

BOOK REVIEW

'The Condition of Menevia' Studies in the History of St Davids Cathedral Edited by Jonathan M. Wooding and J. Wyn Evans. University of Wales Press £24.99 pp.176 ISBN 9781837720880

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This book consists of nine academic essays on the history of St Davids Cathedral. On the whole, it is a volume about the building itself rather than what went on inside it, except for the essay by the late Professor Nigel Yates, who writes both about the fabric and the worship of the cathedral from 1793 to 1862. The editors write that it is a building that has stood for over eight centuries and like other cathedrals in Wales and elsewhere has suffered long periods of neglect and decay. This cathedral faced a further problem, namely, the desire of post-Reformation bishops to locate their throne in Carmarthen rather than St Davids. This was because it was more centrally located for the diocese and also happened to be the place where they themselves lived. Until 1920, the diocese was more geographically vast than the present one since it also incorporated the present diocese of Swansea and Brecon.

Professor Wooding's essay is about St Davids before the stone cathedrals of 1131 and 1182. There was a church there – possibly going back to the time of David – who died around 600 and who eventually became the patron saint of Wales in the twelfth century. He draws on the Chronicles kept at St Davids since 800 and on the writings of Rhigyfarch who died in 1099 and Gerald of Wales who died in 1223. Both had their own particular agendas to pursue in stressing the importance of St Davids, with the former even claiming that David had been consecrated Archbishop in Jerusalem and his monastery dedicated as the metropolitan church of Wales. What we do know is that David (who may well have been in episcopal orders as Abbot) established a monastic community on the site of the present cathedral, with buildings made of wood and deliberately built in a remote lying valley, hidden from the eyes of the world. This was not to prove the ideal place to build a stone cathedral, some parts of which collapsed in 1220 and 1248 and which, over the centuries, needed constant attention to its fabric. It was ideal, however, for contact with Ireland, which was frequent because of its proximity to the sea.

There then follows a series of essays about the building of the 1182 stone Cathedral, after the destruction of the 1131 building. The size of the 1182 Cathedral,

with its twenty-two different forms of Chevron, compares well with the most prestigious churches in twelfth-century England, influenced as these were by French architecture and the West Country school of Masons. The fact that Lord Rhys of Deheubarth is buried there may indicate that he was one of its original benefactors. Some of the stonework and the artefacts inside the building were quarried locally, while others came from further afield and were shipped in by sea. There is a fascinating chapter on Gilbert Scott's contribution to its restoration in the 1850s, as well as Scott's contribution to the reconstruction of cathedrals in England and further afield. The fact that Scott, probably the most well-known architect at the time, took on St Davids is indicative of its importance. It was the largest and architecturally the most important cathedral in Wales, but in a diocese that was the poorest. John Morgan-Guy has a chapter on the stained glass of the cathedral, most of which comes from the 1870s, and Wyn Evans writes about a nineteenth-century controversy between the Dean and the Master of the Chapter School about the alleged misappropriation by the Chapter of the school's endowments. The history of the shrine of St Davids is John Crook's contribution. The shrine was restored and embellished in 2011–2012, but it has been proven by DNA tests that the bones could not possibly be those of David. Pope Calixtus II in the twelfth century declared that two visits to St Davids were the equivalent of one to Rome, hence its importance as a place of pilgrimage, although it is only in the fairly recent past that cathedrals generally have come to be valued as spiritual centres for their dioceses and as tourist attractions.

As indicated, this is a book that goes into much detail about the stonework, artefacts and ornaments of the Cathedral, perhaps more than the general reader may wish to know. It is however peppered with insights about some of the people involved in the history of this great building and the problems they faced. It also gives us a glimpse of a time when its deans and canons were largely absentees and/or pluralists who could not give much time or attention to the Cathedral and indeed when attendances at services were sparse. It is a far cry from the Cathedral of 2024 which has become a place of inspiring worship, a great place for pilgrimage and one of the most visited places in Wales.

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