

# A History of Exeter Cathedral



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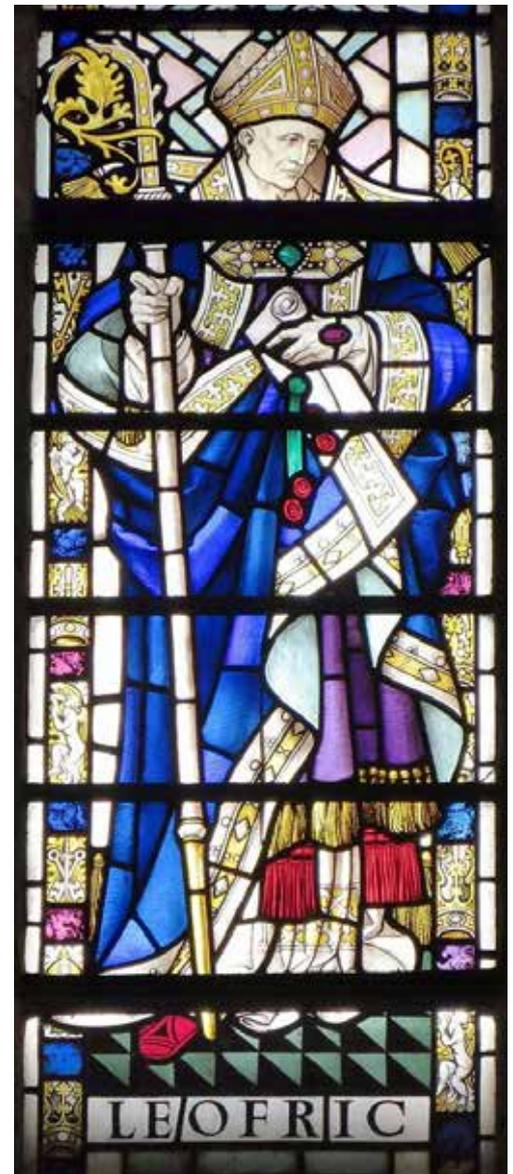
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EXETER CATHEDRAL

## 10th Century The Beginning

Our tale begins with the man whose image is shown in the Great West Window. During the late 10th and early 11th centuries Exeter was a young and very different city to the one we know today. It was a stronghold, defending the area from Viking attack. Behind the safety of the city walls its Saxon citizens flourished in trade and worshipped in many small churches. There was a minster located where an iron cross now stands in front of the Cathedral. Leofric, a clerk in the household of Edward the Confessor, was made Bishop of Crediton in 1046. The Cathedral's story truly begins with him as he persuaded the King and Pope to allow him to relocate to Exeter in 1050.



## 11th Century 1050

### The first Cathedral

Leofric took over the Saxon minster for use as his cathedral. Throughout the rest of his life Leofric worked to acquire resources and wealth for the building. On his death he left many personal books to the Cathedral Library. Today, the library's most treasured possession is Leofric's own collection of Anglo-Saxon poems and riddles known as The Exeter Book. With so few examples of Anglo-Saxon writing remaining it is truly a precious insight into our past.

## 12th Century 1114

### The second Cathedral

By 1107, when William de Warelwast was appointed bishop, a new fashion for Norman (or Romanesque) architecture was sweeping the country's churches. Exeter was being left behind in the style stakes and so, Warelwast began the process of constructing a new Cathedral. The monks at nearby Tavistock Abbey recorded that the Cathedral was begun in 1114 and that in 1133 'the canons went out of the old church and entered the new one'. It is likely that this meant the eastern half was complete and could be used for worship. Building went on though, for some years. Today you can still see the remnants of this Norman Cathedral in the walls either side of you, up to windowsill level. They have held the Cathedral firm for over 800 years.

The most impressive survivors though, are the two great towers. In the year of Warelwast's appointment the recently built central tower at Winchester Cathedral collapsed. Subsequent safety fears may have influenced Warelwast to reject this conventional placement of a tower in favour of two towers to the north and south. No other English church has Norman towers in this position.

## 13th Century 1270

### The third Cathedral

Most of the present Cathedral was constructed between 1270 and 1342. However, the two towers date from an earlier Norman Cathedral, which was demolished to make way for the present building. These towers date from the early 12th century. The image screen, on the west front, was added later in the 14th century. The Cathedral is built in the style known as Decorated Gothic.



## 14th Century



A succession of Master Builders oversaw the construction work. The best known of these was Master Thomas of Witney, who worked on the building for the last years of its construction, from 1315 to 1342. He was responsible for transforming the Norman towers into the Gothic transepts, and for completing work on the nave. He was paid £6, 13 shillings and 4 pence per year, and was given a free house. On average, 30 workmen from many crafts and trades were employed on the building, more in summer, fewer in winter. Their weekly wages ranged from 1 shilling and 3 pence to 2 shillings and 3 pence – about 12p to 22p in modern money, though of course the purchasing power of money was far greater than it is today.

Many of the Bishops grew rich in the service of the King and were able to help finance the building of the Cathedral. Bishop Walter de Stapledon, for example, served as Lord Treasurer to King Edward II. During the last months of Edward's reign, when the country had fallen into civil war, the London mob, who hated the king and blamed the Bishop for many of their grievances, attacked and beheaded Stapledon. His body was later returned to his Cathedral for burial in a place of honour for his years of royal service, and in his will he left approximately £600 to the building fund. The fact that this money paid for the completion of the nave gives us an idea of how much further money went in the 14th century!

One of the principal features of the Cathedral is the high vaulting. The ribs of Beer limestone arch to the centre of the vault in a complex pattern known as tierceron vaulting. The great carved, painted roof-bosses act as corner-stones. Each of the larger bosses weighs about one and a half tons. The vault runs continuously from the great west window to the great east window and at 93 metres is the longest unbroken and unsupported Gothic vault in the world.



## **16th Century**

### **Reformation**

Prior to the religious upheavals of the mid-16th century, the religion of England was Roman Catholic. The Cathedral would have been far richer in wall-paintings and images than it is today. However, during the Protestant Reformation many images were destroyed, defaced or decapitated. The altar-piece in Bishop Hugh of Oldham's chapel, just off the south choir aisle, suffered greatly, as we can see today. As for the wall-paintings, showing scenes from the Bible, lives of the saints and depictions of heaven and hell, these were either wiped clean, or white-washed over. Today, only a very few wall-paintings remain.

## **17th Century Civil War**

For much of the English Civil War, Exeter was occupied by Parliamentary troops. Many of these were Puritans, who showed their objection to church music by destroying the organ.

During the Commonwealth and Protectorate, 1649-1660, Anglican services were forbidden. Exeter's non-Anglican Protestants were either Presbyterians or Independents. Unable to agree on a common form of worship, they divided the Cathedral between them. A wall was built on top of the pulpitum screen up to the vault and the Cathedral became known as 'Peter's East' and 'Peter's West'. To allow access to 'Peter's East' a wall was pierced in the Speke Chantry to make a doorway. When the monarchy was restored in 1660, so was the Anglican Church. The wall in the Cathedral came down, the Speke Chantry doorway was walled up and, in 1665, the organ was rebuilt by John Loosemore.

## 19th Century

### Restoration

During the late 19th century, **Sir Gilbert Scott** carried out much restoration work in the Cathedral. The fine marble floor in front of the high altar, the choir-stalls and the martyrs' pulpit are three examples of his work. In re-constructing the choir-stalls, Scott took great care to preserve the unique collection of 13th century misericords, some of which are on public view.



## 20th Century

### WWII

During the 20th century the Cathedral faced one of its toughest challenges. When the **Second World War** broke out in 1939 Exeter was not, at first, an obvious target for bombing raids. However, the German Luftwaffe turned their attention to the city and its Cathedral during the **Baedeker** raids of 1942. In the early hours of the May 4th German bombers flew over the city and laid siege to large areas of its historic heart. The Cathedral was hit by a high explosive bomb which destroyed the St James Chapel, the muniment room above it and two flying buttresses. If the bomb had fallen a few feet over and it's possible that the whole roof could have fallen in. Luckily the Cathedral employed wonderful craftsmen who over a period of many years restored the chapel and surrounding area. Today you can still see the scars of the damage on the surrounding memorials and pillars.



## 21st Century

### Conservation

Caring for the cathedral is an ongoing task. On the day of your visit you may well see scaffolding set up on various parts of the exterior, and stone-masons working to restore images that have been damaged by erosion or air-pollution.

Today, Exeter Cathedral is a working church. There are at least two daily services and more on Sundays and holy days, with special celebrations and services at Christmas and Easter. There is a very strong musical and choral tradition dating back many centuries.

There is also a wonderful Library and Archive which holds many important collections and is the focus of scholarly research. The Cathedral forms a vital and lively centre for the religious and communal life of both the city and the diocese of Exeter .



### From the Dean

‘Exeter Cathedral is one of the great cathedrals of England, and one of the finest examples of Gothic architecture anywhere. Its visual beauty is a story in stone and glass, embroidery and wood of the faith that built it; a faith which is alive and well and can be experienced here every day.

Whatever your faith you are welcome here. We hope that you will feel at home and enjoy this active centre of the Christian faith. We invite you to linger to enjoy its wealth of colour and history; we invite you to join in our worship and let the 800 year old choral tradition fill your mind and heart too.

Exeter Cathedral has a rich heritage as a place of prayer, pilgrimage and wonder and is loved by many around the world. We hope that you will be one of them.’

*Jonathan Draper*  
*Dean of Exeter Cathedral*

