

From Footstool to Throne
Some thoughts on the Creation of Southwell Diocese

Many visitors are intrigued by our relationship with York, Ripon and Beverley and the continuance of the "Minster" title instead of Cathedral. If the usual, strict definition of a cathedral is accepted {the building in which the cathedra, or seat of the bishop, is found}, then why did not Southwell carry this title from medieval times? Surely early Archbishops had a cathedra in the Minster? However, if one thinks of a cathedra as the principal church of the diocese (holding, of course, the Bishops seat) then one sees how the phrase "Southwell has only been a cathedral since 1884" has gained currency. The early relationship of Southwell, Beverley, Ripon and York has been described as "The throne at York and footstools at Southwell, Beverley and Ripon". This provides an appropriate line of thought as we consider how Southwell came to gain its throne in 1884.

For Southwell, cathedral status had been a long time coming. An Act of Parliament in the reign of Henry VIII declared Southwell to be "The head and mother church of the county," and the king appears to have been in favour of a bishop here. One Dr Cox, afterwards Bishop of Ely, was actually selected for the post but the project was abandoned as no revenues were forthcoming.

Following the great Reform Act and the appointment of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners (1835), the revenues of Southwell Chapter were appropriated and no new appointments were made. The Minster passed under the control of Lincoln. This helped reduce the huge size of Diocese of York. Soon great concern was expressed about the size of Lincoln and Litchfield dioceses; both asked for relief during the 1860's and suggestions were then made for a new diocese covering Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. Suggestion not well received in parts of both counties.

Bishoprics Act (1878) set up new diocese and, after great argument about location of new cathedral, Southwell was selected.

Population of new diocese was about 850,000 and the Act required a firm financial foundation before the Bishop could be installed. £18,000 was raised in the diocese, £40,000 came from Shropshire, Staffordshire, and Lincoln leaving approx £15,000 to be raised. The Bishop of Lincoln and five others entered a bond. Dr. Ridding himself gave £3,500, according to his wife, and the money was raised.

But there was no house for the new Bishop, no organisation, no canonries (the Chapter had died out), and support was slow in coming. Litchfield and Lincoln were asked to surrender two canonries each, but neither would agree. Some help was generously given; the old palace, and five acres, were given by Dr. Trollope, Suffragan Bishop of Nottingham, with the intention of creating a residence but much work needed to be done.

Ridding decided he would live at Thurgaton Priory although Mr. Hassard, the then Archbishop's registrar, advised him to take a house in London and work the Diocese from St Pancras Railway Station!

The new diocese actually came into being through an Order in Council on February 2nd, 1884. Dr. Ridding was consecrated at St. Paul and installed at Southwell on May 28th 1884.

Who then was this man appointed first Bishop of Southwell? A few facts – “born 1828, Schoolboy at Winchester, Exhibitioner at Balliol, 1st class Honours 1851, Deacon 1854, priest 1856, Fellowship at Exeter College then 2nd Master at Winchester where he married the second daughter of his chief Dr. Moberly. Sadly his wife died the following year in childbirth. On Dr. Moberly's retirement, Ridding was elected Head and over the next 16 years developed the college extensively. His second marriage, in 1876, to Laura, the daughter of Lord Selbourne (then Lord Chancellor), probably brought him to the notice of Mr Gladstone, who proposed him for Southwell.

Various newspaper articles of the time dwell on Ridding's ability as a schoolmaster, as a preacher, as an administrator, and as a potential bishop. Accounts of the ceremonies at his consecration and installation can be found in copies of the Newark Advertiser. Contributors were not afraid to be outspoken!

Ridding set about organising the new Diocese with vigour. He visited every parish by rail or road within the first four years and managed to hold services in most of the churches by the turn of the century. He was somewhat hampered in the early years by his duties as junior Bishop, which meant attendance as chaplain in the House of Lords on fifty four days a year for a ten-minute duty. Fortunately this rule was changed in 1887, when a rota system was introduced.

During Bp Ridding's reign, work on the Minster was sufficiently advanced to allow reopening in February 1888, i.e. after completion of work on tower. A new organ was installed in 1892, the nave pulpit given by a Mrs Gordon in 1898 and in 1902 four blocks of new stalls were put in place; these were paid for by Canon Lewis, the Bishop, and the Chapter.

Bp Ridding died in 1904 and was buried at Southwell in the ground next to the south choir aisle, robed and carrying in his arms the pastoral staff carved by Mr Hunston of Tideswell. On her death, his wife was buried beside him.

One action of Bp. Ridding's deserves further comment. He himself designed and paid for the Grant of Arms now used as the diocesan coat of arms. Copies of this can readily be seen in the Minster. A separate note about this will be prepared.