester, Dorchester-on-Thames to Lincoln, Thetford to Norwich, etc. here was a clear example of wider political issues intruding. There is a powerful description of Becket's fate and its wider impact, which would eventually make Canterbury,

alongside Durham, one of the two key mediaeval pilgrim destinations in England and also giving birth to a wider cultural flowering with early on, for example, the Lindisfarne Gospels and later in the south, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

The importance of cathedrals in the development of education is highlighted. Oddly, one of the key dramatis personae, who amongst other things became Chancellor of the University of Oxford, Robert Grossteste – Bishop of Lincoln, does not figure in the account here. Interesting contrasts are drawn between the monastic and secular cathedrals and especially noting the significance of chantry chapels funded by those who wished their dead to be prayed for in perpetuity. Orme notes architectural developments from the more primitive style in Anglo-Saxon England, to the importation of the wider European Romanesque style and then to Gothic, which itself developed further. A pure *geometric* focus morphed into the later *decorated* tracery and stonework, and eventually into the *perpendicular* style. Music also appears repeated 'in rondo form' throughout all the chapters. Early on, the establishment of polyphony is seen to be crucial.

Next, Orme tackles the impact of the 'English Reformations' from which the cathedrals emerged intact, remarkably appearing much as they had before. There was, of course, desecration, but the various reactions of sixteenth century were conservative enough for episcopacy and the threefold ministry to survive. Henry VIII, generally known for the chaotic nature of his changing moods, did effect important and positive reforms. He effectively saved cathedrals and established them upon a more stable basis. So, following the dissolution of the monasteries, the monastic cathedrals were refounded with a Dean and chapter and became known counter-intuitively as 'cathedrals of the new foundation'.

Secular cathedrals were also reformed and set up in a similar fashion. Henry was the first to add to the stock of cathedrals, with the establishment of new dioceses and thus cathedrals in Oxford, Bristol, Chester and Peterborough.

The Edwardian reformation was more radically Protestant, and it is odd that Orme makes no reference to the revisionist histories of the Reformation of the past generation which has transformed historical scholarship of this period. The impact of the various reformations, including those of Mary Tudor and Elizabeth, is charted and notably their impact on worship and music. Elizabeth's conservatism was largely responsible for the patterns which continue to the present day, with sung offices and a very strong musical tradition, which has been the first stage of musical education for many world famous musicians and composers. Puritans were seen off by the Queen's policies! Richard Hooker's work emerges as the theological foundation of what later was sometimes confusingly called the 'via media', and eventually Anglicanism. Hooker charted a course between Rome and the Puritans, retaining essential elements of the teaching of the Patristic period and indeed of Aquinas.

The impact of William Laud, Launcelot Andrewes, George Herbert and the Caroline tradition moves us into the Stuart period and the tragic events of the Puritan revolution where in some cases terrible damage was done to cathedral fabric; Lichfield was left ruinous! The restoration of the monarchy, however, under Charles II brought cathedrals back to where they had been before the earthquakes of Cromwell's Commonwealth; this mirrored something of their recovery after the Reformation. Even Charles' sops to the more Protestant elements were unnecessary,

with cathedrals re-establishing worship as before the revolution and recovering remarkably swiftly. Even Lichfield was fully restored, at great expense.

The next period, Orme designates, *From Restoration to Romanticism*. This includes the accounts of great travellers, including John Stow, in the late Elizabethan period, William Cobbett and his 'Rural Rides' and Celia Fiennes' amazing and opinionated catalogue of the cathedrals she visited – Bristol was not one her favourites. The culmination of this period came with the beginnings of a new Gothick style, beginning with the pinnacles and dainty windows of Walpole's Strawberry Hill House and leading into the full expression of Gothic which dominated church architecture in the nineteenth century, well outside England – pace St George's Cathedral, Jerusalem, St Paul's Melbourne and even the National Cathedral in Washington DC. The Oxford Movement was a key element here. The beginnings of newly established cathedrals began in the 1840s with Manchester and Ripon, and there was a further explosion of new dioceses in the late nineteenth century and the culmination of cathedral building with the laying of the foundations of Liverpool Cathedral in 1904 which would not be completed until 1978.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Orme notes the reforming legislation, beginning in the 1830s and concluding with the 1999 *Cathedrals' Measure*. More cathedrals followed the establishment of further dioceses, and Guildford and then Coventry Cathedrals were the two entirely new buildings alongside Liverpool. Other innovations are noted including the beginnings of girls' choirs through the inspiration of the director of music, Richard Seal at Salisbury. Significant reforming deans are noted including perhaps most significantly, Frank Bennett, Dean of Chester, between the wars. George Bell's sponsoring of the arts began with his time as Dean of Canterbury, and Canon John Collins of St Paul's founded the *Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament*. The significance of the 'Liturgical Movement' for cathedrals also receives a passing note.

This is a marvellous read and compendious in its range, and with such a project, it is bound to reflect the interests and locations best known to its author. This enthusiasm for the subject is there in abundance and adds to the spice. It is regrettable, however, that the past twenty years, which has been a time of both ferment and creativity for cathedrals, receives very little space. It is such ferment which provoked the assumed need for the most recent *Cathedrals' Measure*, where some of the changes may well seem to be mistaken.

Added to that, the completion of Portsmouth Cathedral, the development of the cloisters at Norwich (the largest addition to a mediaeval cathedral since the Reformation) and the new Fraternity and Undercroft at Carlisle have each been transformative projects. Cathedral finance too remains a critical area for almost all these remarkable buildings. Perhaps this suggests yet one more revised edition addressing these and other associated issues! In the meantime, however, Orme's book is nourishing, engaging and exhilarating and should be widely read even if eventually we may ask for more.

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