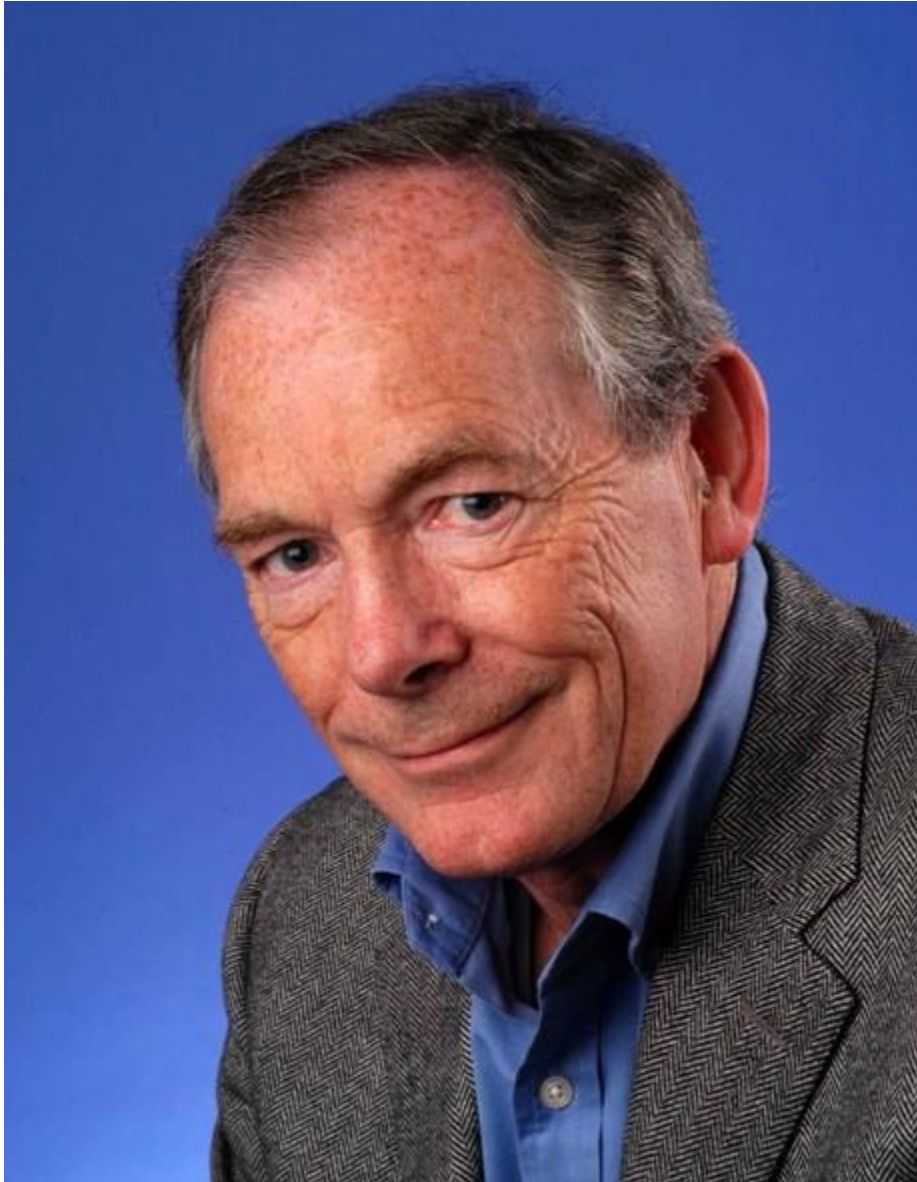


## Writer's dash from spire to cloister

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Simon Jenkins read up on cathedrals, then visited them all. He talks to *Sarah Meyrick* about his responses



Simon Jenkins: journalist son of a Nonconformist divine, the Revd Dr Daniel Jenkins

SEVENTEEN years after producing his bestseller *England's Thousand Best Churches*, Sir Simon Jenkins is back with a companion volume on cathedrals. *England's Cathedrals* is a collection of essays on 42 Anglican diocesan cathedrals, plus Westminster Abbey and a handful ("the most outstanding") of the 19 Roman Catholic cathedrals in England.

The result is the perfect Christmas present for the church-crawler: a beautiful, glossy, coffee-table book, illustrated with the most sumptuous photographs. The front cover offers a splendidly inviting glimpse into the cloisters at Gloucester Cathedral, and the back the mysterious image of an Anthony Gormley sculpture contemplating the water in his hands in the flooded crypt of Winchester.

So why cathedrals? Jenkins laughs. “My publisher asked me,” he admits. “To begin with, I thought, no, I’m snobbish about cathedrals. They’re smart, nice places. They can look after themselves. But then I started looking at them. A lot of them I knew, of course, but not all. It became an unfolding story.”

That unfolding story took him two years of dashing around the country. He visited each cathedral anonymously, preferring simply to “wander in”, as he had when researching his book on parish churches. He dispensed with the services of cathedral guides. “Mainly because I was always in a rush,” he says. “Everything you get on a guided tour you can usually get from a guidebook. And it’s far quicker on your own.”

Instead, he chose to do some intensive research and reading beforehand, and then visited in person to check his own emotions. “I didn’t want to do a Pevsner,” he says. “It was about how I responded, and it was mostly delightful.”

DEANS will, no doubt, rush to check how Jenkins has rated their particular cathedral, and feel miffed if they disagree with his verdict. But Jenkins emphasises that his approach is intentionally personal. “I have awarded stars to cathedrals with mixed emotions,” he writes in the preface. “I regard each of the medieval cathedrals as outstanding in its own way, and ranking them panders to the unfortunate cult of the league table.

“But stars are undeniably popular and they also help answer the question that has bombarded me since I embarked on the book. A ruling obsession of all cathedral enthusiasts is, ‘Which is your favourite cathedral?’”

The obvious answer, that “they all are,” will not suffice, he says; hence the stars.

I ask him, instead, what the greatest surprises of his cathedral tour turned out to be. “It was the things I saw that I didn’t know were there,” he says. “I had never lain under the great Octagon at Ely, for example. Or seen the leaves of Southwell — and they are sensational: so sensational that Pevsner wrote a whole book about them. Again, there were the kings on the front of Exeter.”

He found that, in some instances, he revised his former opinions. “I used to hate Liverpool Anglican Cathedral. Now I admire it very much. Thinking about it, I should probably have given it an extra star. And Westminster Roman Catholic Cathedral is sensational, even if it is incomplete.”

Were there any disappointments? “The more I visited St Paul’s and Westminster Abbey, the more I liked Westminster,” he says. He laughs again. “Once you’ve got over the splendour of St Paul’s, it’s awfully pompous, whereas Westminster Abbey is wonderfully chaotic. There is artistry in every corner. The more you delve, the more fascinating it is.” (In the book he describes the abbey as “a batty old woman cackling over her mementoes in the nation’s attic”.)

He also confesses to being disappointed by Salisbury. “Once you’ve got over the spectacle, it’s curiously bloodless.” (“We arrive exhilarated but leave with a puzzled frown,” he writes.)

HE BELIEVES that each cathedral has its unique character and personality, but admits that his judgements are personal. “Every single one is different, and the more I did it, the more I started comparing them. But [the book] cannot not be personal to me.”

Canterbury he describes as “the noblest church in England”. He is in awe of its status as a “history book in stone”, but finds its aloof beauty hard to love. Beneath Canterbury are his elder statesmen: “mighty Durham, austere Winchester, and eccentric Westminster”. His “three graces” are Ely, Lincoln, and Wells. He admits that, if forced to choose, he would say that Wells was most often at the top of his personal list.

The book has an accessible but thorough introduction on the history of England, and how that is reflected in the building and development of its cathedrals; and a couple of pages on how to read a cathedral if you visit. I ask who he thinks the book is primarily for. “Not the specialist, but a general reader,” he says. And it is not really intended to be a guidebook.

We reflect on the weight of the book: like *England’s Thousand Best Churches*, it is large and heavy. Interestingly, the paperback edition, designed to be more portable, did not sell particularly well. “It’s not really designed for carting about,” he says of *Cathedrals*. “The entries are written in celebration of cathedrals, to be read as essays, *in absentia*.”

He hopes to draw readers’ attention to the sort of details they might not have noticed before. “I’m fascinated by cloisters. They are the most magical spaces in cathedrals, but people tend to take a peek and then move on.”

I WONDER how Jenkins, a distinguished political journalist who has edited both the *Evening Standard* and *The Times*, first became interested in architecture, and particularly churches. The answer turns out to be John Betjeman.

“In one of my first journalistic jobs, I wrote about buildings and covered planning matters for the *Evening Standard*. I think there was a competition for some building or other that he [Betjeman] was judging. He was fairly unsteady on his feet by then; so I drove him around. We went on two or three dozen trips, and it fired my interest. His comments on Pevsner and [Alec] Clifton Taylor fascinated me. Dear old Betjeman.”

Betjeman had written the introduction to a book on churches, where the chapters were supplied by others, and, when he died, Penguin approached Jenkins to take on the project. “They said, ‘Why don’t you go and look at the Betjeman churches? We don’t think the entries are very good.’ It became a hobby, and I wrote the *Thousand Best Churches*.”

Much as he loves churches, he has been outspoken about the need to close them. Last month, he used his weekly *Guardian* column to write a typically impassioned plea for the parish churches to be given away. Two thousand medieval churches in England have fewer than ten worshippers, and 8000 more can barely muster 20, he argues. More than 900 churches are on the English Heritage “at risk” register. The answer is to give them to the community or local trusts.

“I just think it’s completely ridiculous,” he says. “Half of these buildings are disused. Twelve people attending on alternate Sundays is disuse. You’ve got to be more imaginative. You can’t pull them down, but it’s completely ridiculous to retain them for two per cent of the community.”

IS HE optimistic that change will come about? “The Church is the most conservative institution in Britain,” he says. “Every single conversation is about getting more people into church or that

awful phrase, 'reaching out'. It's very difficult to get the Church of England to admit that half its capacity is a failure."

His forthright views inevitably annoy many in the Church. Some readers of his *Thousand Best Churches* felt that Jenkins failed to appreciate what churches were for. He addresses this head on in the new book. "I am often challenged on how far I have respected the true purpose of a cathedral," he writes. "Cathedrals were, after all, built expressly for believers to use. I can only hope that this is enhanced by my appreciation of these majestic works of art and human enterprise."

It is important to remember, he argues, that a visit to a cathedral can carry different meanings for different people.

And this is a key point that he is keen to make. In contrast to parish churches, the figures suggest that cathedrals are thriving. "Even those parish churches which have become cathedrals, like Blackburn, Portsmouth, St Albans, are humming with life. In St Albans there's not a spare foot where someone isn't doing something."

Since the Millennium, cathedrals have further diversified their activities, becoming art galleries and concert halls, theatres, and conference venues, alongside the provision of traditional worship.

"I'm fascinated by the fact that, while parish churches continue their remorseless decline, since 2000 cathedrals have started to increase in popularity," he says. "And that's not just tourists, but worshippers. What on earth is going on here?"

The explanation, he believes, is two-fold. "For one thing, tourism is booming, and cathedrals are big tourism. They ought all to be charging. Those who do are not dependent on subsidy.

"Secondly, cathedrals are beautiful places with lovely music. People like going to services in cathedrals for that, and the anonymity. It's the point that [the sociologist] Grace Davie makes. A cathedral makes no demands on visitors. There's no hugging or kissing or shaking hands. Not everyone wants to be drawn into a community."

IN CONTRAST with parish churches, there is no reason for cathedrals not to be run as going concerns. "I don't think cathedrals are a problem," he says. "All the great old cathedrals raise the money easily. They have cohorts of Friends, and, on the whole, you can draw on local talent and expertise. It's like the National Trust. You've got a volunteer army second to none. You have lay canons at cathedrals who are bankers and stockbrokers, and they can be highly profitable."

Jenkins is well known for being a non-believer — a position he was quite clear on by the time he went up to Oxford to read PPE. His father was a theologian (Professor of Divinity at Princeton) and a Congregationalist, later United Reformed Church, minister. "I was brought up listening to the Bible and singing hymns," he says. "My father was upset I was so fascinated by Anglican churches. He said, 'It's one thing being an atheist, but you can't even write about chapels. . .'"

He tells a story about a reception for *England's Thousand Best Churches*, attended by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey. "He said to me: 'You have been to more churches than I have; does none of it rub off?' And I replied: 'You lot didn't rub off, but something did.'

“What rubbed off was a sense of continuity. For a thousand years, people went to these churches and drew comfort from them. I find this passage of time, the reality of their faith, profoundly moving.”

I ask him what’s next, thinking that perhaps he will write a book on castles. “Railway stations,” he says, and laughs again. His heart was not in the project, to begin with. “My heart did sink when the publisher suggested it. Even when you walk into St Pancras or York stations . . . well, it’s not Westminster Abbey. But I’ve become absolutely fascinated by them.”

*England’s Cathedrals* by *Simon Jenkins* is published by *Little, Brown*. *Review by William Whyte* [here](#).