



Bristol Cathedral – architectural overview

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Overview

This paper briefly sets out the history of Bristol Cathedral, by summarising the key events and figures which have shaped its past, and by identifying the main architectural and artistic features of interest.

Bristol cathedral is the seat of the bishop of Bristol and the heart of a diocese which, today, includes Bristol, and much of south Gloucestershire and northern Wiltshire, including Swindon. It stands on a site which has been sacred for a thousand years or more.

Ancient origins

The cathedral originated as an abbey on the edge of what was, in the twelfth century, a prosperous and growing merchant town. The knoll on which it stands appears to already have already been the site of a holy place: the cult of St Jordan, the legend of which, only attested in the fourteenth century, takes the story of site back to St Augustine of Canterbury and the earliest days of English Christianity, and the survival of a magnificent eleventh-century sculpted stone, now in the cathedral, is proof that a church of some kind predated the abbey.

Foundation of the abbey began in 1140. Large portions of the resulting church – especially the remarkable chapter house -- survive to this day. The monastery was a daughter house of the Augustinian abbey of St-Victor in Paris though almost nothing is known of its earliest canons. For the next four hundred years it was, while never of dominant significance in the town, by some distance its largest religious institution, as well as being the most important Victorine house in England (and one of the wealthiest Augustinian houses of any kind). Its unusual dedication, to St Augustine of Canterbury rather than St Augustine of Hippo (the great church father who was believed to have written the Augustinian Rule), is itself an indication that the cult of St Jordan was relevant to its foundation.

A cathedral is created

The abbey was dissolved in 1539 and its buildings might have been lost had Henry VIII, late in the process of creating 'New Foundation' cathedrals, not raised it to cathedral status, apparently after lobbying from the citizens of what was now England's most important trading city after London itself. The church, like other cathedrals created at this time, was rededicated, in this case to the Holy and Undivided Trinity.

Bristol cathedral was, and still is, governed by a college of canons under a dean. The office of the bishop of Bristol, however, was not well endowed in the early years of the cathedral's existence and at times it virtually fell into disuse, or was run jointly with Gloucester (another New Foundation cathedral). The diocese consisted of the city and county of Bristol, some parishes in south Gloucestershire -- and the county of Dorset, whose nearest border was 40 miles or so away. The church functioned without a nave because the medieval nave had been in mid-rebuild when the Dissolution took place and its site was subsequently developed for housing. Nevertheless the cathedral played an important role in civic life and over time various other aspects of city governance and ceremonial relocated from the historic city centre to the area around the graveyard of the former monastery, which was no longer outside the expanding city. Today known as College Green, this area is today overlooked by both the cathedral and the County Hall

(as well as the Lord Mayor's Chapel, uniquely run by the city council, and originally part of the almonry of the medieval monastery), and very much the city's main civic public space.

Reform of church and bishopric alike took place in the nineteenth century. The diocesan boundary was changed so it more usefully reflects local geography; a nave was constructed in 1868-88, doubling the size of the church, and enabling it to play host to major events in the life of the city.

At least 95,000 people used the building in 2011—12; the cathedral hosts a range of concerts and other events, while the adjacent Cathedral Choir School is one of the most popular state schools in Bristol. The cathedral's professional choir and nationally famous historic organ enrich a magnificent round of worship and music.

Key events and figures

Early saints

The connection between Bristol cathedral and two of the most significant figures in its history – saints Augustine of Hippo and Jordan – is not a straightforward one. St Jordan was legendarily a companion of St Augustine of Canterbury, the apostle to the English, and was present when the meeting of Augustine with the British Christians took place on or near the site that on which the cathedral itself now stands.

The status of this story before the fourteenth century – 800 years after these events took place -- is unclear, though by that point a chapel of St Jordan stood in the abbey graveyard, now College Green. Nevertheless the presence in the church of a substantial work of Anglo-Saxon sculpture, the Harrowing of Hell stone, is testament to the fact that something of religious significance stood nearby before the Conquest.

St Augustine of Hippo, the great church father, is by contrast one of the most vividly understood personalities of the ancient world, thanks to his remarkable writings. These would have been well known at the abbey founded on the site in 1140, and continue to influence Christian thinking into the modern era. His monastic Rule, in which priests live in community in a manner akin to monks, is a source of inspiration to the Dean and Chapter to this day.

Medieval merchants, lords and monks

The monastery was founded by a significant figure in twelfth century Bristol, Robert Fitzharding, a merchant, landlord and financier of increasingly aristocratic wealth who was eventually rewarded with a substantial estate, running from the edge of the city north into central Gloucestershire, and the title of lord Berkeley. Fitzharding's abbey was located at the nearest edge of his lands to the growing merchant town itself. He himself took holy orders at the end of his life and was buried in the church, though his tomb is lost.

For the ensuing four hundred years, the abbey appears to have been intimately caught up with the Berkeleys, acting as the burial place of all of Fitzharding's successors bar one between his death in 1170 and 1368. Even when burial ceases the Berkeley crest and Berkeley history were a major concern of the canons, as its prominence in the late medieval decoration of the abbey and the text of the document known as Abbot Newland's Roll, held at Berkeley castle and the most important source for the abbey's medieval city, attests.

If the roll is anything to go by, those abbots of Bristol who were most respectfully remembered were those who had made the biggest impact on the fabric of the church, such as abbot David (d. 1234), builder

of the Elder Lady Chapel and abbot John Newland (d. 1515) who did much to rebuild the conventual buildings. It is a testament to this that abbot Edmund Knowle (d. 1332) is credited with initiating, in 1298, when he was still a senior canon, construction of the magnificent east end, which remains the cathedral's claim to having an indispensable part to play in the story of Gothic architecture.

Apart from its remarkable aesthetic qualities, the east end is a remarkable insight into medieval culture, being apparently designed to evoke the abbey's role as a kind of mausoleum and prayer factory for the souls of the lords Berkeley. The Berkeley effigies preserved in the church today all relate to the period when the east end was being rebuilt, a time when figures such as Thomas (d. 1321) and Maurice (d. 1326) were deeply implicated in the rebellion against Edward II. Apart from the maintenance of a ceaseless round of worship, which led to the creation of a professional choir to sing polyphony in the fifteenth century, prayer for the Berkeleys seems to have been a dominant concern in the community's spiritual life.

Nevertheless, a preaching cross erected in the graveyard was during the fifteenth century being used for public sermons, and in 1491-96, the Mayor and burgesses exercised their rights to process over this churchyard, causing violent confrontation with the abbey. It seems the people of Bristol were already beginning to see the cemetery, by some way the most important sacred enclosure in the city, as to some extent 'theirs' as well as being part of the monastery.

Bishops, canons and musicians

The role of the church in city life was transformed by the dissolution of the monastery in 1539 and the founding of the cathedral in 1542. Bristol was now the seat of a bishop: significant diocesans include the first bishop, Paul Bush (d. 1558), who had briefly been head of the monastic community at Edington, Wiltshire; Sir Jonathon Trelawny (d. 1721), who won the bishopric after leading the people of Cornwall to stand by James II during the Monmouth rebellion of 1685, but was later imprisoned for treason after refusing to support a 1688 act permitting Catholics and nonconformists to worship in public (he was eventually acquitted); and the noted theologian Bishop Joseph Butler (d. 1752). Members of Chapter have included the geographer of the Americas Richard Hakluyt (d. 1615); the hymn writer Samuel Crossman (d. 1684), and the economist and political theorist Josiah Tucker (d. 1799). The composer Elway Bevin (d. 1637) was organist for some years.

Under the Commonwealth bishop, dean and chapter were disbanded, though from 1647 to 1660 the church, which suffered physically during this time, continued to be used for worship, now dominated by preaching. Restoration of the bishopric was greeted with grand ceremonial by the mayor and corporation, who processed from the city centre to the church for services. Bristol High Cross moved to College Green in 1733 (it was later moved to Stourhead, Wiltshire); County Hall was built there in 1913.

Victorian resurgence

By the nineteenth century the church was, as it remains, a gallery of monuments to the more prominent members of Bristol society during a period when the city played a vital role in national culture, whether as a centre for freethinking and for Romantic culture or as the base for exploration, and subsequent exploitation, of the Americas. Memorials in the building include those of the many slavers who lived in Bristol or who came there from the west Indies towards the end of their lives; the poet Robert Southey (d. 1843); and the reformer Mary Carpenter (d. 1877). The cathedral was also a focus for political conflict: in 1831, for example the building was attacked by rioters furious at the bishop's opposition to a parliamentary reform bill. The head verger, William Phillips (d. 1849), barred the crowd from the church but the bishop's palace was destroyed, the chapter house badly damaged, and many valuable archives lost.

It was canon John Pilkington Norris (d. 1891), under Dean Gilbert Elliot (d. 1891, in himself a considerable figure in improving the fortunes of the cathedral and furthering the development of Bristol), who led the ambitious project to complete the building, the most visually dramatic legacy of the Victorian years of reform at Bristol, which also led to the creation of a more workable diocesan boundary. Installation of statues on the north porch which were deemed suspiciously papist led to a near riot, and the current statues are a replacement. In other ways the nave is the part of the building, perhaps more than any other, that today reflects the lives of ordinary Bristolians, especially in the vivid depictions of members of the auxiliary services – nurses, ARP wardens, etc. – which were placed in the windows of the nave north aisle after a bomb blew them out during the Bristol blitz of 1941.

Art and architecture

A gallery of medieval art

The Harrowing of Hell stone is one of the few major works of Anglo-Saxon sculpture in existence. It is also the most significant object to survive from Anglo-Saxon Bristol. Found beneath the chapter house floor in 1832, it now stands in the south transept of the cathedral. Its original function is unknown, but without it, the very existence of an Anglo-Saxon religious site in the area of the current cathedral would be called into question.

The south transept is also the best place to get some idea of the scale of the twelfth-century church. Much of its walls date from this era, and suggest a sizeable building that was rib vaulted in stone: that is, a structure of some ambition. Though the transept was much-rebuilt in later centuries: some of the finest works of the era anywhere survive elsewhere in the complex. The abbey gatehouse on College Green, and in particular the chapter house (c. 1160), accessible from the transept itself, are lavishly and subtly decorated buildings, the walls of the chapter house covered in extraordinary tapestry-like patterns, testaments to the inventiveness of Norman architecture at the very dawn of the experiments which were leading towards Gothic.

An equally 'textbook' work of the first mature Gothic style, Early English, can be seen in the Elder Lady Chapel, whose foundation and original function as a centre for Marian devotion are attested to in a unique letter, requesting the loan of a master mason (possibly Adam Lock, designer of the Wells west front), written by the chapel's founder Abbot David to the Dean of Wells at some point between 1218 and 1222. Both the richness of this building's interior, the sculpted wall arcades of which include humorous depictions of animals and lavish stiff leaf foliage, and its location off the north transept, possibly an evocation of the Holy House at Walsingham, may relate to its Marian function.

Revolutionary architecture

But the most important architectural change made to the building in the middle ages was the construction of a new east end from 1298. This remarkable work in the Decorated Gothic style is beyond classification: it seems to exist in a parallel aesthetic universe of its own, and debate about its significance and even its date remains active. Its beauty is beyond question: it is as subtle a work of art as anything the medieval world created.

The east end is a hall church – that is, its aisles are the same height as the nave – by far the most elaborate example in Britain of this type of church. Almost every detail of its design, from its inventive vaults, which spring from little bridges across each aisle bay, to the 'starburst' tomb recesses which line its walls, is unlike anything else in existence. The Berkeley chapel anteroom, the skeletal vaults of which reveal their own structure in a manner that is almost 'post-modernist' in conception, is filled with unusual decorative ideas that the designer could not work into the main space. The building appears to presage late medieval design, not only in England but in northern Europe as a whole, as well as to marshal motifs from secular architecture so as to evoke the design of a castle great hall: a veritable mausoleum for the knights Berkeley. Among the examples of decorative art that survive from it is some fine fourteenth-century stained glass,

most vividly seen in the much-restored eastern Lady chapel (but with attractive fragments also now in the cloister), and a sequence of effigies to members of the Berkeley family, of which that to Maurice (d. 1326) in the south choir aisle is artistically the most important.

During the fifteenth century, the transepts were vaulted and the handsome central tower, which includes bells of the era, raised. The convent was almost entirely rebuilt: the surviving west cloister walk, refectory (now part of the Cathedral Choir School) and upper parts of the abbey gatehouse are fine works of the Perpendicular style. A new set of choir stalls, of which an entertaining and beautifully carved set of misericords survive, was installed between 1515 and 1525. The church also owns a magnificent fifteenth-century brass candelabrum, originally from Bristol's Temple church. A new nave was under construction – the window sill level had been reached, and its Romanesque predecessor demolished – when the abbey was dissolved.

Half a cathedral?

For the next four hundred years, the new cathedral (founded in 1542) functioned effectively without a nave. A fine stone late medieval pulpitum screen, given to the Carmelite Friary by the merchant Thomas White and moved from there to the new cathedral at the Dissolution, separated the transept and western bays of the choir from the rest of the east end; the high altar was moved back so it stood against the wall of the eastern lady chapel. Congregants had to move to the transepts for sermons and back to the choir for Communion; a large gallery for the mayor, aldermen and councillors was among the new furnishings.

Fragments of the screen, bearing White's merchant's mark, can be seen in the south choir aisle. Other survivals of this era include a remarkable set of late sixteenth century emblematic wall paintings, rescued from the Old Deanery and now kept in the Sacristy; the magnificent Baroque organ casing of 1682-85, which once dominated the crossing and now stand atop the screen in the north choir aisle; and a rare enamelled glass window of the Restoration era, in the east window of that aisle. A pair of handsome seventeenth-century tombs, now at the west end of the nave, are the finest of several of that period to be seen in the church.

Much else, however, was swept away when the former location of the high altar was reinstated (along with the eastern Lady chapel altar to its east). The nave was constructed in 1868-88. This fine work of Gothic Revival design, by the famous architect G.E. Street (d. 1881), takes the model of the fourteenth-century east end and gives it a High Victorian twist. The work was completed by J.L. Pearson (d. 1897), who added a French Rayonnant-style west front with twin bell towers and a magnificent series of choir furnishings, mostly installed in the early twentieth century, and reflecting the grand, distinctive and rather original take on medieval models which was emerging in the 1890s. Twentieth century enrichments include the organ, whose workings substantially date to 1907 and are among the most celebrated in England; many windows of the 1940s and 1950s by Arnold Robinson; and the abstract window in the north choir aisle on the theme of the Trinity, designed by Keith New and installed in 1965.

The Cathedral today

The life of the cathedral still revolves around worship, the opus dei of the medieval community. Open every day of the year and with a minimum of three services each day, the cathedral is a house of prayer and a sanctuary in a busy city. Recent years have seen congregations increase and witnessed the continuing determination to offer the best of ourselves to God. The Cathedral School goes from strength to strength and recently opened a primary phase. The fabric is still maintained to the highest standards with sympathetic accommodations made between medieval aesthetics and (for example) the need for modern IT.

In 2011 College Green and the Cathedral were the focus for the largest Occupy protest in England outside London. The Chapter learnt a good deal from that engagement and now takes a keen interest in issues of human trafficking and in the consequences of poverty in the city and the world. The Cathedral is a focus for major events and for music and is the congregation house of the University of the West of England. Chapter and Bishop together recognise the importance of the cathedral in the mission of the church.

Further Reading & Information

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