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GUILDFORD

When Winchester Diocese was found to be too large and was divided into three, the old parish church of Portsmouth took over the South, Winchester retained the middle and a new edifice was planned for Guildford to rule the North. That was in 1927, the year I was born, which makes me feel some affinity with this building on Stag Hill. A modest hill, attaining a maximum height of 259 feet, it nevertheless looks impressive from the city and traffic rushing past on the bypass cannot fail to notice the imposing pile of bricks.

Its construction was interrupted by the war and I remember cycling up the hill as a teenager, on one of my Youth Hostelling runs and feeling a bit disappointed with the half that had been built.

Our landlady at Holmbury Saint Mary farmhouse said she had recently revisited and thought the cathedral had mellowed somewhat, or perhaps she had; anyway she now had more affection for it. Her parting words were, "If you go you will not see my signature on my brick but you can see the Queens". We did in Saint Ursula's porch.

We arrived early which was fortunate, being surprised to find several car park attendants ushering us into place. It transpired that the cathedral was being used that morning for a school prize giving assembly. My wife and I managed a quick look round in three quarters of an hour before the Holy place was over run by hundreds of girls in blue and white with their zealous parents; we did not bother to enquire the name of the school, which had erected a table full of cups and prizes in front of the altar.

On the North side is the chapel of the Queens Royal Surrey Regiment, adorned with flags and on the opposite side is the Childrens Chapel in tasteful green with Girl Guide gates. At the East end is the traditional Lady Chapel where I sat, reasonably free from the schoolgirl babble. A carving of Our Lady and Child in lignum vitae wood is absolutely superb. The flow of curves is perfect and I cannot recall seeing a more outstanding Madonna. I was absorbed by it for ten minutes and that masterpiece alone makes a visit to this cathedral worthwhile.

John Clark, a 17 year old schoolboy from Godalming, painstakingly made miniature pictures of the 160 (or thereabouts) parish churches that make up the Diocese; they are framed around the cathedral which holds central position. I enjoyed studying his effort which I doubt if he anticipated would still be hanging on the wall thirty years later.

We just had time for a quick glance at the Baptistry with its dark blue ceiling and green crossed floor leading to the flight of doves above the font, before being politely asked to leave in order that the girls could commence their celebrations.

Outside, the red brick is typical of first half 20th Century building. The ubiquitous colour of houses, factories, shops, offices and schools. Inside it is different. The lovely Doulting honey stone (of which Wells is built) and tall lancet windows give a light airy impression to the long high building.

It has not of course, had time to mature and I hope it does. Certainly it has more chance than the concrete high rise office and housing blocks that have grown with the fleeting nature of mushrooms since the Second world war.

The plan allows uninterrupted viewing of the whole length - no screens or obstructions, while spread around the Eastern half are the side rooms and vestries for Bishop, Dean, Verger, choristers and various other officers. Very compact and absolutely typical of the architectural design of its era - Post war economic functionalism. Without the nooks and crannies, niches and mysterious dark corners to which succeeding generations can make their individual contributions I wonder if it can age satisfactorily.

Most of our heritage of great cathedrals grew out of monasticism; this is quite different but no doubt reflects the thinking of its time.

Our Medieval monks would have been impressed, watching a four ton steam hammer thumping 778 concrete piles 50 feet into the blue clay of the hilltop, each pile requiring about 1500 massive blows. They might also have wondered if reinforced concrete has the strength to last 700 years as have the stone foundations they themselves used.