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by Stanford E. Lehmberg

Although the general lines of the Reformation under Henry VIII are well known, little attention has been paid to the way in which the changes affected the cathedrals. There has, of course, been a good deal of writing about individual cathedrals, mainly by local antiquarians (often nineteenth-century canons of the cathedrals themselves), and general accounts of the Reformation allude occasionally to the cathedral churches. But no one has yet produced a study of sixteenth-century cathedrals, taking all of these churches into account and showing exactly how they were altered as a result of the Reformation. It is particularly interesting to examine the changes which occurred during the first phase of the Reformation, the period between Henry VIII's breach with the papacy in 1533 and the king's death in 1547. This paper attempts to describe the impact of the Henrician Reformation on the English cathedrals and the men who served in them.[1]

In order to appreciate the alterations which were mandated under Henry one must have some understanding of the state of the cathedrals before the impact of the Reformation came to be felt. It is especially important to know what the constitutional arrangements were.

In the early Tudor period there were nineteen cathedrals in England. They were almost evenly divided between monastic cathedrals, staffed by monks, and secular cathedrals, operated by clergy who were not in monastic orders. There were greater and lesser cathedrals in each category. The ten monastic cathedrals were Canterbury, Winchester, Durham, Worcester, Rochester, Ely, Norwich, Coventry, Bath, and Carlisle; all of these were Benedictine houses except Carlisle, which was a house of Augustinian canons, following a rule similar to but somewhat looser than that of St. Benedict. The nine secular cathedrals were York,

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Salisbury, Lincoln, Exeter, Hereford, Lichfield, Chichester, Wells, and St. Paul's in London.

The monastic cathedrals were priories, not abbeys, for their chief administrative officer and spiritual leader was a prior. (The diocesan bishop was considered to stand theoretically in place of the abbot, and occasionally he was allocated the abbot's stall within the choir of the cathedral as well as his great bishop's throne, but generally he had little to do with the actual running of the cathedral.) The number of monks in the cathedral priories varied from seventy, which was often considered the ideal, at Canterbury and Durham, to as few as twenty at Rochester and thirteen at Coventry. A number of monastic officers, called obedientiaries, assisted the prior in managing the affairs of the community; these generally included a cellarer, kitchener, precentor, sacrist, almoner, chamberlain, refectorer, infirmarer, and hosteller or master of the guest house. Each of these obedientaries received income from specified parts of the cathedral's landed estates, and each obedientiary was expected to present an annual accounting of the funds which flowed through his hands. Particularly good collections of these obedientiaries' rolls survive at Durham and Worcester.

The secular cathedrals, by contrast, were run by a dean and a chapter of secular canons or prebendaries. The dean, often named by the king, was rich, powerful, and frequently non-resident, since many deans served the king as councillors, secretaries, or ambassadors. (Thomas Cromwell, though a layman, was dean of Wells from 1537 until his fall in 1540; in this, as in much else, he was unique, and all the other Henrician deans were ordained priests.) The number of canons in the secular cathedrals varied considerably. Lincoln—a vast and rich diocese before the bishoprics of Peterborough and Oxford were carved out of it in the 1540s—was supposed to have fifty-eight prebendaries, Salisbury fifty-two, York thirty-six. Most of the other cathedrals could number between twenty and thirty canons. But most of these men were non-resident; a number of them were dons at Oxford and Cambridge, and many held other, more profitable ecclesiastical appointments which kept them away from their stalls in the cathedral choir. A handful of residentiaries—often as few as three or four—actually performed the services which were sung daily within the cathedrals and managed the business affairs of their houses.

Most of the cathedrals were quite well off financially, for they had been accumulating lands, rectories, and other valuable assets

since at least the time of the Norman Conquest. Although financial records survive for most of the cathedrals, these are often fragmentary and always difficult to use, since there is generally no master account. Our best figures are those compiled by Henry VIII's commissioners in 1536 and included in the great *Valor Ecclesiasticus*. These show that Lincoln, rather surprisingly the richest house, had an annual income of nearly £3500. Canterbury, York, Salisbury, Wells, and St. Paul's could count on receiving about £2500 annually. The poorest secular cathedral was Chichester, with £986 a year; five of the monastic cathedrals were less well off, with annual incomes as low as £418 at Carlisle.[2]

There were, in addition, four cathedrals in Wales, serving dioceses which were accounted part of the province of Canterbury. These were St. David's, Llandaff, St. Asaph, and Bangor. All were secular in organization, and all were smaller and poorer than their English counterparts. As was appropriate for cathedrals in such small cities, all except St. Asaph functioned as parish churches as well as cathedrals. The English cathedrals were not organized as parishes; in most cases there were small parish churches nestled in the shadow of the cathedral itself, serving the parochial needs of local residents.

All of the cathedrals had significant musical establishments, for their services had been sung for centuries and elaborate polyphony, often accompanied by organs, had been in use since the fourteenth century, especially in the masses sung daily in the Lady Chapel to honor the Blessed Virgin Mary.[3] Boy sopranos—and men responsible for teaching them—were present in all the cathedrals, but there were usually smaller numbers of boys than one might expect, only eight or ten in most cases. Monks, generally musically gifted ones chosen from the community, joined the boys in the monastic cathedrals; the secular cathedrals were served by singing men, usually called vicars choral because they served—vicariously—in place of the non-resident canons. In theory there were as many vicars choral as there were prebendaries, but in practice the numbers were smaller, though a choir including twenty-four men was quite common. Usually about half of the vicars choral were priests, who supported themselves by singing masses for the souls of the dead in endowed chantry chapels as well as through their stipends as musicians. Prior to the Reformation the other singing men were expected to be in minor orders (deacons or subdeacons), and the vicars choral lived a sort of communal life, with private houses or chambers in vicars' closes such as the ones surviving at Wells or Hereford but with communal

dining halls, libraries, and chapels.[4] Almsmen and a variety of servants—janitors, bell-ringers, butlers, cooks, and barbers—completed the cathedral establishments.

The initial break with Rome was little noticed in these houses, where the daily round of worship continued much as before. The government's command that the name of the Pope be erased from service books seems to have been obeyed in most places; there are occasional references to missals and other volumes which survived unaltered, but in many cases this seems to have been the result of inefficiency rather than an obstinate refusal to comply. Requests to pray for the king's new wives, Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour, also seem to have been honored with little opposition.

The first real blow for the cathedrals fell in 1538 with the campaign against pilgrimages, shrines, and images. Virtually all the cathedrals had shrines housing the relics of saints; throughout the later Middle Ages countless pilgrims had thronged to these holy places, bearing their offerings and their prayers to the cathedrals. The best known of the cathedral shrines is of course that of Thomas a Becket at Canterbury, where the fabulous wealth accumulated since Becket's murder amazed Erasmus when he came with his friend Colet to visit the cathedral in 1513.[5] St. Cuthbert's shrine at Durham, described vividly in the compilation called the *Rites of Durham,* was hardly less magnificent.[6] Lincoln had not one but two shrines honoring St. Hugh (one was reputed to house his head). Among the other famous shrines were St. Swithun's at Winchester, Wulfstan's at Worcester, Chad's at Lichfield, and Etheldreda's at Ely. During earlier centuries the shrines had been substantial sources of income for the cathedrals—Canterbury took in more than £800 in 1350 and as much as £644 in 1420. But offerings had fallen to £25 in 1455 and a mere £13 in 1532;[7] the decline leads one to think that belief in the efficacy of prayers to these saints had evaporated well before the campaigns of the Tudor reformers or the government's decision to confiscate these treasures.

Becket's shrine, with its treasures described by Erasmus as "beyond all calculation," was despoiled in August 1538. The gold and silver filled twenty-six wagons, and the jewels, including a great ruby given by Louis XII, soon found their way onto the fingers of Henry VIII and his courtiers. Becket's actual body was publicly burned and the ashes scattered.[8] Wriothesley and two other commissioners, visiting Winchester in September, were dismayed to find that St. Swithun's shrine contained no real jewels or gold, "but all great counterfeits"; nevertheless they were able

to remove 2000 marks worth of silver.[9] At Chichester, fifty-seven pieces of silver and gilt were removed from the coffin containing the bones of Bishop Richard.[10] Similar scenes, not all documented, took place elsewhere.

Images, as well as shrines, were attacked as being superstitious, and cathedrals were not exempt from the wave of iconoclasm which swept the country in the late 1530s. There is evidence of rood lofts—great crucifixes set up on choir screens—being torn down, but disappointingly little information about campaigns against "superstitious" statues and stained glass. The modern observer can easily see the result of such attempts to purge the church of anything smacking of popery and darkness—the saints and angels in the chapter house at Ely, for instance, have lost their heads, and the lowest row of niches in the great facade at Wells now stands empty, bereft of the beautiful statues which once stood there. Presumably these went in the late 1530s, but often we cannot be sure, and it may well be that some remained in place until they were attacked by Cromwell and the Puritan troops in the Civil War.

The most sweeping changes in the cathedrals came, however, not as a result of the destruction of shrines and images, but because of the suppression of the monasteries. Since all the cathedral priories had incomes greater than £200, they were unaffected by the first act of dissolution, passed in 1536.[11] But change began shortly thereafter, as two of the monastic cathedrals were dissolved altogether, the remaining eight transformed into secular establishments, and six new cathedrals founded in order to utilize some of the greatest of the monastic buildings.

The first monastic cathedral to be converted into a secular foundation was Norwich. Surviving records do not tell us just why it received special treatment, but there is reason to think that it was the least well run of the cathedral priories, and we know that Bishop Repps or Rugg, originally a monk himself, was a time-server who acceded to every demand of the government, finally having to resign his see in 1549 because he had given away too much and was unable to manage diocesan finance. A royal charter dated 2 May 1538 converted Norwich into a secular cathedral. The last prior, William Castleton, became the first dean; five monks were named prebends, and sixteen more became minor canons. The dean and chapter were given power to make their own statutes (although they did not get around to doing so until the seventeenth century) and to allocate revenues for the support of the clergy and choristers.[12]

The government's hand fell next on the cathedral priories at

Coventry and Bath. These were special cases, for both of them were co-cathedrals for bishops who enjoyed a seat in a secular cathedral as well as a place in these monastic houses. They were therefore no longer needed as diocesan centers. Although these episcopal leaders continued to style themselves bishop of Coventry and Lichfield and bishop of Bath and Wells respectively, they now had to be content with their secular cathedrals at Lichfield and Wells. The priory at Coventry surrendered to the king's commissioner, Dr. John London, on 15 January 1539, with Bath following suit on the 27th.[13] The building at Coventry soon fell into ruin, and nothing remains of it (the cathedral which was destroyed by bombing in World War II was a medieval parish church raised to cathedral status in 1918); the church at Bath, which is of interest since it was the only cathedral building erected primarily in the Tudor period, survives as the principal parish church for the city.

The remaining monastic cathedrals were destined to survive as secular establishments, but they were not actually refounded until 1541 or January 1542. Their fate became enmeshed in Henry VIII's scheme for new bishoprics, probably originally a proposal of Wolsey's, now taken over by Cromwell and Gardiner. Two sets of documents surviving in the Public Record Office show the government considering grandiose plans which would have established a large number of new cathedrals as well as converting the monastic cathedrals into secular institutions.[14] Monastic churches at such places as St. Albans, Burton-on-Trent, Shrewsbury, Gisburn, Thornton, Waltham, Colchester, Dunstable, Bodmin, and Fountains would have been elevated to cathedral status had these proposals been accepted. But such grand designs were soon abandoned, no doubt because they were too costly and too disruptive of the existing order; bishops whose jurisdiction and revenues would have been reduced if new dioceses were carved out of their territories may well have joined the king's financial advisors in opposing them.

In the end only six new cathedrals were established. Westminster Abbey, such an important royal foundation that it could hardly be allowed to fall into ruin, was made the seat of a bishop, and Thomas Thirlby, a conservative who acquiesced in the Henrician Reformation, was appointed to the see. He has the distinction of being the only bishop of Westminster in Anglican history. Evidently the division of London into two dioceses did not work well. No successor was appointed when Thirlby was translated to Norwich in 1550, and for six years the diocese of London

had two cathedrals, St. Paul's and the Abbey. In 1556 Bloody Mary restored monastic life at Westminster; when Elizabeth finally dissolved the monastery three years later Westminster attained its present status as a "royal peculiar," operating much like a cathedral but not attached to a bishop or a diocese.[15] It is ironic as well as anachronistic that the building is still referred to as "the Abbey."

The other new foundations, all of which were to prove permanent, were at Gloucester, Peterborough, Chester, Bristol, and Oxford. A unique surviving record lets us know that some members of the old monastic community at Gloucester stayed on following the dissolution, acting as caretakers of the fabric and probably maintaining services as well, awaiting final action about refoundation. A similar situation obtained at Worcester, and probably elsewhere.[16] The cathedral for Oxford was originally set at Osney, a large abbey just outside the city, but the foundation was transferred to Christ Church—Wolsey's great college—in 1546, just before Henry VIII's death.

These new cathedrals, as well as the monastic houses now secularized, were quite well treated by the government so far as their finances and size of their staffs were concerned. The first draft scheme was even more generous. Canterbury, for instance, was to have been allowed a dean (called provost), twelve prebendaries, six preachers, eight minor canons who were to join twelve lay clerks in singing the services, ten choristers, sixty scholars to be taught Latin and Greek in the grammar school, twenty students to be sent to Oxford and Cambridge and supported there, five readers of divinity, physic, and civil law in the universities, a master of the choristers, and two masters in the grammar school. Even with this lavish establishment, however, the government would have reaped a profit of more than £400, for the cathedral's old revenues exceeded £2387 and the total of the suggested stipends was £1963.[17] In the final settlement the dean was paid £300 a year, twelve prebendaries £40 each, six preachers each £24 2s. 2 1/2d., fourteen minor canons £10 apiece, twelve singing men £8, fifty "gramaryans" (students in the grammar school) £4 each, and twenty-four scholars in the universities (half at Oxford and half at Cambridge), £6 or £8 depending on their status.[18]

Thirteen of the new cathedrals and refounded monastic establishments were given new statutes in 1544. In contrast to the unique case at Norwich, these regulations were imposed from without; the statutes were compiled by Nicholas Heath, bishop

of Worcester, George Day, bishop of Chichester, and Richard Cox, the future bishop of Ely, now archdeacon of that diocese. Although there are a few local variations—special provision for the grammar school at Worcester, for instance, as well as for preachers at Canterbury—these statutes have a basic common text.[19] Appointments to the deanery and canonries were placed in the gift of the crown, an important difference from the old secular cathedrals, where the bishop appointed the canons and the canons elected the dean, even if he were nominated by the king. Unlike the prebendaries of the old foundations, who enjoyed independent incomes from assigned estates, the canons of the new cathedrals had no individual rights or revenues but rather were part of the corporation of the dean and chapter. Minor canons, lay clerks, and choristers were provided for; the statutes mention skill in singing as an essential qualification but provide no mechanism for dismissal if vocal abilities faltered. Constitutionally the position of these musical establishments differed markedly from that of the singing men in the old secular cathedrals, where the colleges of vicars choral formed separate legal entities with property and revenues of their own, quite separate from the endowments of the dean and chapter.

Further changes of some magnitude loomed on the horizon at the time of Henry VIII's death. A statute for the dissolution of the chantries had been passed but not yet put into effect;[20] when these endowments were confiscated under Edward VI many of the cathedral clergy lost significant portions of their income, and the poverty of the minor canons and vicars choral was a constant complaint for the rest of the Tudor period—the financial situation of these men was made more critical because they were now allowed to marry, and had to try to support families on stipends which had been barely adequate for single men living communally. Liturgical change, too, lurked around the corner; the introduction of the English Litany in 1546 provided a foretaste of Cranmer's first Book of Common Prayer, published in 1549 and enforced by an Act of Uniformity which immediately made it illegal to continue the use of Latin texts or their musical settings.

But while Henry lived the services remained much they had always been; the Reformation had not yet made much of an impact on liturgy. In the cathedrals, as indeed in the Church generally, the Henrician Reformation was essentially constitutional and financial rather than theological and liturgical. The constitutional changes, however, were profound, especially in the case of the old monastic cathedrals. It was equally significant that the old

order had been upset; change was in the air and the way was prepared for the further alterations which came with astonishing rapidity under Edward, Mary, and Elizabeth. Not until the closing years of the century would the cathedrals settle comfortably into the new pattern which has been maintained, in its essential features, even to our own time.

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NOTES

1. This paper, based primarily on the manuscript records surviving in the several cathedral libraries or local record offices to which they have been transferred, is part of a larger project to study the history of cathedrals throughout the Tudor period. I am grateful to the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for generous financial support for this work.

2. *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, 6 vols. (London: Record Commission, 1810-1834). Information about the cathedrals is scattered throughout the volumes, which are arranged by diocese. Figures cited here are for net income, after certain deductions are allowed; gross revenues are slightly higher.

3. See my article, "The Reformation of Choirs: Cathedral Musical Establishments in Tudor England," in DeLloyd J. Guth and John W. McKenna, eds., *Tudor Rule and Revolution: Essays for G. R. Elton from His American Friends* (Cambridge, 1982), 45-68, for fuller information about cathedral choirs.

4. Vicars' closes, or fragments of them, survive also at Lincoln, Lichfield, and Chichester.

5. *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. Craig R. Thompson (Chicago, 1965), 285-312.

6. *A Description or Breife Declaration of all the Ancient Monuments, Rites, and Customes belonginge or beinge within the Monastical Church of Durham before the Suppression*, ed. James Raine (Surtees Society, vol. 15, 1842), reprinted with additional editorial material by J. T. Fowler (Surtees Society, vol. 107, 1903).

7. Lionel Butler and Chris Given-Wilson, *Medieval Monasteries of Great Britain* (London, 1979), 90-93.

8. *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, eds. J. S. Brewer, James Gairdner, and R. H. Brodie (21 vols., London: H.M.S.O., 1862-1932), XIII, pt. ii, no. 133.

9. *Letters and Papers*, XIII, pt. ii, no. 401.

10. *Letters and Papers*, XIII, pt. ii, no. 1193.

11. 27 Henry VIII, c. 28. For fuller discussion of the act and the circumstances surrounding its passage see my book *The Reformation Parliament, 1529-1536* (Cambridge, 1970), 223-229.

12. See Hamilton Thompson, *The Statutes of the Cathedral Church of Durham* (Surtees Society, vol. 143, 1929), introduction.

13. *Letters and Papers*, XIV, pt. i, nos. 69, 148.

14. E314/24, fols. 1-34 and 37-80, Public Record Office, London.

15. On Westminster Abbey see the Ph.D. thesis by C. S. Knighton, "Collegiate Foundations, 1540 to 1570, with Special Reference to St. Peter in Westminster" (Cambridge University, 1975). Thomas Starkey had suggested the conversion of Westminster Abbey into a school, not a cathedral; see Thomas F. Mayer, "Faction and Ideology: Thomas Starkey's *Dialogue*," *Historical Journal*, 28 (1985): 5-6.

16. For both Gloucester and Worcester see the Visitation Act Book of Bishop John Bell, ca. 1520-1541, Worcester Record Office, B.A. 2764/802, fols. 188, 215.

17. E315/24, fols. 1-2, P.R.O.

18. Canterbury Cathedral Library, MS. 40.

19. See Thompson, *Durham Statutes*, xxi-lxvi.

20. 37 Henry VIII, c. 4; cf. Lehmberg, *The Later Parliaments of Henry VIII, 1536-1547* (Cambridge, 1977), 220-222.