

A SHORT HISTORY OF SOUTHWELL MINSTER

By Alison Salter, revised January 2017

Some of the most often asked questions from visitors are - 'Why was the Minster built in such a small place?' and 'What is the difference between a Minster and a Cathedral?'. This short history will try to address these questions and others.

The Romans built a villa when they were in Southwell sometime between 43 - 410 AD. It was roughly where Vicars' Court and land of the former Minster School are situated. The area was good for communications, near the River Trent and a good road system, the land was fertile and there was plentiful water from several wells including three in the area where the Minster now stands. Southwell is only 15 miles from Lincoln, a legionary fortress.

It is not certain that the inhabitants were Christian, but Christian symbols have been found at Ad Pontem on the Fosseway. After 313 AD under Emperor Constantine, Christianity became an accepted religion.

After the Romans left in 410 AD Anglo Saxon raids finally led to an Anglo Saxon settlement. Seven kingdoms emerged: Mercia, Northumbria and East Anglia concern us. Southwell was in North East Mercia. Inter-realm warfare was endemic and many Christians fled to Wales, Ireland and Iona. In 625 AD Princess Ethelburga of Kent (accompanied by Paulinus) married King Edwin of Northumbria in York. St Paulinus, the first Christian missionary to northern England, came to these parts and tradition has it that he built a church in Southwell. He may have baptised people in the River Trent at Littleborough, or even one of the ancient wells in Southwell.

In 874 Pagan Vikings (Danes) attacked the monastery at Repton, which was a centre of pilgrimage. Monks brought the relics of St Eadburga to Southwell for safety, so it is reasonable to suppose that there was a church of some sort already in Southwell.

In 956 King Eadwig gave the Manor of Southwell to Oskytel, Archbishop of York. The Charter covers not only Southwell but a group of neighbouring villages including Halloughton, Gibsmere, Upton, Morton, Goverton, Bleasby and Kirklington and parts of other villages. A Saxon church was built and this became "York's Minster at Southwell" with a college of Priests. So the Minster was in effect "A Bishop's semi-independent outpost". It was very much a missionary Church centred on a large church called a Minster, staffed by several clergy who derived their living from the surrounding parishes, but who together formed a group or College of Clergy which was responsible for the services and administration of the central Minster. These clergy were not monks and a Minster was not a monastery. There were 16 members of the Chapter (clergy, priests and canons) from 1291 until 1841, who took it in turns to be "in Residence" so there would have been no one person in charge.

After the Norman Conquest much work was undertaken to build new churches, cathedrals and castles. The Archbishop of York administered his province from four centres: York Ripon, Beverley and Southwell, the latter being particularly useful as a stopping point en route to London, but obviously by Norman standards it was inadequate. The Church was also a vehicle of control after the Conquest as well as the secular arm through its castles. It therefore had to look the part and this was already a venerated site.

In 1108 the building of the Norman church began, initiated by Archbishop Thomas of York, and continued for at least 50 years. Local people were required to donate money, materials or labour and in return, in 1234 the then Archbishop of York (Walter de Gray) determined to enlarge the Minster. The Norman choir (or Quire as it is now) was pulled down and the present quire built in the Early English Gothic style.

The Chapter House was begun in 1290 and completed around 1300, on the orders of another Archbishop of York, John Romaine.

In approximately 1330 the Pulpitum or screen was built, in the Decorated style, with well over 200 heads carved in great variety, grave and amusing, absurd and beautiful. It was around this time that the sedilia was also made for the Sanctuary.

In 1450 the West Window was inserted, in the Perpendicular style, indicating the importance of reading, so the need for more daylight.

Until the Reformation all western churches were Catholic under the authority of the Pope. Henry VIII became the Head of the Church in England, Mary Tudor reinstated Roman Catholicism but under Elizabeth I a Protestant Church Settlement became the rule.

In 1400 the building of the Archbishop's Palace was begun. Many Archbishops of York spent time in Southwell and lived in the Palace. Cardinal Wolsey took up residence in 1530. The last Archbishop to spend much time in Southwell was Edwin Sandys, who died at the Palace in 1588.

The first Civil War from 1642 - 6 brought much activity to Southwell. The Palace was reduced to ruins but the Great Hall remained more or less intact and after the Restoration was used as a Court, later on as a schoolroom. The Minster sustained some damage and it is thought that troops and horses were billeted in the building. The Prebendaries were dismissed, one clergyman was retained to say the services prescribed by Parliament, the font was removed, the organ was unused and the choir dismissed. The Church fell into considerable disrepair. Charles I spent his last night of freedom at the Saracen's Head and gave himself up to the Scots at a ceremony in the Great Hall.

In 1660 Charles II was received as King and the Anglican Church, its services, practices and organisation were restored. The Minster a great

many repairs had to be carried out. There was a new font, dated 1661 which cost £5.5s.0d., the organ was repaired, new sacred vessels and mace etc were made, the bells were replaced or repaired, as were the windows. This was all completed by 1691.

In 1711 lightning struck the SW tower. The Nave roof was destroyed, along with the bells and organ. A new flat ceiling was installed with a much shallower pitched roof. Repairs cost around £4,000 which took all the available cash and considerable subscriptions from many people.

In 1840 the Minster was transferred to the Lincoln Diocese, therefore under Canterbury, and it wasn't until 1935 that The Minster was returned to York.

In the mid-1800s the Minster was in a bad state of repair and was closed for 40 years for major restoration to be undertaken, under the guidance of the architect Ewan Christian. The height of the roof was raised, a new barrel vaulted ceiling installed in the nave, the present spires added (the originals having being removed in 1801).

In 1884 the Minster became the Cathedral for Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire and the first Bishop was appointed - George Ridding. In 1927 Derby gained its own Cathedral so the Diocese of Southwell was just for Nottinghamshire. Since 2005 it has been known as the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham. Bishop's Manor was built between in the early 1900s in the Arts and Crafts style.

Southwell Minster is one of 14 Parish Church Cathedrals in England and is dedicated to St Mary the Virgin.