

How Did They Build Those Gothic Cathedrals?

Dotted throughout Britain, France, Germany and the Low Countries, the great cathedrals stand today as they've stood for 700 or 800 years. Of Europe's 180 Gothic Cathedrals, 80 are in France and 35 in England - although two of those were destroyed, St. Pauls in the Great Fire of 1666, and Coventry in the 2nd World War. St. Pauls was rebuilt by Sir Christopher Wren, and Coventry in modern style, in the post-war period.

Including the two re-built, only five of Britain's Cathedrals were erected after the 300 years linking the Middle Ages with the Elizabethan period.

There they stand — giant Churches of amazing beauty and symmetry, filled with exquisite carving and the most delicate fluted arches. With all the technical knowledge and mechanisation of our period, there is no 'know how' in the 20th Century capable of achieving what our ancestors accomplished with the hand tools of their period.

WORK OR LEISURE?

Even more astounding, they were built without pay, as a form of consecrated leisure activity. There were no tenders, contracts, mortgages, over-time strikes or union confrontations.

How did they do it? One would suppose that far more effort was required to provide food, clothing and shelter than today. What time would such communities have for the intricacies and detail involved in building such beautiful cathedrals?

Many will be amazed to learn that there was, contrary to general belief, a great deal of leisure time. Thorold Rogers, Professor of Political Economy at Oxford University in the middle of the 19th Century, wrote: "At that time (i.e. the Middle Ages) a labourer could provide all the necessities for his family for a year by working 14 weeks."

Lord Leverhume, a prominent figure in the "Industrial Partnership Movement" of the 18th Century, wrote: "The men of the 15th Century were very well paid."

Sombart, in his study of agricultural conditions in Central Europe in the 14th Century, "Found hundreds of communities which averaged from 160 to 180 holidays a year".

THE LAWS OF ENGLAND

Fortescue, appointed Lord High Chancellor by Henry VI, in his book *Le Laudibus Legum Anglicue* (Praise the Laws of England) said: "The King cannot alter the laws, or make new ones, without the express consent of the whole people in parliament assembled. Every inhabitant is at his liberty fully to use and enjoy whatever his farm produceth, the fruits of the earth, the increase of his flocks and the like. All the improvements he makes, whether by his own proper industry, or of those he retains in his service, are his own, to use and enjoy without the let, interruption or denial of any. If he be in any wise injured, or oppressed, he shall have his amends and satisfaction against the party offending. Hence it is the inhabitants are rich in gold, unless at certain times upon a religious score, and by way of doing penance. They are fed in great abundance with all sorts of flesh and fish, of which they have plenty everywhere; they are clothed throughout with good woollens; their bedding and other furniture in their houses are of wool, and that in great score. They are also well provided with all sorts of household goods and necessary implements for husbandry. Everyone, according to his rank, hath all things which conduce to make life easy and happy."

MAGNA CARTA

It was in this period that the mighty Magna Carta was written; establishing the profound truth that the individual leases his life from God, sooner than Caesar or the State. Perhaps a Frenchman, Emile Lousse, Professor of History at the University of Louvain in 1955, best sums up what many Englishmen have forgotten:

"What touches all should be approved of by all. The free man must also be protected in the peaceful enjoyment of his goods. He cannot be deprived of them, without his prior consent, even by the indirect method of excessive taxation or offensive war abroad. His person and his property, including his home, are inviolable. The famous Chapter 39 of the English Great Charter sums all this up for us."

MONASTIC LIFE

The monasteries were the focal point of a deep spiritual ethos that pervaded the land. Cobbett, in his *History of the Reformation*, records that often 100,000 pilgrims at a time journeyed to Canterbury. Besides the great Cathedrals, there was a parish Church to every four square miles throughout the Kingdom. Turner, in the 2nd volume of his *History of England*, claimed: "No tyranny was ever established that was more unequivocally the creature of popular will, nor longer maintained by popular support; in no point did personal interest and public welfare more cordially unite than in the encouragement of the monasteries."

The Precosium of Bishop Fleetwood gave an idea of current prices at the time:

	£	s	d
A pair of shoes	0	0	4
Russet broadcloth, the yard	0	1	1
A stall-fed ox	1	4	0
A grass-fed ox	0	16	0
A fat sheep unshorn	0	1	8
A fat sheep shorn	0	1	2
A fat hog 2 yrs old	0	3	4
A fat goose	0	0	2½
Ale the gallon, by Proclamation	0	0	1
Wheat, the Quarter	0	3	4
White wine, the gallon	0	0	6
Red wine	0	0	4

THE JUST PRICE

Prices varied little, and often fell in times of plenty. G.N. Clark, in his history *The Wealth of England from 1496 to 1760*, gives this picture of prices at the end of the Middle Ages:

"Conscious planning played a very modest part in the economy of this time. In the main the Church, the King and his servants, the municipalities, or the guilds used their limited power of social control, not to impose economic plans, but merely to prevent breaches of traditional rules and standards . . . There was a certain stock of economic ideas. They were good ideas, though they were simple and general. Like most systematic thought at the time, these ideas were a branch of a comprehensive interpretation of the whole universe. The Church was the custodian of this interpretation, although laymen wrote pamphlets on commercial policy. The main doctrines had to do with economic justice, the principles of fair dealing. There was the doctrine that in all transactions a just price ought to be paid. This might be explained so as to mean very little more than that a seller committed a sin if he took more than the correct price, the market price; but it was often explained so as to condemn something more than simple cheating. If it penetrated a little into economic analysis, it meant that the market price itself ought to be just, and that meant, roughly speaking, that it ought to depend on the cost of production and not on unfair competition or on the power of a monopolist. There was one special sphere in which the doctrine of a just price took a form very natural in a peasant society: in the sphere of finance it took the form of condemning usury. There were texts in Scripture and in Aristotle which seemed to mean that all loans should be made without interest; and this was the official theory . . ."

Indeed, Magna Carta had much to say about the evils of usury, and sought to protect the property of the widow, the weak and the helpless from the money-lenders.

Thus it was that the fiery 19th Century historian William Cobbett, after visiting Winchester Cathedral and marvelling at its beauty, told his son: "That building was made when there were no poor wretches in England called paupers; when there were no poor rates; when every labouring man in England was clothed in good woollen cloth; and when all had plenty of meat and bread and beer." (Recorded in Cobbett's *Rural Rides*).

CULTURAL ACTIVITY

Thus we have a picture of a well-fed, prosperous community, working commercially or for gain about one-third of each year, and with, as Sombart says, "160-180 holidays a year".

It was a period which produced an explosion of cultural advancement. It was in this period that our parliamentary system was born; that we received the great Magna Carta; trial by jury; the independent judiciary; the offices of sheriff and justices of the peace; and, of course, the great Cathedrals.

It was a period where the function and value of private property was well understood and protected. Once again, in Cobbett's words, "You may trust the word freedom as long as you please; but at last it comes to quiet enjoyment of your property, or it comes to nothing.

It was a period which men were pleased to call "Merry Englande".

THE GOTHIC STYLE

It was in France that the first examples of Gothic architecture could be seen. In Paris the magnificent Notre Dame was commenced in 1163, and throughout France the creative explosion followed — with names like Beauvais, Laon, Amiens, Reims, Chartres, Bourges. Each was different to the other — even to the stone used. Notre-Dame is white, Strasbourg pink, Reims bright yellow, Chartres a bluish-grey.

In each there is an awe-inspiring impression of space and light when entering. Delicate arches leap to meet the carved vaults high above. The problems encountered in Saxon times regarding narrow roof spans, which had caused much trouble, were overcome by the development of the "ribbed vault" — a discovery which showed that a pointed arch will support far greater loads than the round arches used by the Romans, or the limited wooden beams of the Saxons.

Crossed arches became ribs able to support roofing structures of greater width, and with their flowering sections brought symmetry and lightness as a further enhancement. The first of all Gothic cathedrals, Saint-Denis, in Paris set the example which others enthusiastically followed. As the choir of Saint-Denis was completed in 1144, the Abbe Suger exclaimed that "a wondrous and unbroken light pervaded the sanctuary!"

And this was the whole revelation of the Gothic period — light. Was not the Christ the Light of the World? And did not men pray "Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee O Lord"? The fervour which this new style attracted was surely a light indeed.

VOLUNTARY EFFORT

Historians of the period tell us how the whole community joined in the task of building. Thousands worked to erect Chartres, often harnessing themselves to carts that carried blocks of stone to the construction site, singing hymns as they toiled. Others donated gold and jewels. Thus, Chartres was built in less than 40 years, with an average of 250 workmen right through that period. Others took longer, requiring generations of fund-raising and labour.

The architects, rather than the primitive yokels often depicted today, were master craftsmen and men of great learning. Their techniques for calculating the stresses and strains, the loads to be carried and the geometrical form of their new style is unknown. These techniques, placing the colossal weight on the uniquely shaped pillars, allowed the use of light as never before.

COLOURS

This in turn allowed another set of craftsmen a scope they had never had previously — the makers of coloured glass windows. A riot of beautiful colours filled the naves and choirs, and illuminated the intricately carved altars. The glaziers set up their kilns at the cathedral sites, and plied their craft — mixing mineral pigments into the hot liquid mass before it hardened. Thousands of pieces of glass, seldom larger than a hand, were joined by thin strips of lead into designs and pictures, capturing in colour the gospel, the acts and the miracles of Scripture.

And in fact, since many were unable to read, the Cathedrals became "living scriptures", the Bible story being captured in the radiant colours of the stained glass windows, and the beautifully carved gargoyles and stone figures still seen today.

ENGLAND FOLLOWS

Hardly had the Gothic style developed in France, before it was taken up by the "Ecclesiastica Anglicana". With the same craft and diligence, the same voluntary effort, the great English Cathedrals were commenced, and the spires and towers pierced towards the heavens. The great names are well known — Canterbury, of course, and York; Durham and Exeter; Lincoln and Wells; Winchester and Ely; Oxford and St. Albans; and so the names roll off the tongue; each magnificent and unique. A variety of original design was captured in the disciplined dignity of those great buildings, and then spilled over into the whole range of architecture — Corn Exchanges, Guildhalls and even the cottages and mansions of the time.

The faith of the period did not confine itself to building churches and cathedrals. This was the period when the first of the Public Schools were founded, and in each the notion of "Christian education" was the first priority. Both Winchester College and Westminster School make claim to being the first — but whichever is right, they were quickly followed by others — Eton, Harrow, Malborough, Rugby. Winchester was founded by a Parish Priest — William of Wykeham, who also endowed a College at Oxford, and coined Winchester's famous motto "Manners Makyth Man".

And all without debt or usury, which was banned in the great Magna Carta.

WHAT OF TODAY?

What would they think of the British people in the 20th Century, those fervent builders of the Gothic period? How would they view the concrete petrol stations and the Coca-Cola signs? What would they think of the enormous crowds worshipping the gods of football, or the pop idols? Their crowds in those days went a different way —

"And specially from every shires ende

Of Engelonde to Canterbury they wende

The holy blisful martyr for to seeke

That them hath holpen whan that they were seeke."

But the great Cathedrals still stand. Perhaps in Britain's hour of need they will once again become the focal point of spiritual fervour. Perhaps the story of how they were built, and the economic climate which freed men to "labour for love" will challenge the modern preoccupation with the "balance of payments" and progressive taxation.

For there is a glory about those Cathedrals which transcends time.

The above article has been reproduced photographically from the December 1983 issue of 'The Rock' a Canadian 'Journal for Anglican Traditionalists'.