

## The Diocese of Peterborough

The Diocese of Peterborough includes the counties of Northamptonshire and Rutland. It was created in 1541 by Henry VIII because he wished to reduce the size and therefore the power of the vast Diocese of Lincoln. The great Benedictine Abbey of St Peter de Burgh had been dissolved just two years previously and its church now became the new Cathedral. The last abbot of Peterborough, John Chambers, became the first Bishop of Peterborough.



The Diocese of Peterborough originally comprised just one archdeaconry, the Archdeaconry of Northampton, which had existed previously under the Diocese of Lincoln. It was not until 1876 that the increasing population of Peterborough Diocese led to the creation of its second archdeaconry, the Archdeaconry of Oakham. The county of Leicestershire was included in the Diocese of Peterborough from 1837 until 1926, when the Diocese of Leicester was created,

Originally besides the Bishop, Dean and Archdeacon, there were six prebends and four minor canons. By the end of the twentieth century there were the Bishop of Peterborough, the Suffragen Bishop of Brixworth, the Archdeacons of Northampton and of Oakham, Dean, four residentiary canons, twenty-one canons non-residentiary, two minor canons, one being precentor, the diocesan chancellor and the diocesan registrar.

The first Bishops of Peterborough were accorded the powers of criminal jurisdiction in the Liberty of Peterborough. These included the right to appoint the Coroner and to nominate Justices of the Peace, and they gave the Bishop the additional title of Lord Paramount. However, these powers were removed by Elizabeth I who bestowed them instead on her minister William Cecil, Lord Burghley.

## The Dean and Chapter

The Dean and Chapter, who were the governing body with overall responsibility for the care of the Cathedral, were responsible for appointing the High Bailiff of the City of Peterborough, and for the fairs and market rights within the City until the Peterborough Paving and Improvement Act was passed in 1790. The Dean and Chapter were the lords of the manor of Peterborough. They were also responsible for running the Free Grammar School founded by Henry VIII.

The Bishopric of Peterborough had been endowed with a part of the property of the former Abbey. However, bad financial management led to Peterborough being known as the poorest Bishopric in England until the establishment of the Ecclesiastical Commission in 1842 and the fixing of stipends. The Dean and Chapter had also been endowed with a part of the lands of the former Abbey but also suffered from financial problems until their estates were taken over by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. Consequently the Cathedral fell into disrepair particularly towards the end of the eighteenth century.

## The Records

The records of the Diocese of Peterborough reflect all the varied business of the Diocese, of the Bishop, the Dean and Chapter and the Archdeacons. They were guardians of the moral welfare of their flock, and were responsible for the clergy who ministered directly to the people and for the Cathedral and churches in which they worshipped. They were lords of the manor and landowners of considerable estates in Northamptonshire and adjacent counties.

The records represent the administrative activity of the Diocese, the functions of the Consistory Court and the Archdeacons' courts, and the visitations of individual parishes by the Bishop and Archdeacons.

Although there are references within the records to the western and eastern halves, or divisions, of the Diocese for administrative purposes, there was no real territorial division of the Diocese. The Consistory Court of Peterborough did deal mainly with business in the deaneries of the eastern half of the Diocese, which includes Rutland, and the Archdeacon's court at Northampton with business in the western half, but the two courts had concurrent jurisdiction and any division of work was merely a matter of convenience and custom.

**For further details please see the catalogue available in the Index Room or ask any member of staff.**

Further reading: 'The Bishops of Peterborough 1541 to 1991.' Geoffrey Carnell Much Wenlock, 1993