

“Why Cathedrals Matter”

by Frank Field MP

The Friends of Chester Cathedral

Autumn Lecture 22 October 2009



Mr Frank Field MP, Chairman of the Cathedrals Fabric Commission for England (CFCE) and a lay canon of the Cathedral was welcomed and introduced by the Vice Dean, Canon Trevor Dennis.

Frank Field thanked the Friends for inviting him to his own local Cathedral and said that he would be looking at the importance of our great cathedral buildings and at the challenges they now face. The following are edited extracts from the lecture:

“The Friends of this Cathedral are stewards of a great mystery contained within this building. Gathered here, each of us has different thoughts of why we’re here. Some of you come because of old memories linked with generations of families and friends, other have memories of Cheshire and of community occasions such as Armistice Day. Such buildings are important personally, and in some mysterious way they contain part of us as well as part of past generations. But our cathedrals and churches are much more important, to ensure that we don’t lose our sense of national identity. Englishness changes over time, but in times of rapid change such as now, with huge population movements in this country and the world, it is even more important that we are aware and draw on our roots, and understand how the past influences the vision that we see before us. Nobody can make sense of England without fully understanding the role that the church and its buildings play in the extraordinary march of time on our shores.

To understand architecture in this country you need to know something about our best inherited buildings, our cathedrals and our great churches, but also some of our newer churches which also make a contribution to the future. Our visual form of buildings is shaped by these great buildings and our art, not just our architecture, has been set through the centuries largely by what the cathedrals and other churches have commissioned, and how they have acted as

stewards to the next generation of great artists. You see here the quality of the works of the architect Mr Pace especially, in my judgement, where he incorporated some of the Cathedral’s Jacobean woodwork into his own work. In trying to make judgements we must preserve the best while also embracing the future. What do you think is the importance of these great buildings besides their role as the mother church of a diocese? Why do you as ‘Friends’ work as hard as you do to ensure that this building is handed on to future generations in better condition than it is now?

The Church of England seeks to preserve the very best, but also to embrace change. The Cathedrals Fabric Commission for England (CFCE) is the planning body for cathedrals, and any permanent piece of work, new addition or change, has to come before us. Deans can do temporary work, and inventive deans who think that they can’t get a proposal approved are endlessly trying novel temporary approaches. However, this Cathedral is not one of them. In the CFCE the church has drawn together a body of distinguished experts, some of our best cathedral architects, experts in stained glass, those with knowledge about stone and those who encourage impressive new art not just in cathedrals but elsewhere. The rules are very clear on what we should do, but not on what we should not do, and the CFCE has been trying to develop procedures so that you can do the sort of jobs that you actually wish to do. For example, when I visit cathedrals I ask the Dean to let me look at the accounts, and it is clear that one of the biggest challenges which cathedrals face is the cost of the choir and music.

Elizabeth I in an inspired way decided that the choral tradition of the medieval church should survive and she was brilliant at making that balance between the traditions that she inherited and the Reformation. She could easily have let the English cathedrals go the way of many continental cathedrals and see the choral tradition die out, but thanks to her, the choral tradition survives. I wonder to what extent in the longer run cathedrals will be able to afford the excellence of their musical tradition, and while deans naturally think that government should give cathedrals more money, I cannot see any government of any party having a “Pauline” conversion and deciding that more taxpayers’ money should go to cathedrals.

We need to look at what we do which the rest of secular society wants, and then to sell our wares to that sector of society and take the burden off ourselves for totally proper reasons. The government has a school academy programme and we discussed with some cathedrals the idea that their choir schools might be established as

music academies and I know that Chester has been looking at this idea. Bristol Cathedral Choir School was the first to become an academy specialising in maths and music, and it got a considerable endowment in moving from being a private to a state school with increased numbers. The school has grown considerably in the past couple of years and the costs of its choir are now part of the Academy and tax payers benefit from a resurrection of a musical tradition in state schools. An example of a smaller government initiative is the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Leeds where they managed to get two £50,000 grants, and every Roman Catholic school in Bradford now has music taught by the cathedral. That is the sort of change which the CFCE has been encouraging.

Recently, the government has cut the English Heritage budget, and it would be surprising if we can prevent further cuts in the future. Also, English Heritage will no longer make specific grants for cathedrals, although they can apply for grants. In the past, the Wolfson Foundation has doubled the value of English Heritage grants to cathedrals and we hope that they might continue with the grants, and also try and bring some other big Foundation players to the table.

Another side of the CFCE’s work is where a cathedral’s applies to take something out and replace it with something better. We have to judge whether it is so important a piece of work, is intrinsic to the building, is an important part of the artist’s or that architect’s work that it shouldn’t be tampered with. This is often difficult, so we are trying to seek agreement amongst cathedrals on a voluntary listing. For example, can CFCE bring a group of experts to agree where an artist’s most outstanding work is, and to seek agreement from different traditions, so that when cathedrals ask to change or remove items we know how they are rated by the experts, and whether they are star pieces of work which should be preserved.

I now wish to say more about the challenge which cathedrals face. One reason why English Heritage abolished specific grants to cathedrals was that most cathedrals are now probably in better condition than they have been since they were built. English Heritage decided to concentrate their smaller budget on whatever part of our heritage that is under greatest attack. In the CFCE’s first annual review, cathedrals after cathedral said that whilst they are in better condition, unless we spend enormous sums of money they won’t be in that condition 10, 20 or 30 years hence. You know here that your work is never done, and that when one piece of work is completed, attention is drawn to what you need to do elsewhere.

We are entering a new period of politics. We have been spending way beyond our

means and we simply don't have enough money coming in from taxation to eradicate the debt before we go into the next recession. It is going to be difficult for us all and no less for cathedrals, that as budgets and services are cut and taxes in the short run go up, it will be even more difficult for people to raise moneys on a necessary scale to ensure that buildings like this survive.

Therefore your task becomes more, not less, important. Those of you who are "Friends" have already pledged yourselves as stewards to the great mysteries of this building and what it contains. You are a cathedral with many firsts to your name. Your "Friends" was one of the first groups established about 1930 at a time when these cathedrals were opened up to the community. You were the first cathedral to decide that these great buildings were not just for the locality or the diocese, but for the nation to enjoy. The "Friends" have two hands, one stretches to what we might romantically call old England linking us securely with the past, but no society of cathedral "Friends" would be worthy unless it also links one hand into the future and you do that bravely. You help the Cathedral see its way, and help people see that the building lives, that it breathes, that it grows and that it changes. If we are going to survive as a great country then we need a sense of confidence from the past and of willingness to embrace the future. Voluntary bodies like yourselves need to go to their tasks with renewed vigour and do them in small and important ways. I salute you for what you have done, not just in the past year, but in all those years since you were founded. I also hope that your enthusiasm will encourage other people in the Cathedral who are not yet "Friends" to think that they too, in this easy but very important way, can support the future of this great building. I want to thank you for inviting me back to my own Cathedral, and it's a real pleasure to be amongst you, for you not simply love this building but put that love into action.

In response to various questions from the floor, Frank Field made the following further comments:

Admission Charges: Cathedrals which charge for admission still remain open to all with free access for worship or for private prayer. These buildings are immensely costly to maintain and whilst the public do not pay for them through their taxes, they think that they are part of the welfare state with free right of entry. I am the last person to criticise those who charge; we do actually need to raise the money to keep these buildings from falling into disrepair. Because in the past we didn't have to pay for them, we didn't value them in monetary

terms. All cathedrals carry out regular programme of inspections, and Winchester has just discovered a huge hole in its roof and will be hard pressed to keep the weather out in the next couple of years. We have to do the repairs, and it is a trade-off. I think that it will be a very brave person that didn't say in 15 years' time that all cathedrals will have to charge if they want their buildings to remain sound.

Cathedrals as spiritual powerhouses in a secular world: Faith is a gift and we do not know whether that gift will continue to be bestowed on us. I'm not one who thinks that the Holy Spirit acts in a way that encourages us to take the easy way out. If we teach people about the faith, it appears that the Holy Spirit finds its job a little easier. So while the future is not rosy, we have a duty to ensure that we pass on to the next generation that flame of faith which we were given. We may have to rethink the role and structure of our cathedrals and churches, how we use our full-time priests and our other staff. I think that is one of the big questions that our culture faces; is it going to become totally secular or are we going to see some wonderful renaissance of Christian ideas?

I think we need to use our cathedrals as centres which serve a much wider community on a Sunday. This is not my idea, but as people go to the cinema to watch operas on the live screen as they are being performed at different places in the world, could not cathedrals main services (particularly when there are choral) be relayed to churches with screens similar to those in a cinema. The churches might also become community centres for films and sporting fixtures, and begin to recreate the church as a medieval place where people gather.

CFCE's role towards Abbeys, Priors, Minsters, Catholic cathedrals etc.:

Although the commission has no power to go into these areas it doesn't mean that they won't try to do so. If we could get the major foundations to put some of their income towards supporting cathedrals then it would be logical to extend that to Catholic cathedrals as well. We are going to see whether we can raise a salary so that the cathedrals collectively have a gifted media person to publicise innovations, good ideas, and beautiful addition like your Song School or your Cloister Garden. There are very rich people who have little contact with the Church in a traditional sense and we need to interest them, so that they decide to support the ventures which we hold so close to us. I hope that this will be a joint initiative between the English Anglican and Roman Catholic cathedrals and it could quickly begin to bring in some big donors. Not that "Friends" and small donors are unimportant; they become even more important because you never know which activity that "Friends" undertake will

just excite or spark that interest in individuals who in some wonderful way decide that you are going to be the recipient of a large amount of their money

Cathedral buildings importance to a tourist city like Chester.

Although immensely important and I don't want to play down the tourist side as being secular, but it goes back to an earlier question. We never know how people's imagination, minds, spirits are touched when they come into a building like this. The work you do in making people welcome, making it easy to understand what this building is about, and putting people at ease may encourage some to stay and see what the Services are about. These are missionary opportunities, so of course the money is important, of course it's important for Chester to have the tourists and without their money things would be even more hard pressed, but I don't want to get into the game of thinking that somehow tourism is there and our little spiritual community is here. God works in this mysterious way and as you do in this Cathedral I think we should encourage that.

CFCE's past support, and future help with grants from English Heritage and others:

I wish to salute you for past work such as the Song School, and I'll leave you with one remark about the Cathedrals Fabric Commission. Please apply for what you want in its entirety. It may not all be granted, but we are trying to embrace what people want to do. Sometimes we apply a little brake, sometimes we suggest that people be bolder, but we cannot do our job if deans and chapters try and guess what they think they can get past us. Maybe it will take time, maybe it won't be achieved because of money, but I wouldn't want to think at the end of my stewardship of the Commission that cathedrals could have been more imaginative if they hadn't tried to read our minds.

We are anxious that when cathedrals do embrace change, they don't go to a catalogue, and that they go to artists and local craftsmen. We need examples of big changes that other cathedrals can go to and see how imaginative their colleagues have been, and the perhaps be even bolder with their own plans.

Finally can I thank you all and your Fabric Advisory Committee (which does the really hard work of deciding what is right for the Cathedral) and please don't think that we are in business to refuse things.

See CFCE annual review for their views, and for photos, reports and plans from cathedrals:

www.cofe.anglican.org/about/cathandchurchbuild/annualreview2008.pdf