

THE STORY OF SOUTHWELL MINSTER.

Peter Latham'

The beginning of the the story is linked to the history of the sheltered valley in which the Minster stands. Consider this in, say, 100 BC.... good, fertile soil, numerous streams and springs, ample timber, ideal agricultural environment. Iron Age Celtic settlement here, perhaps based upon Burgage Green? Southwell was in Coratini territory which extended from Wash to Humber and included Nottingham and Leicester; pagans, worshipping usually at open sites sometimes associated with springs.

AD 43. Roman invasion changes life in Britain for ever. 9th legion create fort at Lincoln, later small fort at Osmanthorpe near Kirklington Villa built on site of Vicars' Court, small at first but by 400AD measured at least 100x70yards.

Almost every Roman dwelling had shrine of some sort, larger villas had temple in grounds. Where might ours have been? More likely to have been on rising ground to west of villa where Minster now stands. Ground to east of site was marshy and wet.

Christianity present in area before 400AD. (Roman Christian font found at Ad Pontem five miles from Southwell)

Did villa's pagan shrine become Christian chapel?

410 Romans leave. Soon pagan Angles and Saxons arrive. Dark Ages begin. Very dark indeed until 627 when Venerable Bede tells us Roman missionary Paulinus in the area baptising believers in the River Trent near a place called Tiowulfingacaestir, now thought to be Littleborough, near Retford.

Christianity is here to stay.

956 King Eadwig makes gift of land (estate) to Oskytel, Archbishop of York. Original charter lost but we have copy made by percipient scribe in 14th cent. (See Philip Lythe's book.) On this land Saxon church built. Shape, size, and plan not known. All that remains are area of mosaic flooring made with Roman tesserae (under bread pews), part of a column (now in Visitors' Centre), and door lintel (Tympanum) in N Transept.

1086 Norman invasion. N's were great rebuilders of churches.

1108 To raise funds for rebuilding Archbishop Thomas II offers freedom from requirement to make annual pilgrimage to York in return for donation; allowed to make pilgrimage to Southwell instead. As usual building started at E end to bring High Altar into use as soon as possible.

Nave started after 1120. Superb example of Norman Romanesque. Perfect harmony of all elements. Unfussy. Master mason unknown, probably more than one before completed in 1150.. Builders used hoists, treadmills to lift loads, scaffolding, arch formers. Stone used is Mansfield Permian Sandstone; wears well but photographs badly (Hugh Varah). North.Porch, style now transitional. Outside, study of West towers shows transitional arcading also on NW tower yet Early English Gothic on SW tower.

Inverted "V" notch at base of NW tower is a puzzle; earliest record is illustration dated 1672. Surely a roofline? May have sheltered crucifix or statue like continental roadside calvary. Recent repointing elsewhere with pale mortar revealed another, smaller, inverted "V" high on outside wall of North_Transsept. Did a roof here shelter another figure? There was an entrance below; only removed in 1876 and still easily seen from inside the church.

1234. Norman quire (59') was now considered too small, replaced by present Early English Gothic masterpiece. Again building started from E end; to see 'the join' stand in S quire aisle with back to Roman ceiling painting.

[Insertion March 2012 during review]

C1260 Chapel (now Pilgrims' Chapel built in EE Gothic style) Perhaps follow-on contract to Quire work.

1286. Chapter House. Stone vaulted roof with no central column is unique. Alleged that York Minster Chapter House was copied from it but because made twice as wide unable to complete roof in stone as at Southwell; timber used instead. Central ceiling boss at York is timber, and glued on!

Major building works now complete, then:

1337. Pulpitum. Meaning platform or stage. Here priest would stand so that he might be seen from either side. Decorated Style. 280 carved heads arranged in descending social order from top to bottom. Some restoration. Intriguing misericords. Several stonemasons' caricatures.

THE REFORMATION. (meaning the re-formation of the church)

1537. Monasteries being dissolved.

1540. Southwell Chapter surrendered properties to king. (Henry VIII)

1543. Strangely, Chapter was re-founded. Was king planning to upgrade Southwell to a See? Or did Cranmer (a Nottinghamshire man) speak on Southwell's behalf?

1545 Chancies abolished. Funds went to king. Major blow.

1547. Edward VI (boy king) now on throne. Southwell Chapter lands went to Crown, to William Neville (Protector) thence John Beaumont (Master of Rolls). He was charged with corruption and forgery and Southwell lands went to King. He died before he had disposed of them.

1553 Mary came to throne. Southwell Chapter re-established. Properties restored. 1558 Elizabeth I now queen. 1566 E confirmed restoration of Chapter's lands, perhaps influenced by Archbishop Edwin Sandys.

1642 CIVIL WARS. Charles raised his standard at Nottingham.

Southwell Chapter had to vacate stalls. Services much restricted. Figures and carvings damaged. Brasses taken because saleable. Charles I spent his last night of freedom at what is now the Saracen's Head Hotel.

There is no evidence to prove that Edward Cludd, local Parliamentarian, 'saved' the nave of Southwell Minster. This story first appears in Dickinson's History of Southwell (1788) and has been repeated by later writers (eg Dimock). Dickinson seems to have been an enthusiastic yet inaccurate local historian. See booklet Edward Cludd by Richard Beaumont.

1660. RESTORATION. Chapter restored. New font 1661.

1711. November 5th. SW pepperpot struck by lightning. Resulting fire spread to nave and crossing tower destroying roofs, bells, clock, and organ. Much damage to masonry, particularly crossing tower. After repairs (completed 1720) new (flat panelled) nave ceiling had very low pitch so that raised portion necessary to clear W window. Nave and transepts now had flat panelled ceiling. New squat pepperpots of low pitch.

1744. Chapter donated £20 towards cost of new parish fire engine 1780. Buildings of Vicars' Court pulled down and present ones erected.

1784. Booth Chapel pulled down; an unsightly building against SW corner of nave which, from 1280, had been chantry chapel, then burial place of the brothers Booth (both A/Bps of York), library, and grammar school. Materials were used to build new library in corner made by S transept and quire. Unsightly, removed in 1825.

1800. Building generally in poor condition.

1801. Cracks begin to appear in NW tower,

1805. Towers in dangerous state. Pepperpots removed to reduce weight.

1851. First appearance of a man who was to play a very important part in the Minster's story; Ewan Christian, architect.

Harold Brooke, Minster Librarian and Archivist, completed a book on the work of Ewan Christian entitled "Closed for Business" and this provides a clear picture of the way in which Christian improved the state of the building.

Works carried out during Christian's time included:

1856. W Window reglazed with tinted glass.

1879-81 New W pinnacles erected, (the present ones).

1881-88. Nave re-roofed to higher pitch to clear W window.

1875- New floor to nave; note chevron pattern, seen when chairs removed.

Victorian architects and builders were not always as caring and sensitive as Ewan Christian. We owe much to his skill and perception,

1884. The Minster became the cathedral for the new diocese of Southwell.

The intention has been to provide a brief history of Southwell Minster and its site over a period of two thousand years in a one-hour talk,

References and for further reading:

Richard Beaumont's several booklets, particularly The Chapter of Southwell Minster.

A Prospect of Southwell by Norman Summers,

Closed for Business by Harold Brooke

Southwell Minster During the Reformation by Letty Lewenz.

The Southwell Charter by Philip Lythe,