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Guildford Cathedral: a short history

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The rapid collapse in confidence amongst British Christians in the years after 1960 has tended to colour the history of the previous years, such that periods of confidence and expansion are rendered otiose when viewed at a distance. Such is the visible commitment to the future that was the foundation of the Anglican diocese of Guildford in 1927. The ancient diocese of Winchester stretched from the Thames in the north to Portsmouth, Southampton and the south coast. By the twentieth century it was much too large for the bishop to serve effectively, and so it was divided, with new dioceses created: Portsmouth in the south and Guildford in the north, leaving Winchester with the central portion.

There were five new dioceses created in 1926-7 (the last such sub-division; in later years the direction of travel was more likely to be towards consolidation and amalgamation under pressure of finance.) Of the five (Derby, Leicester, and Blackburn being the others), it was only for Guildford that a new cathedral was planned. In each of the other four an existing city parish church was taken over, and (as with Portsmouth) expanded if it was felt necessary. Guildford’s first bishop, John Greig, was consecrated in Holy Trinity Guildford, a handsome Georgian building in the historic centre of the town, incorporating part of the medieval parish church. However it was soon felt that the building was too small for the purpose, and the property around it too valuable to be purchased and demolished to make way for expansion. And so, the diocese set to the task of building anew on a new site. It was to be one of only two such cathedrals built in the twentieth century, the other being Liverpool. It is a matter of note that when the cathedral was consecrated and thus Holy Trinity ceased to be a pro-cathedral, the civic functions that Holy Trinity had discharged for centuries were not transferred to the cathedral. The parish church, close to the Guildhall, was far better placed for that, and so the fact of building afresh on a site on the edge of the town created a more distant relationship between town and cathedral than was the case almost everywhere else.

Stag Hill is on the west side of the town, and runs west to east, such that the east end of the present cathedral overlooks the town. A six acre site on the top of the hill was donated by Richard, earl of Onslow, and 1932 saw the launch of an open competition for designs for a new cathedral. This was a
period of rapid building of new Anglican parish churches, but an open competition such as this was relatively unusual. Some two hundred entries from architects were received, of whom five were invited to submit fuller plans in return for a honorarium of 500 guineas. From this list of five names now mostly forgotten, the winning design was that by Edward Maufe, at an estimated cost of £200,000. The five designs were shortly afterwards exhibited at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London, and the critic of The Times thought Maufe's 'simplified Gothic' by far the outstanding design. After work before the First World War making alterations to and decoration of churches including St Martin-in-the-Fields, Edward Maufe had come to some prominence in Anglican circles with the churches of St Bede Clapham (1922-3) and St Saviour Acton (1924-6), to which he added the religious broadcast studio at Broadcasting House (1931), and the church of St Thomas the Apostle at Hanwell, west London (1934). A member of the Royal Academy, he was knighted in 1954.

Once the design had been approved, there was the small matter of raising the funds, and in 1933 the diocesan conference agreed that a fund be set up, and that at least £50,000 be raised within three years before work should start. If the target were missed, the option on the site would lapse. The target was hit, and Cosmo Lang, archbishop of Canterbury, laid the foundation stone in 1936. Bernard Geen, the civil engineer engaged on the project, later thought that the work could have been finished within twenty years had war not broken out in 1939; but intervene it did. All work ceased in 1939, and did not resume until 1952, by which time the cost had risen significantly.

When building began again, £158,000 had already been spent, and another £100,000 was needed in order even to complete the parts standing in 1939 to give a usable building; and so the fundraising began afresh. 'Make that not a shell but a shrine' wrote Geoffrey Fisher, archbishop of Canterbury 'and at once the diocese will begin to draw strength from it as its mother church, and the sacramental centre of its diocesan life.' Deploying modern fundraising techniques, the appeal was made for ten thousand 'Cathedral Builders': individuals who would commit to giving at least £1 per year, ideally by a seven-year covenant. By 1961, on the eve of the consecration, some £540,000 had been raised in total, but a further appeal was necessary for another £200,000 to complete the garths at the west end, the Lady Chapel and the tower. George Reindorp, bishop of Guildford, consecrated the building on 17 May 1961, in the presence of the Queen and more than half of the English bishops, with a sermon from Geoffrey Fisher.

More than a quarter of a century passed between the creation of Maufe's designs and the consecration in 1961, and even at that point the building was not quite complete. Architectural fashion, always fluid, had moved far in the interim, and so an assessment of the cathedral's architecture is hard to undertake without comparison, explicit or otherwise, with the cathedral that was consecrated the following year at Coventry. Maufe was of an earlier generation than the
architect of Coventry, Basil Spence, and Spence’s less restrained work such as the new Sussex University was clearly in the brutalist style of the post-war years. There was always a tension in the building of a new cathedral. On the one hand the desire that the building be ‘of its time’ was particularly acute, and this felt need for a contemporary expression of the faith was common across all the religious arts. On the other, the building needed to acknowledge and incorporate the language of the historic buildings of which it would be a counterpart: in short, it still needed to look like a cathedral to the non-specialist observer.

The pressure for a different type of church architecture came from two directions, by no means complementary to each other. Spence’s Coventry was a good deal more contemporary in its language than Maufe’s Guildford, and yet it was still taken to task by secular architectural critics for not having gone far enough in embracing the modern and eschewing the grammar of the Gothic. For those looking on sympathetically from outside or from the fringes of the church, the church was an antique in its worship, its religious art, the dress of its clergy. Only a whole-hearted embrace of a new contemporary language could reach those with whom the church had ceased to communicate. As a result, in comparison with Coventry, Guildford has suffered in critical appreciation. Alec Clifton-Taylor thought Maufe’s simplified Gothic ‘mild and unadventurous’ although not ineffective; his study of the English cathedrals gave Guildford two pages and two pictures, compared to six pages and four photographs for Coventry.

The second critique came from within the church itself. In the early Sixties, just as Guildford was approaching completion, there was a flourishing of new thought amongst a younger generation of liturgists, theologians, parish clergy and architects that sought to apply the insights of the Liturgical Movement to the internal ordering of churches. It was time to make the building serve the liturgy, and to express a strong and new apprehension of the communal element to being the Body of Christ, with the incarnate Christ present in the assembly. In contrast, the whole purpose of the Gothic cathedral was to lead the attention towards the holy places of the east end, and upwards towards a God who was “out there”. In this context, both Guildford and Coventry could not but be symbolic of an old order perpetuating itself.

When viewed in terms wider than those of contemporary architectural criticism, to what extent can Guildford be said to embody something of its time? It has recently been seen as an expression of post-war austerity, although Maufe’s designs were unchanged since 1932. Yet it is possible to read something of this spirit into the relative lack of ornamentation outside and in, and the sparing use of stained glass. Yet this aesthetic of ‘austere simplicity’ owed as much to Maufe’s admiration for Swedish building between the wars, and is already evident in his churches from the 1920s, mentioned above.
Rather stronger is the connection between the building and the Church of England’s idea of itself, particularly at the time that the building was approaching completion. In the 1950s and 1960s the Church of England was revising its canon law, beginning to revise its liturgy, and looking to rationalise its organisation and its finances. In Adrian Hastings’ phrase, the completion of Guildford seemed to signal the arrival of a church that was ‘efficient, sophisticated, progressive.’ Guildford shows something of the desire to be a church that preserved those elements of the past that were most important, whilst at the same time moving with the times. Maufe’s neo-Gothic designs artfully conceal, and indeed rely upon, the most modern of techniques. Acoustically, most medieval cathedrals were suited only to music, and that only in the choir; by contrast this was a time when the acoustic properties were being taken much more into account in modern buildings, and thought had been given to the competing claims of music and speech. To counter both fire and the death-watch beetle, the roof was not of wood but reinforced concrete clad in copper; the first such use of the material in an English cathedral. In Maufe’s own view, the use of modern materials had allowed the ‘conquest of space’. The arches in the aisles of the nave could now spring from the same level of those of the central part, giving a greater internal space and allowing long lancet windows to light the nave. On the interior this aided the architect in the task of ‘reaching up to enclose great spaces to inspire worship’; and outside there was no need to buttress the structure, thus freeing Maufe to create a simpler more elemental shape. Here were modern techniques in the pursuit of older aims.

There was a strong element of planning for efficiency in much of the layout. Most medieval cathedrals had been added to as needs had changed over time, with chapels and outbuildings uncomfortably fitted in corners. At Guildford, Maufe planned such that all the necessary vestries and chapels were in place from the beginning, and clustered around the chancel for ease of movement. The heating pipes were embedded in the floor, another effective yet unobtrusive measure; and there was a convenient tunnel beneath the nave to allow easy servicing of heating and electrical installations. The clergy stalls in the chancel were moveable to allow the easy staging of religious plays.

The same impulse for rationality and convenience is evident outside. Most English cathedrals were in tight city centre locations, hemmed in by cramped medieval street plans. Starting afresh on a new site with ample space, Guildford could build purposely to accommodate the new technology of the moment in the 20s and 30s: the motor car. After the plans were settled, an extra parcel of land was acquired to allow an imposing approach road to be built up the hill from the newly completed bypass road to the west (now the A3). The drive, lined with trees funded by the architect’s wife, would bring bus- and coach-loads of visitors as well as private cars to a wide turning circle a convenient distance from the west door. There was a vehicular road around the whole perimeter of the building allowing fast and efficient entry and exit to the building through multiple doors, with ample parking.
spaces to the north. Here was a forward-looking, modern, efficient church, planning for the future traffic growth which was surely to come. It was ‘the most functional of all our cathedrals.’

Alec Clifton-Taylor, writing in 1967 admired the exterior, with its ‘crisp outlines [and] good massing and a minimum of ornamentation.’ Maufe had intended that the building rely for its effect on its basic masses, and to be an elemental shape that grew out of and rode upon the hill. The brick was made from the clay of Stag Hill itself, with small elements of Clipsham stone, and in this and in the interplay of the essential shape of the building and its location, Guildford takes account of the *genius loci*.

The external ornamentation is so minimal that it can be described in detail. A set of figures by Alan Collins of the seven virtues on the south front match the seven gifts of the spirit on the north, on the lower mullions of the seven lancet windows. Outside the Lady Chapel sit Saints Cecilia, Martha and Catherine along with Lady Margaret Beaufort. The sculptor Eric Gill (d.1940) was a friend of Maufe’s, having worked with him at Hanwell, and two designs of his were executed by others for Guildford after Gill’s death: a figure of St John the Baptist above the entrance in the south transept, and a composition illustrating God as everlasting refuge high up on the east front. The square tower has four angels by John Skeaping which cling to the interstices on each edge of the square tower. It is topped with a fifteen-foot golden angel.

The interior largely achieves what has been described as an ‘austere simplicity aiming directly at the creation of a religious atmosphere.’ Faced throughout in Doulting stone, a light Somerset limestone, for Clifton-Taylor its clean lines created a ‘cool spaciousness which is very satisfying.’ Maufe’s achievement in creating aisles the same height as the centre of the nave allows a good deal of light from the tall lancet windows, and the nave is very wide, some 41 feet compared to 31 feet at Winchester. Unlike the Gothic cathedrals (and like Coventry) there is an unimpeded view, without a pulpitud, from the west to the high altar in the east: Maufe imagined ‘the way of the Faithful being led forward by the rhythm of the arches on both sides towards the altar.’ This was the Gothic conception of sacred space pared of its clutter; the faithful were drawn out of themselves towards God, rather than finding Him in their midst.

Inside as well as out the ornamentation was minimal, and conspicuous in its absence was a centrepiece work of art to match Graham Sutherland’s immense tapestry at Coventry. There are two very modest albeit effective figures of the Madonna and Child, by John Cobbet in the nave and in the Lady Chapel by Douglas Stephen, and the carpet on the floor before the high altar was by Alix Stone. The use of stained glass is also minimal, with the three windows in the west front being of clear glass. The principal design is the rose window in the east by Moira Forsyth. Maufe allowed himself greater decoration in both the baptistry and the Lady Chapel, both with richly painted ceilings; but the overall effect of the building is one of restraint.
There was a scrupulous symbolic inclusiveness in the patronage of elements of the interior. In the context of two world wars, more than one cathedral began in the twentieth century to incorporate chapels and memorial spaces dedicated to a local army regiment, such as the chapel for the Royal Sussex Regiment at Chichester; and at Guildford there is the chapel of the Queen's Royal Surrey Regiment in the north transept. At this time moves between the Church of England and the Free Churches towards greater co-operation, and indeed reunion, were well advanced; and it was the Free Churches of the city who gave the stone lectern in the nave. This was also the heyday of the industrial mission and the workplace chaplain, part of a conscious attempt to embed Christianity in the workaday world rather than it being an activity for Sundays. At Guildford ancient and modern modes of work face each other across the nave, with the livery companies represented by the north aisle windows, and the professions by those in the south.

Select Bibliography


*The Times*

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