



ST GEORGE'S LECTURES

4 - Why Do We Have Cathedrals?

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Why Do We Have Cathedrals? A Historian's View¹

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We should be too long to tell your honours of cathedral churches: the dens aforesaid of all loitering lubbers, where master Dean, master Vicedean, master Canons or Prebendaries the greater, master Petty Canons or Canons the lesser, master Chancellor of the church, master Treasurer (otherwise called Judas the pursebearer) the chief chanter, singing men (special favourers of religion), squeaking choristers, organ players, gospellers, epistlers, pensioners, readers, vergers, etc., live in great idleness and have their abiding. If you would know whence all these came, we can easily answer you: that they came from the pope, as out of the Trojan horse's belly, to the destruction of God's kingdom. The Church of God never knew them; neither doth any reformed Church in the world know them.²

John Field didn't like cathedrals: in 1572, he was asking the English Parliament for their abolition. He thought they were a popish survival, a relic of England's Catholic past, with no place in a reformed Church. And he was right – "neither doth any reformed church in the world know them". In 1572 no "reformed", no Protestant, Church had cathedrals – except the Church of England. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century had swept away Catholic religion, and it had swept away bishops and their cathedrals: endowments were confiscated, chapters were suppressed, choirs were dismissed, and buildings were allowed to fall down or, as in Scotland, converted to parish churches. Among the reformed states of Europe, Scandinavia kept bishops, but only England kept cathedrals and their chapters.

John Field was a bit of a radical: he wanted to get rid of bishops and the Book of Common Prayer too. He wanted England to have a proper Reformation, like Switzerland and Scotland. But the abolition of cathedrals – or their total reconstitution – was not only demanded by radicals. Thomas Cranmer, archbishop of Canterbury and Protestant martyr, had no time for cathedral foundations. When Henry VIII's government proposed a moderate reform of Canterbury cathedral in 1539, Cranmer wanted something much more drastic: "for having experience, both in time

¹ I wish to record my warmest thanks to Dr John Shepherd, Dean of Perth, and Professor John Tonkin, for inviting me to give the St George's Cathedral Lecture, to the Friends of the Cathedral for financial support, and to Joy, Andrea, Melanie and Michael for generous hospitality. Anyone asked to give the annual lecture is advised to accept!

² *Puritan Manifestoes*, ed. W H Frere and C E Douglas (1954), p.32



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past and also in our days, how the said sect of prebendaries have not only spent their time in much idleness and their substance in superfluous belly cheer, I think it not to be a convenient state or degree to be maintained and established".³ He wanted the chapter abolished and the cathedral turned into an academic college with five professors, twenty tutors and forty funded students.

A decade later Simon Heynes, dean of Exeter, proposed a "reformation of the cathedral church of Exeter": the dean would be called a pastor, the chancellor would become a theology lecturer, the canons would be preachers, and the cathedral would serve as a mission centre. In 1552 Bishop Hooper thought the problem lay with appointments rather than organization: "Ah Mr Secretary, that there were good men in the cathedral churches! God then should have more honour than he hath, the king's majesty more obedience, and the poor people more knowledge."⁴ John Jewel complained in 1559 that "the cathedral churches were nothing else but dens of thieves, or worse, if anything worse or more foul can be mentioned". In 1576 Bishop Cox of Ely thought cathedrals pretty useless: he hoped "cathedral churches would be brought to some better frame touching exercise of learning, whose exercise now is only in singing and very little in edifying."⁵ Some critics of cathedrals wanted total abolition, some wanted wholesale reform: all agreed that cathedrals as they stood were a waste of resources, irrelevant to the proper tasks of an evangelical Church.

The Reformation should have killed off cathedrals in England, as it did everywhere else. For early English Protestants, most of them Calvinists, there was no place for cathedrals in the Church of Christ. We should not be surprised by this. The Church of England of the Reformation was not a member of the modern Anglican communion: as yet, there had been no Laudian movement and no Oxford movement; there was then no tradition of Anglican church music, no particular emphasis on the sacraments, no recognition of the role of dignified worship in spiritual development or the due praise of God. In truth, the Reformation Church of England was not an Anglican Church at all: Anglicanism had not yet been invented. If anything, it was a Calvinist Church: above all, it was a preaching Church.

The task of its ministers was to preach the gospel, to convey justifying faith, to promote assurance of salvation, to protect God's elect people against doubt and the devil. But cathedrals consumed funds which could – which should – be devoted to the support of parish preaching. And cathedrals encouraged popery – the popery of liturgy, and the popery of works religion. The cycle of cathedral services was only a trimmed down version of the *opus dei*, the daily routine of Catholic devotions which offered prayers for souls. But Luther and Calvin had cut through works religion: salvation came through justifying faith in Christ, not through repetition of rituals and incantations. Cathedral worship was irrelevant to salvation: it was unnecessary. Worse, it was a corruption, a diversion, a temptation, a popish relic.⁶

Of course, there were other popish relics in the half-reformed Church of England. There remained many features which most Protestants regarded as un-Protestant, institutions and customs which had so far survived but which might yet be rejected. There were bishops, there were archdeacons, there were courts and commissaries: some

³ *Miscellaneous Writings of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. J E Cox (Parker Society 1846), p.396

⁴ S E Lehmborg, *The Reformation of Cathedrals* (1988), pp. 94. 268; J Saunders, "The Limitations of Statutes: Elizabethan Schemes to Reform New Foundation Cathedral Statutes", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xlviii (1977), p.466

⁵ Works of John Jewel, ed. J Ayre (Parker Society, 1950), iv, 1217; Lehmborg, *Reformation of Cathedrals*, p.269

⁶ Criticism of Cathedrals is discussed by C. Cross, "Dens of Loitering Lubbers: Protestant Protest against Cathedral Foundations", *Studies in Church History*, ix, ed. D Baker (1972)



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thought these should go, and petitioned Parliament for further Reformation. More generally offensive to Protestants were the surviving ceremonies of the Book of Common Prayer. There was kneeling for communion, there was signing with a cross at baptism, and there was the ring in the marriage ceremony. There was the cope and the surplice, there were saint's days and festivals, there was confirmation and the churcing of women. Like cathedrals, they had nothing to do with Protestantism, nothing to do with salvation, nothing to do with the gospel – or so it was said. But unlike cathedrals, these other things were cheap, and there was no profit (and little saving) in their abolition. The cathedrals were different: there were 22 English cathedrals after the Reformation, with an average annual income of about £1800 each – as much as a landed aristocratic family. In total, the cathedrals owned property worth £45,000 a year⁷ – half as much as the Crown's own landed revenue. It is surprising enough that the cathedrals survived Protestantism: it is even more surprising that they survived the politicians.

It was, after all, politics rather than theology which brought down other Catholic institutions. In 1536 King Henry VIII had seized the property of the smaller monasteries – not because he disbelieved in monasteries, but because he needed the money. Henry faced the risk of a joint invasion by France, Spain and the German Empire, and he had to finance a crash program of naval building. In 1538 Henry began the systematic suppression of the larger monasteries – not because he disbelieved in the benefits of monastic prayer, but because he needed the money. The threat of invasion remained, Henry was constructing a chain of forts along the English Channel coast: they had to be paid for, and by 1540 all 800-odd monasteries had gone. Then Henry began to pick off the collegiate churches, and in 1545 he secured an Act of Parliament which allowed him to seize chantry property if he needed to. The chantry endowments funded masses for the souls of the departed, but Henry had not ceased to believe in the efficacy of prayers for the dead – indeed, when he died he left a huge sum to endow prayers for his soul (which, it must be admitted, he certainly needed!). Henry was at war with France, he faced a financial crisis, and he needed the money. The 1545 Chantries Act made no bones about it, citing “the exceeding great and inestimable charges, costs and expenses which your Majesty hath had and sustained, ... for the maintenance of these present wars against the realms of France and Scotland.”⁸ In 1547 young Edward VI's government confiscated all remaining chantry property: it declared that chantries were superstitious institutions, but again the real motives were secular: the property was sold, and the proceeds spent on the war against the Scots.

Somehow, the cathedrals survived all these suppressions and expropriations, but at times it was a close thing. Indeed, some cathedrals were suppressed, though almost all were soon restored. Of the nineteen pre-Reformation cathedrals, ten were monastic in form: they were cathedral priories, served by monks rather than secular canons – so they were vulnerable to attack when the monasteries went down. At first the prospects looked good. In May 1538 the cathedral priory of Norwich was reconstituted by royal charter as a secular cathedral: the last prior became the first dean, five monks became prebendaries, and sixteen monks became canons. But this was to be the only case of institutional continuity, and soon the cathedrals' future looked grim. In January 1539 the cathedral priories at Bath and Coventry were forced to surrender to royal commissioners: the assets were seized, the monks were pensioned off, the buildings at Coventry were allowed to fall down, and at Bath the abbey became a parish church. But Bath and Coventry were special cases: each was a second cathedral in a diocese which also had a non-monastic foundation –

⁷ S. E. Lehmborg, *Cathedrals under Siege: Cathedrals in English Society* (1996), p. 140

⁸ *Statutes of the Realm*, iii, 988



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Bath and Wells, Coventry and Lichfield. Arguably, they were surplus to diocesan requirements. And the king needed their money.

The other seven monastic cathedrals now went into limbo – Canterbury, Carlisle, Durham, Ely, Rochester, Winchester, and Worcester. One by one, through 1539-40, they were forced to cede their property to the king, and the monastic communities were dissolved. Perhaps that would be the end of them. But in each case some of the ex-monks were instructed to remain in residence and maintain services in the church: all was not lost. Officially these cathedrals did not exist: in practice they were ticking over while the king's officials sorted out what to do with them. And then, one by one, they were refounded as secular cathedrals – first, Winchester, in March 1541, then Canterbury in April, and the last of the seven was Worcester in January 1542. These refounded cathedrals were small by English standards, each with a dean and four to twelve canons – the existing secular cathedrals each had a dean and between 24 and 52 canons. Henry VIII saved a little on the new establishments, and creamed off the profits of change. But the refounded cathedrals were not cheap imitations: they were the real thing, generously endowed. Henry had his chance to abolish some of the cathedrals, and turned it down. He had his chance to go for a cheap alternative, but he didn't. So far, so good.

It is even more strange that cathedrals – and their endowments – survived the reign of Edward VI. In 1547 the regime suppressed the remaining collegiate churches, which in form and function were just like cathedrals – each had a dean and canons, and existed for the routine of daily church services. But the cathedrals were not touched. Some bishops were ordered to grant the whole estate of their sees to the king, and in return were awarded salaries of much lower value. But the cathedrals were not touched. More bishops were forced into ruinous exchanges of property with the crown – and some were forced to cede lands to members of the government. But the cathedrals were not touched – well, only Chester was seriously touched. The dean and two canons of Chester were imprisoned on trumped-up charges in 1552, and held until they agreed to lease almost all the cathedral's property at a low rent to the comptroller of the royal household – but that was a piece of private chicanery, rather than an official disendowment.⁹ Perhaps the protection of cathedrals might be credited to Archbishop Cranmer. He didn't like cathedrals, it's true – but he didn't like laymen ripping off the Church either, and he drafted a new code of canon law which confined the alienation of Church property to legitimate social and religious causes.

Elizabeth's reign was safer for cathedrals. The estates of Ely were at risk in 1559, and those of Hereford in 1583. There was some doubt about the future of Henry VIII's "new foundation" cathedrals, and Elizabeth was asked to secure them with a new act of Parliament. But for the first 27 years of her reign the realm was at peace, and cathedrals faced only the private depredations of greedy courtiers. Then 1585 brought war with Spain, and demands for the disendowment or even destruction of cathedrals. One proposal had asked "whether it be fit in a great distress of money for war to pull down cathedral churches, that 3,000 lances may be maintained?" Archbishop Whitgift protested to the Lord Treasurer in July 1585 that "Some of calling have openly given it out that these wars must be maintained by the dissolution of cathedral churches, which God forbid."¹⁰ God did, and cathedrals survived the nineteen years of the Anglo-Spanish war. A Gloucestershire gentleman proposed the suppression of cathedrals in

⁹ R.V.H Byrne, *Chester Cathedral* (1958), pp.24-6

¹⁰ Saunders, "Limitations of Statutes", p.455n, P Collinson, "The Protestant Cathedral", in *A History of Canterbury Cathedral*, ed. P Collinson, N Ramsay and M Sparks (1995), 156



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1589 and no one took any notice. But when war loomed again, in 1624, so did the threat to cathedrals. Prince Charles was then an enthusiast for war against Spain and the Habsburg empire: his chaplain, John Prescott, proposed the sale of cathedral lands, to clear the crown's debts ready for war and end all that "chanting and pomp."¹¹ Once more, the cathedrals escaped. The kings and queens of early modern England might have abolished the English cathedrals. They didn't.

"Why do we have cathedrals?" I asked – but you are not getting a theologian's answer. You are not getting an explanation of the pastoral and evangelical role of cathedrals in a modern Church. What you *are* getting is a historian's answer: we have cathedrals, we still have cathedrals, because they were not abolished. They were established in England in the 7th century, as mission churches with a bishop's *cathedra*, or throne. By the time of the Norman Conquest they had become mother churches of dioceses, the centres of elaborate liturgical worship. And so they remained through the later Middle Ages, centres of worship. The Reformation of the 16th century removed their religious purpose but left them almost intact, to the confusion of all Protestants and the fury of some. Non-one had any Protestant idea of what cathedrals were really for. So kings, queens and treasurers looked at cathedrals quizzically, and thought of what lovely wars could be had at their expense. But somehow, over and over again, the cathedrals were not abolished. Why do we have cathedrals? Because they are here – and they're here because they're here because they're here because they're here!

Why? Why *were* they not abolished? Why, against all the theology, against all the odds, against all the interests of the state and its servants? – against the protests of radicals and the reform-plans of moderates? – against Protestant common sense and politicians' greed? Why? It is very strange, and no-one has tried seriously to answer the question. We shouldn't blame the historians too severely: doing history is a difficult business, and it's hard enough explaining what did happen without worrying about what didn't. But sometimes what didn't happen is rather important: sometimes things are as they are because of what didn't happen as much as because what did. We have cathedrals because they didn't get dissolved at the Reformation. And they didn't get dissolved at the Reformation because England didn't have a proper Reformation – it didn't have the sort of Reformation which necessarily would suppress cathedrals.

If we are to understand how cathedrals survived, we have to understand how religious change happened in Tudor England. And if we are to understand how religious change happened, we have to abolish "the Reformation". Busy little historians are still writing books and giving lectures on "The English Reformation," trying to explain it. They're wasting their time: there *was* no English Reformation! It didn't happen, there's nothing to explain. Now historians like big events with big causes: they make us feel important and useful. But in England the Reformation was not a big event: at best, it is just a historians' label for a lot of little events – the attack on church courts and canon law, the repudiation of papal authority, the suppression of monasteries, the introduction of an English Bible, the attack on images, the new English Book of Common Prayer in place of the Latin mass – and so on. In many German and Swiss cities and states all these changes came together, as councils or princes decided to have a once-and-for-all Reformation and abolish all the Catholic ways and Catholic institutions. But it wasn't like that in England: England never had a once-and-for-all Reformation, it never had the big event. Instead, it had a lot of little events, bits of Reformation stretching across a half a century and more, each one happening for its own reasons. And it is deeply

¹¹ J Hacket, *Scruta Reserata: A Memorial offered to the Great Deserving of John Williams* (1693), p.204



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misleading to lump the little events together into a big event, and then try to explain the big fiction we have created. England didn't have a proper Reformation: it had stumbling, bumbling imitation.

The English never had to decide for or against "the Reformation": they didn't know it was "the Reformation", because no historian had written the book and given the label. Small numbers of people opted decisively for new Protestantism, but most did not. Instead, they took many small choices, one at a time: for or against Cardinal Wolsey in 1529; for or against the canon law in 1532; for or against the king's divorce from Katherine of Aragon in 1533; for or against the papal supremacy in 1534; for or against the smaller monasteries in 1536; and so on. But no-one asked them to decide for or against cathedrals. At the top, politicians were not implementing a preconceived Reformation plan, a step at a time, demolishing Catholic ways in logical order: most of them were taking tactical decisions based on short-term considerations. There was nothing inevitable, nothing irreversible, about religious change in England. It blundered on, and sometimes it turned back. There was no great ongoing English Reformation, no single progressive movement, no big event to explain.¹² No big deal. Just history. Things just kept happening.

Of course, historians can't just leave it at that. We can't say "things just kept happening", or we'll be out of a job – "things just kept happening" doesn't make a big book, and it's not very convincing anyway. We have to explain something, if we want to be taken seriously. But it is not the historian's job to explain "the English Reformation": it didn't happen like that, in a big event. It is our job to explain each little event, one by one, year by year, month by month. So our problem is not why the Reformation didn't abolish cathedrals; our problem is why Henry VIII didn't abolish cathedrals in 1538 – and why Edward VI didn't abolish cathedrals in 1547 – and why Elizabeth I didn't abolish cathedrals in 1585 – and why James I didn't abolish cathedrals in 1624. You will be glad to know that there is no time to answer those questions in detail! Instead, I want to outline some of the issues and considerations which kept the abolition of cathedrals off the political agenda.

The first consideration was Henry VIII's conscience. Yes, he did have one: it was very flexible, and it usually gave Henry the answer he wanted, but it did exist. And it looks as if he felt badly about the suppression of the monasteries. We can usually tell when Henry really cared about something: he made himself write. Henry's handwriting was terrible, he hated putting pen to paper, and he only wrote about the things that mattered most to him. He wrote love letters to Anne Boleyn in 1527, he corrected the theology of the 1537 *Bishops' Book*, and he drafted the preamble of a 1539 parliamentary statute giving him power to establish new dioceses and new cathedrals. Henry's preamble explained that the monks had to be ejected because of their "slothful and ungodly life" – but now their properties could be put to better use. Henry would found new cathedrals, with all sorts of additional functions, "whereby God's word might be better set forth, children brought up in learning, clerks nourished in the universities, old servants decayed to have livings, almshouses for poor folk to be sustained in, Readers of Greek, Hebrew and Latin to have good stipends, daily alms to be administered, mending of highways, exhibition to ministers of the Church", and all conceivable goodies provided.¹³ Henry justified the attack on the monasteries by promising to make things better. He was going to show that he was a good king, a Christian king who cared about the religion and the welfare of his subjects: Henry was going to be a reformer.

¹² See my *English Reformations: Religion, Politics and Society under the Tudors* (1993)

¹³ *Statutes of the Realm*, iii, 728



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Henry and his advisers went back to a project started by Cardinal Wolsey in the 1520s, the subdivision of some of the largest English dioceses and the creation of new ones. It was a sensible proposal, for several dioceses were unwieldy by European standards. Those who worked with Henry most closely on the plan were Catholic bishops such as Richard Sampson and Stephen Gardiner, men who believed that a diocese was more than an administrative area, and should have a cathedral as a liturgical centre. At first they thought of fifteen or sixteen new dioceses, but Henry didn't feel *that* badly about the dissolution of the monasteries: they settled on six new dioceses, with six former monasteries as their cathedrals – Bristol, Chester, Gloucester, Oxford, Peterborough, and Westminster. The new dioceses, and their new cathedrals, were established in 1541-2.

So of the 800-odd monasteries Henry VIII suppressed, he salved his conscience by converting fourteen of them into secular cathedrals – the eight former monastic cathedrals, and the six cathedrals he founded for the new dioceses. And the fourteen cathedrals “of the new foundation” (as they were called) were reformed cathedrals, so Henry could tell himself he had done something really worthwhile: as he had promised in his preamble to the 1539 statute, their clergy were to be preachers, there were grammar schools and almshouses attached, they paid for chairs and scholarships at the universities – and they repaired roads too.

So Henry VIII didn't just refrain from abolishing cathedrals, he created new ones and he changed their role – he gave them some outreach, in the modern pastoral jargon. He set up a working party – two of the younger bishops, and the up-and-coming Richard Cox, soon to be dean of both Westminster and Christ Church, Oxford – to draft statutes for the “new foundation” cathedrals. Despite the outreach, the work of the new cathedrals was to be very like that of the older non-monastic cathedrals: the working party prescribed the duties of the deans, canons, and other functionaries, and set the daily round of cathedral worship at the centre of their lives. And what Henry and his advisers had done was to be crucial in the survival of traditional cathedrals.

Since the foundation of cathedrals had been the excuse for Henry's confiscation of monastic property, it was difficult for his successors – notably his own Protestant children, Edward and Elizabeth – to undo his achievement. Since Henry himself had associated his reformed cathedrals with useful social and religious functions – preaching, education, and charity – it was hard to dismiss them as useless. And since the re-foundations and new foundations had been made while the English Church was still Catholic in its worship and in most of its beliefs, their role was defined primarily in conservative terms – as worship rather than mission. In destroying the monastic tradition Henry had, paradoxically, saved the cathedral tradition.

So Henry VIII's conscience was an important consideration in the survival of cathedrals. And so was their usefulness to Protestant bishops. Religious change in Tudor England was a top-down process: governments redefined religion, and appointed reliable bishops to enforce it. The Catholic Henry VIII needed Protestant bishops who would support his royal supremacy; the Protestant regimes of Edward VI and Elizabeth wanted bishops who would impose Protestantism upon their dioceses. And Protestant bishops needed Protestant preachers to declare the word of God to the people. But there were not enough Protestant preachers for the parishes, and anyway bishops could not usually appoint to parish benefices. If bishops wanted to bring in preachers, they had to nominate them to cathedral posts. At Canterbury, Cranmer appointed the Six Preachers; at St Paul's, London, Bishop Ridley appointed some of the greatest English preachers of the 16th century – John Bradford, John Rogers, Rowland Taylor, and others.



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In the reign of Elizabeth, bishops tried to make their cathedrals power-houses of preaching. In their injunctions to cathedrals they increased the preaching obligations of deans and canons: there were sermon rotas through the year, and fines for missing preachers. In many cathedrals divinity lecturers were appointed, to supplement the cycle of Sunday sermons. In Durham there were 170 sermons and lectures a year in the cathedral, and in 1578 Bishop Barnes established a routine for the canons to preach another 303 sermons in the parishes of the diocese. Perhaps to their surprise, Protestant bishops who didn't believe in cathedrals found that they needed them. Of course, there were better ways of mounting missions. Cathedral revenues might have been diverted to support itinerant preachers – or if funds had been redistributed to the parishes, benefices would have been more attractive and preachers might have been attracted to small towns and rural churches. But there was no guarantee – and little likelihood – that if government was encouraged to suppress the cathedrals the proceeds would go into preaching. For bishops struggling to convert their dioceses to Protestantism, even cathedral preachers were better than no preachers.

But all this preaching had one drawback: it frightened the old-fashioned Catholic sympathisers who didn't want new-fangled Protestantism thrust down their throats – or their ears. Elizabeth I wanted Protestantism preached, but not too much of it – not so much that it would drive the Catholics among her subjects into revolt. And she wanted to balance the preaching of the new religion which some signs of continuity with the old. This was the third consideration in the survival of cathedrals: continuity with the past. Most of Elizabeth's bishops didn't want continuity: they wanted a clean break, to get rid of all the old ways and make people opt decisively for the new. But Elizabeth had trouble getting the Book of Common Prayer through Parliament in 1559, and she had to reintroduce some of the old rituals to get the service book accepted. She seems to have thought of cathedrals, and especially their music, in the same way – as concessions to Catholic opinion, to show that religion hadn't changed so much after all.

Protestant opinion was hostile to polyphonic church music, and insisted on clarity and simplicity in singing: the words were not to be obscured by the music. There was a dramatic expression of this view at Exeter cathedral in December 1559, when a crowd of Protestant townspeople occupied the choir stalls and began singing metrical psalms in place of choral anthems. But Elizabeth was on the side of tradition in music. At her instruction, the royal injunctions on religion of 1559 preserved choral endowments, and prescribed that “for the comforting of such as delight in music” choirs might sing canticles “in the best sort of melody and music that may conveniently be devised”.¹⁴ Henry VIII's conscience had saved cathedral endowments in 1539: twenty years later his daughter's fear of Catholics – and her own musical tastes – saved cathedral music. Perhaps those Tudors weren't so bad after all.

A fourth consideration in the survival of cathedrals was vested interests – and there's no surprise in that. Many of those who might have pressed for the abolition of cathedrals gained from their continuance. The Crown found it convenient to name its most important lay servants as deans or canons of cathedrals – so shifting some of the government wage-bill onto the Church. Thomas Cromwell, architect of the suppression of the monasteries, was dean of Wells – no wonder cathedrals didn't go down, along with the monasteries. Among Elizabeth's secretaries of state were: Thomas Smith, lay dean of Carlisle; Thomas Wilson, lay dean of Durham; and John Herbert, lay dean of Wells. Her Latin secretary was dean of Carlisle, one of her physicians was a canon of Hereford, Oxford and Salisbury, and, most bizarrely of all, the earl of Leicester was a canon of York. Nicholas Wotton was a priest, in name at least – but

¹⁴ E Cardwell, *Documentary Annals* (1844), I, 229



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he held the deaneries of both Canterbury and York for twenty-five years, during which he was a privy councillor and diplomatic trouble-shooter to four monarchs.

A canonry and then a deanery were on the *cursus honorum* of the successful Tudor cleric: they were crucial steps on the ladder to the top. Two-thirds of sixteenth-century English bishops had held cathedral office first: fifty-five deans became bishops, and ten of them became archbishops.¹⁵ Some bishops made good use of their own powers of appointment in cathedrals: Archbishop Sandys made two sons canons of York, and sons were appointed as canons by the Elizabethan bishops Aylmer, Barnes, Downham, Godwin, and Scory. A canonry or two gave a decent income without too much responsibility, so time for scholarship and a chance to make a mark. A deanery gave a would-be administrator opportunity to show what he could do – and enough money to finance plenty of trips to Lambeth and Whitehall in search of further promotion. Perhaps it was hard for bishops to see how the Church's career structure could work without cathedrals: they were the link between the obscurity of the universities and the grandeur of the episcopal bench.

By accident or design, chapters made their cathedrals more attractive as going concerns and less attractive prospects for abolition. In the 1530s, when the attack on the monasteries suggested all ecclesiastical property was at risk, the chapter at Lincoln rented out their estates on long leases of thirty to forty years. This brought in entry fines for the canons, and with inflation it also reduced the profits the Crown might gain from confiscation. The perpetual grant of the estates of Chester which Sir Richard Cotton obtained in 1552 impoverished the cathedral, but at least no-one else would want the lands. At Norwich in 1567, the chapter made a ninety-nine year lease of several manors, to begin when the current lease ended – so not much profit for the Crown for another hundred years and more. In 1571, such long leases were forbidden by act of parliament – unless they were made to the Crown. Thereafter, Queen Elizabeth sometimes secured leases which she then assigned to courtiers – who then had an investment in the survival of cathedrals.

There were still those who looked greedily at cathedral estates, and proposed expropriation by the Crown. But this came to work to the advantage of cathedrals, and formed a final consideration in their survival: criticism of cathedrals got a bad name, as it was made to look self-interested and subversive. Richard Bancroft, soon to be bishop of London, thought that all proposals for further reform of religion were a front for designs against Church property. In a sermon at St Paul's Cross in 1589, he declared that:

I am fully of this opinion, that the hope which many men have conceived of this spoil of bishops' livings, of the subversion of cathedral churches, and of a havoc to be made of all the Church revenues, is the chiefest and most principal cause of the great schisms that we have at this day in our Church.¹⁶

Would-be reformers could be ignored, for their motives were base. And even those who proposed the use of cathedral revenues to finance war or to support parish preaching were suspect, for they were accused of dangerous radicalism and levelling. Archbishop Whitgift defended cathedrals as essential to the maintenance of a learned ministry, and bulwarks against presbyterianism, against "popularity and confusion."¹⁷ Views which had been held by

¹⁵ Lehmborg, *Cathedrals under Siege*, p.260

¹⁶ R Bancroft, *A Sermon Preached at Paules Cross* (1589), pp.23-4

¹⁷ Saunders, "Limitations of Statutes", p.455



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the founding fathers of the Church of England – Thomas Cranmer, John Jewel, John Hooper, Richard Cox – were dismissed in the 1580s as subversive. So it seemed that cathedrals were safe: Protestant bishops had learned to love them, and any critics were branded as extremists.

Indeed, cathedrals were safe – so long as the bishops were in control and the critics looked dangerous. But by 1641 the roles had been reversed: the critics were in control, the bishops looked dangerous, and cathedrals were again at risk. Cathedrals survived Henry VIII, Edward VI and Elizabeth I: what they could not survive was Archbishop Laud. The cathedrals had become centres for the preaching of reformed religion, and they had contributed to the advance of Protestant belief in England. But William Laud undermined all the efforts to make cathedrals look Protestant: he emphasized ritual against preaching, and used cathedrals as models in a shift towards ceremony – with east-end altars, communion-rails, bowing towards the east and at the name of Jesus. By 1641 Laud's enemies controlled Parliament, the bishops looked like extremists, and the cathedrals were again seen as relics of popery. Suppression of cathedrals was once more a respectable option, touted in Parliament as a solution to the financial difficulties of the country. On 15 June 1641 the House of Commons voted that deans and chapters should be “utterly abolished.”¹⁸ For the moment, however, nothing official was done.

But cathedral clergy, cathedral worship and cathedral buildings had been discredited in the eyes of many Protestants. The magic had gone. At Canterbury in August 1642, soldiers destroyed the communion table and rails, threw down the brass eagle lectern, defaced the monuments, and ripped up the surplices and service books. At Worcester in September it was the same story – and later at Chichester, Exeter, Rochester and Winchester. In the civil war which followed, several cathedrals were damaged by artillery fire when cities were besieged: Lichfield was fought over three times, the cathedral was deliberately bombarded in May 1646, and its central spire collapsed. Carlisle was occupied by Scottish forces, who pulled down the west end of the cathedral and six bays of the Norman nave: they used the stone to repair the castle and construct fortifications.

“Why do we have cathedrals?” I asked: because they were not abolished during the Protestant Reformation, was my reply. But that is only part of the answer, because they *were* abolished during the Puritan Revolution. After defeating King Charles I in civil war, Parliament suppressed the Book of Common Prayer in 1645, the bishops in 1646, and the cathedrals in 1649. The reason given by Parliament for its attack on cathedrals was straight from the days of Henry VIII: “the necessity of raising a present supply of moneys for the present safety of this Commonwealth”¹⁹ – the cathedrals' property was seized as security for loans to pay off the Scottish army and fund an army in Ireland. The estates were sold for roughly half a million pounds – well over a billion dollars in modern values – and the deans and canons were all dismissed. Durham cathedral was used to house 3,000 Scots prisoners of war, and in appalling conditions half of them died. In 1651 it was proposed that cathedral buildings should be demolished, and the proceeds of sales used for poor relief – but in fact most cathedrals became city churches, and preachers were appointed to serve them.

In the reign of Elizabeth cathedrals had survived because their enemies looked like extremists: presbyterian militants helped cathedrals. In the mid-17th century the cathedrals went down because their friends looked like extremists: Laudian bishops hindered cathedrals. But then the enemies of cathedrals came to look like extremists again – and the

¹⁸ Collinson, “The Protestant Cathedral”, p.198

¹⁹ *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum*, ed. C H Firth and R S Rait (1911), ii, 81



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regicides saved cathedrals. Those who cut down cathedrals also cut down the king: in 1649 Charles I was executed, and the parliamentary soldiers and politicians responsible were never forgiven. They tried to cloak military rule with representative forms, they tried to keep religious radicals under control, but it seemed like a world turned upside down. The attack on the Church of England came to be seen as one part of a general onslaught on all authority, hierarchy, stability, security, and good order. So when the monarchy was restored in 1660, the Church was restored with it – the Prayer Book, the bishops, and the cathedrals too.

There were negotiations over the form of the Prayer Book and the powers of the bishops – but no discussions of the role of cathedrals or whether they were worth restoring. The cathedrals came back almost by accident, as they had survived the Reformation almost by accident. The clergy who had remained loyal to Crown and Church during the Commonwealth period now expected favour – and a hundred petitioned King Charles II in the first months of his reign for cathedral dignities and canonries. To gratify the petitioners and to reward loyal families the king made 223 nominations to vacant cathedral posts in the summer of 1660.²⁰ Charles wanted to have bishops, and traditionally bishops had formal election by cathedral chapters. So surviving deans and canons and the new appointees were asked to meet to elect the king's candidates as bishops. The deans and canons were soon scurrying about in search of their old chapter records and estate accounts, taking possession of their closes, and restoring worship in their churches. Cathedrals were once again going concerns, without anyone having formally decided they should be. A restored king could hardly unrestore cathedrals, and their confiscated property was returned to them. England had cathedrals again, and Bishop Hacket set about rebuilding Lichfield.

For admirers of the cathedral tradition in the Anglican communion, all this is not a very edifying story – but then, if it's not too cynical a thought, history isn't a very edifying story. The Church of England has cathedrals not because anyone decided to have them, but because no-one successfully decided not to have them. They survived from the middle ages, they survived somehow through the Tudor Reformations, and England became the only Protestant state with cathedrals. They did not survive the civil war, when Parliament decided a Protestant state shouldn't have, and couldn't afford, cathedrals. That at least was a rational, a Protestant, decision. But they were restored in 1660, along with the monarchy, the House of Lords, the Order of the Garter, and other useless bits of English tradition – again, not because anyone deliberately decided to have them. They just happened.

I confess I like it this way: I like my history messy, without the false neatness that rationalizing historians so often impose. I love cathedrals and choirs and Thomas Tallis and Herbert Howells and the Prayer Book and dignified worship and liberal-minded sermons. It's all terrific. But it was an accident. Of course, later ages produced explanations and justifications for cathedrals, and in many respects the Church of England – the Anglican communion – became less Protestant than its founders intended. Later, cathedrals were no longer anomalies, no longer inexplicable leftovers from another Church: they were made more relevant. In the early nineteenth century, there were several royal commissions and Church enquiries into the role and funding of cathedrals. They were re-thought, reorganized and made to matter. With the urbanization that accompanied the Industrial Revolution, great city-centre cathedrals had a mission again, and new ones were needed. So when the Anglican Church in Australia came to found cathedrals, they seemed necessary, important and natural. There was an Anglican tradition and cathedrals were part of it.

²⁰ I Green, *The Re-establishment of the Church of England, 1660-1663* (1978), p.64.



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But that was *later*, and it wasn't envisaged at the start. And I'm rather glad it wasn't all planned – not by man, anyway. Not even Thomas Cranmer could dream up the Anglican cathedral tradition – and not even William Laud or Oliver Cromwell could destroy it. Cathedrals survived the Reformation, cathedrals were restored after the Cromwellian Commonwealth, but not because anyone really meant them to. We have cathedrals because of the untidy way in which the past happened. Why do we have cathedrals? – because of messy history. And history is messy, history is untidy and irrational – because it isn't purposely made by kings and politicians, it isn't planned by theologians and implemented by bishops. History is made by everyone, by people like us, who didn't know where they were going and hadn't got a big plan – they just shuffled along and made the best of what they'd got. The people of post-Reformation England found that they'd got cathedrals: they didn't quite know why, but they made the best of them – they made them into vibrant, characterful contributors to Christian life and worship. Don't ask why we have cathedrals: just look what we have made of them.