

WELLS CATHEDRAL



Whilst on a short holiday in Weston-Super-Mare recently Emily and I visited Wells Cathedral. We thought that you might be interested in some of its history and background. I might add that we were particularly fascinated by the clock described below.

Although Bishop Reginald was responsible for the very early stages c1180 of the building's construction, the greater part of the original cathedral took shape under Bishop Jocelyn "of Wells", so named because he was a local Somerset man and had the burning ambition to restore to Wells its cathedral status. He oversaw the construction of the Nave and most of the West Front. Simultaneously he was building the central part of the present Bishop's Palace and a residence at nearby Wookey. He lived to see the church dedicated, but despite much lobbying of Rome, died before cathedral status was finally granted in 1245.

By the time the building was finished, including the Chapter House (1306), it already seemed too small for the developing liturgy, in particular the increasingly grand processions. So, a new spate of expansive building was initiated. Bishop John Drokenford started the proceedings with the heightening of the central tower and the beginnings of a dramatic eight sided Lady Chapel at the eastern end, which was finished by 1326. Bishop Ralph of Shrewsbury followed, continuing with the eastward extension of the quire and the retro- quire beyond with its forest of pillars. He also built Vicars' Hall and

Close, to give the men of the choir a secure place to live, away from the town with all its temptations. He enjoyed an uneasy relationship with the citizens of Wells, partly because of his imposition of taxes, and felt the need to surround his palace with crenellated walls and a moat and drawbridge. The appointment of William Wynford as master mason in 1365 marked another period of activity. He built the south-west tower of the West Front and designed the north-west one, which was built to match in the early 1400s.

The famous Wells clock was probably in place by 1390. Bishop Ralph Erghum seems to have brought his clockmaker with him to Wells. The Wells clock is unique because it still has its original medieval face, depicting a pre Copernican universe with the earth at its centre. When the clock strikes every quarter jousting knights rush round above the clock and the Quarter Jack bangs the quarter hours with his heels. An outside clock opposite Vicars' Hall, placed there just over seventy years after the original clock is connected to the inside mechanism.

Bishop Bekynton (1443- 465) built all four gateways still in use, houses along the market place, almshouses for the poor and a complete water system for the city, piped underground from the wells in his palace garden.

By the time Henry VIII came to the throne the cathedral and all its surrounding buildings were complete and substantially as they are today. It was during the reign of his son Edward VI, that a distinctly protestant style came to the fore, not only in theological matters but in outward appearance as well. Following the dissolution of the chantries in 1547 and the consequent lack of income, medieval brasses were sold off and a pulpit was placed in the nave for the first time. The painted stonework was covered with white limewash.

After the disruptive period of Mary Tudor's reign Elizabeth I was determined to restore harmony to her church. In Wells, she gave both the Chapter and the Vicars' Choral a new charter in 1591 and a period of relative stability ensued. This however came to an abrupt end with the onset of the civil war and the execution of Charles I. During the fighting a considerable amount of damage was done, to stonework, furniture and windows. The Commonwealth period under Oliver Cromwell saw great dilapidation and indifference towards the fabric of the Cathedral. No dean was appointed and some clergy were reduced to performing menial tasks or begging on the streets.

There followed a period of gentle decline and decay with many bishops being more absent than present and several deans were appointed from the laity. Consequently a major restoration programme was needed by the middle of the 1800s. Such was the success of the restoration that in the 1900s it was possible to keep a rolling programme of improvement to the fabric going and this strategy has continued to this day. It is evident from the state of the building now, that the dean and chapter have taken their duty seriously to make and keep this a fitting place in which to worship God and sing his praises.

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