

The Significance of Westminster Abbey



By Catherine Stines

Edward Rutherfurd's novel is full of information describing a two thousand year old story of a family's tale in one of the most beloved cities in today's world, London. The story begins with a young Celtic boy who has inherited traits that include webbed fingers and a white spot in his hair. London known as nation of immigrants, Rutherfurd uses this particular family as a example of such branching into Saxon Bulls and Carpenters, Viking Barnikels, Norman Silversleeves, Fleming and Flanders, Meredith's from Wales, the Protestant Penny family, Huguenots from France, and Scottish Forsyth's. (Logan) So as the meager Doggett's and the upper class Duckets expand, we discover this nation is one of many different classes and many different characters. Rutherfurd uses many different backdrops in his novel discussing historical landmarks such as the



Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's Cathedral, Buckingham Palace, Convents Garden, Royal Society of London, Twinings Tea Shop, Museum of London, West End, Soho, and Big Ben. The landmark I will be discussing into detail is Westminster Abbey and its true significance on London tradition and society.

Beginning as a legend, Westminster Abbey began as a shrine that was first founded in 616 on the present site today. In the 960s Saint Dunstan (the bishop of London) planted a community of

Benedictine monks there to work the area. (Westminster Abbey) A century after that event King Edward III decided that he was going to build a palace close to the shrine and create a new church dedicated to St. Peter. Being the oldest son of Ethelred II and Emma he was the second to last king of the Anglo-Saxon era. King Edwards's greatest achievement undoubtedly was the construction of a new cathedral, where virtually all-English monarchs from William the Conqueror onward would be crowned. (Britannia History) They determined that the cathedral should not be built directly in the city so they built it west of the city (hence "Westminster"). (Britannia History) On Christmas in 1065 the building was then consecrated into a church although its master planner could not attend due to illness coming into old age when the church was finally finished. (Britannia History) Rather than naming his grandson Edgar the next king he named Harold as his successor. (Britannia History) In his weak state many considered his decision erratic and not decided in the right mind. However with Harold's untimely death William the Conqueror took the throne just nine months later. (Britannia History) There is still some speculation to what kind of person King Edward actually was. After his death, he was certainly celebrated and held to high standards in many groups getting him the recognition to be canonized in 1161, however this event could have been viewed as a strictly political move. (Britannia History) A timid but aggressive man, his reputation for saintliness was flashy, possibly a facade perpetrated by the monks of Westminster in the twelfth century. (Britannia History) Although today many look back on him as a deeply religious man and a patient and peaceful ruler. No matter what man he truly was, he did create Westminster.

The Anglo Saxon period around London focused heavy on the religion of Christianity. In the London novel Rutherford shares that with an Anglo Saxon poem, “High on the hill in the sight of heaven,
Our lord was led and lifted up,
That willing warrior came while the lord wept;
And a terrible shadow shaded the sun,
For us He was broken and gave us His blood
King of all creation Christ of the Rood.” (Rutherford 146)

Rutherford explains the transition of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, “A little over a decade later, when both the kings of Kent and Essex were dead, their people revolted against the new religion (Christianity) and the bishops were forced to flee. But once the Roman Church had established a hold, it did not give up lightly. (Rutherford 162-163) Christianity was going to be spread through London whether the people wanted it to be the main religion or not and Westminster Abbey was a clear a symbol of that.

The next great contributor to the cathedral came in the Middle Ages due to King Henry III. The renovations he commissioned ultimately changed the look of Westminster forever and is what we mainly seeing when we visit it today. He took huge sums of money from his own palace and budget and put it all into Westminster. So in 1245 reconstruction began on the church rebuilding the entire church in the new Gothic style, intending it as a shrine to the memory of Edward the Confessor. The king began this project because he idolized the creator of the church, Edward. (Westminster Abbey) In this significant time of transition Rutherford makes clear implication in his book that possibly King Henry was spending too much of his money in the wrong place,

“Notwithstanding the huge sum raised by the Jews, or the pawning of the jewels that Henry had intended for St. Edward the Confessor’s sumptuous new shrine, he had run out of money. The magnificent eastern half of the church, the choir and transepts and a little bit of the nave rose splendidly, its soaring arches in the pointed Gothic style.”

(Rutherford 402) After Henry did run out of money that unfinished construction lasted unfinished for another century before it was completed. During the reign of King Richard II the project was finally completed under the supervision of Henry Yevele. (Sacred Destinations)

After the reconstruction, the abbey was with scholars and monks and was often employed in royal service for events. Henry VII added his own flair to the cathedral adding a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary in 1503 (known as the Henry VII Lady

Chapel). Henry VIII would later seize the

cathedral in 1534

because all

monasteries were

being dissolved

nationwide.

(Westminster Abbey)

However, the Abbey

had been used for

many events and

became a necessity to the throne, therefore the structure was saved from physical



destruction and eventually commissioned as a “Royal Peculiar” by Queen Elizabeth I. (Westminster Abbey) During the 1600’s however it suffered some damage due to Puritan iconoclasts, luckily it was protected by its symbolic importance to the city as a whole. (Westminster Abbey)

Then in 1722 and 1745 Sir Christopher Wren and Nicholas Hawksmoor built the Abbey’s two western towers making major renovations on the outside of the cathedral. (Sacred Destinations) They decided to construct the towers with original material to copy early examples of a Gothic Revival design. The last time Westminster was renovated was in the rebuilding and restoration that occurred in the 19th century under Sir George Gilbert Scott. (Sacred Destinations) It was at the Abbey that the first third of the King James Bible Old Testament and the last half of the New Testament were translated. (Sacred Destinations)

While Westminster was growing physically inside it was growing spiritually as well holding almost every coronation since William the Conqueror in 1066. (Nicholson) Before 1066 there was no specific location on where the ceremony would be held although when Edward the Confessor built it his plan did not include the Abbey to be such, however, Harold Godwinson, King Edwards immediate successor most likely had his crowning the following day was in the Abbey, therefore starting the tradition. (Nicholson)

The Abbey’s role as a coronation church influenced Henry III’s rebuilding of the church in the mid-thirteenth century where he wanted sufficient space for his own ceremony. The worshipping requirements of the community had to be reconciled with the need for a large space in where an assembly of people could witness the crowning of the

monarch. The plan of the Abbey copies the French coronation church, Reims Cathedral,



in placing the quire to the west of the crossing and transepts.

(Nicholson) This created a large space between the quire and the sanctuary suitable for the coronation ceremony.

(Westminster Abbey) At other times wooden screens across the transepts provided the enclosed quire required for monastic worship. In 1298, Edward ordered the construction of the Coronation Chair, which is used at every succeeding coronation.

(Westminster Abbey) From the thirteenth century the monarch made a formal progress from the Tower of London to the Palace of Westminster on the eve of the coronation.

(Nicholson) Then on the coronation day the ceremonies began in Westminster Hall and made its way to the Abbey for the coronation service itself. (Nicholson) These ceremonies however no longer take place. In the early 19th century coronation services started to be more of a personalized party rather than the church service themselves.



(Westminster Abbey) The coronation service traditionally follows a common pattern but many different monarchs made their ceremony unique to their values and beliefs. James II declined the procession from the City, and the preliminary ceremonies and banquet in Westminster Hall were abandoned after George IV's coronation in 1821. Instead, for the coronation of William IV in 1831, a temporary building was erected at the west end of the Abbey to provide space for the processions to form. (Nicholson) The ceremony traditionally given in Latin was given in a combination of Latin and English. Then on James I coronation the ceremony was held all in the English language. (Nicholson) For

instance, in 1689, a second coronation chair was made for the rare event of William III and Mary II sharing the throne as Joint monarchs. (Westminster Abbey) On King George III's coronation people ate their meal during the sermon and George IV's imitated an enormous theatrical event. (Nicholson) In contrast his successor, William IV, did not want to have a coronation at all, after some persuasion however his coronation is now largely known as 'the penny coronation' since such little money was spent on the event. (Westminster Abbey) Although Queen Victoria's coronation



brought the event into full swing again bring the event to more to a traditional ceremony. However the most shocking details to date is from the latest Queens coronation, who made it possible for the general public to witness the ceremony in its entirety for the first time. Most likely not many knew that they were witnessing a huge change in historical history. (Nicholson) These events in their entirety were only celebrated in one place, Westminster Abbey. (Westminster Abbey) Another significant part of Westminster

Abbey is its monuments and gravestones. Over 3,300 people are actually buried in the abbey

although there are only 600 monuments representing people succeeding to the highest level of their profession. Authors, scientist, musicians, religious figures, monarchs, and politicians are all represented in the cathedral. (Nicholson) Perhaps one of the most known monuments there is the one of Sir Isaac Newton's. (Westminster Abbey) One of the world's most influential mathematicians, physicists, and scientists of all time his monument is one of the cathedrals main attractions. Another famous area of the cathedral is "Poets' Corner" that can be found in the South Transept. (Westminster Abbey) A monument for Shakespeare, a grave for Dickens and many other prominent poets and writers can be found in this area of Westminster.



Overall, Westminster Abbey is not only was crucial to the life of the Doggett's and Duckets but it provides its own significant history that helps define London as a whole. As it goes through architectural transitions, inducts monarchs and is the burial place for many known figures around the world this cathedral is a place of significance.

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