

A PIOUS NOTE ON PREBENDARIES by Canon Wealands Bell, Precentor,

reprinted from the Order of Service for the Commemoration of St Chad and the Cathedral's Benefactors (5 March, 2012), with permission

The names of the prebendal stalls, listed in our Constitution and Statutes, can appear to be a piece of history whose relevance to the contemporary church evaporated some centuries ago.

A 'prebend' was originally a monk's daily allowance of 'provender' or sustenance. In its later, more familiar usage, it refers to that income from estates or parish churches, usually in the form of tithes, which was designated by the bishop to be for the maintenance of a particular priest (thus, 'Prebendary') while engaged in the cathedral's work.

A complement of twenty canons, under a provost, was established in the cathedral by bishop Aethelwald in 822, at a time of some dejection following the demise of Lichfield as, albeit briefly, a third Archbishopric. This may have been in part a response to the Rule for Canons promulgated by the Council of Aix in 816. It went somewhat against the fashion of the day: the Council of Chelsea of 820 was clear that monastic models constituted best practice for cathedrals; Lichfield, however, maintained a secular path, carrying out the work of the cathedral through canons rather than monks. How this system operated and developed during the three hundred years following 822 is largely unknown. It is possible that, owing to the depredations of warfare and a consequent shrinking of the common life, there were only five remaining canons at the time of the Norman Conquest. In the thirteenth century the successors of these five (named as Freeford, Stotfold, Longdon, Hansacre and Weeford) were granted the honour of being designated to serve at the high altar.

What is clearer is that from the re-establishment of the cathedral chapter by Bishop Roger de Clinton in the 1130s, following the return of the episcopal seat from its temporary migration to Chester and Coventry, there was a full-scale creation of a Prebendal system which, except for a final flourish under Bishop Meuland, was completed by 1255 when Bishop Weseham made over in perpetuity to the Chapter all rights to the income from Prebendal holdings.

The work of the majority of the Prebendaries was always pastoral (and perhaps scholarly) rather than liturgical: worship was committed to the Vicars Choral, who were never mere deputies for absent Prebendaries; each group had its own task. It is the 1241 statutes which prescribe the annual election of an Intimator (to keep an account of absences from

quire), and which permit any Vicar Choral to be present at the audition of those seeking appointment as such. Dean Savage delights that such arrangements persisted in his own day, and we too may note that, in this matter at least, nothing has changed in the last 771 years.

Dean Savage regarded the Prebendal system as ‘a practical scheme with a high ideal,’ one which was ‘the glory of the Cathedrals of the old Foundation.’ It had always been, he wrote in an address to the College of Canons in 1921, ‘a society of selected clergy intimately associated with the central Church, and at the same time in close touch with Parochial Cures scattered throughout the Diocese.’ This remains its beauty and its usefulness, and we are glad to celebrate it.

Far from being mere fantasy or an ecclesiastical *Toy Town*, the names of the Prebendal stalls root us all firmly in the adventitious ups and downs of our history, and remind us of our obligations to those who have gone before us, as well as to those who come after. In a highly individualistic age, they remind us of our going hence as surely as our coming hither. For a short while, we play our part in the drama of this place. Today we give thanks for those who have done so with distinction, and pray for grace to follow their good example.

This account is reliant on the
Victoria County History of the Cathedral (Kettle and Johnson, 1970, 2001) and
Dean Savage’s *The Prebendal System* (1921).