

SOUTHWELL - OFFICIAL GUIDE

This is an extract from the town guide to Southwell for 1923. The rest of the guide is copied in the folder on the town.

THE CATHEDRAL

A tradition (based on the writings of that great Saxon Scholar, the Venerable Bede), relates that in the year 630 a church was founded at Southwell by Paulinus, the second Bishop of York, and while we have no positive proof in support of this theory, there is much to be said in its favour, and such evidence cannot altogether be ignored. For over three hundred years there is a blank, and then, in 958, a charter is issued by King Edgar, in which he grants certain Crown lands at Southwell and other parts of the county to Oskytel, the Archbishop of York, and thus is conveyed to us our first definite information. The Archbishop at that time became lord of the manor, and in all probability founded a college of clergy as the centre of his new property, built himself a house, and established a sort of sub-cathedral in the south of his great diocese, like Beverley in the east, and Ripon in the west. That college of clergy founded in Saxon days, developed later into a chapter, and continued through the storm of centuries, only to be swept away through the short-sighted policy of Lord John Russell in 1840.

Another chapter in the history of the Minster was commenced on 11 January 17th, 1884, when it became the cathedral church of the newly-constituted see of Southwell, comprising the two counties of Nottingham and Derby. Three months later, Dr George Ridding, Headmaster of Winchester College, was consecrated Bishop, and began his great work in connection with the formation and development of the diocese, and this has been continued by his successor, Dr. Edwyn Hoskyns, who was translated from the Suffragan Bishopric of Burnley, on the death of Bishop Ridding in 1904.

It is not intended in the following pages to attempt a graphic description of the architectural wonders of Southwell Cathedral; such a thing would be impossible in the space allotted to us. We must be content, therefore, to remind ourselves of just the more important features of the building, together with its rich historical associations.

The Revd W.E.Hodgson, in his "Life of Thomas of Beverley, Archbishop of York" makes the following statement with reference to Southwell Minster:-

"Other churches may be older, a few may be larger, but none are more beautiful", and that great Oxford authority, Mr Bond, says of Southwell:- "That for two hundred years or more, the highest and best of medieval art found cultivated and wealthy patrons at Southwell; twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth century work are all seen here at their best.

"Few of our cathedrals, from the point of view of either architectural design or sculptural detail, can be mentioned in the same breath with Southwell. Nowhere will the architectural student find such a treasure of the best work of the best periods as in the sister churches of the canons of Beverley and Southwell".

It was indeed a most fortunate thing, that at the formation of the diocese, a church was here to hand which in plan and character is a true cathedral, and not simply a large parish church, as in the case of many buildings elevated to cathedral rank in recent years. It consists of a Norman nave of eight bays, with two western towers, north and south transepts of two bays, a massive central tower, and Early English choir of eight bays with smaller transepts, a Decorated period Chapter house, and other appendages, the external length of the cathedral being 318 feet.

Entering the western gateway to the minster precincts, our attention is at once arrested by the massive four-square appearance the building presents, for Southwell is one of the very few early churches in England which still retain their three great towers, and is unique among cathedrals by the fact that its towers are pure Norman from base to parapet.

The nave was probably begun between 1110 and 1114, and consists of eight bays in three stages. Internally, it is a grand specimen of Norman architecture, exhibiting many interesting features, the

aisles retaining their original Norman vaulting. The transepts extend 43 ft from the central tower, and are 28 ft in width, both are divided into three stages, but have no aisles. The choir screen is not only one of the most beautiful features of the cathedral, but it is one of the choicest of the few remaining in the country. It was probably commenced about 1333, by that wealthy and generous Archbishop of York, Walter de Melton, who also completed the west end of the nave at York, and inserted there a screen with many similar features.

The choir is a pure example of the Early English style, being, graceful, simple, and elegant in design. It consists of six bays, together with a sacarium of two bays, and was built by that great Archbishop-builder, Walter de Grey, who also erected the great south transept of York, and the west front of Ripon Cathedral. The combination of triforium and clerestory in one stage, and the great east window of eight lights, at once place it on a pedestal by itself; it is the only cathedral in England possessing these peculiar features.

The Chapter house, approached by a beautiful vestibule from the north choir aisle, is the latest and loveliest of the cathedral buildings. It was probably commenced about 1290, by Archbishop Romanos of York, and may well have furnished the design for the later Chapter house of York, for both are similar in appearance, and both without a central pillar, the only two in England, but whereas York is vaulted in wood, Southwell has a vault of stone springing from between the windows, and following the octagon form.