

## **Canon Thurmer Memorial Lecture.**

On Friday 27 May, about 85 people gathered at St Michael's to enjoy a talk by Nicholas Orme, Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Exeter, entitled "A Brief History of England's Cathedrals". And what a talk! In just 50 minutes Professor Orme took us on a vivid tour of two millennia of Bishops and their Cathedrals in Christian England.

The Lecture turned on 5 historical catastrophes that befell our Cathedrals and from which they recovered renewed and strengthened.

AD400 – the Roman Empire in the West collapses, and whatever Cathedrals there were in England for Bishops of London, Lincoln, York and elsewhere, are lost to history. Around 600, Augustine's neat plan for 2 Archbishops each with 12 bishops and cathedrals is partly worked out, some surprisingly rural, like Sherborne, some monastic foundations, some 'secular' with Canons, and his HQ never gets moved from Canterbury to London.

AD800 – the Viking incursions, and 6 cathedrals, mainly in the North, like Hexham, fall. Around 900 Dunstan revives monasticism at some cathedrals like Worcester. 1066 has surprisingly little effect though some rural ones get moved to cities, e.g. Dorchester to Lincoln. Crediton has already moved to Exeter in 1050. But some are still in unlikely places such as Ely, while Bath & Wells, and Lichfield & Coventry continue as 2-centre dioceses.

AD1529 – the English Reformation, and Henry VIII asset strips and dissolves hundreds of monasteries. Cranmer is not keen on cathedrals, so it is a close-run thing but surprisingly Henry keeps or converts the 9 secular and 10 monastic cathedrals, partly because he likes their music and partly as well-funded gifts for his cronies; so not much theology involved. They survive the Reformation roller-coaster of Edward, Mary, Elizabeth, James I & VI and Charles, until...

AD1650 – the English Commonwealth tries Puritanism, abolishing bishops, cathedrals, music, and fun. But not for long! Charles II returns from Europe, choirs move from Lady Chapels to monks' choir stalls. Then Deans & Canons slumber through the 18<sup>th</sup> century with no thought for the fabric around them. In 1826 William Cobbett lambasts Salisbury, and in 1851 the spire of Chichester gracefully collapses.

AD1840 – the Ecclesiastical Commissioners Acts of Robert Peel's Government disendow the cathedrals and wake up their Chapters, while Mediaeval Romanticism and the Gothic Revival inspire reform and renewal. At the same time the Industrial Revolution, the railways, tourists and guide books force cathedrals to take a more business-like attitude to their cities and their faithful.

With 4 new-builds at Truro, Liverpool, Guildford & Coventry, and several upgrades of existing churches there are 42 Anglican Cathedrals across England by mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. (Time did not permit any mention of the revival of Roman Catholic Dioceses & Cathedrals.) While Parish Churches struggle in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Cathedrals thrive, reaching out to worshippers, tourists and organisations alike, through music and culture, hosting exhibitions, education, refectories, diocesan festivals, etc. Finances may be tight, but all seem to be in good hands and good heart, serving their diverse communities into the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium.

All-in-all a fine and fitting tribute to the memory of Canon John Thurmer who, as a residentiary Canon of Exeter Cathedral from 1973-91, also presided over a period in our Cathedral's life when it had to reach out and strengthen its engagement with the changing religious and secular life of the Diocese and the county of Devon, as it does today.

Many thanks to Professor Orme for such an engaging talk and for answering our varied questions from Cathedrals in fiction to the restoration of Shrines. Thanks also to David Beadle, Caitlin Lovich and the St Michael's Lectures team for organising, and to Richard Parker for opening the evening with reminiscences of Canon John Thurmer.

Professor Orme is preparing a book on the History of England's Cathedrals, to be published in 2017.

Richard Barnes.