

Case Study: Access at St Paul's

On a number of recent occasions the arrangements for access by the public to St Paul's other than to attend services has become a matter of minor controversy. This was probably most notably the case when Neil Macgregor, director of the British Museum, raised the issue in his Scott Holland lectures — in itself something of an irony! — late in 2008, a little fuel being added to the fire by a commentary on the lectures and other matters published by Nicholas Cranfield in the *Church Times*. This was not an isolated incident however. A quick trawl through the web reveals it cropping up with some regularity. Sometimes the critique comes in from the left; on other occasions, from the right. And in the wonderful world of the blogosphere, it can come from almost anywhere.

The critique is predictably often not well informed: 'SatNav for the soul' seems rather akin to one of those devices that takes lorries through fords on single track lanes, since his trump card is to compare the situation with the professed position of the organization he believes St Paul's to belong to, the Church of Rome. (You will be pleased to hear that the first comment on his blog came from his nephew, putting him right on that one.)

As the examples given here suggest, the standard critique relates to the appropriateness of making a charge for entry to a place of Christian worship, which is seen as inconsistent with Christian principles. When representatives of the cathedral respond, or indeed just sympathetic voices are raised, of which there are many, the two most obvious points in reply are of course the financial dependence of the cathedral on visitor income in the absence of state aid and the fact that people are always welcome to worship in the cathedral free of charge. Both are perfectly reasonable responses. As I noted at the end of the contribution I made to the *Cathedral History* published in 2004, following the introduction of charges to visit the floor of the cathedral in 1991, within a year tourism and trading accounted for 32 per cent of the cathedral's income; by the time of the opening of the sophisticated visitor resources that characterise the crypt dubbed the 'people's boulevard' as reordered in 1997, they contributed 67 per cent. I would be intrigued to know whether the percentage has continued to rise to date!

Yet it remains the case that St Paul's continues to attract negative comment on this issue. While this owes something to the London prices involved, I think it may not be too fanciful to suggest that it may also owe something to the fact that the discussion of access and charging for entrance is hardly a novelty at the cathedral, even if the terms in which it is discussed have altered significantly. In this brief presentation, I want to revisit mid-nineteenth century discussion of this subject. This may in part offer some consolation that the current cathedral staff are not the first to confront the difficult issues that access raises, but in exploring the reasons why it became an issue in this period rather than any other it might also suggest additional ammunition in making the claim that those who seek to deprive the cathedral of this revenue stream might also need to accept that the consequence is the allocation of some form of public support for the cathedral fabric.

If we look back to the cathedral and the access granted to the non-worshipping public in the nineteenth century, a few key points that are probably already familiar to many in the audience need to be made at the outset.

i) Before the mid-19th century worship in the cathedral largely took place in the choir, a space then much more forcefully cut off from the nave and transepts by the presence of the organ on top of the choir screen. It was only on grand occasions such as the charity school services did a congregation form beyond the screen.

ii) More generally, the nave presented a pretty open space, until the late 18th century lacking even the monuments that now add interest, let alone the highly decorative ceiling decorations, although the building itself was of course already one of the sights of London

iii) The issue of public access to St Paul's already had a long history. It is perhaps only thanks to the even greater carelessness of other Londoners that old St Paul's was not consumed in a fire started by a careless visitor. Sixteenth-century tourists climbed the steeple during services, and on Sundays strolled on the roofs, making whooping noises at the top and dropping stones either outside or inside the fabric onto those walking beneath. More casual everyday passers-by arranged meetings or transit across the floor, the nave or 'Paul's walk' seeing 'the south alley for usury and popery, the north for simony, and the horse fair in the midst for all kinds of bargains'. It is not without significance for us that the rise of historical writing and editing in the nineteenth century made the evidence of all this newly familiar to nineteenth-century commentators.

iv) Although visitors and tourism were not as central to the economy of the late Hanoverian cathedral as today, they none the less mattered. First, charging for entrance was standard practice, costing 2d (a miserly 35p in today's spending terms according to TNA) for as visit to the interior save for 2 1/2 hours each weekday and 4 hours on Sundays. Visits to the crypt or to the ball and cross of the dome were charged extra: and in 1840 it cost 1/6, or some £3.30, to visit the west gallery, the model, the library and bells. Since we know the totals received, we can calculate that in a good year some 60,000 availed themselves of at least a visit to the floor producing over £22,000 in today's terms for the cathedral. The sums though not huge were important since it was these monies that were used to eke out the meagre salaries of the equivalent of £340 pa paid to junior virgers: from the gallery tours alone they each derived the equivalent of an additional £5,000 from the visitors. Given Hanoverian attitudes to property, it simply would not have occurred to the dean and chapter that they should instead be remunerated from the monies earned from cathedral estates yielding the equivalent of just under .5m in 1835 from the common fund, placing St Paul's in the middle of the league table of cathedral wealth at the time.

This system was well established by the 1830s. Why then, did it suddenly become a source of controversy along with the whole question of visitors and their behaviour?

- 1) First, the very fact that cathedrals had suddenly become the target of much more wide ranging government-sponsored reforms made the possibility of change here suddenly seem feasible. The thirty years after 1830 saw all kind of schemes proposed – including such hare-brained ideas as cutting a hole in the floor under the dome so that people could look down on the monuments in the crypt
- 2) These reforms were themselves were the consequence of the change in political climate associated with the Great Reform Act of 1832. This may not have created a democracy, but it did put a premium on attention to ‘the people’ in political statements and policies which encouraged suspicion of any member of the establishment as a likely speculator in much the same way as now assails MPs, and also sought to promote the interests of a public of whom visitors to the cathedral could be regarded as one manifestation. The whig-liberal governments in office through the 1830s were past masters of such rhetoric.
- 3) There was also suddenly a lot more to see in the cathedral. In 1791 the Dean and chapter had given permission to a committee of royal academicians to select a location for a statue of the philanthropist John Howard, the first such to be admitted to the floor of the cathedral, and this opened the floodgates to the introduction of what has been described as an ‘outstandingly coherent group of heroic tributes, unrivalled in Britain or abroad’. The initial batch of civic figures were followed by a remarkable series of marble homages to military heroes., These were not just the random product of the bloodiness of the Napoleonic wars, but formed a key part of a coordinated programme of commemoration paid for by the British government. The state underwrote the erection of 33 such memorials nationwide: 31 of them were set up in St Paul’s, at a cost of well over £100,000, or £5m in today’s money. They concentrated around the transepts, forming an effective gallery of contemporary figurative art by the finest sculptors then operating in Britain, and with the hidden focal point of Nelson arriving beneath in the crypt, later to be joined by Wellington. Once this extraordinary programme was complete, yet more followed, of a wider range of subjects, and it is clear from a range of evidence that these memorials became a key element in the attraction of the cathedral, not least to the many veterans of campaigns from Trafalgar to Khartoum.

But of course the veterans were in a sense the last audience for which such memorials were intended: they were not to console old soldiers, but *pour encourager les autres*; to a generation which had a strong belief in the moral efficacy of art: these were essays in civic virtue and patriotism designed to rub off on viewers living in what could be a politically restive capital city. When conceived, this programme was no doubt aimed at those men and women of the upper and middling sort whose support was desired for the war effort on the home front, and who no doubt provided the bulk of paying visitors; but

in the wake of 1832 radicals and others hoped to extend it to the artisans whose civic virtue once awakened might entitle them to admission to the franchise.

Thus it was in 1837 that the dean and chapter found themselves under assault over the issue of admission charges from a quarter even more elevated than the director of the British Museum, the home secretary and Queen Victoria. Following a radical petition to the monarch insisting that 'frequent contemplation of works in the fine arts, of historical and literary monuments ... is eminently conducive to the instruction, refinement and rational amusement of the people' and demanding that the Cathedral be opened gratis, the queen had asked the chapter to consider the issue. Dean Copleston replied that while sympathetic, in the end 'weighty objections' prevented compliance. 'A church ought not to be regarded in the light of a gallery of art; Canon Sydney Smith worried that with a million passing the doors weekly, opening more would see 'St Pauls become as it was in the century before last, a rendezvous for the worst characters of both sexes in the metropolis. Copleston was also quick to insist that taking the parliamentary grant for the monuments had not made the cathedral any more a 'national building or subject to the government'. Smith underlined the risks by enclosing a letter from a verger who reported on the consequences of the free opening on Sunday afternoons: 'The whole cathedral except the choir is converted into a lobby for fashionable loungers ... what with the pacing of feet, the murmur of voices, and the gadding too and fro, ... every church-like notion is driven from our minds'. Smith concluded that in one hour of free opening 2-3000 had entered, 'many of them of the lowest description, with their hats on, laughing, talking, eating and making an uproar; the cathedral is constantly and shamefully polluted with ordure the pews are sometimes turned into *cabinets d'aisance*, and the prayerbooks torn up; the monuments are scribbled over, and often with the grossest indecency'. With more opening, the cathedral would become once again 'a royal exchange for wickedness'.

Temporarily successful in their resistance to significant change, 4 years later the chapter again faced their radical critics, this time in a select committee of the House of Commons to which they were unceremoniously summoned to give evidence. Anyone who watched the recent appearance of UEA management in the climate data enquiry will have obtained a pretty good idea of the discomfort this unprecedented indignity inflicted on the great and the good, notably Sydney Smith. The committee was unequivocal in demanding greater access on a gratis basis every day. From the minutes of the committee more interesting material on the nature of the problems associated with access emerges. Smith recounted an experiment by which rails constraining visitors had been removed during some of the free hours already in place. Bad behaviour had resulted: beggars and prostitutes were regularly observed plying their trade, and yes, he had meant what he had said about the state of the pews: he had seen a 'quantity of urine after a service'. Additional manpower would be no help: you are well aware of the jealousy of the English people at being interfered with'. Joseph Hume, the chief radical campaigner, mocked the whig canon who had made a career out of his robust writings in support of precisely this independence: 'You seem to be afraid of the London populace: have you of late had any experience as to their conduct in large bodies?': Answer: no, I am not afraid, why do you say I am afraid?'. For Smith the 2d fee struck a good balance: affordable by

any true art lover, but striking a balance between ‘the indulgence of the people and the decorum of the church’. Continental ways were no model, because catholics treated churches with more respect than protestants.

A striking feature that marked out the 1841 discussion from the correspondence of 1837, no doubt encouraged by viva voce examination, was the breaking of cathedral ranks. This time the same minor canon cited by Smith in 1837 disowned the senior cleric’s testimony as ‘a little overdrawn’. He did not recognise the account of disorder, and that he resented was that of the ‘gentlewomen with plumes of feathers ... walking up and down and lounging about during services’. His testimony was rather confirmed by verger John Lingard: yes he had seen urination, and although monuments had not been defaced ‘gross and offensive’ graffiti, but like Packman he was worried by walking up and down, and those he had been forced to challenge while male, had not been artisans, but a law student and a qualified surgeon. The poorer classes, ‘if they are spoken to, behave themselves a great deal better than those who style themselves gentlemen’. Another verger, James Sykes, sang a bit more from Smith’s songsheet, lamenting the sound of cracking nuts and throwing of orange peel during services, cigar-smoking and again urinating (he had caught 20 people at it the last year, ‘generally they have been ladies’ – but once he began to talk of the damage done by sticks, it may again indicate that though the offenders were described as ‘townspeople’ as opposed to countryfolk who were better behaved, it might not be the lowest classes he had in mind. Meanwhile, Packman stressed what he saw as the indignity of depending on these monies for his income as a cleric, when he felt he should have been paid from the cathedral revenues.

No immediate action followed, but once the graffiti had been cleaned off the writing was on the wall. In 1851, the year of the great exhibition, fees for entry to the floor were finally abolished.

At first sight there might seem little direct connection between the issues and discussions of the 1830s and contemporary debates on access and charges. In the 1830s, after all the chapter seemed to want to keep people out; today, they are generally in favour of encouraging them in! Beyond the consolation afforded by the earlier discomfort of the chapter, and the advisability of installing the loos now found in the Crypt, however, a number of things might be worth reflecting on.

- i) It is striking how important it was to the radicals – often men of secular turn of mind – to get people into the cathedral rather than to despoil it as latter day Cromwells. It was their zeal for access rather than anticlericalism that drove the assault on admission charges, and at times it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the chapter could have found more common ground than they imagined in the educative value of the cathedral
- ii) It clearly emerged only gradually the difference in perspective on what we might now call the ‘visitor experience’ that existed among the cathedral staff. They clearly were incapable of a proper in-house discussion, and the fact that they had not come to an internal consensus from dean to verger handicapped their engagement with external critics

iii) I think the contemporary chapter and staff can pat themselves on the back for having found happier solutions to at least some of the issues that stymied their predecessors: how to allow services to proceed relatively unmolested, and to preserve moments of spiritual reflection within a day dominated by the presence of the visitors.

iv) There is a reminder, if any is at any future point is needed, that it is a bad idea to defend charges on the grounds that they deter the undesirable and ensure a 'better class of visitor'. It is both politically suicidal, but also does not in practice necessarily reflect the realities of where bad behaviour may originate

v) It indicates, I think the importance of continuing to bear in mind and reflect on the history of the fabric which the visitors come to see. In an obvious sense, Dean Copleston's robust assault on any insinuation that the use of parliamentary monies had created any obligation on the chapter to allow access and that the church was not an art gallery was correct. But it is an absolute line that makes little sense in an age which has seen the crypt accommodate a shop and a café. The key is where to draw the line. And it may make some of this decision making easier when it is acknowledged that the memorials were indeed not intended to be Christian commemorations of those buried in the cathedral, but civic paens to men in many instances buried in corners of foreign fields that were forever England. This may also be a point with two further ramifications.

vi) McGregor's critique was unusually sophisticated, in focusing on the creation of the Light of the World as an object of devotional reflection in the cathedral following the reaction to charges associated with seeing the Keble version. But although St Paul's contains much significant devotional art, much of its artistic merit is tied up in decoration not so clearly tied to its core religious purpose, and there therefore seems less merit in a case for not charging to see the latter at least: if in the 19c the one thing that could not be charged for was the monuments, perhaps they are now the easiest thing to charge for.

vii) And finally it is important to note that the radicals while demanding free access in their 1841 report nonetheless conceded that this would necessitate more security and associated expenditure. They thought the money for that should not come from existing cathedral budgets but be found from other sources – by implication, public money. There is a strong case to be made even in these financially straitened times for some recognition of the case for public support for the extraordinary national treasure houses that our cathedrals represent. The history of the national pantheon at St Paul's placed here by the state for the state's benefit, and still not incapable of stirring a sense of public spirit, might perhaps serve to give that argument additional potency in the case of St Paul's.