

LEAVES OF STONE

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Southwell Minster, Nottinghamshire, the cathedral and parish church of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

An anomalous survivor of the Reformation, this collegiate church was elevated to cathedral status in 1884. John Goodall reveals its remarkable history.

Original article contained photographs by Paul Barker

In about the year 1108, Archbishop Thomas of York wrote to 'all his parishioners of Nottinghamshire' to request alms towards the 'the building of the Church of St Mary of Southwell'. Their generosity, he promised, would release them from the need to travel to York each year, as his other parishioners were obliged to do. Furthermore, he assured them, even most modest sum would win for its donor the benefit 'to the end of time' of prayers and blessings of the new church and all the churches in the archdiocese of York.

Southwell Minster is architectural proof that the Archbishop was not disappointed in his call for money, for, over the next few decades, there rose from the ground a substantial church, commensurate in scale with an abbey or lesser cathedral. It was laid out on a cross-shaped plan with three towers: a central belfry over the crossing and two towers at the west end of the nave (probably completed in about 1170). Today, the whole western section of this building—namely, its transepts and nave—still survives.

This ambitious building was a response to the problems faced by the Archbishops of York in the management of their vast diocese. Southwell was, in fact, one in a select group of three great churches—along with Beverley and Ripon—that were elevated by the Archbishops as ecclesiastical centres in their respective regions during the Middle Ages. Like the metropolitan church of the Archbishops at York, moreover, these foundations were all 'minsters', churches served by a community of priests (rather than monks) and of Anglo-Saxon origin.

In the case of Southwell, the foundation of the church is generally associated with a grant of land by King Eadwig to Archbishop Oskytel of York dated about 956. This grant, known only through a 14th-century copy, makes the gift of a property that probably relates to the estate of a large Roman villa just east of the church (a fragment of Roman painting and pavement are today displayed in the church, the latter beneath the transept floor). Whether the minster already existed at the time of the gift or was founded immediately thereafter is not clear. Nor is anything known about the Anglo-Saxon buildings that must have occupied the site.

As constituted from 1171, however, the community of priests or canons was governed by regulations or statutes derived from those of York Minster. Each drew his income from a small estate or prebend. Very unusually, there was no permanent head of the community in the form of a master or dean. Rather, this role rotated between canons. In addition, although the Archbishops appointed all the canons and also reserved the right of disciplinary visitation, its community was otherwise independent. The combined property of the prebends and the minster formed a substantial 'peculiar' of nearly 30 manors across

The numbers of canons at Southwell gradually increased from six or seven to 16 by the close of the 13th century and there was a concurrent expansion in the wider community. This was partly driven by the gathering complexity of the liturgy, which attracted additional priests, clerks and singers. Another impetus for expansion was the practice of pluralism, by which ambitious clergymen acquired multiple church appointments to build up their income. To fulfil the duties of each, they paid deputies or vicars choral to act in their place in the minster.

It was probably the resulting pressure on space (combined with a desire to keep architectural pace with other great churches in the region) that precipitated the first major change to the 12th-century minster. In 1233, exactly in tandem with changes to the sister churches of Beverly and Ripon, work was under way to the replacement of the original choir with a much longer and stone-vaulted successor. So as to minimise the disruption caused, construction was undertaken from east to west. By this means, the setting for the new high altar could be largely complete before the old choir needed to be demolished. Work probably finished by 1248.

The dimensions of the new choir at Southwell were conditioned by the Romanesque building and care was taken to lend the relatively small-scale interior monumentality. Its two-storey elevation was richly ornamented and the vault was supported on delicate shafts of stone rising from the springs of the main arcades. In points of technical detail, the building bears close comparison with contemporary works at Lincoln Cathedral.

The next addition to the minster was the creation of a new formal meeting chamber or chapter house for the community. Overt the course of the 13th century, and informed by the magnificent example at Westminster Abbey, a distinctive tradition of octagonal chapter houses had developed in England. Southwell's example, begun in about 1288, looked to the most dazzling recent example of the form, that of its mother church in York, begun in the 1260s.

Copied by it from York is the idea of dispensing with a central pillar to support the vault, creating thereby an open internal space ringed by windows. Southwell probably also borrowed the related idea, pioneered at York, of creating a conical roof over the chapter house to give the building prominence. As at York, the Southwell chapter house is connected to the church by a corridor or vestibule and entered through a splendid double archway. Around the lower level of the walls is a continuous stone bench divided into individual seats for the canons by an arcade of arches. The interior is detailed throughout by spectacular carving, which is notable for the naturalistic rendering of foliage: here, sprigs of maple, oak and hawthorn grow through the mouldings and enclose curious scenes of life in stony bowers.

Of the busy liturgical life of the late medieval minster, little physical evidence now remains. The most impressive relic is the stone choir screen or pulpitum erected in about 1320. Behind it, there survives a small group of misericords from the medieval stalls and, between the two towers at the west end of the nave, a large new window was opened out in about 1400.

The story of Southwell Minster during the Reformation is bizarre in the extreme. In 1540, the chapter surrendered to Henry VIII, but was not dissolved. Then, three years later, by the terms of a private royal act, the minster was re-founded on its original terms, but with the King as the patron. This foundation was suppressed in 1547 and its property was carved up. In probably 1552 its estates returned to the hands of the Crown.

Throughout this period, however, some members of the former community remained in occupation and, in 1557, Queen Mary's officials attempted to eject them. The rump community, however, contested the action citing the 1543 re-foundation charter, and won. This, astonishingly, on June 20, 1557, the minster was re-founded essentially in its pre-Reformation form. This remarkable state of affairs was confirmed by Elizabeth I in 1585 and James I in 1604.

Southwell suffered badly during the Civil War in the 1640s, when the archbishop's palace to the south of the minster was ruined and the estates of the foundation were seized. As a result, major repairs were undertaken to the church following the Restoration in 1660, yet this damage was to pale into insignificance beside a later catastrophe.

'On Monday the 5th November 1711 about 10 a-clock at night, the top of the ball on one of the south spires of this collegiate church of Southwell was fired by lightning; which, backed by a furious wind that drove it almost directly on the body of the church, in a few hours burnt down the spire and roof, melted down the bells, and spared nothing that was combustible, except the other spire, till it came to the quire, where, after it had consumed the organs, it was by singular providence stopt and extinguish'd.'

This description of the fire, published by Daniel Defoe as part of his 1720s *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, is accompanied by a description of Southwell provided by an anonymous canon of the minster. Its early-Georgian community was the same as that established in the late 16th century and comprised 16 prebendaries, six vicars choral (one who acted as the parish priest), an organist, six singing men, six choristers, a register to the chapter, a treasurer an auditor and a verger. And there was still no dean: the resident prebend—who, by rotation, took responsibility for managing affairs—occupied The Residence, a handsome house built in 1693 and furnished and maintained at common cost.

This arrangement continued until 1840, when the chapter was dissolved and its endowment was used to establish new cathedrals at Manchester and Ripon. Amid acrimony and ill-feeling Southwell briefly became simply a parish church. Then, in 1884, it was elevated to the status of a cathedral for a new diocese of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire.

The promise of cathedral status encouraged an extensive renovation. In 1880, the architect Ewan Christian returned the roofs over the nave and transepts—which had been rebuilt in 1711 on a low pitch—to their original proportion. He also replaced the spires, which had been dismantled in 1801. The choir was reconfigured with modern stalls in two stages by Charles Simpson in 1886 and W. D. Caroe in 1902. The first incumbent, Bishop Ridding, was memorialised by a life-sized kneeling bronze figure by F.W.Pomeroy.

Despite its cathedral status, Southwell Minster is not as well known as it deserves. The spacious setting of the church within the town, the interest of the building and the sheer quality of its fittings are outstanding. The 20th century has been particularly kind to the interior, with such exemplary additions as the new west window glass. If have never visited, you should make a New Year's resolution to do so in 2015.

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