

# The Minster as Textbook

Patrick Nuttgens

York Minster has always provoked mixed feelings. When I first saw it as a schoolboy, and wandered around it with my father, looking at as much of the stained glass as we could see (not all of it having been put back after the Second World War) and making rough jokes about some of the classical oddities inserted by Sir Albert Richardson or his eighteenth century predecessors, I came away with a lasting impression of gloom. It now seems a false impression, though there are many people in York who regret the recent changes that have effaced that brooding presence. But what is also certain is that the Minster has undergone a spectacular piece of renewal and that the exploration of it is a new and exciting experience.

It is not just the structural transformation, devised and supervised by Bernard Feilden and his professional colleagues, fundamental and important in the development of the science of restoration as it is; it is not just the cleaning and restoration of the whole Minster so that it shines like new (even the crumbling west facade, probably the main victim of an enthusiastic facelift); it is not just the new role of the Minster in attracting a vast increase in the number of tourists to the city, so that the Minster now welcomes, as tourists and worshippers, more people in a year than ever before; it is also very much the fact that the nature of the investigation and restoration—and the presence in the chapter of some outstanding scholars as well as the founding of the new university of York whose outstanding department is history—has sparked off a massive investigation of both the Minster itself as a historical document and the mass of documentation available in York, in archives now carefully preserved. The Minster is a textbook. It looks clear and clean and explicit; with all its faults scrupulously exposed so that any future structural problems will be obvious at once, it is at last a book of stone. And the scholarship that goes with it is equally scrupulous. More is known about its history, its structure, its monuments, its incomparable glass, than ever before. It may or may not be true, that, as A. J. P. Taylor maintains, no other cathedral can rival York Minster in its grandeur and beauty (and personally I do not think it is) but certainly no other cathedral is such a treasure house for study. And the handsome new

book, reasonably priced because partly subsidised, edited by the Professor of History in the University and the Chancellor of the Minster, is a fitting milestone in the history of a great institution as well as a great building.<sup>1</sup>

The work of twelve distinguished authors, the book is organised in a rational way. The two first chapters give the general history of the Minster up to the end of the Middle Ages, followed by chapters giving its architectural history—first up to 1290 and then until 1558. The next chapters take the story up to 1916. Then the book breaks into a number of different subjects—glass, music, monuments, library and a final chapter on the history of the Minster from 1916 to 1975.

That division appears logical because the main architectural history of the Minster does I suppose finish with the Reformation—the Minster was effectively finished in 1472. There is probably too little emphasis on some of the later structural changes, such as the Victorian roofs; but all in all it is balanced and thorough. You could say that this is the history of the Minster in terms of its documentation, which is superb, and in terms of its architecture in so far as it is visible.

If there is an imbalance, it is one caused by the very nature of the study—a problem brought out in the crucial chapter by Professor Barrie Dobson on the Later Middle Ages. It is one of the few that start from an understanding of the purpose and function of the Minster. In his first paragraph, he refers to an event in February 1349 when after Vespers some supporters of the Bishop of Durham entered the Minster to stage a deliberate demonstration against the authority of the Metropolitan Church of York, and expressed their contempt for the clergy by breaking wind and shouting insults and performing other enormities. Professor Dobson makes the important point that this is the kind of thing which makes it difficult to write a genuine history—the real history of mediaeval cathedrals—because, of all the human qualities, serenity of routine is the one that disarms the historian most completely. And nobody can now hope to recreate in words the continuous rhythms of divine worship in the late mediaeval minster.

His account, he points out, would have seemed to many people at the time to deal with some of the least important activities. A cathedral is a very complex institution and he makes three crucial points. First, it is the largest and most splendid house of Christian worship in the diocese—a building whose primary *raison d'être* was the *opus dei*—the continuous round of communal devotion in the choir and elsewhere. Secondly, it towered above the city of York as a heavenly mansion deliberately designed to signify the Holy Catholic Church which is built in heaven of living

<sup>1</sup> *A History of York Minster* Edited by G. E. Aylmer and Reginald Cant (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977) pp. 586 ill. 182. £9.75 in UK.

stone. Finally, it was a massive business corporation, an instrument in the North for diverting economic wealth from local parishes towards the comparatively small group of professional ecclesiastical administrators. And he points out that of those three functions the first can only be assessed intermittently; the second is hidden from us completely, just because the cathedral clergy took it so absolutely for granted; the third tends to dominate history because the records are so plentiful. With that salutary reminder and proviso, you can find in this history of the Minster a rich story of idealism and endeavour and sacrifice and greed. It is worth making a quick trip through the history, pointing out some of its features, because the story is one of considerable complexity which unflinchingly says more about the period than just about the fortunes of the Minster itself.

The key to the beginning of York is of course the period of the Roman occupation of Britain; but the key event as far as the Church is concerned was the Peace of the Church of AD 312, the general edict of toleration for the Christian Church. The Christian community of York had its own mission by 314. And with every century the role of York in the history of the Church becomes more central.

The first church of which we have any record was built for King Edwin after his conversion—as a baptistry for himself and his family in 627 and a base of operations for his bishop, Paulinus. That building was put up in a hurry, was made of wood and was small. York was to be the seat of the northern metropolitan, alternating in seniority with London; that was an instruction from Gregory the Great. It did not quite work out because of Edwin's death and the flight of Paulinus to Rochester.

But in 664 the see of York was restored, probably for St. Wilfrid, and that led to a new emphasis of building. Wilfrid, however irritating and maddening as a man, saw to the restoration of the stone church which had followed the wooden one. He had the roof covered and its ridges covered with pure lead. He also had the building whitewashed inside and made to look reasonable. From that moment there has been something to care for and change continuously, getting bigger and bigger, more and more complex, with every phase.

It was fortunate in some of the outsize personalities who dominated its history for the next few centuries. Among them was Egbert who held the see from 732 to 786 and was probably the first resident ruler of the see to be recognised as an archbishop. He was regarded as the founder of the Cathedral School. He appointed as scholasticus his friend Ethelbert, whom Alcuin regarded as his particular teacher. Under them York became a focus for learning. It was still so in the middle of the 9th century, but its reputation as such seems to have been brought to an end after the

Danish invasion of 867 and 869.

Ealred was Archbishop at the time of the Norman Conquest and carried out many reforms, particularly of the liturgy and the organisation of the cathedral and diocese. A key figure after him was Thurstan, Archbishop of York from 1114 to 1140. He died in the odour of sanctity as the founder of Fountains Abbey and a monk of Pontefract. With great and lasting ingenuity he settled the question of the primacy between Canterbury and York.

After him the major character is William Fitzherbert, the centre of fearful rows, who was taken ill and died in 1154 after celebrating Solemn High Mass in York Minster, and was always thought to have been poisoned; he was later to enjoy a strange celebrity as St. William of York.

The architecture of the early minster is as fragmentary as the story itself. In a chapter packed with almost incredible detail Dr. Gee sorts it all out as he traces the architectural history up to 1290, noting as he does so the pieces of material from earlier churches built into later parts of the building. Crucial to the history is the south transept, which is the oldest part of the present Minster in any complete sense, and built after the fire of 1137. The transept was completed by Walter de Gray, Archbishop from 1216 to 1255.

The Archbishopric of de Gray must have been the turning point for the Minster. His reign was one of the longest in the English Church and was unsurpassed in York until the pontificate of Archbishop Harcourt in the early 19th century. De Gray was in the front rank of the reforming bishops of the 13th century. He sorted out a mass of problems, liturgical and disciplinary, made decisions about celibacy and authority, and he also completed the organisation and the definition of the roles of the key dignitaries of the cathedral.

The four dignitaries—the *quatuor personae*—were, as Professor Dobson points out, the four cornerstones of the Minster's spiritual as well as material fabric. The Dean had the presidency of the chapter as well as general responsibility for the welfare of the cathedral clergy; the Precentor supervised its liturgical life; the Chancellor, the secretarial and educational functions of the cathedral; the Treasurer was responsible for the safe-keeping of the Church's plate and relics, and also for the maintenance of the fabric and furnishings.

The greatest memorial to the continuing harmony between the Archbishops and their chapters was the mutual support given throughout the Middle Ages to the massive enterprise of rebuilding the whole cathedral. As Professor Dobson points out again, it is easy to forget that the faithful in the late mediaeval Minster worshipped in an atmosphere of almost perpetual building crisis. In the accounts of the 14th century one can get some idea of the var-

ity of activity, the general effect of increased liturgical complexity, the rapid multiplication of new altars and chantry foundations, converting the Minster into a veritable house of many mansions.

It is worth also pointing out other activities which have a bearing on the actual life of the Minster as opposed to what we sometimes imagine it to have been. There were lots of other activities—rents paid inside the Minster, sometimes at the High Altar. Money, valuables and documents were deposited there for safe keeping by the York Jews, by local merchants and by the government. Lots of wooden partitions were put up to provide enough seclusion for a variety of formal and informal gatherings, including on occasion meetings of the York City Council itself, as well as meeting places for convocations and synods, and in the early 1330's the Royal Chancellery itself, which met in the Chapter House.

There is a colourful section on the Vicars Choral and their activities. The evidence about them is voluminous and does justice to their central place in the life and worship of the Minster. The office of Vicar Choral derived from the obligation upon absentee canons to appoint a personal deputy to take their place in the choir. It was a common practice. In York there were 36 canons and 36 Vicars Choral. After 1252 a number of statutes set up an integrated system for the Vicars Choral. It became a well organised and largely self-governing body. They also had a new place—residential accommodation in a block of property in the Bedern. That happened in the late 1240's, but after 1275 it was known as the Bedern Constant Chapel and the Common Dining Hall. By the end of the 14th century there was a special pedestrian bridge from the solar of the Bedern gatehouse across to the gatehouse of the Minster. There seems an ironic justice in the fact that the origins of the Vicars Choral led to behaviour as appropriate as their disreputable start. The single most astonishing revelation afforded by surviving records of the 14th and 15th centuries are of the improprieties, crimes and, above all, the adulteries of the Vicars Choral. Their behaviour in the choir seems to have been not much better.

To an architectural historian like myself some of the most useful comments are on the surroundings of the Minster at the end of the Middle Ages. The Minster had its own precinct, the Chapter's Liberty, which included most of Petergate, northern sections of Stonegate and Goodramgate, parts of Grape Lane and Aldwark, as well as the area round the cathedral itself. But York and Lichfield were alone among mediaeval English cathedrals in not having a cloister. The Minster was instead surrounded by a dense jungle of often small and transient urban tenements. They included the prebendal houses of the canons themselves, houses undoubtedly large and well-furnished, which had in them some of

the largest private libraries known to have existed in 15th century England. There were large households, and the inhabitants of the Minster precinct were great patrons of the city and surrounding area.

Against this background the architectural history of the mediaeval Minster makes a lot more sense than a cursory tour of the buildings might suggest. The Chapterhouse was the largest in England, started about 1260, mostly from the next few years. It was the culmination of a series of other examples—Lincoln, Westminster, Salisbury and others. The first design had a central pier, but this one without a central pier was finished about 1285, and must be the earliest chapterhouse on this scale. The existing model of the roof structure above the vault confirms how extraordinarily intricate and ingenious the structure is, including the bits which it is not possible to see. Historically important is the room over the vestibule to the Chapterhouse. It is well lit, it has a wardrobe and a fireplace. But more important, it was used as a mason's drawing office, probably as early as 1365. That is proved by the gypsum floor which illustrates the process of masoncraft, with drawings of full scale mouldings on the gypsum.

The architectural history from 1291 to 1558 is by John Harvey. A fascinating and beautifully written account, it starts with the laying of the foundation stone for the new nave in 1291, in a design quite different from the transept. Harvey's explanation about the design and the proportions of the nave is important. It was largely conditioned by the size and layout of its Norman predecessor. The proportions were therefore governed by the old building, the old foundations being accepted as a hidden stylobate for the new piers. That gave a module for the Gothic plan. Everything was derived from a dimension of about 27 feet—the width of one of the new bays being half the span of the nave. From that could be derived the height from the floor to the capitals and the diagonal of the square worked out on this unit could be used to give half the height to the springing of the windows of the clerestory. Harvey also traces some of the alterations and changes that led to the present great western towers and to the huge West Window. The earlier towers had been much more closely spaced together, leaving room only for a doorway. His account is quite fascinating. Mr. Harvey is, of course, an expert on the authorship of mediaeval buildings. He traces the work of several masters who were successively concerned with the Minster. The whole building of the nave occupied about 70 years, two generations or the extent of a lifetime. Its most distinguished feature is the curvilinear West Window with its glass of 1339. Earlier glass in the aisles has the first known yellow stain produced by the silver process, about 1320, a cardinal landmark in the history of glass painting.

Probably the most crucial master mason was William Colches-

ter who worked on the Minster from 1407 when the old lantern tower collapsed. Colchester decided to build an entirely new tower above the strengthened arches of the central crossing. His design must have existed for a long time after his death. He intended to put up a tall tower with two main stages, but after a great deal of delay only the lower stage was built, by about 1420. Colchester died in that year. By then the whole length of the church from east to west was structurally complete. The lantern had not emerged from the roofs, nor had either of the western towers above the main parapet at the front. It is presumed by Harvey that the defects and distortions found in the crossing during the twenty years following the collapse at that time in 1407, either caused Colchester to have doubts or everybody else to take fright. They therefore did not build the other stages of the tower which would have had possibly a tall spire as well, making it outdo the steeples of old St. Paul's and of Lincoln. As it is, the central tower has always looked strange, stopping where it does, with truncated pinnacles at the four corners.

The one part of John Harvey's chapter that I find least convincing is his explanation as to why the central screen, the pulpitum, is unsymmetrical. It has seven niches on the north, and eight on the south side. I can appreciate his point about having to have more on one side because of adding in Henry VI, but looked at as a piece of continuous building it does not seem convincing. The statues are of about 1455 to 1460.

The history of the Minster after the Reformation does not become any less exciting; in fact it contains some of the most entertaining episodes as well as some of the best writing in the book. There is, for example, an excellent chapter by Claire Cross dealing with the period between the Reformation and the Restoration, which gives a concise account of the changes that followed immediately after 1547. The places above the High Altar where there had been images were repainted with scriptural texts, and thus, says Claire Cross, the transformation of the Minster from a resplendent if somewhat shabby edifice of late mediaeval Catholicism to a sombre temple of the new Protestantism was practically complete.

The Minster went into stagnation after the mid-Elizabethan period. One of the deans, John Scott, had a notorious reputation for gambling. He spent the latter part of his office in the King's Bench Prison in London, where he died in 1644. He was not alone in his offences. The account of prebendaries, canons, and others, both during the period of the Civil War and the Commonwealth and after appears often to be a story of nepotism, confusion and drunkenness.

In contrast with that, the 18th century appears to have been a period of relative indolence and stagnation. The only major item was the repaving of the entire Minster between 1731 and 1738,

supplemented by the making of the steps to the South Door. Lawrence Sterne recorded that he preached on All Saints' Day 1756 to one bellows blower, three singing men, one vicar and one residentiary.

There is, however, an interesting sidelight on the use of the Minster in the 18th century. In about 1730 the Earl of Oxford recorded that in the main aisle between the western gate and the choir gentlemen and ladies regularly walked after the evening service in summertime for want in York of the convenience of a park and gardens. They took delight in sitting there. There were seats on the north side so that they could rest. The author of the chapter points out that soon after the Earl of Oxford's visit the New Walk was laid out. No doubt its attractions, along the bank of the river, diminished those of the Minster nave which was now left to the curious visitor and the Minster congregation.

In contrast with that again, the 19th century saw the Minster enjoying some weird disasters, many controversies and ultimately some significant victories. Possibly the best chapter in the book is Owen Chadwick's dealing with the period from 1822 until 1916. He makes the point that the Victorian Age was a high age for cathedrals, partly because there was money to spend as a result of the railways making them the centre of the diocese as never before, and also enabling them to satisfy those who travelled in search of history or art or music in relation to Christian worship.

The disasters for the 19th century Minster included the fire started by Jonathan Martin on February 1st 1829, which destroyed most of the choir, all the choirstalls, the roof of the choir, the Archbishop's throne and pulpit, and the organ. After that there was another fire on the 20th May 1840, this time an accident caused unintentionally by a clockmaker working in the belfry, which destroyed the whole of the nave roof and a good deal of the south west tower.

By that time it was not so easy to collect money for the restoration, partly because of the nonchalance of the Dean. Dean Cockburn held the office from 1822 to 1858. He is a colourful and fascinating figure, wholly unsuitable to be a Dean. He was popular for his kindness and his oddities. He had a dry wit; could be caustic and never minded what he said; caused all sorts of problems; was accused of simony and eventually acquitted. But he invariably lived half the year in Somerset. As he got older he came less and less from his Somerset rectory. The new Deanery which he had built for himself on the north side of the Minster, taking the place of the old one on the south side, fell into disrepair and was hired to wealthy racegoers for the races, or even advertised as accommodation suitable for the hunting season.

But the Minster took on a new look as the result of two unusual and impressive deans who followed him. Cockburn's successor was

Dean Duncombe, 1858-80, one of the key figures in the Minster. He probably got there for the wrong reasons, among them being the fact that he had an enormous amount of money. He did an enormous amount of rebuilding, sorting out the Deanery and the Minster. He was always there. He had no natural abilities, no eloquence or intellectual ability, no great taste, a poor voice and no ministerial experience. But he was always around, sensible and courteous, looking into every detail, caring for people, believing passionately in worship, wanting the cathedral service to be a model and the Minster to be a mother church for the diocese. He subscribed money to sorting out the immediate surrounds of the Minster and the clearing away of unsightly buildings. It was partly indeed due to his sorting out of the area south of the west end which led to the new wider street, leading to the Minster, called Duncombe Street, now known as Duncombe Place. He found the Minster backward, like any cathedral of the 18th century, transformed it and left it as the Minster we know now.

His successor was Purey Cust, Dean from 1880 to 1916—equally remarkable, pleasantly absentminded—on one occasion describing the Deanery as a Drainery when he was writing a letter appropriately enough about drains. Under him was the work by Bodley which included the adding of flying buttresses to the nave and pinnacles to the buttresses on the north side. The new road built in 1902 from Goodramgate to Minster Yard, called Deangate, was not named after Purey Cust, who in fact opposed it; that road has caused as much trouble as anything else to the Minster since. He bought, however, the old sub deanery house at Precentor's Court and leased the site for a nursing home, the origin of the present Purey Cust Nursing Home. Like Duncombe he had the rare honour of seeing a place in the city called by his name during his life.

I have tried in this review to isolate some of the more decisive themes in the history of the Minster. The remainder of the book is taken up with specialised studies of particular aspects. I mention them less, not because they are less important but because they have an emphasis different from the main story. They contain what may in the end become some of the most important studies in the book. They include a staggeringly thorough survey of the stained and painted glass by David O'Connor and Jeremy Haselock, a good critical study of the music by Peter Aston, a very useful account of the Minster Library by C. B. L. Barr, and a quite fascinating study of the funeral monuments and other post-mediaeval sculpture by Professor Aylmer, which has almost convinced me that such 17th century marble prodigies as the hilarious figure of Archbishop Dolben reclining plumply and looking at some fat little angels above him or the thoroughly unspiritual 18th century figure of Archbishop Sharp are to be taken seriously.

It is a fitting memorial to a lot of people but also a salutary reminder, to quote Canon Cant in the final chapter, that “the heart of the Minster’s worship remained, as always, the recitation of the divine office”. That is one of its greatest beauties and York is better than most. But it is difficult to believe that everything will continue indefinitely as it has grown up in the last two centuries. The cathedral is always changing, finding a new role time and again, in whatever denomination, discovering new ways of expressing and explaining the love of God and the meaning of His words.

In the end it is surely of the nature of cathedrals, as opposed to simpler and more directly functional little churches, that they have a capacity greater and more transcendent than their requirements at any one time in history. The survival of the cathedrals depends ultimately upon whether they are profound and comprehensive enough to adapt again to changes—in the liturgy, in the life of the church, in everyday affairs.

The last word in the book is given by Canon Cant, and it will serve also to end this review.

“So long as the Church of the future has a territorial or a diocesan system it will need the use of large central buildings for church occasions: but it may not accept the need for these buildings to remain in the care of deans and chapters, and certainly not if the church of the future is the hidden church of the dispersion which some prophesy. It may well be that the great building whose story we have told will prove more durable than the present constitutional status of its guardians”.

### NEW BLACKFRIARS for your friends

If you think an article in *New Blackfriars* would especially interest one of your friends – let us know about it.

Just send the name and address to our Manager and she will send off an extra copy free of charge, (with a note to say that it comes from you).