

# ST NICHOLAS' CATHEDRAL AND PRECINCTS

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Regular worshippers there will forgive me, I hope, for including St Nicholas' as part of a book about 'Hidden' Newcastle. I can only say by way of excuse that a recent national survey showed it to be the second least visited cathedral in the country, with only that of Bradford coming below it. A dominating feature of the skyline and a symbol of the town for many centuries, the church of St Nicholas has been a cathedral only since 1882 – though it is said that it came very near such a promotion as long ago as 1553, when John Knox held the office of Stipendiary Preacher. Even so, until the installation of its bishop, St Nicholas had certainly been one of the largest and most impressive parish churches in the country. The Lantern Tower is one of only a handful in the British Isles and is possibly unique inasmuch that for many centuries it was maintained and a light kept burning in it at the Corporation's expense for actual use as a navigational reference point for shipping on the Tyne. The tower remains illuminated, with a lamp kept burning to this day. The history of the church is covered amply elsewhere, but perhaps a handful of details qualify for inclusion in our search for the unusual and obscure. One tale that will stand re-telling is that of how the Lantern Tower was saved from destruction during the Civil war. In 1644 the town – which had taken the Royalist side – was besieged by a Scottish army under the command of the Earl of Leven. He threatened that unless the town surrendered, he would bombard the church tower and demolish it. The mayor, Sir John Marley, (whose statue is in Northumberland Street) had the bright idea of placing some Scots prisoners of war at the top of the tower where Leven could see them. The tower was thus saved, as the noble Scottish commander had no wish to kill his own men. Another legend from this period tells of when King Charles I, being held prisoner in Newcastle by the Scots in 1646, attend-

ed a service in the church one Sunday. The preacher, a local Parliament sympathiser, called for Psalm 52: "Why dost thou, tyrant, boast abroad thy wicked words to praise?" The king immediately stood up and called instead for Psalm 56: "Have mercy, Lord, on me I pray, for man doth me devour."

A few years before this, the following riddle was composed about the church, reputedly by Ben Jonson, and is said at one time to have been carved in the stonework inside the tower, though there is no trace of it today

"My altitude high, my body four square,  
My foot in the grave, my head in the ayre,  
My eyes in my sides, five tongues in my wombe,  
Thirteen heads on my body, four images alone.  
I can direct you where the wind doth stay,  
And I tune God's precepts thrice a day.  
I am seen where I am not. I am heard where eye is not.  
Tell me now what I am and see that you misse not."

The tower is indeed a glorious sight if one takes the trouble to pause and admire the detail, most of which is very high above. Recent restoration has left the four golden figures – each one standing at a corner on the tower – in beautiful condition: the naked figures of Adam being eternally tempted by Eve with her apple, and on the other two corners, a crowned king and a mitred bishop or Saint remain aloof and oblivious of their sinful neighbours. Above them, no less than thirteen weathervanes glint lustrously as they swing in unison, still directing "where the wind doth stay." The tower is still very much seen "where [it is] not" from many unexpected viewpoints. Artists, particularly during the 19th century, have often portrayed the spire towering over huddled backstreets. Perhaps the best known of these is Ralph Hedley's *A Glimpse of the Cathedral* (on the front cover of this book) which shows a rear view of the building still available by looking across



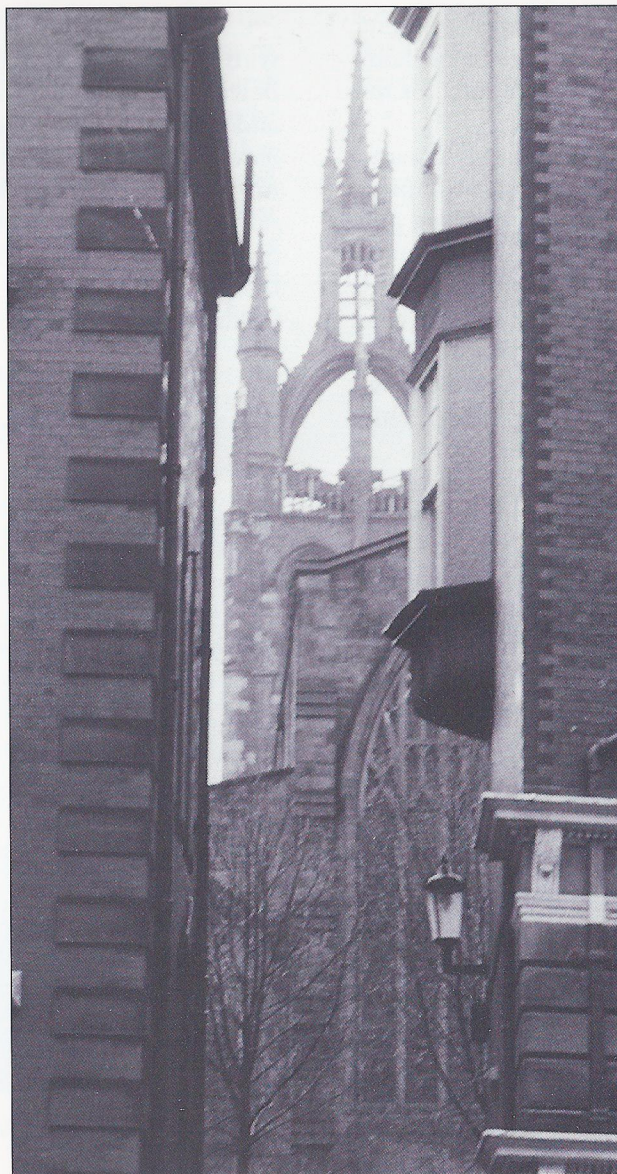
Dean Street from Low Bridge – a view very much in keeping with the theme of this book. Modern architecture surrounding the tower means that unfortunately the bells are not always now “heard where eye is not”, though their sound still echoes to many unexpected parts of the city.

Sixteen bells are hung in the tower, three of which are pre-Reformation bells over three centuries old, but which do not form part of the modern peal. Most bear inscriptions as to their origin, often naming some benefactor who paid for them to be made. Some of them have been given names themselves, such as the St Nicholas Bell which bears the Latin rhyme:

+Cunctis•Modulamina•Promans  
+Sum•Nicholaius•Obans

meaning: “Bearing tunes to all, I am rejoicing Nicholas.”

Another was known as the Thief or Reiver Bell, which was used to toll the curfew when the gates in the town wall were closed at night. The bell which today chimes the hours was presented in a clause of the will of Major George Anderson in 1831, and is thus known as the Major Bell. Another interesting reminder of Newcastle’s Royalist sympathies during the Civil War concerns the bells. After the Restoration, it was the custom to muffle the bells upon the anniver-



*The Cathedral from Low Bridge  
– a present-day glimpse of the Cathedral.*

*Christopher Goulding*

sary each year of the king’s execution. Apparently this custom survived until at least 1810.

The size of the church, its architectural features, and its internal decorations and fittings owe much to the munificence of generations of wealthy Newcastle merchants and local political figures. The interior contains much beautiful and intricate carving both in stone and wood. Of particular interest is the local craftsman Ralph Hedley’s late Victorian work on the misericords – wooden tip-up seats in the choir stalls. The seat bottoms feature stylised mythical beasts such as griffins and wyverns, and are much influenced by earlier medieval examples. Celia Fiennes, who visited the town in 1698 gave her impressions:

“... the Quire is neate as is the whole church and curious carving in wood on each side the Quire, and over the font is a great piramidy of wood finely carv’d full of spires.”

A much older piece of woodwork is exhibited in a small glass case on the south aisle wall above the misericords. Here is a piece of oak said to have been part of one of the great piles which supported the first bridge over the Tyne – the Roman Pons Aelii. Taken from a tree that lived during Christ’s own lifetime, the wood found its way to the



cathedral in 1896, having passed through the hands of many generations of a family called Wheeler. An ancestor of theirs is said to have acquired the wood during excavations for the 18th century Tyne Bridge.

The great and the good of Newcastle have left many memorials to themselves inside, and one of the most impressive is that of the Maddison family. This highly detailed and elaborately adorned monument is situated in the south transept and commemorates three generations of a family who were municipal dignitaries during the 16th and 17th centuries. The three figures atop the monument represent Faith, Hope, and Charity, and below them kneel the armoured figure of Sir Lionel Maddison, his wife, and their sixteen children.

In the north transept is the Crypt Chapel, formerly a 14th century charnel house (where bodies or bones were deposited). This very plain and simple chapel contains four curious stained-glass windows of modern origin set into the north wall. These small pieces of esoterica commemorate one Archibald John Campbell Ross KBE (1867-1931) and rather naively depict scenes from his life, including one of him seated wearing a brown suit and playing the flute, accompanied by a woman in 1920s costume playing a violin and standing by a grand piano.

Outside, the back streets and alleys surrounding the cathedral yield many curiosities and features of interest. What is left of the old churchyard is surrounded by exquisite cast iron railings, featuring lengthy Latin inscriptions in ornate old English lettering running along their entire length. Outside these railings is a paved area enclosed to the south and east by Edwardian office blocks. The block to the east (which fronts onto Dean Street) has an ornate door surround to its rear entrance which is surmounted by a stone carving of a rabbit or hare. The animal sports a pair of impossibly large canine teeth and these, along with the manic expression of its face, have led to the beast being popularly known as 'The Vampire Rabbit'.

Around to the south side of this area, a plaque on the wall marks the former site of the workshops of Thomas Bewick, the legendary engraver. He worked here until 1797, and a bust representing him is set into the wall. Where The Side winds its way uphill to approach the church, the sharp turn in the pathway is called Amen Corner. Near this corner stands Milburn House. On its side which faces the Black Gate, high up on the gable, is a sundial. Directly below it, set into the wall above the doorway, is a bust of Admiral Collingwood which marks the site of his birthplace in 1748.



*The 'Vampire Rabbit' of St Nicholas Churchyard.*

Christopher Goulding

Across St Nicholas Street, opposite the West Door of the cathedral is Denton Chare. Now merely a back alley to Westgate Road sandwiched between the old Post Office and its neighbour, Denton Chare was once a bustling thoroughfare, described as "a brisk place of business" and site of the Cock Inn – an important 18th century Posting House and coaching inn featured in many a Tyneside song. Another posthouse, the Turf Hotel, backed onto Denton Chare. It is hardly surprising that the Victorians sited their new Post Office there, though alas, the deserted and redundant Chare does not even warrant having a postcode today. The only object of note to the north of the cathedral is an extremely ugly and ungainly statue of Queen Victoria, surmounted by a crossed arch bearing the Royal armorial helm. It is said that the Queen faces west to avoid insulting either the Church or the Corporation by having her back turned to them (the old Town Hall was across the road in the Cloth market).

An interesting postscript to the elevation of St Nicholas' Church to the rank of Cathedral was written by the Northumberland historian Cadwallader J. Bates in 1895:

"The fatal subjection of the county to the town, which has become the ruling feature of English life, was emphasised by the partition by Parliament of the ancient diocese of Durham in 1882 ... Instead of a see of the first rank being established in Northumberland where the origins of English Christianity still throw a halo around Lindisfarne, and where the priory church of Hexham with its nave rebuilt would form a real cathedral, the ambition of Newcastle to rank as a city was gratified by the bishop's stool being set up in a typical parish church under the patronage of St Nicholas of Myra, a saint in no way connected with Northumbrian history."

Bates' disapproving tone was echoed by songster Richard Heslop in more down-to-earth style in his contemporary song *Newcastle's a Toon Nee Mair*:

"Aad Nichol's chorch an steeple tee,  
The clock fyece an the beadrel,  
They'd set the whole consarn agee  
An caal it noo 'cathedral'!  
Hoo can the bishop hev the flum  
Te caal the place a city?  
The Toon's been toon afore he cum,  
Te change it, mair's the pity!"

