

# CHURCH TREASURES DISCUSSION AND VISIT TO LICHFIELD

8th September 2001

As well as the Church treasures discussion Peter Stone had organised three visits to introduce members to Lichfield. Looking back on the day, it was very much one of personalities – Saint Chad, Bishops Walter de Langton and Hacket, and two 18th century Lichfield worthies, Erasmus Darwin and Samuel Johnson.

Our first visit was to the Cathedral where we were met by two very knowledgeable Cathedral guides. We divided into two groups for an architectural and historical tour of the Cathedral. The great Cathedral of today is a direct result of the appointment of Chad as Bishop of the Mercians in 669. He had been a pupil of St Aidan at Lindisfarne and was renowned for his godliness. Following his appointment he moved the centre of the See from Repton to Lichfield. It was to become the third largest English diocese in the Middle Ages and the miracles that took place at St. Chad's tomb established Lichfield as an important centre for pilgrimage, making it necessary to build a Norman cathedral to replace the Saxon chapel which had housed the tomb, and then in the 13th and 14th centuries the larger Gothic Cathedral, the only English cathedral with three spires. Bishop Walter de Langton (1296-1321) was one of the most important of the medieval 'building' bishops; his work included a new Lady Chapel after the design of Sainte Chapelle in Paris, a new Bishop's Palace in the Close, a new shrine for the tomb of St Chad, reputed to have cost £5000, and walling the Close. Ironically this last work contributed to extensive damage to the medieval cathedral in the 17th century; the walled Close and massive gateways to the south and west making an ideal fortress for both Royalists and Parliamentarians. There were three sieges of the Cathedral and Close during the Civil War, the central spire was bombarded and fell into the Cathedral, tombs were looted, statues and monuments defaced. The Cathedral suffered more than any other in England and much of it remained open to the elements until the appointment of Bishop Hacket at the Restoration. He spent the next six years restoring the Cathedral and rebuilding the Bishops Palace using much of his own money and raising sponsorship. 18th century work by Wyatt saved the nave by replacing 500 tons of stone from the vaulting with lath and plaster, and major restoration work by George Gilbert Scott during most of the second half of the 19th century concludes the architectural history of the Cathedral. With such a history it is hardly surprising that no medieval furniture survives. Indeed little 17th century furniture survives with the exception of the three remaining seats from the post 1660s choirstalls. Evans, an uncle of George Eliot, carved the Victorian choirstalls. The magnificent Victorian bronze, brass and iron choirscreen by Skidmore is one of the treasures of the Cathedral.

In the afternoon we visited 'Darwin House' on the edge of the Cathedral Close, home to Erasmus Darwin from 1757 to 1781 which was recently opened as a centre to publicise the work of Darwin and the Lunar Society. Although little original furniture remains, videos and interactive computers deal with the life of Darwin and the work of the Society. Erasmus was a

medical doctor by training but also a physicist, chemist, geologist, meteorologist and evolutionary biologist (grandfather of Charles). He was a prolific inventor, friend of Boulton and Watt and the chief energizer of the Lunar Society. In the 1790s he even became the most famous poet of the day with his great evolutionary poem *Botanic Garden*. Most of the science it contains was far ahead of its time and his message is still electric. His unsentimental vision of the world

*Air, earth and ocean, to astonish'd day*

*One scene of blood, one mighty tomb display!*

*From Hunger's arms the shafts of Death are hurl'd*

*And one great Slaughter-house the warring world*

is tempered by the humanist motto inscribed on the Temple of Nature

*In Life's disastrous scene to others do*

*What you would wish by others done to you.*

He was elected a fellow of the Royal Society in 1761, the first of five generations of Darwins to be Fellows of the Society, from then until 1962. Take a few minutes to read '*Erasmus Darwin 1731-1802, Master of Interdisciplinary Science*' by Dr Desmond King-Hele FRS in *The Interdisciplinary Science Review Vol 10 pp170-191* (1985). A reprint is available from the Darwin Centre (01543 306260, for £1.50 plus p&p. Marvel and be grateful.

Our final visit of the day was to Samuel Johnson's birthplace, an early 18th century town house overlooking the Market Place. His father was a bookseller; the front room on the ground floor is again a bookshop and the museum includes a display of bookbinding. We were greeted by Annette French, the Museums and Heritage Officer, who guided us around the house which includes displays on Johnson and his family and local history. The furniture includes Johnson's travelling writing desk, a Gainsborough chair from his London home in Bolt Court and a miniature longcase clock c.1770 by John Stevenson of Stafford. The house is also a centre for research and contains a library of Johnson's works and related material. The visit was a fitting end to a real introduction to Lichfield and our thanks are due to Peter and Anne Stone for their immaculate arrangements and to all our guides during the day.

*Polly Legg*