

The hope of Hope Street

19.07.2004

As Liverpool Cathedral marks its centenary, Joe Riley asks: is our grandest building an asset or a liability?

THE hand of history falls gracefully enough upon Liverpool Cathedral today.

At exactly the same hour - 4pm - on exactly the same date in July that his great-great-grandfather, Edward VII, laid the foundation stone, Prince Edward attends a service marking the centenary of what the late poet laureate John Betjeman proclaimed to be one of the great buildings of the world.

Not just a local landmark, but a global wonder, towering nearly 400ft above the River Mersey.

But on July 19, 1904, there was no set skyline on St James's Mount.

Instead, the silk-hatted merchant princes of Liverpool filed into a specially-built 8,000-seat amphitheatre to see the King ennoble the first giant block of Woolton red sandstone which would eventually grow into the fifth largest church in all of Christendom.

The cost on completion in 1978 was put at around £5m. At today's crazy values, the organ alone is insured for more than that.

But cathedrals do cost a fortune to run. In this case around £1.4m a year. Or, if you prefer, £4,000 a day.

So, in the early 21st century, post-war, post-bomb damage, post-recession and well past the peak of church attendance, is the cathedral an asset or a liability?

Dean Rupert Hoare knows the arguments on both sides of that debate.

But unlike one of his predecessors, Edward Patey, the dean most bombarded with challenges for justification as the cathedral neared completion, Dr Hoare believes Liverpool has grown to accept the exceptional status of its mother church, both as spiritual centre and tourist attraction.

"There is a feeling of being handed a baton in a race, and running with it into the future," he says.

But progress comes on the back of much change.

"The cathedral was originally and most definitely an Anglican and a Protestant building put up for an Anglican diocese," notes the Dean.

"It still is that, but it is also an increasingly ecumenical place, where people from many other churches can feel it is their cathedral as well."

The co-operation and unique friendship of Bishop David Sheppard and Archbishop Derek Worlock forged an enduring bond between the two religious communities from either end of Hope Street.

Rupert Hoare notes: "There was a sectarianism, but that has gone. Now we have two cathedrals which are in genuine committed collaboration with one another."

The other big link nowadays is with the Roman Catholic cathedral in Liverpool's senior twin city, Cologne.

When Dr Hoare notes "it is the biggest tourist attraction in Germany - six million visitors a year" he alludes to the other society with which cathedrals have to engage. The secular one.

While Dean and Chapter look after matters concerning the next world, the cathedral's lay administrator, Andy Chittenden, who arrived 18 months ago having previously managed a technology business, has to add up the pounds and pence of the present life.

That includes more than £300,000 spent annually on maintenance and paying the wages for a full-time and part-time staff of 74.

There is no state funding and, next year, money from church commissioners for building repairs is being withdrawn in favour of less well-placed cathedrals.

While there is some cash from wills and a little from an investment portfolio, the greatest reliance - aside from hiring the cathedral for outside events and income from the refectory and bookshop - is on the Sunday morning service collection plates.

There is even a thing called Liverpool Cathedral Enterprises Ltd but still, as yet, no entrance charge for tourists, as is increasingly the case in other British cathedrals.

The growing use of Gift Aid means that for every pound donated, the cathedral can claim an extra 28p.

By such careful maths is God's house kept in good order.

This year's celebrations have added extra expense. For example, the founding of the Centenary Girls' Choir - the first time girls have been allowed to sing services - requires a special support fund..

Meanwhile, the next big project is extremely down to earth: "We've simply GOT to build a new and adequate set of loos," says Andy Chitterton.

But primarily, the Dean has genuine hope for the cathedral's ministry: "Religion might be going through many changes, but it is not dying out.

"When there is a big event, and particularly in times of anxiety or sadness, people still turn to a religious building to express how they feel.

"I used to think that secularisation was a one-way process. But who would have thought, even 20 years ago, that people would now be clamouring to have more church schools."

"You may not need cathedrals to be a Christian community. In that sense they are not essential. But they are a wonderful added gift which can inspire people.

"I don't for one moment believe this will ever become just a public space.

"Other cathedrals have gone to be 1,000 years old, and I think this one will."