



Thin Places, Sacred Spaces, Historical Traces

St Helen's Tour of Mystic Britain A Visitors' Guide

Chapter 11 – Midlands and Cotswolds: September 2023

Circling back toward London now, we find ourselves in the Cotswolds, an area replete with historical and spiritual significance. Heather will relate how an Oxford movement influenced how the Anglican Church has developed, and then Val will take us through Gloucester Cathedral, inviting us to a Three Choirs Festival performance while there. Since some of its history is resident here, the Book of Common Prayer will take the stage for a bit, courtesy of Helen. Lots to see and hear, so let's open our eyes and ears ...

Of the University of Oxford's different Colleges, we'll visit Oriel College, the home of the Oxford Movement. A group of theologians and priests active in the 19th century, they were often known as the "tractarians", after a series of "tracts" published from 1833 to 1841. In July 1833, one of their leaders, John Keble, really initiated the Movement with his "Assize Sermon" to criticize a Bill that increased political control over the Church of Ireland. This was only the proximate concern; the Movement's real issue was a perceived liberalization of the Anglican Church. Its High Church Anglicans valued the Catholic roots of Anglicanism and argued for a return to many Roman Catholic practices and a stronger emphasis on liturgy. (Most Protestant denominations put more emphasis on Bible readings and sermons than on sacraments and liturgy.) They also placed more value on the writings of the Church Fathers, like Saints Augustine and Ambrose, than those of their fellow Anglicans. They postulated the "Branch theory", wherein the "true Catholic and apostolic Church" of the Nicene Creed included three branches: Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglicans. They also criticized the move of liberal Christianity toward interpreting the Bible in the light of modern philosophy and science.

The theories and theology of the Oxford Movement translated into practices adopted by its priests. They placed an emphasis on liturgy, brought back the wearing of vestments, resumed hearing confessions, used oil to anoint sick parishioners, and held Eucharist services more often than their non-Oxford colleagues. To them, the powerful emotional symbolism of the sacraments was a physical sign of God's grace that anyone could understand and feel. Particularly in poor parishes or with distressed or aggrieved parishioners, they thought it was important to communicate the values of the Church and the message of God's grace in a way that could be experienced and not just heard. This emphasis on liturgy and the sacraments remains a central feature of Anglicanism, making it distinct from other non-Catholic denominations.

Gloucester Cathedral has been a place of Christian worship continuously for over 1,300 years. Orsic, an Anglo-Saxon prince founded a religious house on a Roman site, in. 678-9 AD. Active over the next 400 years, it introduced Benedictine Rule in the early 11th Century, but the monastery did not thrive. In 1072, King William I (William the Conqueror) appointed Serlo, a monk from Mont St Michel in Normandy, to be Abbot. He was an energetic,

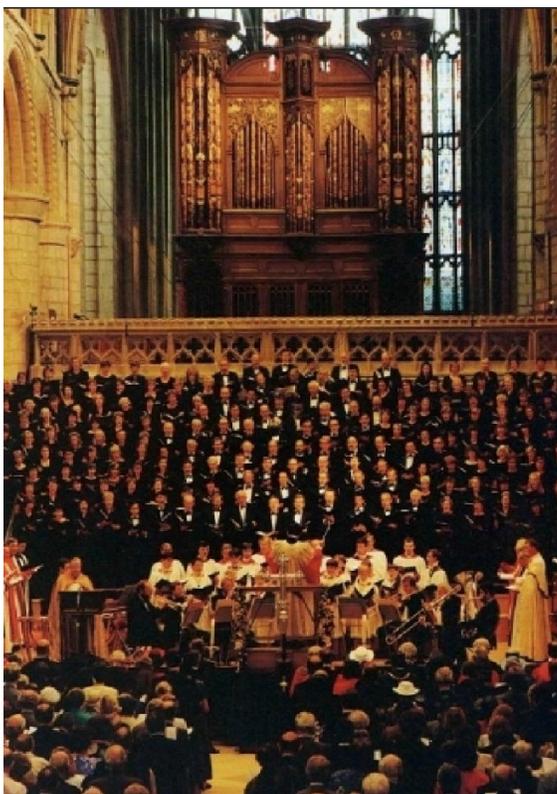


The cloisters, Gloucester Cathedral - Harry Potter scenes were filmed here (Photo: panoramio.com)

charismatic, and devout man, and in ten years, had built up sufficient wealth and landholdings in Gloucester and South Wales to allow him to start building the magnificent Abbey of St Peter which has survived to this day. The abbey took on significant royal associations. At Christmas 1085, it was from St. Peter's Abbey Church that William ordered the famous Domesday Book, which proclaimed that "This manor was always exempt from tax and from all royal service." In 1216, the nine-year-old Henry III was crowned in the abbey; and in 1327, King Edward II was buried there. The king's gruesome and unjust death in Berkeley Castle made him into an unofficial saint, and his tomb attracted pilgrims from near and far. Many of them donated extravagant gifts to the abbey enabling further remodelling and additions to the building.

When Henry VIII ordered monasteries dissolved, Gloucester Abbey surrendered in January 1540. No longer a community of monks, it was led by a Dean and chapter of canons. The abbey buildings became Gloucester Cathedral, the seat of the Bishop of Gloucester in 1554, but ecclesiastical life was not safe; in 1555 Bishop Hooper was burned at the stake on the orders of the Catholic Queen Mary. In the 1620's, the clergy held profoundly different views on what the nature and style of the new 'Church of England' should be. Then, under Oliver Cromwell there was a move to demolish the cathedral building altogether. Thankfully, interventions by the mayor and burgesses of the City of Gloucester prevented that happening. In 1660, the monarchy was restored and the Dean and Chapter resumed the running of the Cathedral. Throughout the 18th, 19th and 20th Centuries rather than rebuild, they have carried out repairs and conservation work.

"Gloucester Cathedral has endured through the centuries as a place of Christian witness where God is worshipped and the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed every day." (*Gloucester Cathedral information pamphlet, 198; sacreddestinations.com; Gloucestercathedral.org.uk*)



Three Choirs Festival (Photo: theartsdesk.com)

For three hundred years the cathedral cities of Hereford, Gloucester and Worcester have taken it in turn to host an annual 'music meeting'. The Gloucester Three Choirs Festival, the oldest non-competitive classical music festival in the world, provides a spiritual presence in the nation's cultural life. At the heart of the modern festival are the daily services of Choral Evensong sung by the professional choirs of the three cathedrals, representing the venerable and unique tradition of Anglican music and liturgy; and the large-scale evening concerts featuring the Three Choirs Festival Chorus. The original performers were solely the three cathedral choirs, who still remain at the heart of the festival. The large-scale choral repertoire at today's concerts is performed by massed choirs drawn from the three cities and joined by an array of international artists and ensembles to provide a diversity unimagined in the 18th century. The Three Choirs Festival is now a week-long programme of choral and orchestral concerts, cathedral services and musical activities.

In 2015, the Three Choirs Festival marked its 300th Anniversary although two World Wars interrupted it.

"It sprang from a fortuitous and friendly proposal, between a few lovers of harmony and brethren of the correspondent choirs, to commence an anniversary visit, to be kept in turn; which voluntary instance of friendship and fraternity was quickly strengthened by social

compact; and afterwards, being blessed and sanctioned by a charity collection, with the word of exhortation added to confirm the whole.... Though the members of that communion we have entered into, being voluntary, may go off as their wills vary or as their affairs require, yet, by the accession of others, the Society may subsist unto many years, yea, generations, tending to the furtherance of God's glory, in the exaltation of His holy worship, to the improvement of our choirs, the credit of our foundations; to the benefit of our cities, the comfort of the fatherless; to the delight of mankind, of ourselves, and all that come nigh us. Upon these grounds it commenced, and upon these let our brotherly love continue." 1729 sermon preached by Thomas Bisse, Chancellor of Hereford Cathedral. Three centuries later, the Chancellor's words still ring true.

(Gloucestercathedral.org.uk; Three Choirs Festival, Wikipedia; Herefordcathedral.org.uk; threechoirs.org; 3choirs.org.uk)

The Book of Common Prayer. The one thing that sets Anglicans across the world apart from other denominations is the fact that our services are all based on a prayer book that had its beginnings in one published in 1549. When the English church separated from the Catholic Church during Henry VIII's reign in the 1530's, services were based on three books: the missal, the breviary and the manual. It is widely believed that separation occurred so that Henry could divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn, but while this may have precipitated the split, the English church had already been influenced by the Reformation in Europe and was distancing itself from the Catholics. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer started working on a prayer book in 1546 to ensure that all parishes followed the same liturgy but it was only when the old King died that it could be published.

In his preface he states: "*there was never anything so well devised by the wit of man or so sure established which in the continuance of time hath not been corrupted.*"

Having spent time in Germany, Cranmer was influenced by Lutheran practices. He included rites for the services of Morning and Evening Prayer, Holy Communion, Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage and a funeral service, together with collects and a yearly lectionary. A big change was the encouragement of weekly Holy Communion services and communion for all the congregation; since medieval times the practice had been to take communion only at Easter, the rest of the year featuring the consecration and adoration of the elevated Host.

Published in 1549, the Book of Common Prayer caused some controversy when introduced (what new prayer book hasn't?). A more reformed version in 1552, also directed by Cranmer, was used only for a few months before the young King Edward VI died. He was succeeded by his sister, Mary Tudor, a staunch Catholic, who suspended the use of the prayer book during her reign of religious intolerance, 1553-1558. In 1556 Archbishop Cranmer was one of those martyred; he was burnt at the stake for heresy in Oxford. Elizabeth I succeeded her sister and in 1559 reinstated the Book of Common Prayer. It was again revised by James I in 1604 and then a third time after the Civil War in 1662. The 1662 version remained virtually unchanged until the 20th century when it was again revised in most provinces of the Communion. The Canadian Book of Alternative Services came into use in 1985 in addition to the **1962 Book of Common Prayer**

The Anglican Church has been influenced by much over its years of evolution. The right degree of separation from Rome, separation from secular rulers, separation from tradition and separation from the world have been issues in many chapters of its history. Perhaps that is as it should be. As Christians, we are sometimes described as "in the world but not of it". How can we influence the world without being diverted by it? Is our faith primarily about a personal relationship with our Lord, or about being His hands and feet in the world? Are those opposing emphases, or are they mutually reinforcing? We live in and with that tension; our Church has lived with and suffered through much of it to get to where it is now. Perhaps that can help us deal with it today.

Your Mystic Britain travel guides

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