Spires, Saints, Shrines and Sheep

Building Medieval Cathedrals

***Richard Higginson's** recent tour of England's cathedrals has led him to reflect on some fundamental questions: Why and how were they built? What type of workers built them and who paid for them? How did their construction take place in business terms? The answers are intriguing. He shows how cathedral construction was a visionary effort sustained over many centuries, an impressive inter-generational community project.*[1]

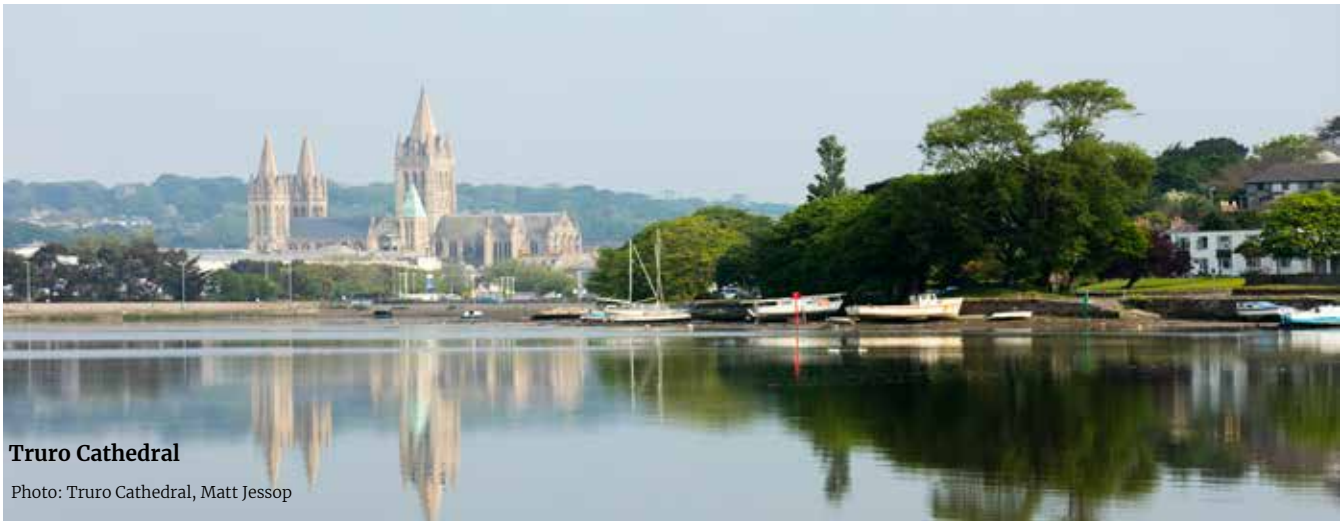
'The medieval cathedral is the most spectacular and lasting accomplishment of the English people. For over a thousand years cathedrals have towered over England's cities, towns and countryside. They are grander than palaces, castles or mansions.'[2] So writes Simon Jenkins in the opening chapter of his *England's Cathedrals*. No mean tribute from a self-confessed agnostic!

Cathedrals: An Overview

Over the last 18 months my wife Felicity and I have immersed ourselves in a post-retirement project to visit all of England's 42 Anglican cathedrals. We are nearly complete: only Leicester (currently closed because of an extensive refurbishment project) and nearby Derby remain to be visited. Typically, we've viewed them in batches of three, combining this with visiting friends all over the country, which is part of the fun. It has been a thoroughly enjoyable experience. We have been impressed not only by the cathedrals' architecture and history but the warmth of welcome and sincerity of worship found in each one.

The 42 cathedrals can be split into two groups of roughly equal halves.

There are 20 that have either been built or become cathedrals during the last two centuries. Truro, Liverpool, Guildford and Coventry are all recent creations. The other 16 (Ripon, Manchester, St Albans, Southwell, Newcastle, Wakefield, Birmingham, Southwark, Chelmsford, Bury St Edmunds, Sheffield, Bradford, Blackburn, Derby, Leicester and Portsmouth[3]) consist of upgraded parish churches, most of them converted into cathedrals when the growth of urban populations following the Industrial Revolution led to the carving of new dioceses out of existing ones. Several of these buildings (eg Blackburn, Bradford and Sheffield) have been enlarged to justify their enhanced status and accommodate large congregations on special occasions. Often this has created an uneasy mixture of old and new, though the addition of modern artwork such as vivid stained



Truro Cathedral

Photo: Truro Cathedral, Matt Jessop

glass and striking sculptures has compensated for this. Every cathedral in this group is of interest and worthy of a visit, but overall they do not carry the same majesty and mystique as the great medieval cathedrals.

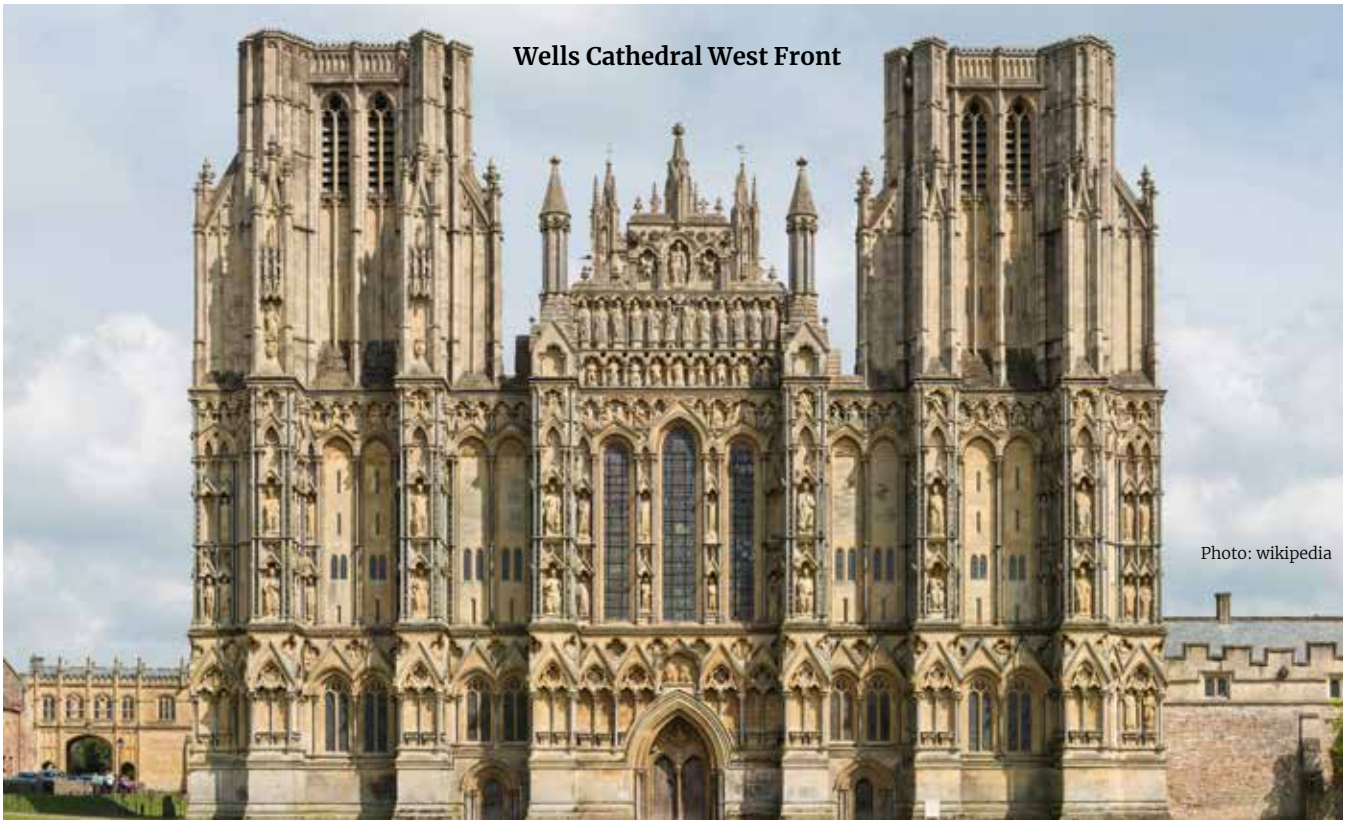
The 22 medieval 'masters' comprise three different groups in terms of their foundation. Nine were non-monastic and therefore – somewhat confusingly – called 'secular', run by cathedral canons: York, Old St Paul's in London[4], Lincoln, Salisbury, Wells, Chichester, Exeter, Hereford and Lichfield. Seven were Benedictine monasteries that were also cathedrals: Canterbury, Durham, Ely, Norwich, Rochester, Winchester and Worcester. At the time of the Reformation, when Henry VIII effectively annexed these cathedrals from the Roman Catholic Church for the newly formed Church of England, the king destroyed many monasteries in the act of dissolving them. But he preserved six that he wanted as cathedrals, three of them Benedictine monasteries (Gloucester, Peterborough and Chester) and three Augustinian (Bristol, Carlisle and Oxford).

Whether of monastic foundation or not, these buildings are constructed on a similar pattern. They follow a cross shape running from west to east. The long part of the cross is the nave, where the congregation gathers, and two transepts (north and south) provide the crossing. The eastern section comprises the choir or chancel, then reserved for services only involving clergy; the high altar in an area often called the presbytery; and further chapels around the end of the building, typically including a Lady Chapel directly behind the altar. Other key buildings are the cloisters (most often at the south-west corner of the building and the chapter house (usually at the north-east corner), though some cathedrals have these two areas that were central to the life of monks or canons adjoining each other. Some also have crypts, underground store rooms that double up as meeting rooms or extra chapels.

Despite the fact that they follow the same design, medieval English cathedrals look remarkably different. There was more variation in their external appearance. Compare for instance Salisbury and Wells, both magnificent Gothic buildings in the same part of the country. Wells has a highly distinctive, elaborately carved west front with twin towers and a chunky central tower. Salisbury has a more conventional west front with flanking pinnacles; it is slender, graceful and its dominating feature is a slim tower and spire, the tallest in the country. Some cathedrals are enhanced by imposing locations: Durham on a rocky peninsula above the River Wear, Worcester overlooking the River Severn, Lincoln at the top of a steep hill.

The sophisticated knowledge and expertise that went into these cathedrals is the more impressive because in certain areas medieval people were strikingly ignorant. This came home to me when we saw the Mappa Mundi in Hereford Cathedral. Their knowledge of cosmology and global geography was very backward. But they knew how to build, not just buildings that were strong and mighty, but awe-inspiring and beautiful.

Visiting around the country has led me to ask these fundamental questions. Why were these cathedrals actually built? How were they built? What type of workers were involved in building them? Who paid for them? How did the construction of cathedrals take place in business terms?



Wells Cathedral West Front

Photo: wikipedia

Building Cathedrals – Why?

The obvious answer to this question – and one which applies to churches and chapels as well – is that people built to the glory of God and for the worship of God. They believed that God was honoured and magnified by a beautiful building. This is taken to a further level in the construction of a cathedral. Its height and length add to the effect. The soaring heights of a vaulted ceiling are meant to direct human thoughts to God in heaven, away from the distractions of things on earth. At the same time earthly materials (stone, wood, glass, etc) are the means through which God's grandeur is acknowledged.

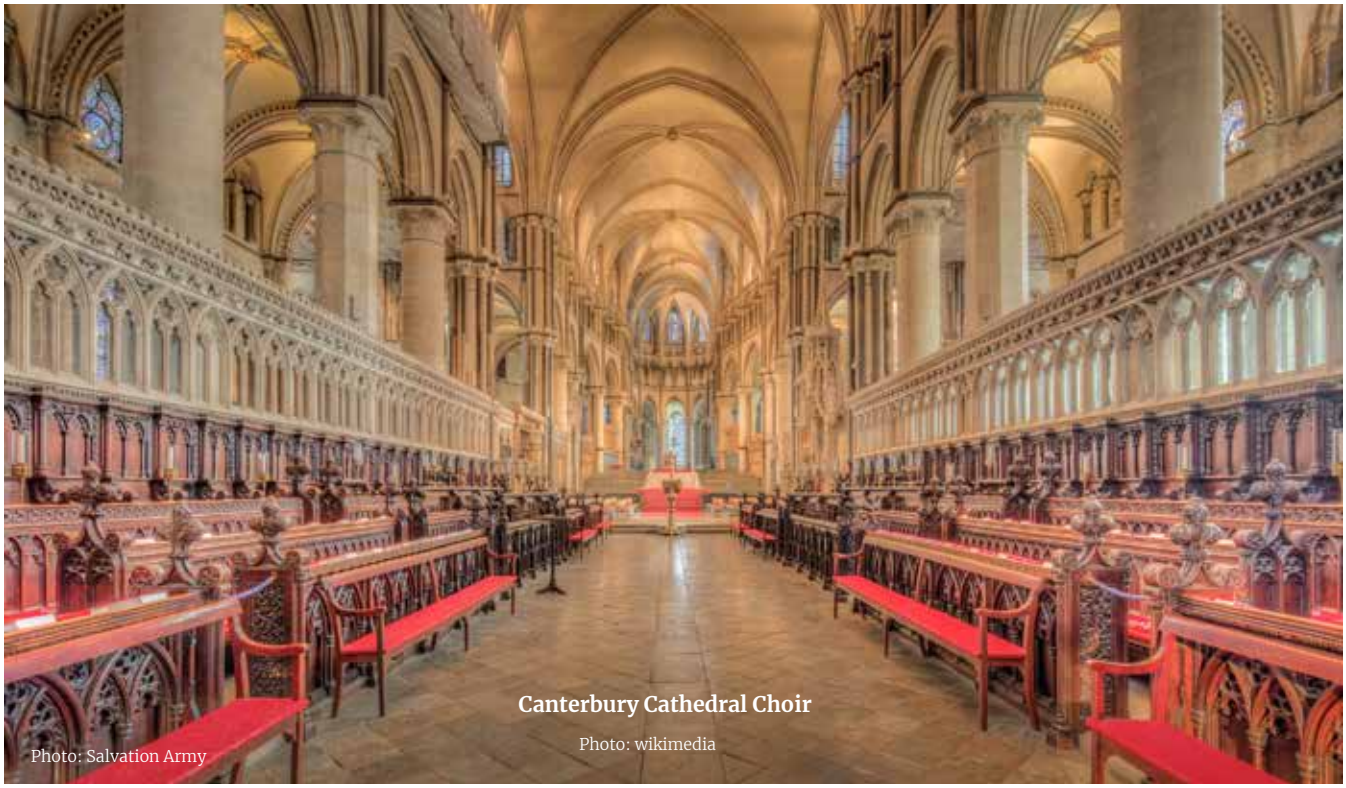
Medieval men worked with a sense that God is all-seeing. Because he was the ultimate Master, they aspired to the highest standards of workmanship. This is illustrated by the fact that even the sculptures done in the most inaccessible parts of the buildings, not seen by most people most of the time, are of the same high quality.

But being human, motives were inevitably mixed. Yes, they built to the glory of God, but they might also build to their own glory, or the glory of their monastic order, or the glory of their town or city. No doubt a competitive element crept In – an aspiration to build a bigger or better cathedral than the neighbouring one. Arguably this had a positive effect in keeping standards high!

Cathedrals take their name from the Latin word *cathedra*, which means the seat of a bishop. It is the leading (and usually biggest) church in the area known as a diocese, the area over which a Catholic or Anglican bishop has authority. Most cathedrals have a literal seat or throne (a tall, upright, uncomfortable looking chair) where the bishop sits on formal occasions.

Cathedral building in this country started with the Saxons. But as Simon Jenkins observes, 'Saxon cathedrals are the great ghosts of English history'.[5] Virtually all traces of them have vanished. When William I from Normandy conquered England in 1066, he showed respect for the diocesan geography, traditions and saints of the Saxon church, but little for their existing bishops or buildings. He embarked on a vigorous programme of constructing new cathedrals, along with fortifying the country with castles. The two were connected in the Conqueror's mind: as Jenkins says, the Normans 'built to show the English, and indeed all Europe, that this was an empire that would stay'.[+] He also revitalised the monasteries, so that priories only destined to become cathedrals much later produced buildings every bit as impressive as cathedrals which already had that status.

Cathedral building was already under way in France, and the Normans introduced their Romanesque style to England. Their naves have thick pillars and round arches. Roofs were wooden, which could be painted attractively (as later happened at Ely and Peterborough) but were also something of a fire risk. It was a fire at Canterbury Cathedral in 1174, destroying the choir and most of the east end, that was the spur for England to move into the next architectural style imported from France, namely Gothic. The Canterbury monks 'called together both French and English architects'[7] for a grand consultation. They appointed the distinguished architect William of Sens (who had designed the cathedral in the French city of that name) to carry out the rebuilding. He duly set to work, introducing the new style which embraced pointed arches, stronger and



Canterbury Cathedral Choir

Photo: wikimedia

Photo: Salvation Army

more graceful than the round ones, and vaulted stone roofs. This set the trend for English cathedrals built during the next three centuries, Gothic passing through three connected phases, Early English, Decorated and Perpendicular.

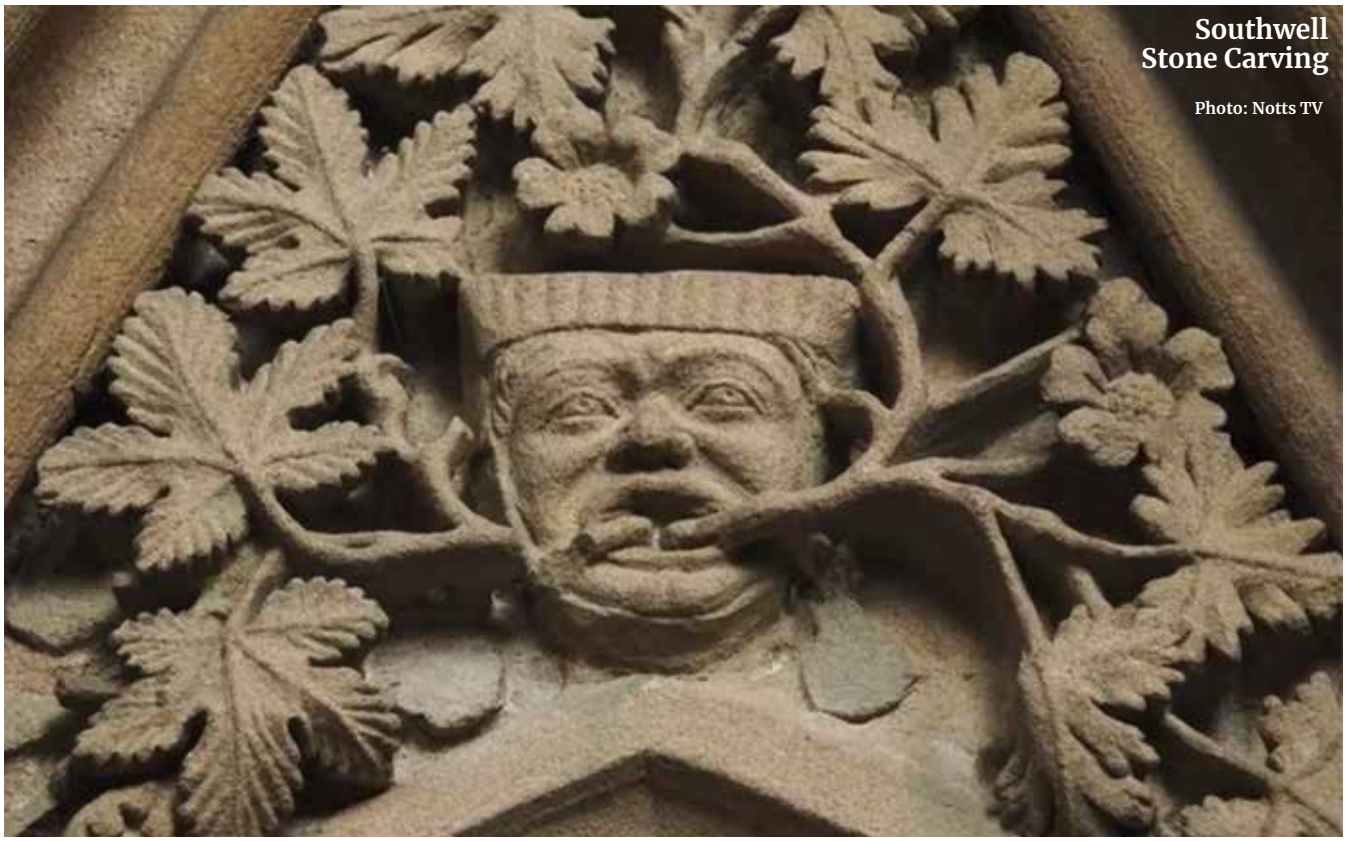
Sadly, William fell fifty feet from scaffolding (then of a somewhat rudimentary nature) in 1179, failed to recover from his injuries, and returned to France, licking his wounds. But he had trained a young assistant, William the Englishman, who took on the mantle of architect and completed his work. For monks the building of the choir, where they worshipped, was a priority. Medieval cathedrals were always built starting from the East End; the nave and towers were added later.

Building Cathedrals – How?

William I may have taken the initiative in launching the wave of building cathedrals, but few of his successors showed a similar interest. It happened with the permission and approval of the Crown; not with very much financial support. Since cathedrals were the bishops' seat, they might have been expected to show more active interest, and some did, notably Wulfstan at Worcester and Hugh at Lincoln, but many were largely absent from their diocese and more immersed in matters at court. The major responsibility for designing, fund-raising and building these great churches fell on the dean and chapter of canons or prior/abbot and chapter of monks. They appointed, employed and paid the workers who got the job done.

At the head of the building operation was the architect who was often also the master mason. So his role was quite 'hands on', leading by example, though the role became more restricted to designer and overseer as the Middle Ages progressed. Under him were a large team of masons, among whom there was a certain amount of specialisation. There were stone cutters, whose work often began at the quarries, and stone fitters, making sure that everything was laid in its appointed place – assisted by mortar makers. Then there were the sculptors who did the more detailed work, carving the piers on the columns, ribs on the vaults, and amazing decorative work such as the stone leaves of many different types of tree, found in the chapter house at Southwell. We would love to know more about how masons operated but the documentation about their work is relatively scarce.[8] This is because masons wanted to protect the 'tricks of their trade', notably the mathematical and geometric principles - gleaned from Arab science – underlying their work: a secrecy which helps explain the clandestine nature of the Freemasons' lodges which are descended from the medieval lodges. The masons had a pride in their work which stemmed partly from their understanding of God as a celestial super-mason. God was sometimes portrayed with square and compasses measuring out the earth in medieval art. We get a hint of this in Job 38:5 which asks 'Who determined its measurements – surely you know! Or who stretched his line upon it?'

To build durably and carve delicately masons needed high quality stone. Two of the best limestone quarries in the country were Doulting near Bath and Barnack near Peterborough. Purbeck in Dorset had a dark marble-like quality. The North-West was not so well supplied, necessitating recourse to the reddish sandstone used at Lichfield, Chester and Carlisle; this didn't



Southwell Stone Carving

Photo: Notts TV

weather so well and has required more restoration than cathedrals built with limestone. Transporting stone from the quarries to the building site, by river or road, was another important facet of the operation requiring skill, care and brute strength.

Secondary in status to the masons – but not much lower – were the carpenters. Wood was used in many different parts of the building, including roofs (initially), doors, lifting machinery, scaffolding and choir stalls. This last gave carpenters opportunity both to parade their skills and demonstrate their wit. Many a misericord, the ledge in the monk's folding seat, portrays comical scenes like a fox preaching to a goose or a woman beating her husband. Woodworkers seem to have been given free rein to be irreverent in that context.

A wonderful example of masons and carpenters working together in a unique creation is seen at Ely. The Norman tower which fell in 1322 took with it the crossing and three bays of the choir. The monk/architect, Alan of Walsingham, fled the cathedral in a state of despair. But he recovered his nerve and designed as replacement not a tower but a stone octagon on eight piers, its vault acting as base for the wooden lantern. About this Jenkins comments: 'Modern engineers continue to marvel at the skill of these masons and carpenters, working with none of the tools of modern construction.'[9]

Other skilled craftsmen who played significant roles in cathedral construction included smiths, plasterers, tilers and glaziers. The latter came into their own as huge stained glass windows became a prominent feature of later Gothic architecture.[10] Nor should we forget labourers who mucked in with ordinary but crucial tasks like digging the foundations.

It is regrettable that the medieval cathedrals don't pay visual tribute to the contribution made by manual workers. The many tombs and monuments that fill the aisles and transepts glorify 'the great and the good', *alias* the rich and powerful. Modern cathedrals do better here. In the north aisle of Guildford cathedral is a colourful window recognising the work of the builders, carpenters, joiners, glaziers and embroiderers.

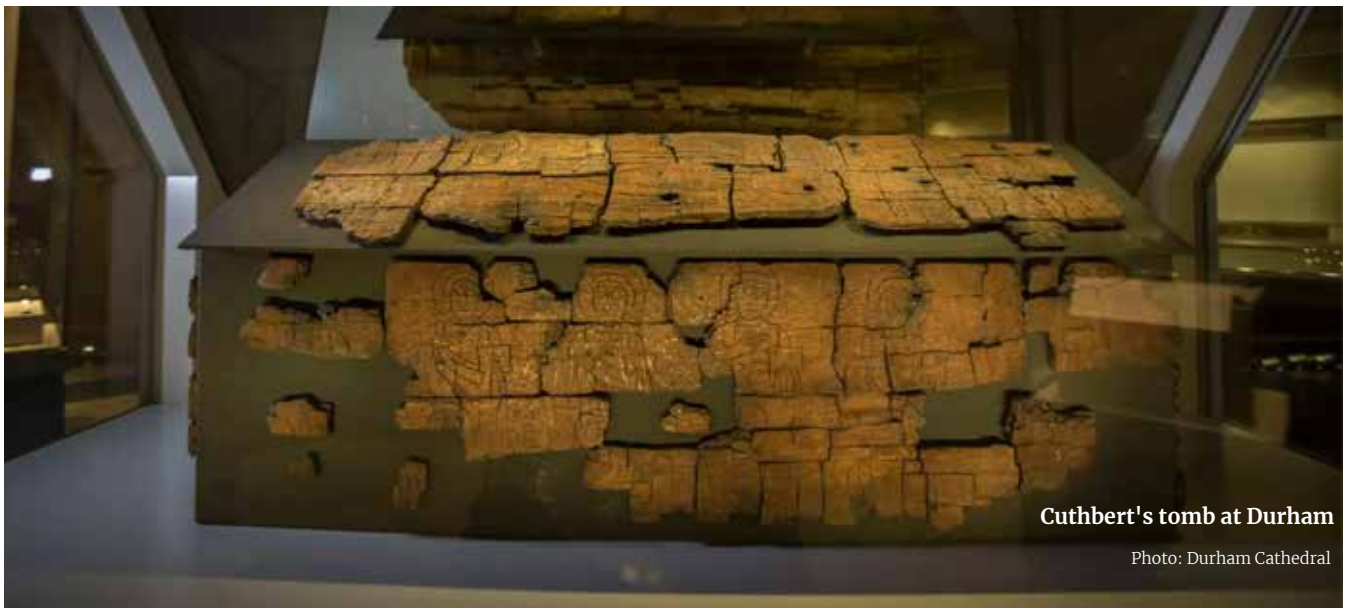
Building Cathedrals – Who Paid?

The money which paid for these massive building projects came from an intriguing variety of sources.

First, there were *generous individual benefactors*. These might be bishops, knights, merchants or other wealthy individuals. Sometimes several benefactors gathered together to form a guild.

Second, there was *income from the land*. Monasteries were usually major landowners, and monks were practical as well as prayerful people. They farmed their extensive estates purposefully, and – as Paul Johnson says – 'went in for large-scale production for the market, especially of cheese, corn and wool'.[11] Some monasteries had 20,000 sheep. While much of this income went towards sustaining the life of the monastery, substantial amounts were used for building cathedrals.

Third, the *development of saints' shrines* proved an enormous money-puller. This cathedral phenomenon started as a result of the murder in 1170 of Thomas a Becket, the Archbishop who fell out with King Henry II, largely over who had authority in church appointments. Within minutes of his death, townspeople flocked to dab their garments in his blood and healing miracles were reported. Becket's shrine became a place of pilgrimage. The pilgrims filled the coffers and helped to finance the further construction of Canterbury Cathedral. Other cathedral chapters took note and followed suit, finding a local saint whose shrine became a comparable hotspot. The saints were either heroes from the Saxon period (eg Cuthbert at Durham, Etheldreda at Ely, Chad at Lichfield, Swithun at Winchester and Wilfred at Ripon[12]) or recent bishops who had been particularly holy or energetic (eg Richard at Chichester, Hugh at Lincoln and Wulfstan at Worcester). Effort, often



Cuthbert's tomb at Durham

Photo: Durham Cathedral

successful, was put where necessary into persuading the pope to canonise deceased worthy individuals. Miraculous claims were made for the dead person's relics, and taking the relics on tour made them more accessible (at a suitable fee) to the general public.

Fourth, *charging the public* for various privileges, such as allowing them into the choir (laypeople being normally confined to the nave), or fees for burial within the cathedral and ringing the 'great bell' at funerals.

Fifth, *the payment of indulgences*. This was a practice which became widespread in the later Middle Ages throughout Western Europe. Donors were encouraged to give by the promise of a reduction of the time they would spend in purgatory, the intermediate state of purification before getting to heaven. Highly dubious both from a theological and moral standpoint, it was one of the abuses of the Catholic Church which aroused the wrath of Martin Luther and triggered the Protestant Reformation.

Sixth, *the resort to money-lenders*. Sometimes the only way there would be enough money was to borrow it. The money-lenders were invariably Jewish, because the church banned the practice of usury. Ironically, this was based on Old Testament law, but Jews felt free to lend money to Gentiles because of the exception allowing interest on loans to foreigners in Deuteronomy 23:19-20. In the twelfth century, the wealthiest man in England was reputedly a Jewish money-lender, Aaron of Lincoln. Not only did he lend money to Bishop Hugh for the construction of the local cathedral; he also helped with Peterborough and St Albans.

Cathedrals: A Long-Term Project

Most of the medieval cathedrals took many centuries to complete. Despite the variety of ways in which money was raised or borrowed, there were times when it ran out. Or sometimes the king demanded that masons' energies and expertise be employed elsewhere, as when Edward I built numerous castles to subdue the Welsh. No problem: the cathedrals were long-term projects. The one notable exception, a cathedral built in a mere 38 years (1220-1258) was Salisbury, and this explains why it was built in a consistent Early English style. Even then, its crowning glory, the beautiful spire, wasn't added until the next century in 1334. Most of our great cathedrals are fascinating amalgams of different architectural styles. This doesn't seem to matter. Who cares that Durham, which is mainly Norman, has a 15th century central tower?

One of the most startling transitions is at Gloucester, where a rugged Norman nave gives way to spectacular Perpendicular transepts, but the contrast adds to the building's interest rather than detracting from it.

These cathedrals were largely built piecemeal. As time passed, styles changed and techniques improved, so masons adapted whatever was the original blueprint. Sometimes they needed to in order to make the building more secure. Very few people who worked on the cathedrals lived to see them completed, but they accepted that. Workers made their contribution and passed on, a bit like King David who, according to St Paul in one of his speeches, 'served the purpose of God in his generation' and then died (Acts 13:36). Unlike most contemporary commercial ventures, this was a visionary effort sustained over many generations, with the baton being passed on from one group of monks, canons, masons and carpenters to another. As we have seen, it had its dubious aspects, notably the exploitation of ordinary people bound up in saints' relics and indulgences. But overall, cathedral construction was an impressive inter-generational community project. Our lives today are the richer for it.

1 To some extent this article complements and follows up 'The Business of Barchester', Pete Hobson's article in FiBQ 18:4, which explored cathedrals as commercial as well as worshipping entities today.
2 Simon Jenkins, *England's Cathedrals*, Little, Brown, 2016, p.vi.
3 Of these, Ripon, St Albans and Southwell were of much older foundation than the others.
4 Of these one no longer exists: Old St Paul's was the largest of these medieval cathedrals but was burnt down in the Great Fire of London in 1666. Its replacement, Christopher Wren's classical design, therefore occupies a unique position in our history; no other cathedrals were built in that era.
5 *England's Cathedrals*, p.vi.
6 Op.cit., p.vii.
7 Reported by a contemporary monk, Gervase, and cited by Jenkins in *England's Cathedrals*, p.39.
8 The author who is most informative on this is Jean Gimpel, *The Cathedral Builders*, Pimlico, 1983.
9 *England's Cathedrals*, p.93.
10 York Minster is an excellent example of this.
11 Paul Johnson, *British Cathedrals*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980, p.189.
12 St Albans, of course, was already linked with and named after a saint, the first English Christian martyr Alban.

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