

In the year 909 Dunstan, future Archbishop of Canterbury, was born in the West Country. As Abbot of Glastonbury he reformed monasticism. Later, as scholar, artist, craftsman, musician, leader and indeed politician, he was a powerful influence on the tenth century church.

The great King Alfred had died ten years before. The Danish threat had not gone away, but the kingdom was stronger and self-confident. It was a time of consolidation and flowering in the Church.

By the end of the tenth century we can get a snapshot picture of what the church was like.

*Parishes* were well established as ecclesiastical units. The local Church was normally the property of the lord. Churches had differing status, being (as now!) either *principales* or *mediocres*.

*Priests*, described as “altar thegns”, were often local men with rudimentary education, simple in taste. A good few still married, despite the strictures of the reforming Saint Dunstan.

*People* were instructed to observe the Lord’s day from Saturday lunchtime till Monday breakfast. They were encouraged to make their communion regularly (including each Sunday of Lent) and received communion in both kinds, the wine through a silver or ivory straw. And “no man to take the housel after he hath broke his fast”.

Children were given careful and regular instruction. Teaching resources included books of homilies. The *Blickling Homilies*, for instance, were written to prepare everyone for the end of the world in 1000.

Dunstan and other leaders set high standards of reform, worship and Christian life. Clearly forms of paganism and heathen practices persisted, for laws of the time forbid “the worship of fountains, necromancy, auguries and enchantments, soothsaying and legerdemain” or resorting “to special stones and trees as holy places.”

The very things that had worried Saint Boniface two hundred years before were still prevalent. Apostle of Germany, Boniface had grown up in mid Devon and was well aware of the *nymets*, the woodhenges around sacred pools which formed the holy places of the old religion.

To this day local names recall them: Kings Nympton, Nymet Tracey, George Nympton and so on. In cutting down Thor’s Oak at Geismar in Germany, Boniface was deliberately confronting the old religion with the new.

His stern faith and abiding love for the English kept him anxious for the church that had nurtured him.

He sent a request to King Aethelherd for a monastery to be founded at the place called *Creddie*. Thus his birthplace is construed to be Crediton. In 739 a minster was established in Crediton and gifted to Forthere, Bishop of Sherborne.

The whole of the West Country was part of the Diocese of Sherborne and so it remained until 909. At that time it was split into county dioceses: Wells for Somerset, Crediton for Devon, St. Germans for Cornwall.

#### *Why Crediton rather than Exeter?*

First, surely, because of the popular cult of Boniface. Second it stood at the centre of Devon, an important crossroads. Third, perhaps because the rich manor and monastic lands could fund a bishopric. Lastly, the bishop’s seat in Saxon times was not necessarily in the main centre of population or the County town.

So for 150 years the see was based at Crediton. That it was a significant and influential holding is clear, as we know that Ethelred the Unready’s son, Alfwold, held the see at the turn of the millennium. (The good bishop kept a large galley manned by slaves at Topsham to row him around the diocese).

About 1040 the dioceses of Cornwall and Crediton were united under Bishop Lyfing of Crediton and then in 1050, his successor Leofric, petitioned King Edward the Confessor and Pope Leo IX to transfer the see to Exeter.

#### *Why Exeter rather than Crediton?*

Since 50 AD when *Isca Dumnonii* was founded by the Romans as their westernmost station, it had been the regional capital. It was a walled city and had already withstood Viking raids. It had a well-established and flourishing Benedictine house and Minster. It was also a port.

So it was that Leofric, last bishop of Crediton and first bishop of Exeter was enthroned in a splendid ceremony in Exeter’s Minster Church. Edward the Confessor and his beautiful young Queen Eadgyth acting as supporters.

It is intriguing to learn from William of Malmesbury that even at this date, nearly four hundred years after the Synod of Whitby, two integrities existed in Exeter.

St Sidwell’s was a Saxon Church, following the mainstream Roman rite, whilst St. Petroc’s followed the Celtic rite.

A British bishop, we believe, remained embedded in a monastic foundation at Par in Cornwall even as lands around Padstow funded the Crediton bishops.

Eleven hundred years on, the great cruciform Collegiate Church in Crediton reflects in its stones the reddish purple of the Devon earth; and the ravishing wedding cake that is Exeter Cathedral sits proud on its hill in the new, open cityscape.

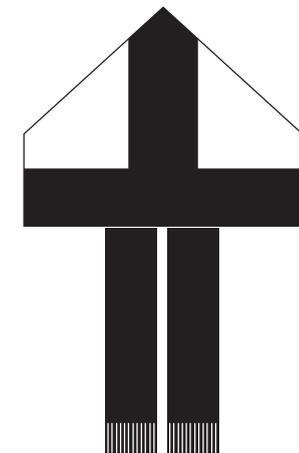
These are the physical signs of a rich and living heritage encompassing British, Roman, Saxon and Norman Christians. And us.

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| Bishop         | a senior Christian cleric in charge of spiritual life and administration of a particular region<br><i>Greek</i> episkopos 'overseer' from Skopus 'watcher' (Source of English 'scope') |
| Bishopric      | the area that a bishop governs<br><i>Old English</i> rice 'realm, power'   |
| See            | similar meaning to above<br><i>Latin</i> sedere 'to sit'   |
| Diocese        | the churches that are under the authority of one bishop, or the district containing those churches.<br><i>Greek</i> diokesis 'administration' (of a household, from oikos 'house')     |
| Cathedral      | a principal church containing the bishop's seat or throne<br><i>Greek</i> Kathedra from Kata 'down' and hedra 'seat'   |
| Mitre          | a bishop's tall pointed hat creased across the top, symbolising the cloven tongues of Pentecost via <i>Greek</i> and <i>Latin</i> 'belt, turban' but of uncertain origin.              |
| Crosier        | a staff with a hooked end like a shepherd's crook symbolising bishops' role of care for their congregations as shepherds tend flocks   |
| Pectoral Cross | a cross worn on the bishop's breast<br><i>Latin</i> pectorale 'breastplate'  |



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## The Bishopric *of* Devon



Words by Anthony Geering  
Prebendary of Exeter Cathedral  
Rector of Crediton 1986 - 2001

Graphic Design by James Hambly  
[www.jameshambly.com](http://www.jameshambly.com)