The Formation of the Friends of Winchester Cathedral

By Tom Watson

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Introduction

In 2021, the Friends of Winchester Cathedral celebrates the 90th anniversary of its formation in 1931. This article sets out the early history of the Friends and the church and social contexts of its formation. Rather than being an isolated event, the establishment of the Friends was part of a major change that took place in the Church of England from the mid-1920s onwards and opened up cathedrals to become the much-loved public places of worship and tourism that we know today.

I. Launch

It was a wet St Swithun’s Day on 15th July 1931 and instead of meeting on the Deanery lawn for afternoon tea following the annual Festival service, the congregation gathered in Winchester Guildhall. With a rousing proposal speech by the Vice-Lieutenant of Hampshire, Sir William Portal (right), supported by the Mayor of Winchester, William Lansdell, the Headmaster of Winchester College, Canon Alwyn Williams, and Professor Reginald Gleadowe (also Winchester College), the meeting ‘welcomed the formation of an association of the Friends of Winchester Cathedral and assures the Dean and Chapter of its loyal support on any steps they may take with that end’.1 The meeting supported Sir William’s resolution which was ‘carried unanimously’.2 Dean Gordon Selwyn, who had arranged the meeting and became the Friends’ inaugural Chairman, ‘pointed out that this would be an association of the laity. The Dean and Chapter were not asking to find money and (would) not have any say in how it was spent’.3

The formation of the Friends association had happened at break-neck speed (for a cathedral) as Dean Selwyn had only taken up office on the 1st of January that year. The first official notice that it was being proposed came in the Hampshire Chronicle of the previous week in the Cathedral’s weekly notice of services: ‘Tea will be followed at

1 “Report on St Swithun’s Day service and subsequent meeting, held in the Guildhall”, Hampshire Chronicle, July 18, 1931, p. 5.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
once by a short meeting … on the subject of the “Friends of Winchester Cathedral … It is hoped that as many as possible will stay.” Another object of the meeting was to ‘launch the Miss Pesel’s and Miss Blunt’s embroideries for the choir’ which were expected to take several years to complete and needed a large group of volunteers. This was a precursor to the formation of The Broderers whose work has been supported by the Friends since autumn 1931.

However, the *Winchester Diocesan Chronicle* for July 1931 had not mentioned the proposed meeting, only the four services to be held on St Swithun’s Day, which may indicate that Dean Selwyn was acting quickly because he had been planning the formation of a Friends’ association since his arrival. Correspondence between T.D. Atkinson, the Cathedral’s architectural surveyor, and the Dean on 18th February referred to ‘a fund such as “Friends of Winchester Cathedral” (which) would be extremely useful” for repairs to the Cathedral which Atkinson had listed. Had Dean Selwyn told the architect about his plans for a Friends’ association or was Atkinson suggesting it to the Dean? There is no evidence either way, but eight Cathedral Friends associations had already started and both men may have been aware of this fund-raising model. Later in the year, an article in the Portsmouth newspaper, *The Evening News*, claimed that Dean Selwyn had ‘followed suit’ from the example of the new Portsmouth Cathedral’s Guild of Friends which he had known from his time as Rector of Red Hill, near Havant. This is, again, speculation as the Dean’s public and private output makes no reference to it.

II. Context

After World War I ended in 1918, the Church was divided and confused with ‘no vision or great sense of purpose and direction’. The great loss of life in war and the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-19 had drained energy from society and the Church. Cathedrals did not welcome visitors and were closed for long periods, unless a verger could be persuaded to open up on payment of six pence. Winchester and its near neighbour at Chichester had poor reputations for welcoming visitors. The writer of a tourist guide to southern cathedrals commented in 1925 that ‘one never passes the grille at either Winchester or Chichester, but a sentiment very like awe comes over one at the thought

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4 “Notice on St Swithun’s Day services”, *Hampshire Chronicle*, July 11, 1931, p.7.
5 Ibid.
7 Letter from T. D. Atkinson to Dean Selwyn, 18th February 1931. (HRO catalogue: DC/E7/1/19/Repairs and Improvements). Atkinson’s typed letter set out “the most important of immediate needs of the Cathedral”. The contents and comments are typical of a report for a new Chief Executive from a senior member of staff.
8 “Where Kings Lie Buried”, *The Evening News* (Portsmouth), November 20, 1931, p. 8. The diocese of Portsmouth was established in 1927, with the Church of St Thomas of Canterbury in the port city designated as a pro-cathedral at that time.
that one is trespassing in what was for years the Holy of Holies’. By comparison Salisbury Cathedral was lauded for its openness where visitors ‘were left to stroll about freely and unconcernedly’. In the same year, the Archbishop of York, Cosmo Lang (later Archbishop of Canterbury), commented that for many diocese and parishes ‘the cathedral is still a place remote and strange’.

However, the attitude of closure to the public and remoteness from the rest of the church was challenged by Dean Frank Bennett of Chester who wrote in 1925 that cathedrals had ‘come to be regarded as something like the special property of a small corporation’. Bennett literally threw open the doors at Chester Cathedral in early 1920s, ended the six pence entry fee and sought voluntary contributions instead. Vergers, instead of receiving topped-up income from visitor fees, were given proper salaries. Dean Bennett was a remarkable churchman and leader often found in the cathedral meeting and counselling visitors. He was considered a ‘genius’ who transformed Chester and set up a model of openness that many English cathedrals soon embraced.

Other cathedrals adopted the “Friends of” model from the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge (1909) and the Bodleian Library in Oxford (1925), with the outcome being that Canterbury Cathedral founded the first cathedral Friends association in 1927, followed by Peterborough in the same year, York (1928) and Exeter (1929). Dean George Bell of Canterbury, later Bishop of Chichester, wrote to The Times in 1927 that his cathedral’s Friends’ association had a simple object ‘to gather round the Cathedral in association with the Dean and Chapter a body of supporters who are prepared to take some share in caring for it and preserving it for posterity’.

As will be shown, it was the Canterbury model that Winchester would emulate. In Winchester, Dean William Hutton (1919 – 1930) and Chapter ended fees to visit the Cathedral in 1925 and followed the trend to rely on voluntary contributions, often the antecedent to the formation of Friends’ bodies. Dean Hutton also aided his successor’s strategy by establishing the Cathedral’s annual festival in St Swithun’s tide, welcoming diocesan groups, encouraging education and introducing loudspeakers to the Cathedral.

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11 Ibid.
14 Lloyd, Church of England, 393.
16 A memorandum, dated 1925, concerning abolition of entry fees and their replacement with voluntary gifts placed in boxes is in the Cathedral ledger for 1921-64 (HRO: DC/C1/76/D6). It also includes a payment to local printers Warrens for ‘Free to Visitors’ notices in the same year. (HRO: DC/C1/76/H6)
By 1931, Winchester city had a population of 22,970 which had declined by 3.45 per cent since the post-World War I census in 1921. The district’s population had also dropped by 4.5 percent to 61,986. However, because of the expansion of social housing in Lower Stanmore and smaller households, the number of houses had risen by 13.8 percent to 5364. This period was in the depth of the Great Depression but Winchester’s unemployment rate that year was 7.33 per cent, which was below the national average of 13.8 per cent and well below areas such as South Tyneside and Merthyr Tydfil where more than a quarter of the population was out of work. Locally, the main types of unemployment were household work, agriculture and forestry, wholesale and retail, manufacturing, public administration and defence. The ratio of men to women in the district’s workplace was slightly less than three to one.\textsuperscript{18} In summary, Winchester was relatively prosperous with a higher level of employment than much of the rest of England. Although the city and district had weathered the reduction of the army presence and the closure of a prisoner of war camp after the war, it had attracted the new multiple stores, including Woolworths, to the High Street (left in early 1930s) and was ‘comparatively prosperous and hopeful’.\textsuperscript{19} The Stock Market crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression hit personal fortunes as well as the Church.\textsuperscript{20} The hopeful 1920s were past and the Friends of Winchester Cathedral was launched at a time of financial crisis and uncertainty that was locally severe but not near the crises seen in industrial regions. It is notable that the Friends associations formed between 1930 and 1933 were mainly in the South, apart from Durham (1933) and predominantly in rural, non-industrial areas where the impact of the Great Depression was less harsh.

III. Purpose and early progress

The example of the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral was front-of-mind in Winchester in 1931. In welcoming the formation of the Friends, the Bishop of Winchester, Theodore Woods, wrote: ‘Certainly Winchester should not be behind Canterbury in this regard’ while Sir William Portal proposed that membership should be based on the Kent cathedral’s model of individuals paying five shillings a year and corporate bodies ten shillings a year, both as minimums, and Life Membership of £20. The aim


\textsuperscript{19} Tom Beaumont-James, Winchester – From Prehistory to the Present (Stroud: Tempus, 2007), 166.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
of the Friends, according to Sir William, was to ‘support the Dean and Chapter in caring for and in preserving for those who come after us the great cathedral we love so much’, with emphasis on caring and preserving similar to that expressed by Dean Bell of Canterbury in 1927. There appears to have been latent interest in a Friends organisation as anonymously reported but possibly written by Dean Selwyn in the Diocesan Chronicle after the 15th July meeting:

‘For some time past the desire has been widely expressed that Winchester should have its Association of the “Friends of the Cathedral”; and, as S. Swithun’s Day approached, and it became clear that a large number of de facto Friends would assemble, the occasion seemed to afford an excellent opportunity for testing and focusing this feeling’. It would appear that, if it was a late decision to test the water about a Friends’ organisation as this report implied, Dean Selwyn left nothing to chance by asking Sir William Portal to propose the association with support from the Headmaster of Winchester College, the Mayor Winchester and a letter of support from Bishop Woods. The proposal could only succeed with this high-level support and demonstrated Dean Selwyn’s leadership in recognising the local interest and capitalising upon it.

Later in 1931, the Friends’ first membership brochure was issued with its Purpose set out on the first page, with additional emphasis on social benefits. The two aims were:

‘The first to bind together all those who love Winchester Cathedral and to bring others as far as possible to appreciate and enjoy it. The second to help the Dean and Chapter to do what is needed to preserve it for posterity, with its beauties unimpaired, and, if possible enriched’.

In 1934, Dean Selwyn gave a more personal insight into his concept of the Friends as ‘the modern counterpart of (Bishop) Godfrey de Lucy’s “confraternity for the repair of the church”’. In 1202, Bishop de Lucy started a confraternity for the repair of Winchester Cathedral that would last for five years and resulted in the construction of the retrochoir at the east end of the building. A confraternity is a group of people with a common interest or a particular purpose, or a brotherhood which has a religious or charitable purpose. With this understanding, it could be interpreted that Dean Selwyn’s ideal for the Friends was a more organic connection than fundraising and social gatherings: it was to be at the heart of the Cathedral’s life.

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21 Hampshire Chronicle, July 18, 1931, p. 5.
22 Winchester Diocesan Chronicle, XXXIX, no. 8, (August 1931): 145.
23 Friends of Winchester Cathedral Membership Brochure, 1931. (HRO: DC/E7/1/19)
24 E.G. Selwyn, The Story of Winchester Cathedral (London: Raphael Tuck & Sons, 1934), 76.
25 Selwyn, Winchester Cathedral, 35.
Once the summer holidays of 1931 were over, the Friends organisation started to develop. Its membership recruitment started strongly with more than 120 signing up at the launch event. A royal patron, the Duke of Connaught, was announced in early October. He was the third son of Queen Victoria, a soldier and a former Governor-General of Canada who served until his death in 1942. The first staff member, Mrs Ethel Cruickshank, was appointed at Honorary Secretary in October, but sadly Sir William Portal who had enthusiastically proposed the formation of the Friends died in late September. He was considered to be a great loss to the Cathedral and Hampshire. The Council of the Friends, with Dean Selwyn as Chairman, was announced with a mammoth 43 members, including the Lord Lieutenant and a wide range of county notables. There were eight women in its membership.

A more formal announcement of the Friends’ formation came on 14th November in The Times which published a letter from Dean Selwyn accompanied by a panoramic photograph of the Cathedral taken from the tower of Winchester College Chapel. The letter reported on the July meeting, royal patronage and the purpose of the association. Again, Winchester followed the Canterbury process by using the Establishment’s newspaper for communicating ecclesiastical news as did some other cathedrals. The letter was also published, in part, in Scottish and Hampshire newspapers. Dean Selwyn emphasised the historical and architectural appeal and importance of the Cathedral and the nature of the Friends who would be ‘prepared to take some share in caring for it and in handing down to posterity with its beauties unimpaired, and if possible, enhanced.’ The letter set out the Cathedral’s funding needs and invited supporters from around the world to take an annual subscription.

In January 1932, the Diocesan Chronicle reported strong growth in membership following the Dean’s letter. This response continued with 532 members enrolled by 31st March. Around £350 (equivalent to £16,000) was raised through subscriptions in the first nine months. Although the first list of members was not published until the end of the 1933/34 financial year, it had risen to more than 1000 by then. In February 1932, the Friends announced the first of what would be a staple event: three ‘lantern

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26 Ethel Mary Cruickshank (1868-1949) was the Friends’ first Hon. Secretary and Treasurer. She was the Winchester-born widow of Rev Alfred Cruickshank, clergyman, Winchester College master and Professor of Greek and Classical Literature at Durham University until his death in 1927. It is unclear how long Mrs Cruickshank served in this role; however, she was in the first membership list in the 1934 edition of Winchester Cathedral Record (No.3) and was on the Friends’ Council from 1942 to 1947.

27 By comparison, The Friends of Canterbury Cathedral had a Council of ‘some 30 members’, including at least two women of whom one was the actress Sybil Thorndike. Bell, Letter, op. cit.


29 Muskett, Sixpenny Entry, 97.

30 The Dean’s letter was published widely, albeit in reduced forms, in other media: The Scotsman and Edinburgh Evening News, The Evening News and the Hampshire Telegraph and Post (latter two Portsmouth) all on 20 November 1931 and fully in the Hampshire Chronicle (Winchester) on 21 November 1931.

31 Selwyn, Letter, op. cit.


lectures’ for members on topics connected with the Cathedral, including one by Louisa Pesel about canvas embroidery. Also, the Friends took up a rented office in Church House (now 9 The Close) which had been refurbished. Its use was shared with the Broderers. In these offices, the Friends’ Council met in March to authorise its first expenditure on two projects: The repair of St Swithun’s Gateway (now called the Prior’s Gate) and the Coat of Arms above it; and the movement of sculptures stored in the Cathedral into new places.

IV. Broderers

The formation of the Broderers almost coincided with the establishment of the Friends. Since that beginning in 1931 there has been a close, supportive relationship. The initiative to undertake the extensive embroidery project began before Dean Selwyn’s installation. Louisa Pesel had been invited to Winchester by Bishop Woods who knew her from Leeds. As reported above, an element of the 15th July Guildhall meeting at which the Friends was formed was a presentation by Miss Pesel and her designer colleague Sybil Blunt about proposals of embroideries for the Choir and to seek volunteers. On Thursday 29th October 1931, the Broderers’ inauguration service was held at the Cathedral and was followed by a display of embroidery designs at the Guildhall. On the 15th November that year, Louisa Pesel received £100 from the Friends for her new group. In early 1932, the Broderers got into full swing using the Friends’ office for making cushions, kneelers and other forms of needlework for the Cathedral, financed by the Friends. Bishop Woods died in February 1932, but continued sponsorship had already been ensured by Dean Selwyn and the Friends. By May 1932, the Broderers presented 117 kneelers, one stall cushion and ten alms-bags as well as borders for bench cushions in preparation, which demonstrated how effective and efficient Louisa Pesel and Sybil Blunt were in training their volunteers. Their report also promised another 150 kneelers, and 38 alms-bags were in production.

V. The first year

As the first year of the Friends’ existence came to its close, another of its regular features was published. This was the first edition of the annual Winchester Cathedral Record, originally proposed as The Friends of the Cathedral Chronicle, which was edited by the Cathedral’s Co-Librarian, Canon A.W. Goodman.

The first edition contained the initial report of the Friends’ Council, articles on the Cathedral, and accounts. The report

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34 Winchester Diocesan Chronicle, XL, no. 5 (May 1932): 77, 80.
was first published as a four-page foolscap document and the same text was published in the *Record* on 21st June 1932. An important element was the ‘four-fold’ policy of the Friends which is very similar to the current Objects of the Friends’ Constitution:

1. To undertake, or assist in, the execution of definite schemes of repair, large and small, to which the Dean and Chapter consider necessary, but for which the funds at their disposal are not sufficient – such schemes to be tabulated in order of urgency for consideration by the Council.
2. To collaborate with the Dean and Chapter in such areas of restoration or enrichment as are desirable, and may approve themselves to the Council.
3. To support the Dean and Chapter in cases of special or emergency funding expenditure, not only by contributions but also by applying all the machinery at the Friends’ disposal towards raising special funds to meet such emergency.
4. To apply some proportion of their funds towards the provision of a Reserve Fund to meet unforeseen emergencies in future years.36

The policy statement demonstrated that the full focus of the Friends’ activity and fundraising in 1932 was towards the Cathedral, mainly its fabric which was not in good condition. By the end of its first eight months in March 1932, the nascent association had funded repair works, the rearrangement of medieval sculptures and the first outputs of the Broderers’ work. Separately, it endorsed the Dean and Chapter’s appeal for £20,000, equivalent to a modern £920,000, to replace an unhealthy coke-stove heating system, install electric lights in place of gas ones, reconstruct the organ and endow the choir. This was a considerable amount to seek in the depths of the Great Depression.37 By October 1932, the Friends had also funded the extermination of death-watch beetle in roof-timbers of the North and South Transepts.38

Although the formation of the Friends of Winchester Cathedral was expedited by Dean Selwyn in just over six months after his installation, it built on a trend towards outreach and openness that had started with Dean Bennett of Chester and had been promoted by two of England’s most important cathedrals in Canterbury and York who were early adopters of the Friends’ association model. In becoming the tenth cathedral to form an association, Winchester was able to surf that wave of change even in the depths of the Great Depression, which shows both Selwyn’s leadership and the latent desire of Winchester’s congregation and admirers to accept the opportunity and challenge. That many aspects of the original Friends’ Objects and activities remain in 2021 shows that the association was established soundly and met a continuing social need to be linked to the great cathedral. Today, the Friends has nearly 3,000 members, and annual income of around £175,000, as well as legacies. It continues to support the Cathedral with as much vigour as in 1931.

37 *Winchester Diocesan Chronicle*, XL, no. 6 (June 1932): 98-99.
38 *Winchester Diocesan Chronicle*, XL, no. 10 (October 1932): 195.
Acknowledgements

This article has benefitted greatly from the deep knowledge and infectious enthusiasm of David Rymill, the Winchester Cathedral Archivist, who identified primary sources that were often slips of paper within large archive files and guided the author through the complexity of the Diocesan and Cathedral archives. I am also very grateful for the helpful and insightful comments received from the article’s five reviewers.

Photographs

Page 1 – Sir William Portal portrait (Portal family); Page 4 – Winchester High Street (Postcard, courtesy Winchester Memories Facebook group); Page 7 – Winchester Cathedral Record No.1 cover (Author)

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