

MINSTER

By David Turner November 2013

In current English usage, Minster is an honorific title given to particular churches in Great Britain, most famously York Minster.

The word derives from the Old English "mynster", meaning "monastery", "nunnery", "mother church" or "cathedral", itself derived from the Latin "monasterium", meaning a group of clergy living a communal life. Thus, "minster" could apply to any church whose clergy followed a formal rule: as for example a monastery or a chapter; or simply to a church served by a less formal group of clergy living communally.

The term minster is first found in royal foundation charters of the 7th century, designating any settlement of clergy living a communal life and endowed by charter with the obligation of maintaining the daily office of prayer. Widespread in 10th century Anglo-Saxon England, minsters declined in importance with the systematic introduction of parishes and parish churches from the 11th century onwards. Minster, however, remained a title of dignity in later medieval England for instances where a cathedral, monastery, collegiate church or parish church had originated with an Anglo-Saxon foundation. Eventually a minster came to refer more generally to "any large or important church, especially a collegiate or cathedral church". In the 21st century further minsters have been added by simply bestowing the status of a minster on existing parish churches.

History

Early and Mid Anglo-Saxon periods

The first minsters in the English-speaking parts of Britain were founded in the century after the mission to the Saxons led by Augustine of Canterbury in 597. In the earliest days of the English Church, from the 6th to the 8th centuries, minsters, in their various forms, constituted the only form of Christian institution with a permanent site, and often the only form of permanent collective settlement in a culture where there were no towns or cities.

Minsters were commonly founded by the king, receiving a royal charter and a corporate endowment of land tenure and other agricultural rights and entitlements within a broad area of territory. The superior of the minster would generally be from the family of the founder, and its primary purpose was to

support the king in the regular worship of the divine office; especially through intercession in times of war.

Minsters are also said to have been founded, or extensively endowed, in expiation of royal crimes; as for example Minster-in-Thamet near Ramsgate. Minsters might acquire pastoral and missionary responsibilities, but initially this appears to have been of secondary importance. In the 9th century, almost all English minsters suffered severely from the depredations of Viking invaders; and even when a body of clergy continued, any form of regular monastic life typically ceased.

Late Saxon and Norman periods

Following the English recovery, in the 10th century, surviving minsters were often refounded in accordance with the new types of collective religious bodies then becoming widespread in Western Europe, as monasteries following the reformed Benedictine rule, or as collegiate church or cathedral chapters. Consequently by the 11th century, a hierarchy of minsters became apparent; cathedral churches, or head minsters having pre-eminence within a diocese; surviving old minsters being pre-eminent within an area broadly equivalent to an administrative hundred; while newer lesser minsters and field churches were increasingly proliferating on local estates. Of particular importance, for these developments, was the royal enforcement in this period of tithe as a compulsory religious levy on arable production. This vastly increased the resources available to support clergy; but at the same time strongly motivated local landowners to found their own local churches, so as to retain tithe income within their own estates.

In the 11th and 12th centuries local estate churches, typically served by individual priests, developed into the network of parishes familiar to this day. The old minsters, mostly then became parish churches; their former pre-eminence acknowledged by the occasional retention of the honorific title; and sometimes by the continued recognition of former estate churches within their ancient territories as being, in some degree, of subsidiary status and dignity.

Late 20th and 21st century additions

Additional minsters have been designated in the 20th and 21st centuries, by adding an honorific title to existing parish churches. These have included Dewsbury (1994), Sunderland (1998), Preston (2003), Rotherham (2004), Stoke (2005), Newport (2008), St Andrew's Plymouth (2009), St John the Baptist Halifax (2009) St James's Grimsby (2010), St Nicholas Great Yarmouth (2011), **St Margaret's King's Lynn (2011) and St Peter's Leeds (2012).**

Current Minsters

status	examples
cathedral (status long held)	Lincoln Minster, York Minster
cathedral (recent elevation)	Ripon Cathedral, Southwell Minster
former cathedral, now parish church	Stow Minster
former collegiate church, now parish church	Beverley Minster, Hemingbrough Minster, Howden Minster, Wimborne Minster
parish church	Ashingdon Minster, Dewsbury Minster, Halifax Minster, Reading Minster, Stonegrave Minster, Kirkdale Minster, Grimsby Minster, Croydon Minster
minster status preserved in placename	Axminster, Forrabury and Minster, Ilminster, Minster-in-Thamet, Upminster, Westminster Abbey, Wimborne Minster
ruins	<u>South Elmham</u> Minster
city church (recent elevation)	Doncaster Minster, Great Yarmouth Minster , King's Lynn Minster , Leeds Minster, Preston Minster, Rotherham Minster, Stoke Minster, Sunderland Minster, Newport (IOW) Minster, Plymouth Minster