



THE ARCHBISHOP  
OF YORK

*The Evensong service commemorating the 40th anniversary of the South Transept fire takes place on Tuesday 9 July at 5.00pm at York Minster.*

Archbishop Stephen writes in today's [Yorkshire Post](#) as the anniversary of the fire at York Minster in 1984 approaches.

I first visited York Minster in August 1984. Just married, and with barely two halfpennies to rub together, my wife and I were on our honeymoon in Yorkshire – a portend of things to come. She was born here, so had deep rooted associations and affections. I had never been before.

That first week in August 1984 was only a month after the devastating fire which all but destroyed the south transept, so my first visit was an experience of both the astonishing wonder of this incredible building, but also the shock of how easily the apparent permanence of human achievement, even things built to the glory of God, and even those that have been standing for centuries, can be swept away.

Somewhere, I've got a photograph of me standing outside the Minster on that day, but I can't seem to find it.

Therefore, as I prepare to celebrate forty years of marriage, we in York and Yorkshire - and probably across the world as well, since this is such a very much-loved building - prepare to remember the 40th anniversary of the shock and horror of that day.

Of course, if you don't remember the York Minster fire - if you're under 40, or if you visit the Minster today - you won't be aware of what happened. The south transept was quickly, skilfully and lovingly restored. At York Minster we are proud of the craft skills, ingenuity, creativity, and dedication that made this building in the first place and are still alive today. Indeed, you need only look at the Minster's investment in a new Centre of Excellence for Heritage Craft Skills and Estate Management, due to open this autumn, to begin to understand how the Minster is responding to today's challenges of climate change, increased rainfall and the pressing need to get to net zero carbon emissions. Thankfully, we have not been visited by fire or flood in the past forty years, but the job of renovating, restoring and, in some cases, re-creating the building goes on every day.

Today the greatest natural threat to the magnificent Minster is climate change and the damage to our stone and medieval glass. The Minster is leading the charge on decarbonising the Precinct through pioneering retrofit and sharing best practice with its global network of cathedrals and heritage estates. By the end of the year, the Minster will be producing a third of its energy requirements on site through renewable technologies.

In November 2022, King Charles III visited York to unveil the statue of his Mother, the late Queen Elizabeth II, and as part of the development of the precinct and the Cathedral environment a new square at the west front of the Minster will be created and named Queen Elizabeth Square over which the magnificent statue, created by the York Minster stonemasons will look for many centuries to come.

In this way, and even down to small details like the Blue Peter competition to design six of the new roof bosses for the restoration, church

buildings are a living thing. Continually changing and evolving as the Minster Precinct has done for the past 2000 years.

Two of the winning designs were of a man on the moon and of a starving Ethiopian child. Both these things tell us something about the world in 1984, our needs and our aspirations.

Living things remain the same by changing.

Each generation needs to lovingly provide for the upkeep and preservation of our historic buildings. But, each generation also makes its mark. And when lightning strikes or foundations give away, buildings have to be restored. In that restoration, what is old is replaced, but sometimes it is also reimagined so that the new building is continuous with what was there before, but now bears the stamp of a new generation.

So, the ancient purpose of York Minster, in the buildings that predated this one and right up until the present day, is that it is a place of worship, witness and welcome; a house of prayer, built to the glory of God and for the people of York and the Province of York, which spans the whole of the north of England.

It is a place where the gospel of Jesus Christ is known and shared. Worship and witness takes place every day. Written in stone and glass, and in all the other things inside the building that enable this worship, witness and welcome to take place, like the rings of a tree showing its age, so the building tells the story of the centuries in which it has been inhabited for these holy purposes.

And today, when we venture inside the building, be it for the first time or the 500th time, we are filled with awe.

We turn to the west and see inside the stained-glass window what is known as the heart of Yorkshire.

We travel to the east of the building and see the great medieval masterpiece which tells the story of creation and the story of the last things in a glorious, encyclopaedic and kaleidoscopic tapestry of glass the size of a tennis court, recently conserved and restored to its 1408 glory.

Who needs the Sistine chapel, when you have the East window at York Minster?

But for me, as the 98th Archbishop of York, there is one thing I tend to turn to in my many visits to the Minster, and especially in those precious times when I find I am alone in the building, able to pray quietly, or simply walk around its spacious magnificence.

In the choir is the 'cathedra' where the Archbishop sits. It is not particularly beautiful, nor am I entirely comfortable with its size and splendour. It looks a bit like a throne. Or maybe a seat of judgement. But it is the piece of furniture which makes a church into a cathedral (it's where the name comes from). And although it does speak of authority and judgment, two aspects of the role of archbishop, I see other things as well. It is a seat of mercy, like the mercy seats we read about in the Bible. It is like a University Chair, a place for teaching. It is like 'the chair' meaning the one who chairs the meeting, whose job it is to convene and direct.

And because a cathedral itself is named after the chair inside it, then the cathedral itself as well as being a place of worship, witness and welcome, like every other church, is also called to be place of teaching, convening and gathering, to be the place for a whole region - and even a nation - where we can learn about the love of God in Jesus Christ and how we might live peaceably in the earth. It is a place where we can come with our confusions and sorrows and find understanding and mercy. It's what makes us new. It's what keeps us going.

The current building has been doing this since 1472. There has been a church on this site since 627 when Paulinus was the first Bishop of York.

As we remember the anniversary of the fire, let us also remember with thanksgiving the determination and labours of those who overcame this tragedy, and who through the centuries built and rebuilt this beloved building. Let us also remember those places around the world where much loved and much needed buildings are also destroyed, by so-called natural disaster or by human atrocity, be it Notre Dame in Paris, about to be reopened after its fire, or the Anglican Hospital in Gaza.

Our world needs the mercy and peace, the sense of awe which takes us beyond ourselves, and the truth about God that we are given in Jesus Christ. In the ever changing but constantly the same York Minster these precious things are preserved and proclaimed. Come what may.

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N Hilton-Scott, Chapter of York