

The Interview: Richard Gem, President of the Society for Church Archaeology

Interviewed by David Baker

As our President approaches the end of his term of office, we celebrate his work on the study and care of cathedrals by reporting on matters that tend to get excluded from formal academic contributions. He was interviewed by David Baker in February 2012.

What drew you to the study of Cathedrals?

From my boyhood I have had an innate interest in antiquities, archaeology and history. This included, among other early outlets for my enthusiasms, planning church crawls in my native Sussex and my first experience of a cathedral was at Chichester – in all this my family was a willing accomplice. I was particularly fascinated by Anglo-Saxon and Norman churches in the county, and undertook a school project on the former. I was a member of the Brighton and Hove Archaeological Society and my first participation in an excavation was with them, on a prehistoric site. Then, in the summer holidays before going up to Cambridge to read archaeology I spent a short period as a volunteer on the excavation of the Old Minster site in Winchester. After taking my degree in archaeology, I wanted to move on to engage in doctoral research on the transition between Anglo-Saxon and Norman architecture, looking at the origins of Romanesque architecture in England, and the extent to which it was dependent on the Conquest of 1066 or independent of it. This necessarily involved a detailed study of all the cathedrals and greater monastic churches in England

which retained fabric of the period up to c.1090, as well as lesser churches that fell into the late Anglo-Saxon and early Norman periods; concurrently I was looking also at buildings in Normandy and more widely on the Continent.

After Cambridge, I first got a post with what was still then the Ministry of Works (now after many transformations English Heritage). But the work I was assigned to was as an Inspector for the Historic Buildings Council, writing reports on a wide range of building types, whose owners had applied for grant aid. Analysing frequently undocumented buildings was a great way of learning to look at them with completely fresh eyes, guided only by the evidence actually before you. At that stage there were no government grants available to churches; but when such grants were introduced in the 1970s (though not for cathedrals) I was involved in setting up a churches section for the new scheme.

In 1980 I moved from the state sector to the church sector, becoming a Research Officer with the Council for the Care of Churches and its sister body the Cathedrals Advisory Committee. In 1990 the latter was transformed into the statutory Cathedrals



Richard Gem at Trier Cathedral museum, with a model of the late antique cathedral

Fabric Commission, of which I was the first Secretary. Having been involved in the drafting of the new legislation, I had been particularly keen that it should include provisions for the archaeological management of cathedrals that would meet equivalent standards to those applied to scheduled monuments – with the possibility of higher standards because of the integrated management structures in place at cathedrals. The next few years saw the issuing by the Commission of guidance to cathedrals on good archaeological management practice and, jointly with the Association of Cathedral Archaeologists, on the role and duties of cathedral archaeologists. Shortly before my retirement in 2002 I was involved in revision of the Care of Cathedrals legislation, which introduced a requirement for cathedrals to commission regular reports from their archaeologist. I hope in all this I have helped to lay sound foundations on which others can build.

So, in answer to your question, I suppose you could say that circumstance drew me to a particular involvement with cathedrals, while this corresponded to a degree with my wider research interest in buildings and their cultural context between Late Antiquity and the central Middle Ages.

Within your own research interests, what are your key academic questions for the study of cathedrals today?

The key academic questions probably need to be seen within a chronological framework. The first set of questions then would relate to the late Roman and early post-Roman period. Three British bishops are attested already in 314, at London, York and probably Lincoln and they must have had cathedral churches; while by the end of the 4th century there must have

been many more cities with bishops and cathedrals. But of these we know effectively nothing. I would not expect Britain to have seen anything of the grandeur of the cathedral complexes excavated in the imperial capitals at Trier, Milan or Aquileia; but the major British cities most probably had churches comparable to the cathedral of Rouen built c395–6 and excavated in the 1980s and '90s. The problem on this side of the Channel is that there was not a continuity of episcopal sees from the late Roman period through the Anglo-Saxon settlements; while in the conversion period the selection of sees reflected the new political realities of the 7th century. So, it will be difficult to pre-select the site of a British Late Antique cathedral for excavation; but if one should be encountered by chance, then it should be subject to a detailed research project.

Moving on to the Anglo-Saxon period, we may know the location of most of the sees, but after the Norman conquest all the actual cathedral churches were rebuilt, except partially in one or two cases such as Dorchester and Sherborne; the result is that in many cases their precise sites in relation to the present cathedral are uncertain. So we have no overall picture of Anglo-Saxon cathedrals. In some cases there have been more or less comprehensive excavations, as at Winchester and Canterbury; while elsewhere there have been partial modern excavations, as at Wells, Lichfield and Sherborne; and earlier antiquarian excavations at Rochester. But these have provided rather different pictures. At Winchester Cathedral we have seen a 7th-century church retained but hugely augmented in the late 10th century, following a pattern seen also in major monastic houses such as Glastonbury and St Augustine's at Canterbury. At Canterbury Cathedral, however, the earlier church was more or less totally replaced with a new unitary construction in the early 9th century, following a pattern familiar on the Carolingian Continent. Which of these patterns was more typical in England? I suspect that there is also another distinction to be made between, on the one hand, cathedral churches that served not only the bishop but the needs of an important and well-endowed religious community (such as Canterbury, Winchester or Worcester); and, on the other hand, cathedrals that served mainly or exclusively the need of the bishop to have some designated church as his see – the sort of institution that Lanfranc picked up on as being sited in 'villages' rather than 'cities'. But we need far more research to be able to understand these issues more widely. Again, we know next to nothing about the domestic buildings adjacent to Anglo-Saxon cathedrals serving the needs of the bishop and of the cathedral community.

For the period following the Norman conquest we are, I think, much better informed, because so many of the major cathedral buildings survive, at least in part. We are certainly in a position to form a good general picture of the massive rebuilding programme that was instituted in the last third of the 11th century and continued on into the early 12th. But this is no reason for complacency, since individual cases can stand out against the general pattern as, for example, the excavations at York Minster have shown. Indeed, the general picture is only as good insofar as it is a summation of a whole range of individual studies: so each cathedral needs to research its own individual development. If there are particular areas in our understanding of late 11th and early 12th-century cathedrals that might benefit from additional research, they might include their liturgical arrangement, and their furnishings and decoration – aspects of which we have a limited picture. Also there would be value in more research into the historical evidence for the resources deployed for the construction of cathedrals, to complement the growing body of work by archaeologists on the materials and techniques of construction.

Which is your favourite cathedral and why?

I do not have a single favourite cathedral, but I have a huge admiration for a small number that, in my opinion, reach a pinnacle of perfection in design terms. The nave of Ely is the quintessence of what so much English Romanesque design was about, the ultimate refinement of the wooden-roofed basilica; while its equally admirable antithesis is the fully vaulted Durham. For the early Gothic period, the eastern arm of Canterbury is without compare for its combination of architecture and so much of its original programme of stained glass; while at Lincoln a more specifically English early Gothic reaches a wonderful moment of fulfilment. So, there are four ‘favourites’ from the point of view of admiration of their quality of design. Then there are others that have a different sort of charm, such as St Alban’s, which is closest to where I live; the layers of history are so tangible there, in a place that has a unique continuity with Late Antiquity in the commemoration of St Alban, and in the recycling of Roman materials in its construction. Others pose particularly intriguing archaeological puzzles, such as the 11th-century west front of Lincoln.

Can you give us some examples, from your experience, of ‘pure’ research into cathedrals supporting their conservation?

To give an answer to your question requires a detailed familiarity with the day-to-day inter-relationship of research and conservation at any particular cathedral. Since my retirement I have not had that first-hand experience except at Westminster Abbey, which is of course a royal peculiar, but was very briefly a cathedral in the 16th century. There, following on from the new legislative provisions for cathedrals in 1990, the Dean and Chapter have instituted parallel arrangements under royal authority, including the establishment of a Westminster Abbey Fabric Commission (on which I serve) and the appointment of an Abbey archaeologist – a post occupied successively by Tim Tatton-Brown and Warwick Rodwell. There have been numerous projects in which archaeology and conservation have been intertwined. One of these has been the conservation of the 13th-century Cosmati pavement in the sanctuary, for which detailed archaeological analysis and recording has informed the work by the in-house conservation team. When a couple of years ago a question was raised about whether the central tower of the Abbey, which had been left unfinished in the 18th century, should be completed, among the Dean’s and Chapter’s first steps was to commission from Warwick Rodwell a meticulous archaeological study of the whole history of the crossing tower, which was published with exemplary speed (though the project was subsequently dropped for the foreseeable future). Again, a project currently in hand for bringing the 14th-century cellarium into use as a catering facility for visitors, has been preceded by a detailed archaeological investigation (by Pre-Construct Archaeology, working to the brief of the Abbey archaeologist) which has not only informed the design for the facility and enabled the retention of archaeological features, but has also found evidence of the 11th and 10th-century monastic buildings. You may say that none of this was ‘pure’ research in the sense of being undertaken primarily for academic reasons; but it was ‘pure’ in the sense of being to the highest professional standards and with a series of research questions in mind. The one project that has been undertaken recently for academic reasons is an investigation of the site of the 13th-century vestry in the angle of the north transept and nave, in which ‘Time Team’ was involved by the Abbey archaeologist under the terms of a tight contractual agreement. This has provided invaluable archaeological information, but

this is not aimed at informing any specific conservation project.

Here I would like to refer to John Schofield's splendid report, recently published, on *St Paul's Cathedral before Wren*. This is the most comprehensive assessment of the archaeological resource of any cathedral to have been put so far into the public arena. It forms a model that I think will be worth taking into account at other cathedrals, while at St Paul's itself will inform all future conservation projects, and also all future academic research.

Finally, then, in answer to your question, I am not sure of the validity of the concept of 'pure' archaeological research at cathedrals. All of our ancient cathedrals, and many of our post-medieval ones, are of national importance as heritage resources. From an archaeological point of view that resource should be fully documented and analysed non-intrusively at a general level; while in relation to any works project that may have an impact on the resource it should be analysed intensively, with whatever degree of excavation or opening up of the fabric may be necessary to reach a full understanding. This degree of documentation and analysis is a necessary precondition of the responsible management of our cathedrals, while simultaneously it contributes to building up an understanding of the fabric and site that is as important to outreach and education as it is to more academic objectives.

David Baker is a member of the Rochester Cathedral Fabric Advisory Committee and was appointed in 2012 to the Cathedrals Fabric Commission for England as the nominee of the Society of Antiquaries of London and the Council for British Archaeology.