

THE RESTORATION OF THE MINSTER UNDER EWAN CHRISTIAN **Based on three talks given by Harold Brooke in 1992 & 1993**

Harold Brooke was a churchwarden, a member of the Cathedral Council and secretary to the Parochial Committee.. He became Honorary Librarian and Archivist in 1989 and was the author of the booklet: Closed for Business – Ewan Christian’s Restoration of Southwell Minster 1848 -1888, which is still available and a good read.

TALK 1 in September 1992

The main people involved in the restoration were:

Venerable George Wilkins - Archdeacon of Nottingham and Residentiary

Ewan Christian - Ecclesiastical Commissioners Architect.

James Nicholson - Clerk of the Fabric.

John Gregory - Minster Mason.

1848 Wilkins and Gregory started some "repairs, mainly to the Western Towers"

1851 Bishop of Lincoln asked Christian to survey the fabric of Southwell Minster.

1851 In May this report was presented and work commenced, with the Commissioners paying for all repairs to the fabric, but not responsible for any embellishments to the interior.

1853 In April, Nicholson wrote to the Commissioners stating that Wilkins had raised by subscription the sum of £160 in order to remove all the whitewash from the Nave. This meant scraping and cleaning all the stonework. When this was done it was found that plaster & cement had been used instead of stone for repairs. This accounted for the fissures and giving way of the central tower. The piers were now being underpinned and all plastered portions being replaced by stone. By July all this had been done and the tower made safe.

A large curtain which hung at the back of the Screen for 50 years to stop the draughts into the Quire had been removed to cover up the organ, and it was so cold that the congregations were refusing to come to church and the singing men had suffered illness for the want of it. It was agreed to purchase a new one, containing 100yds of material for £15.4s.6d.

In October Wilkins wanted to raise the belfry floor by one stage - Christian suggested raising it by two stages or erecting a ringers gallery. The latter was done in order to restore the tower to a Lantern as it was originally intended.

1854 - In January Wilkins wrote saying that he had stopped the bells from being rung, and would not go up the tower for fear of being crushed to death, due to the window arches being in a dangerous state, and would the Commissioners send Mr Christian, their Architectural Physician to have a look. He duly came but was not too worried, saying the defects were not new and were due to subsidence. This had now been remedied by putting iron ties below the bell chamber, on all sides.

Gregory received a rise of 4d per day, making 4/4d for 10 hours x 6 days per week. His labourer received 2/6d per day. The summer of 1854 was spent in removing hundreds of loads of earth & debris from around the external walls of the Minster, causing the interior floor to be green & damp for some feet. The North porch was the same and had to be restored.

1855 Nicholson reported that there was no pump or well for supplying water to carry on the work. All water used so far had been borrowed! SW tower now receiving urgent attention. In October Wilkins wrote saying that fissures had appeared above the West window. Christian came and thought these were due to subsidence or the expansion of the iron bar which connected the two towers above the west window. This was painted white and the fissures pointed.

Three stained glass windows added - present of sons of Sir Richard Sutton.

West window reglazed. Wilkins used Cathedral tinted glass against the wishes of the Commissioners.

Lengthy correspondence followed over cost, which they finally paid, but warned Wilkins that they would not, in future, pay for anything not agreed by them.

1857 Wire guard put round ringers gallery because the ringers were sometimes lifted off their feet. Most of the year spent in the Chapter House repairing windows and the stonework beneath them, all of which were in bad condition.

1858 Chapter House repairs continue. New iron gates erected outside West door. These along with N & S doors were to keep out the sheep when the main doors were open. Thus, Wilkins said "The animal flock is kept outside while the spiritually minded flock have free access at all reasonably prescribed hours". More repairs to SW tower.

1859 - Christian made a survey of the work done and was highly pleased.

West wall of S Transept had been repaired being in a very bad condition. Door to bell tower restored. Flagstaff renewed at a cost of £53.2.0.

1860 - More work on SW Tower. Chimney shafts restored due to damage by high winds. End of this year, spent in preparation for the repair of the interior wall of the N aisle of the Nave from the transept to the N porch, which was apparently the most decayed part of the church. Nicholson asked whether the three Gothic windows should be replaced by Norman windows like those at the west end.

Gregory & Cooke still getting 4/4d & 2/6d per day.

So, by the end of 1860, most of the work had been carried out on the central tower and the two western towers, which obviously had been in the worst condition.

TALK2 on 13th February 1993 [was fact sheet no 34]

1861 N nave wall repaired between porch and transept. Christian wanted to put in Norman windows instead of large Gothic, but it was decided to keep them as they were.

However, two large windows on the S side were replaced by a Norman window.

1862 James Nicholson, Clerk of the Fabric, died on May 18th, aged 89. He had worked almost up to the time of his death. His £30/year salary was split between John Kirkland (who had taken over) and John Gregory, the mason. Neither were to assume the title of Clerk of the Fabric.

1863 Christian reported that some windows were requiring constant repair. 90 were repaired (17 re-leaded, 45 repaired and 28 renewed with new glass). All the clerestory windows were taken out and re-fixed. By the end of September, 30 more windows had been repaired.

1864 Christian reported that the Bell story in central tower was unsound. Extra mason employed and all working 11 hr day. Work continued on the tower for rest of year.

1865 Christian reported that the external stonework on the upper stages of the central

tower was found to be in a worse state than expected. The fire of 1711 had spent its chief fury of the N & E sides of the tower, and the stonework was shelling, although the core of the walls was sound. We can see now why his 1851 report said that the central tower was his chief concern.

Gregory, requested Christian to ask the Commissioners to raise John Cook's wages to the rate of the district. He wrote, extolling the virtues of Cook, saying he had 10 children. Gregory's and Cook's wages were raised to 30/- and 18/- per week respectively.

Wilkins wrote to the Commissioners asking if they would purchase 190 chairs (already in the church) from the "Society of Parochial Chairs" for a sum of £10! The Commissioners refused.

1866 In Sept a letter was sent to the Comms re the warming of the church. This was signed by J M Wilkins, who was the son of Ven George Wilkins, who had died on 17th August, although there was no mention of this in the correspondence. Thus started a long saga about the warming of the church. There was an open fireplace stove in the N choir aisle which the Comms refused to repair and Wilkins paid for this himself. Comms agreed to pay for an extra stove on the S side.

1867 Comms refused to pay for candles. Wilkins wrote asking if church could be lit by gas as there was now a gasworks in the town. So started another saga about the lighting of the church.

Wilkins wrote about insurance. Comms asked Christian to advise the amount for which church should be insured. He replied as follows: Fabric £12,000; Organ £700; Music Books £100; Library fittings £50; Library books & Mss £600; Church plate & furniture £100; Clock and Chimes £250; Bell frame & mountings £1200, making a total of £15000. Comms refused to insure against fire.

1865 Problems outside the church, with the well & drains in Vicars Court. New drains laid to the new town sewer.

Work continued all year, restoring stone work under galleries in the choir aisles. S aisle used as a storage room for lumber etc.

1869 Heating & lighting problem raised again. Wilkins wrote to Comms asking for a fund to be set up to pay for this. This could be done from the monies received by the Comms from Pew Rents, which were illegal. No comment from Comms! The Bishop of Lincoln wrote, backing Wilkin's plea for heating. Christian obtained estimates for heating - £527 for the whole church & £265 for the choir only. He could light the choir, but the galleries must be cleared away.

1870 Wilkins heard that Comms had agreed to do something about the heating & lighting, and wrote to say that he hoped the Comms gents would be instructed not to collect pew rents in the future! Whitewash being cleaned off choir - took 15 months. (see my separate Fact Sheet re whitewash).

1871 Masons preparing and restoring stonework in choir.

1872 The choir galleries removed in August. Wage increase for masons - Gregory and Cook now getting 36/- & 20/- per week.

Evening services suspended because nave was cold & dark, and choir not yet ready. Bp of Lincoln complained.

Extra masons employed to speed up the work. Four new Gurney stoves put in nave - two more ordered for choir aisles.

Triforium ceilings boarded up to prevent draughts.

1873 Bp of Lincoln wrote to Comms with signed petition from people of Notts for the setting up of an Episcopal See in the County of Notts. Also complained again about slowness of work, saying that the congregation were excluded from the choir and the nave was unbearably cold in winter and asked in the name of the officiating clergy and the congregation, if the Comms would give instructions for the dispatch & completion of the work. The natives were getting restless! Christian was not impressed, and replied saying that " ... the work had been carried on gradually & surely, on the system that had been followed for years past, although recently, as the a/c's showed, at an accelerated pace."

New gas piping ordered for the church. Things were moving!

1874 In April the Comms asked Christian for a report on the condition of the fabric, the work still necessary to complete the restoration and an estimate for same.

As this report and the comments by G A Street are very significant, they will be dealt with in the next talk on this subject

TALK 3 on 7th September 1993 [was fact sheet no 40]

In 1875 the Church Commissioners asked Ewan Christian to report on the fabric of the Minster, possibly in anticipation of its diocesan destiny. Photographs accompanying the report have unfortunately disappeared.

1875 Report

1 The Nave

a) 1672 engraving shows roof higher than in 1875, however, roof installed 1711 after the fire - height uncertain, but it cut off top of central arch and west window; made up with inferior materials roughly worked. The whole was unsightly. Recommended restoration of previous pitch.

b) Floor of aisles and transepts very damp and damaged by insertion of memorial slabs. Repairs required.

c) Some window glazing required attention.

2 The Quire

a) Needed re-flooring and

b) Refitting, recommended restoration of steps and altar rail to west of the sedilia. Pews to extend eastward only as far as the transepts. Chairs could be added when maximum seating capacity (700) required. Galleries should be removed.

c) Improved lighting in Nave should be extended to the Quire.

d) 2 Gurney stoves should be installed, as in the Nave. Fuel storage in S.W. tower should cease and alternative location outside the church be found.

e) Roof was in satisfactory condition.

3 The Chapter House

a) Partial lining of walls with deal board was a disfigurement and should be removed.

b) Floor of Chapter House and Cloister required relaying.

4 The Library

a) Recommended restoration of original floor level - 3 ft. below 1875 level.

b) Recommended renewal of roof and restoration to correct pitch.

c) Library should be removed to the room above the Chapter House passage.

5 Miscellaneous

- a) Both western spires or pinnacles had been removed 1801. Recommended restoration of "ancient outline".
- b) Recommended cost of recommendations - around £22,000.

The Bishop of Lincoln asked George Street, eminent architect, for his opinion and comments. Street

- a) Agreed with Christian's report on the Nave and the restoration of the western pinnacles.

- b) Advocated removal of the altar in the Quire to the site he believed originally intended by the builders, ie. to the west of the transepts.

- c) The three bays, which would then lie to the east of the altar, should be screened off and used for small services, the centre bay to be a Lady Chapel, as he believed was the original intention.

- d) The Quire to be the 4 bays east of the tower, about 60 feet long. Bernasconi's stalls and canopy to be removed. Suitable for weekly congregations and additional chairs could be added below the stalls if necessary.

- e) The screen should be removed to provide a processional route and to promote the through use of the Church. The screen might be re-erected across the transepts to provide a feature of interest.

- f) If the screen were retained, the choir could be sited on it. Street believed it was originally a singing and music gallery. Lessons could read from an eagle lectern and sermons preached from a pulpit under the tower. In this case an altar would be installed in the Nave – but he did not recommend this.

Christian opposed the provision of east end chapels: it would lessen the dignity of the choir, and where would the organ be sited if the singing men took over the Screen?

- a) The Bishop of Lincoln concurred with the main principles of Christian's report. The Screen was to remain. The Quire was to be fitted with stalls in anticipation of the Minster's future as a Cathedral. The Nave was to be furnished for Sunday services and for large services.

- b) 1876 - the old doorway in the N. transept was removed, although Christian had wanted it to be opened up.

- c) 1877 - the Commissioners' Meeting agreed that Christian should implement 1875 plan.

- d) Clipsham of Norwell won the contract with the lowest bid - around £18,700.

- e) 1879 - 120 tons of lead bought because lead prices were low - had to be stored in a nearby garden.

- f) 1879-81 Western pinnacles erected with lightning conductors.

- g) 1882 - in spite of being paid more than the original tender, Clipsham went bankrupt. A Norfolk firm completed the work.

- h) Beginning of 1884, Southwell Minster became a Cathedral.

NOTE During questions, it was agreed that it was highly unlikely that the centre of the east of the Quire was ever intended as a lady Chapel, because the whole building was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, but the three eastern bays may perhaps indicate that something special was intended.