

CAMBRIDGE INTRODUCTION TO WORLD HISTORY

The Middle Ages



Trevor Cairns

This book is about a period of history called **THE MIDDLE AGES**. The name is a poor one, for it tells us nothing at all about the people who lived then, or about what happened. The obvious question is: 'Middle of what?'

The answer is: 'Between ancient history and modern history.'

The idea used to be this:

ANCIENT Greek Roman



People in Europe were civilised in the time of the Greeks and Romans

As you see, the name suggests that those thousand years were no more than a long interval, when nothing worthwhile was going on. The early part is sometimes even called 'The Dark Ages'. Since you already know something about that part, which was the period of the barbarian invasions, of the spread of Christianity and Islam, of the Viking raids, of such men as St Benedict, the Emperor Justinian, Charles the Great and King Alfred, you can decide whether or not 'Dark Ages' is a good name. The real Middle Ages are the centuries from about 1000 to about 1450.

It would be strange if nothing very interesting happened in Europe during all this time. In fact there were two very important things about the way people lived together – or, to use a better phrase, the way society was organised – during the Middle Ages.

People in Europe
were less civilised
during the
thousand years
in between –
the **MIDDLE AGES**

MODERN 16th 17th 18th 19th 20th centuries



People in Europe have been civilised since about 1450

First, the **CHURCH**. Everyone in western Europe believed in the same Church, and this made it very powerful. It tried to see that everyone did as it commanded, because the Church alone knew what God wanted; or so people thought.

Second, the **FEUDAL LORDS**. These were the warrior noblemen who wore armour, rode horses and lived in castles. They were the ruling class all over Europe during the Middle Ages. They obeyed the king of their country when they wanted to, and they looked down on the ordinary people as being altogether lower creatures than themselves.

While the Church and the feudal lords kept their grip, the Middle Ages went on. When the Church and the lords found power slipping out of their grasp more and more into the hands of the merchants and the kings, the Middle Ages came to an end.

So we could call these centuries 'The Age of Church and Lords': but it is rather a mouthful, and everyone knows the old name already. There is a well-known adjective, too: 'medieval', from the Latin for 'Middle Ages'. Therefore, as long as we remember the ideas which lie behind it, it is more convenient to go on using the name that everyone recognises.

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front cover: The Seal of Robert Fitz Walter (*Sigillum Roberti Filii Walteri*), a leader of the English barons against King John. Though only $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches (5.7 cm) high, it shows details very clearly.

back cover: Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, preaching for Henry of Lancaster against King Richard II. The original picture is $3\frac{1}{4}$ inches (8.2 cm) high, and comes from a French manuscript history written in the fifteenth century.

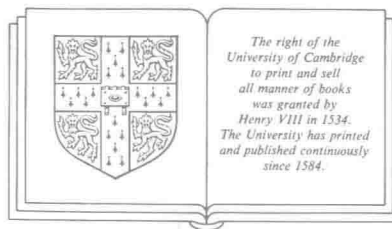
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GENERAL EDITOR · TREVOR CAIRNS

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THE CHURCH — those who pray.

Drawing of an archbishop from the Lambeth Apocalypse, written in England in the thirteenth century.

THE FEUDAL LORDS — those who fight.

Drawing from the Holkham Bible, written in England in the fourteenth century.

THE ORDINARY PEOPLE — those who work.

Painting from the Bedford Book of Hours, a prayer book written in France in the fifteenth century.



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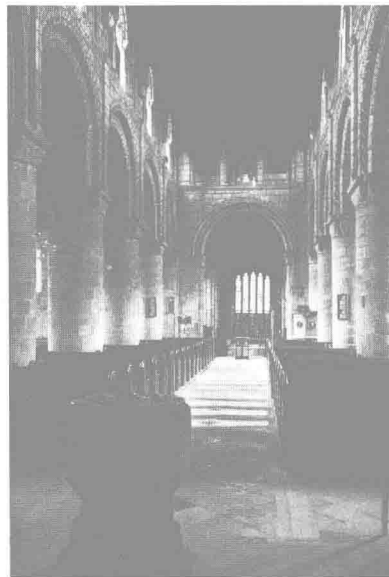
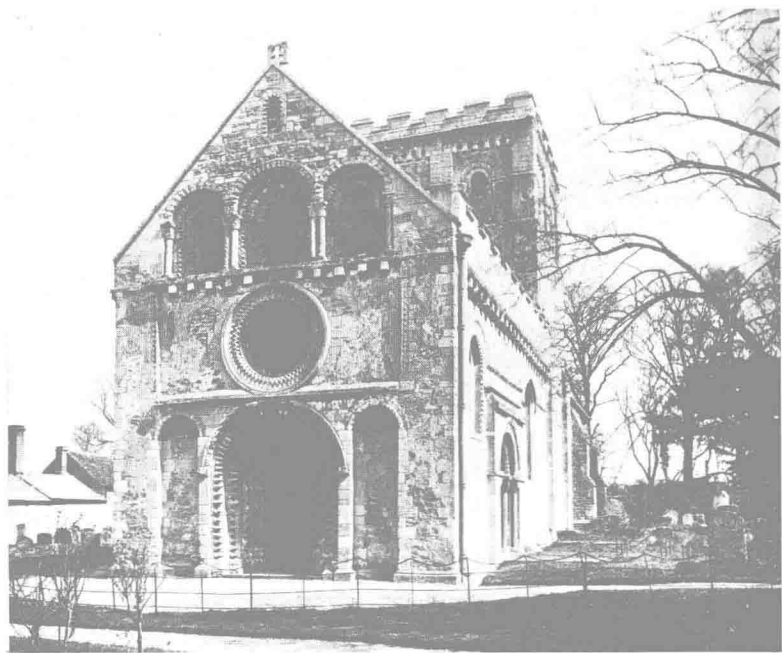
1. The Church

The parish priest

THE CHURCH BUILDINGS. If you live in England, you are sure to be fairly near an old parish church. Sometimes it may be Anglo-Saxon, but usually it will date from some time between about 1000 and 1500. You ought to be able to tell how old it is by looking at it, because builders changed their styles during the Middle Ages, beginning with massive, solid work and making buildings lighter and more delicate-looking as the centuries went on and the builders became more skilful.

Sometimes you may find a church like this one at Iffley. The style of building is called Romanesque. If you think of how the Romans had built, especially their rounded arches, you will understand why. In England this style is often called 'Norman', because so much was done in the century or so after 1066 by Norman kings, bishops and lords. In these buildings you may often find rows of patterns carved round the tops of doors and windows, especially a zigzag or 'chevron' pattern.

Frequently, though, your church will have doors and windows arched very differently, pointed like these at Grantham. The pointed arch was one of the great inventions of medieval builders. As time went on they made their buildings altogether more pointed, and often added tall spires to the towers. This style of architecture is called 'Gothic'—a stupid name, because it was certainly not the work of the Goths, whom you may remember long before, in the barbarian invasions. The name Gothic was invented by sixteenth-century people who thought that because this style was not like the architecture of the Greeks and Romans it was uncivilised, barbarous; so they called it Gothic, just as we call barbarous, destructive people 'Vandals'. Though nowadays it has lost its original meaning, the name 'Gothic' has remained because, just as with the name 'Middle Ages', everybody has got used to it.

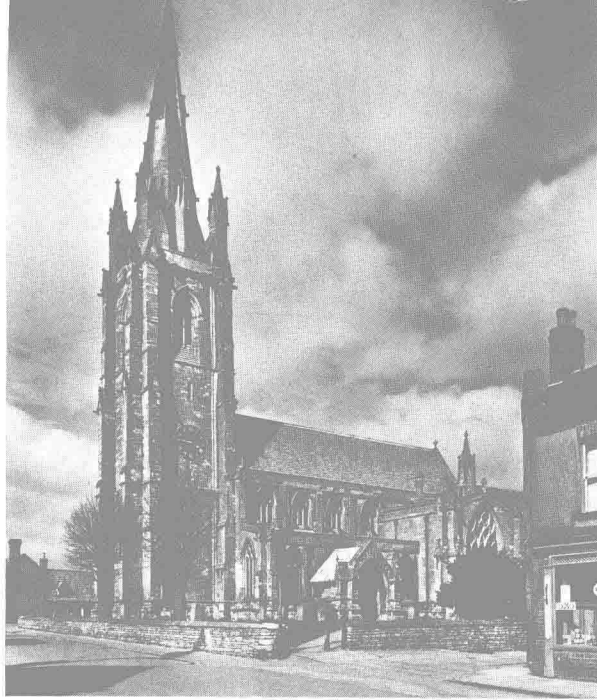


Heavy round arches and pillars in a Norman church: Melbourne, Derbyshire.

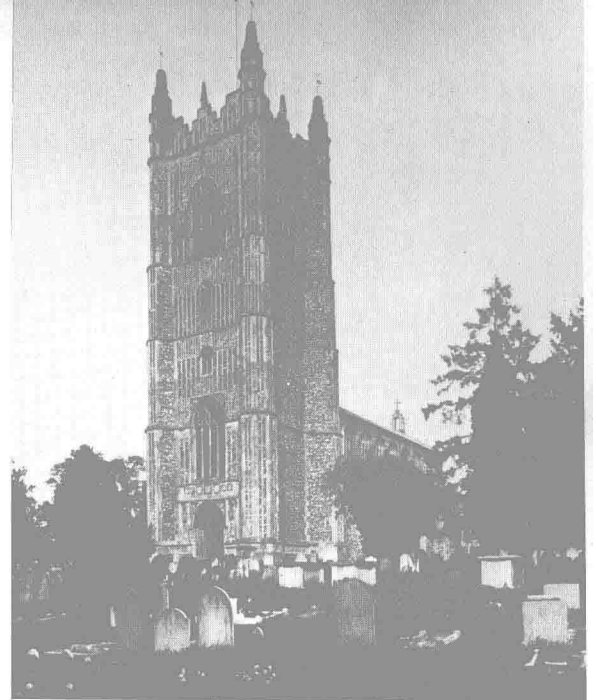


Thirteenth-century Gothic pointed arches and clustered pillars: Grantham, Lincolnshire.

left: A twelfth-century Norman church: Iffley, Oxfordshire, seen from the west.



right: Fourteenth-century Decorated Gothic: Heckington, Lincolnshire, from the south.
far right: The fifteenth-century Perpendicular style: Redenhall, Norfolk, from the west.



As time went on, Gothic architecture became more delicate and ornamented. Towards the end of the Middle Ages it grew into its lightest and most daring form in England, with lofty flattened arches and enormously wide windows. You can see why this style has been named 'Perpendicular'. Many churches in the Perpendicular style were built by rich wool merchants both in East Anglia and in the west of England during the fifteenth century.

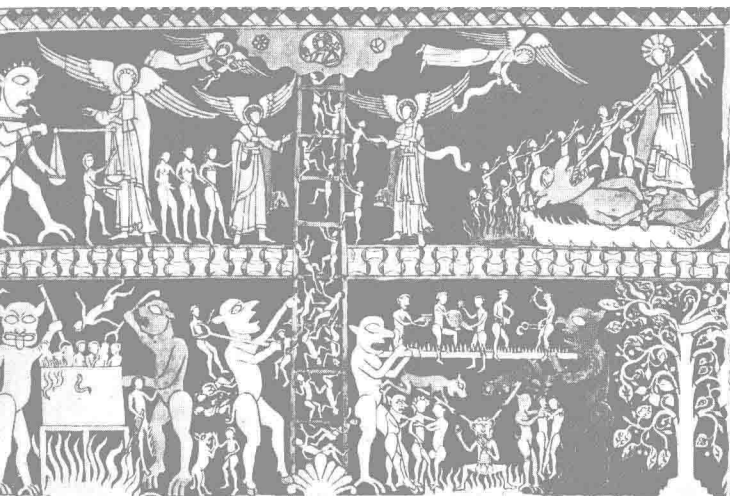
Often you will find churches which kept on being enlarged and altered during the Middle Ages, so that they are part Romanesque, part Gothic, part Decorated Gothic, and in England may be part Perpendicular as well.

Whatever the style of building, every village had at least one small church, normally with a priest. A town often had a big church, with several priests, and as a town grew more churches would have to be built, each with its priest to look after the people in the parish. More people, though, lived in villages.

left: The nearly flat arches inside a Perpendicular church: Chipping Camden, Gloucestershire.



The replica rood screen dominates the great church at Saffron Walden, Essex, as the original must have done in the fifteenth century. *below*: Drawing of a twelfth-century Last Judgment painted on the church wall at Chaldon, Surrey (the original is now very faded).



INSIDE THE CHURCH. Everybody went to church on Sundays and on other holy-days, such as the feasts of important saints. The Church ordered that these days should be kept for the worship of God, free from ordinary everyday work. These were the only days off that people had, and we still use the same word, holiday. People came to church to attend Mass, as the main morning service was called, and sometimes the priest would preach, telling them of God and the saints, and urging them to lead good lives.

Few, if any, of the people in a parish church would be able to read, and in any case there would be no prayer books for them. All books were very expensive. The priest's sermon would be in ordinary language, but the Mass would be in Latin, the language which the Church used in every country. Probably most people were so used to it that they could tell what was going on, even if they could not understand the words; but in case their eyes and minds began to wander from what the priest was doing, the inside of the church would contain pictures and statues for them to look at, to make them think about religious matters.

Most of these pictures and statues have been destroyed, and the few which have survived were mostly made in the later part of the Middle Ages. Still there remain enough for us to be able to imagine what the inside of a church was like then. Looking forward, a worshipper would see a screen in front of the altar, often beautifully carved and with the panels painted. On top of this screen there would be a rood, or big crucifix, so that nobody could forget how and why Christ had died. On the walls, and sometimes over the arch above the rood, were paintings. One popular subject was the Last Judgment, showing the dead rising from their graves and being judged, the good being taken up to live with God in Heaven, and the bad being sent to suffer torture for ever in Hell.

Sometimes the whole inside of the church would be covered by paintings. Here is an Italian church with walls still covered by masterpieces painted in the early fourteenth century. In England there is nothing as good as this, but some churches now have wall-paintings which have been discovered quite recently after being whitewashed over for hundreds of years.

right: The interior of the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, is covered with scenes from the life of Christ, painted soon after 1300 by the great Italian artist Giotto.



right: At Lavenham, Suffolk, the stately Perpendicular church stands guard over a little town which still looks much as it must have done at the end of the Middle Ages.



CHURCH AND PEOPLE. The parish church was usually the finest building in the village, often the only stone one. Even today, as this photograph illustrates, the church often dominates a village or small town. Nobody could forget it. Every Sunday and holy-day the people went there. The parish priest christened them, married them, visited them when they were ill, and buried them. He tried to make them friends of God; without the Church they would have no chance of going to Heaven. Even in the business of this world, the priest would often be needed to give his help and advice, for there would usually be no other man in the village with any sort of education.

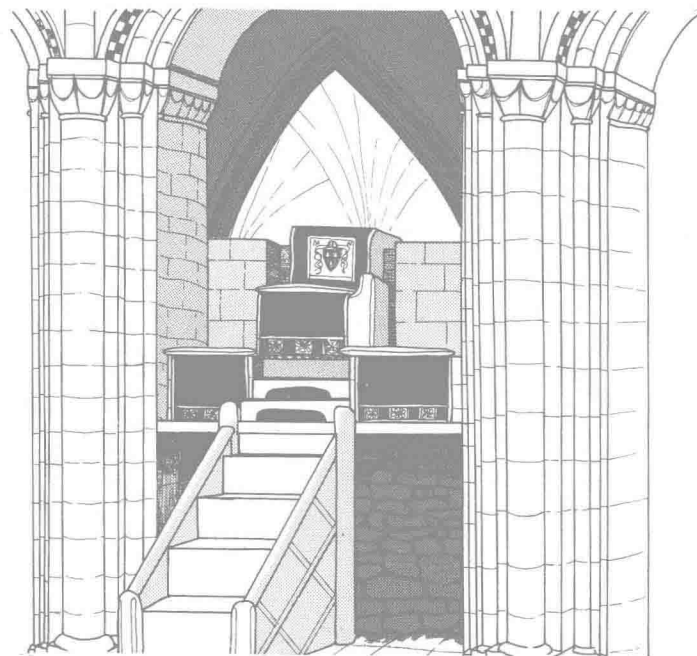
The people of the parish did not get all this for nothing. The priest had to eat and to have a house. The church, like any big building, needed constant looking after. Perhaps any expensive work on the church, or the presentation of precious vessels to be used on the altar, would be paid for by some very rich man – a lord or, towards the end of the Middle Ages, a merchant. All the same, the ordinary peasants would pay tithes (a tenth of their income) and make special offerings at times like Easter. Also, all believed that it was good to give to the poor or to the Church or the Crusade; generous people would be rewarded by God in Heaven.

The bishop

The priest was a very important man in his own parish, but this did not mean that he had the right to do exactly as he pleased. He had to obey the bishop. The bishop's task was to look after parish priests, to see that they behaved well and to appoint new ones.

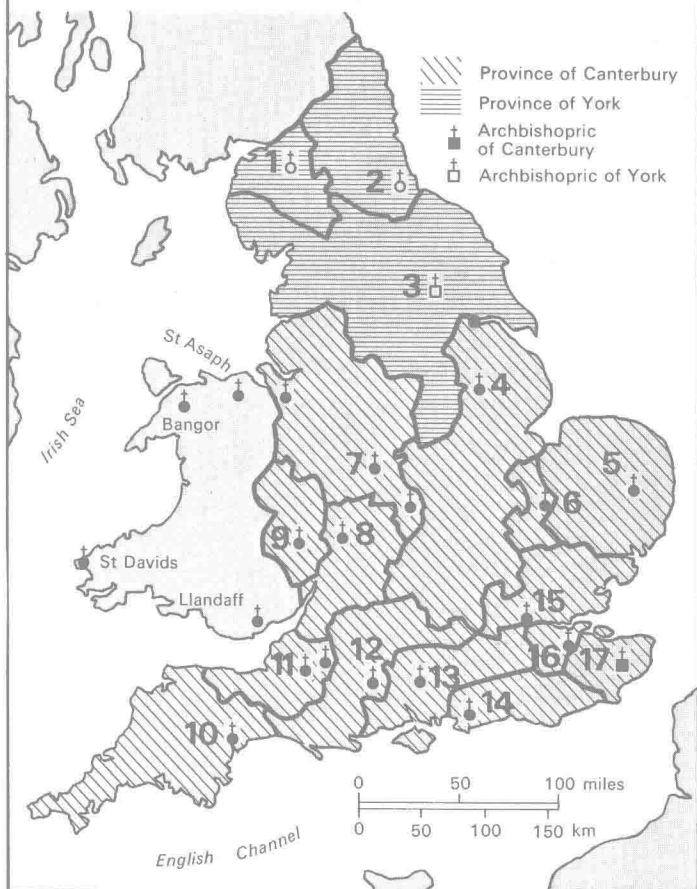
The map shows how England was divided into bishoprics. Inside each bishopric, or diocese, the bishop ruled over all the priests and most of the monks and nuns who lived there. You can see that a bishop held great power.

At Norwich the Norman bishop's throne stands in what had been the traditional place for a 'cathedra' since the time of Roman basilicas: at the far end, behind even the high altar.



Medieval bishoprics and archbishoprics of England and Wales

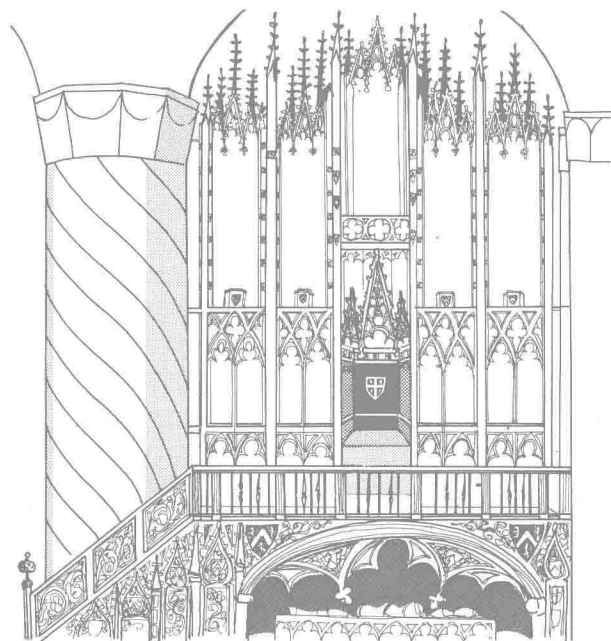
- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 Carlisle 1133 | 9 Hereford 676 |
| 2 Durham, trs. first from Lindisfarne, then from Chester-le-Street 995 | 10 Exeter trs. from Crediton 1050 |
| 3 York 625 | 11 Bath and Wells 909 |
| 4 Lincoln trs. from Dorchester 1072 | 12 Salisbury trs. from Sherborne 1078 |
| 5 Norwich, trs. first from Elmham, then from Thetford 1091 | 13 Winchester 662 |
| 6 Ely 1109 | 14 Chichester trs. from Selsey 1075 |
| 7 Lichfield 669 after 1100 sometimes also at Coventry and Chester | 15 London 604 |
| 8 Worcester 680 | 16 Rochester 604 |
| | 17 Canterbury 597 unless a transfer is indicated, dates given are those of the foundation of the see |
| | Welsh bishoprics fd. 6th century; came under Canterbury 12th century |



If a priest was accused of committing a crime, he was not tried in an ordinary court, by the lord of the manor or by the king's judges. Only a churchman could judge a churchman, so the bishop held a court for such cases. This court also tried men who were not priests if they were accused of offences against the Church, or if they were involved in a dispute over marriage or over wills – for, as you know, the Church married and buried everyone. There was so much work for the bishop's court that he handed it over to the archdeacon, and there were many lawyers who made a special study of Church Law, or Canon Law as it was called, and worked only in Church courts.

Such important churchmen as bishops were expected to keep up a dignified state. In his main church each bishop had a throne, where he sat during some services. The Latin word for a throne is 'cathedra', and so the chief church of a bishopric is known as a cathedral.

At Durham the Decorated Gothic throne, said to be the highest in Christendom, stands in what has become the normal place: before and to one side of the high altar. The bishop who built it lies proudly below.





At Albi, in southern France, once the centre of the Albigensian heresy, the cathedral towers fortress-like over the city.

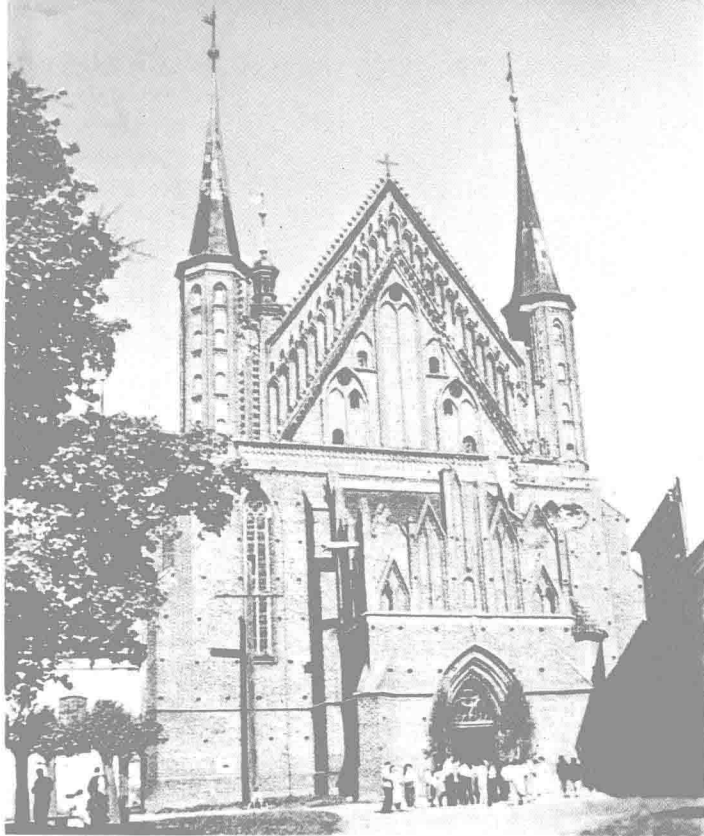
The cathedral, the mother church of the whole diocese, naturally had to be as splendid as possible. There must be space for multitudes to worship, for large choirs, for elaborate processions. There must be a high altar for the main services, and smaller altars in side chapels, where people could have private services if they wished. There would be a specially holy place where the relics of a saint were kept, or perhaps some venerated statue, and it had to be so arranged that pilgrims could come to visit this shrine. Outside, it was fitting that the cathedral should be of equal magnificence, with soaring towers and rich carving to remind people both far and near of the majesty of God and His Church.

Often there were other buildings beside the cathedral. Sometimes a wall, with gates, was built to form a 'close' round the cathedral. The bishop would need a house near the cathedral. Such a great church required many priests, or 'canons', to conduct services, and they also needed somewhere convenient to live.

There are so many great medieval cathedrals, in so many different styles of building, each with its own particular splendours, that it is only possible here to show enough to suggest the rich variety. Look at the pictures on the next two pages, and think about the purpose of each of the things you see.

Think also of the amount of labour, skill, time and treasure which must have gone into the cathedral.

And notice how we have been able to take examples from all over western Europe – Medieval Western Christendom.



left: The west end of a cathedral is usually a very impressive setting for the main entrance: Frombork, Poland.

below left: Entering, the worshipper looks straight up the nave towards the high altar: Cefalu, Sicily.

below: Behind the high altar, the chief centre of worship, the reredos, or screen, gleams in splendour: Gerona, Spain.





left: Before the high altar is the choir, sometimes enclosed and furnished with elaborately carved stalls for the clergy: Norwich, England.



left: Behind the high altar a way is designed to allow processions or pilgrims to move round the cathedral: Troyes, France.
below: Through the Church, the way to salvation: this belief seems to be expressed in the Paradise Portal, Paderborn, Germany.



left: The relics which drew pilgrims were often concealed in tombs or jewelled cases, but all could – and still can – see the Black Virgin of Montserrat, Spain.



The Pope

The bishops were the officers who held the Church together, but there were others above them. Over each group of bishops there was an archbishop, and in every kingdom there would be one archbishop who was senior to the rest. In England there were two archbishops. The map on page 11 shows which bishoprics were within the province of each archbishop. Canterbury was senior to York.

People who were not satisfied by a judgment in a bishop's court could appeal to the archbishop. People who were still dissatisfied could go still further, to Rome, to the court of the Pope himself. Nobody could go further than that – at least, not in this world.

The Pope or, as he was sometimes called, the Vicar of St Peter (or of Christ), was head of the entire Western Church. He ruled it on behalf of God. No man could be above him.

Think of what this means. Everyone believed that when Christ had finally ascended to Heaven He had left St Peter to act as His representative, or vicar. He gave him even the keys of Heaven and Hell. St Peter was the first Pope, and every Pope afterwards inherited his powers. Remember how important this had seemed to King Oswy at the Synod of Whitby. The Pope spoke with the voice of God. From him, through the archbishops and bishops and priests, God's commands came to ordinary laymen.

Any man who was not a churchman was a layman. Even a great layman, count or earl, duke or king, was supposed to treat the Church with respect and obedience. Enemies of the Church, it was thought, were enemies of God.

This was something that even the toughest warriors and the proudest kings feared. If they were to die while still enemies of God, they would surely go straight to Hell. And this was certain if they had been cut off from the Church as a punishment, or excommunicated. Once a man had been excommunicated the Church would have nothing to do with him. He could attend no service. He could not be married. If he were to die, there would be no last sacraments or decent burial for him. What was more, he would be spurned by his friends, for anyone trying to help him would incur the same dreadful punishment. On earth and in Heaven there was no hope for anyone who was under the curse of the Church.

With a power like this in his hand, a Pope would sometimes

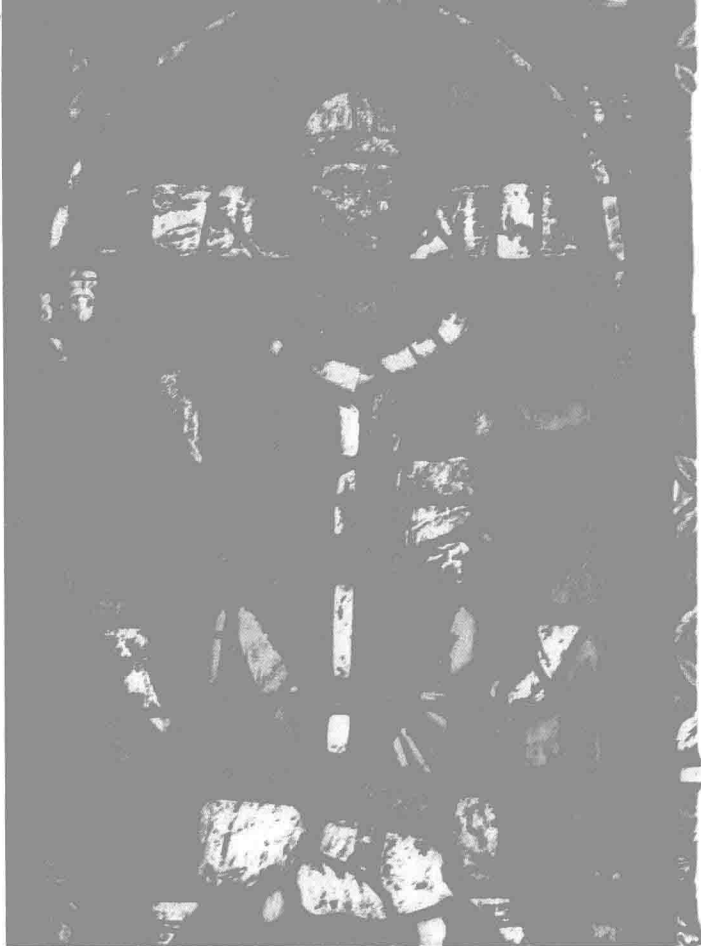
St Peter with his keys, shown by an Italian sculptor at the end of the Middle Ages.



An excommunicant (*below*) was condemned to be an outcast in both this world and the next.



try to make himself the complete master of western Europe. Some Popes even thought that they had the right to remove a king if he behaved badly, and give the kingdom to someone else. Though in fact no Pope ever succeeded in doing quite that, many Popes were well able to put the fear of God, quite literally, into kings and nobles.



One king had a grander title than any of the others. He was the Holy Roman Emperor. You know how the Frankish king, Charles the Great, had become the first Holy Roman Emperor in AD 800 and how, long after his death, his empire had split. During the Middle Ages the Holy Roman Empire consisted of Germany and some of the near-by lands, and the emperor was elected by the most important German nobles. Sometimes there were fierce quarrels between Pope and emperor, for some emperors argued that the chief king in Christendom was just as important a servant of God as the Pope, though God had given him different duties to perform; against this the Pope would argue that unless he crowned him, the emperor did not have God's blessing. On the whole, it was the Pope who won these quarrels.

Archbishop Thomas Becket, shown in a stained glass window in Canterbury cathedral made a few years after his murder in 1170. His pallium is clearly visible, the narrow white cloth with crosses hanging from his neck.

From all over Europe people flocked to the papal court. Pilgrims came to visit the churches and relics of the Holy City; lawyers and their clients to plead their cases; archbishops to receive the pallium, the strip of cloth which was their badge of office; messengers with offerings of money from churches all over Christendom; great men seeking the Pope's aid, or perhaps permission to break one of the rules of the Church in some such matter as marrying a near relative. The Pope and his courtiers were tremendously busy. There had to be hundreds of officials to deal with all this work, to write letters and seal documents and record judgments and count money and make sure that all the laws and rules and regulations were kept up to date. In short, the Pope was the only ruler in Europe who had a real civil service, something like a modern government – or like the ancient government of imperial Rome a thousand years before.

Rome was no longer the Imperial City; and her ruler no longer enforced his authority with the sword. But Rome was still the heart of western Europe.

Monks

So far, we have been thinking about all those churchmen whose main job was to keep the Church going and to look after the laymen. There were thousands of other churchmen, and women, who wished to serve God without having anything to do with the ordinary everyday world of the laymen, where people were too often wicked, dishonest, greedy and violent. Such men and women became monks and nuns.

You will already have heard about St Benedict, and know that there was nothing new in this idea. In the Middle Ages, it became more important than ever. New orders were founded. Monasteries became bigger, new ones were built. In England alone there were more than 2,000 in the fourteenth century, and it was the same story all over Christendom. Most monks were Benedictine, following the Rule of St Benedict, or lived according to some very similar rule. By looking at a typical monastery we can learn much about the sort of life they led.

This picture of a monastery may at first seem a baffling