

EDITORS' NOTE

Minsters and Cathedrals

“What is the difference between a minster and a cathedral?” is a question often asked. Here is an answer: A minster can be a cathedral, for example York Minster or Southwell Minster, but a cathedral does not have to be a minster. What distinguishes a cathedral is that it has a *cathedra*, the throne that the bishop notionally sits upon.

The derivation of “minster” is from the Latin *monasterium* or religious community, which was translated into Old English as *mynster* and became “minster” in modern spelling. The word usage, however, became confused as after 900, historians used “monastery” to describe communities of monks and “minster” for those of non-monastic (secular) clergy.

In Winchester, the Old and New Minsters were populated by secular clergy until 965 when Bishop Aethelwold drove them out at the points of swords and replaced them with monks who lived by the Rule of Benedict. What then developed was a monastic cathedral and the Priory of St Swithun. Monastic cathedrals were an English phenomenon as the rest of Europe separated cathedrals from monasteries.

There were probably 300 to 400 minsters in England by 1000. In the eleventh century many were converted back into monasteries or became parish churches. Here in Winchester the Old Minster gradually became a cathedral with a monastery, which was surrounded by parish churches that served lay people.

In the nineteenth century, Ripon Minster and Southwell Minster were elevated to cathedrals, with Southwell retaining “Minster” in its name. In the past twenty-five years, sixteen large parish churches have been elevated to minster status, an honorific title. Minster is also used in place names – Axminster, Kidderminster, Leominster, Wimborne Minster – even though the church has gone or is of less importance.

- Derived from Nicholas Orme’s *Going to Church in Medieval England* (London, 2021).

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