

The Impact of Visitors on the Medieval Cathedrals and Abbeys
of England

by Jane Fawcett, ICOMOS UK

Although the problem of wear and tear must have caused concern during the Middle Ages, and repairs necessitated by visitors, whether pilgrims or tourists, have been going on ever since, it is only during the past decade that the dramatic increase in the number of visitors to cathedrals has set up a visible process of deterioration. Nearly 20 million people are beginning to make a dramatic impact on even the hardest of floors, and although the damage is slow, it is also irreversible. The destruction of historical evidence is always a serious matter, and since cathedrals are the repositories of our history to a unique degree, it is important, at this stage, to consider to what extent we are losing evidence for which there is no other source.

There has been concern about the overseas promotion of tourism to the UK for many years. In 1969 the British Travel Association, now the British Tourist Authority, published a short paper on principles adopted by the Association. These included "the promotion of market research overseas to find prospective travellers" and to identify their preferences; research into "which of Britain's holiday products are unique and competitive on a world wide basis, with detailed information on capacity and availability of services"; "executing a marketing campaign . . . to sell travel to Britain to the public"; "the provision of reception and information services to improve the visitor's satisfaction . . . and to increase travel spending during his visit"; and "the feed-back of specific information, through consultation and research, to regional and local authorities and to the travel industry . . . to develop new travel services and . . . attractions".

The dangers of this kind of promotion by the world tourist organisations was recognised by ICOMOS with the publication of The Charter of Cultural Tourism of 1976, which commented: "ICOMOS feels directly concerned by the effects, both positive and negative, on the heritage, due to the extremely strong development of tourist activities in the world . . . Tourism is an irreversible social, human, economic and cultural fact. Its influence in the sphere of monuments and sites is particularly important, and can but increase . . . Looked at in the perspective of the next 25 years . . . tourism appears to be one of the phenomena likely to exert a most significant influence on man's environment . . . and on monuments and sites. In order to remain bearable, this influence must be carefully studied, and at all levels be the object of a concerted and effective policy . . . It is the respect of the world cultural and natural heritage which must take precedence over any other considerations."

In 1978 the English Tourist Board launched a Survey on English Cathedrals and Tourism, for which I was consultant. The

findings were published in 1979. These revealed that whereas some heritage organisations like the National Trust and the Department of the Environment had responded to the demands of the tourist trade and dramatically improved both the facilities for visitors and controls, the Deans and Chapters of Cathedrals had not. Our census revealed the existence of 20 million visitors to our cathedrals and greater churches in 1978. The ability and wish of cathedral authorities to respond to this influx, which often amounted to exploitation, varied, but none provided adequate controls or facilities for such numbers; some of the worst were unaccompanied parties of children.

The situation was grave then; it is, in many cases, desperate now. We hoped that by drawing attention both to the dangers and opportunities generated by 20 million visitors, action would be provoked and solutions found. Our wide-ranging recommendations pointed the way to a number of solutions. In some directions, much has been achieved, and the report can be said to have generated new policies. Cathedral museums and exhibitions, shops and restaurants have, on the whole, improved; more cathedral treasuries have been established; security in libraries has become better. Income from voluntary contributions from tourists has increased dramatically; published material, including guides, has been rationalised, and the design improved; the use of buildings in cathedral closes for tourist facilities, and the restriction of cars within these visually sensitive areas is improving. Only in the control of damage and pollution by visitors has very little been done, and this is where the greatest dangers to the fabric lie.

We hoped that experiments in the use of silanes to harden the surface of ledger stones, controls to divert the crowds from sensitive areas, mats to clean shoes of grit and other substances at cathedral entrances, and above all the recording of inscriptions and locations of historically important stones and monuments, would have progressed. Unfortunately, very little has happened.

A survey of monuments and inscriptions in all cathedrals and greater churches is an urgent requirement. The identification of areas particularly prone to damage, and the introduction of experimental methods for the protection of vulnerable areas should be undertaken now. These are likely to include chancels, chantry chapels, and points of outstanding historical significance, such as the Martyrdom at Canterbury. The cathedral architects should initiate such studies.

The proposal for a glass viewing platform in the Chapter House at Westminster Abbey, to protect the mediæval tiled floor from damage could be considered elsewhere; further experiments in

the introduction of illuminated glass panels to protect important stones should be undertaken and commercial sponsorship sought. Above all, when ledger stones and monuments do not relate to burials below ground, the possibility of moving them to a safe position should be investigated urgently before they become totally defaced.

Finally, it is time that we decided whether our history, as displayed in churches and cathedrals, is expendable or not. If not, then we must act quickly before it is all erased. We have probably done more damage to the visible evidence of the past during the past thirty years than during the previous 200 or more, despite an increased awareness of conservation issues and improved methods. It is a sobering thought.

Ledger Stones Although minor damage to monuments, walls, choir stalls and even to the structure itself has occurred, it is the floor that takes the greatest punishing, and it is here that our record of history is often to be found. In the past, when the names and inscriptions on important ledger stones were seen to be deteriorating, they have been re-entered. Even heraldic ledger stones have been recarved, when the armorial crest was known. There are recent examples of this at Westminster Abbey. However, recarving is only possible when the surface of the stone is not seriously eroded, if the wording of the inscription is known, and if skilled craftsmen are available.

Brasses The majority of surviving medieval brasses have been taken up and displayed elsewhere for safety. Those that remain in situ are usually covered and protected, and the damaging effects of frequent brass rubbing are now generally recognised. Brass-rubbing centres provide an easy alternative. Plastic mats or rugs do not necessarily provide adequate protection, however, since they create problems of condensation, and often gather particles of grit which can do even more damage than the pounding of feet.

The Gothic Revival gave birth to a new wave of memorial brasses, and these brasses, many designed by and for leading Victorian architects, artists and musicians, are also under attack. There is no time to lose, as their loss would be a national loss. Those at both Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral are unprotected and deteriorating fast.

Monuments It is now recognised that pressures caused by overcrowding are particularly damaging to delicate furnishings. Chancels, containing carved wooden choir stalls and misericords, altar rails and plate, monuments in restricted spaces such as chantry chapels, wall paintings and tapestries, are all at risk from such pressures. Cathedral shops set up in sensitive areas such as the beautiful Bray Chantry Chapel at St George's, Windsor, and the South Transept at Canterbury increase the concentration of visitors, and hence the likely damage. By

provided improved facilities within the main body of the cathedral, the authorities are often encouraging the deterioration of the fabric.

ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL

Ledger Stones and Brasses Of the ledger stones and brasses in the crypt, those near the much visited monument to Sir Christopher Wren are showing serious signs of deterioration. These include ledger stones to Sir Joshua Reynolds and Sir Thomas Lawrence (almost obliterated), George Dance, Benjamin West and Turner (badly worn). The Wren tomb itself, and that of Robert Mylne, are raised above the floor level, and this protection might be extended to a few of the more important stones.

In the same area, several fine C19 brasses are wearing badly; particularly vulnerable are those to Lord Leighton, Sir John Millaes, Sir Edward Poynter and Sir Arthur Sullivan. These brasses, which are remarkable works of art in their own right, are on the main route for tourists visiting the Crypt, and it can only be a matter of time before their destruction is complete. The fine black slate stones with brass inlay to Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema and William Holman Hunt are also deteriorating.

A firm has established a technique, used for brass-rubbing centres, of taking fibreglass moulds from the originals, which can be adapted for recording existing stones and brasses. Stones which are in the direct line of traffic should be removed and taken to a less vulnerable position.

The fine Cosmati pavement round Nelson's tomb is also badly cracked and suffering from over-use. The Nelson ledger stone, to the west of Nelson's tomb, has become completely obliterated and there is no record of the inscription.

Recording A limited record exists of a number of early inscriptions, and a further record was made of the Crypt in 1890 by Penrose. Many of the inscriptions are, however, unknown, unrecorded and their position unknown.

Brass Grilles Five of Wren's original brass ventilation grilles on the nave floor have survived, under the Dome. All are deteriorating. The other C19 grilles are also showing signs of wear. Some way of protecting or removing the Wren grilles is desirable while the design can still be identified.

A Treasury has been installed in the Crypt, the Wren model of the Cathedral is on permanent view, and much of the Crypt has been opened up for exhibitions. More people are thus attracted to this area, and the trend may continue, as more developments occur in the western end of the Crypt. In providing improved facilities within the main body of the cathedral, the authorities are often encouraging the deterioration of the fabric.

WESTMINSTER ABBEY

Monuments Damage to the monuments in the Abbey had been a cause of dispute for several centuries. The danger of damage to monuments was increased by the removal of many of the protective railings during the 1820s.

The Countess of Suffolk Her crown has been stolen several times, and the wooden porcupine at her feet has lost so many quills that a notice now hangs round her neck asking visitors not to touch.

Sir Richard Pecksall Small shields are regularly stolen from this monument, and several have already been replaced twice.

Queen Elizabeth I In the C19, the last remains of the Crown and Regalia were stolen. A replica of the Collar and Crown have recently been made. The railings round the monument have also been replaced to prevent further damage. During the past 10 years, 20 of the rose leaves from the new screen have been levered off and removed as mementos.

St. Edward the Confessor Pieces of mosaic are occasionally levered off with a knife and removed. The Cosmati floor of 1260 has recently been covered with a new protective floor.

Henry VII Chapel The choir stalls are extremely vulnerable. The congestion in the Chapel during peak hours is very worrying. It is questionable whether monuments of this importance should be subjected to these pressures.

Hands and other removable objects are regularly stolen from monuments. In Poet's Corner, the stones to Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Handel (a heraldic ledger stone, possibly a C19 replacement of the original), William Chambers and John Dryden, have been almost completely obliterated. Many others are wholly illegible. The stone to Thomas Telford, in the central Nave, was replaced in Purbeck stone twenty years ago; it was replaced again in 1977, having become indecipherable, in cast iron with brass lettering, an almost indestructible combination. This rate of erosion gives an accurate idea of the length of time it takes, under present conditions, for the inscription to become obliterated. In the Cloisters the damage is even more noticeable. Many ledger stones are worn completely smooth. Those in the west walk, to the Abbey architects, are becoming illegible. So are the stones, some of them fine heraldic ledgers in the north walk, now used as a brass rubbing centre. It is ironical that enthusiasts, recording brasses from other Churches, should incidentally, be contributing to the destruction of these stones.

Brasses Many of the earlier brasses and brass inscriptions have been removed, sometimes to a less vulnerable place, and their original positions have been recorded by plain brass plaques. However the fine monumental brasses in the Nave to Sir Charles Barry, Sir George Gilbert Scott, G E Street and J L Pearson, are in the main line of traffic, and are deteriorating.

Chapter House Over 80,000 visitors walk on this, the most important medieval tiled pavement in Britain every year. Owned by the Crown, it is in the care of English Heritage, who insist on felt slippers, which do not adequately protect the tiles. Recording Although many inscriptions were recorded by Dugdale in the C17, and by Neale and Brayley in 1823, the record is not complete, nor was it accompanied by a plan. Detailed plans were begun during the mid C19, but never completed. Thus we have no comprehensive historical record of those buried in the Abbey, and the visual evidence is vanishing fast.

CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL

Trinity Chapel has been roped off for protection. A perspex screen has been constructed round the tomb of Henry IV after many small fragments from it were broken off and removed. Replicas have replaced the original Black Prince's Achievements.

Ledger Stones Some of the damaged stones have been taken up from the South Transept, where the Cathedral Shop is causing severe congestion and damage. These stones have been placed along the South Aisle and their inscriptions recorded; they did not relate to the burials below. Similarly, in the Martyrdom Chapel many of the stones were mutilated and indecipherable. A metal grille is being designed to protect the altar from visitors. The wear and tear in the Cathedral has reached crisis proportions, and the noise and disruption at peak times destroys much of the quality of the experience that the building has to offer.

ICOMOS UK have recently set up a Committee on Cultural Tourism, under the Chairmanship of Michael Welbank, to monitor damage to various surfaces, including stone floors in a cathedral, and in a medieval ruin, wooden floors in a country house, grass surfaces on an earthwork and a historic garden. English Heritage, The National Trust and the Countryside Commission will provide advice. The survey on carpet wear by the International Wool Secretariat, a walking machine developed by the Building Research Establishment, the use of micro-photogrammetry to record contours, will all be investigated. Funding will be sought for detailed surveys and controls considered in the light of assembled data. During the next few years, we hope to make a substantial contribution to the very limited fund of knowledge at present available on this vitally important subject. At present there is a major commercial exploitation of the heritage for profit, without adequate financial support being provided by the tourist industry. The destruction caused by visitors increases, while the industry promoting this exploitation makes virtually no attempt to control the damage they cause, or to conserve the monuments they visit.

"The Impact Potential of Visitors from the New Worlds on the
Medieval Cathedrals of England"

by Jane Fawcett, ICOMOS UK

SUMMARY

Although the problem of wear and tear must have caused concern during the Middle Ages, and repairs necessitated by visitors, whether pilgrims or tourists, have been going on ever since, it is only during the past decade that the dramatic increase in the number of visitors to our cathedrals has set up a visible process of deterioration. Nearly 20 million people are beginning to make a dramatic impact on even the hardest of floors, and although the damage is slow, it is also irreversible. The destruction of historical evidence is always a serious matter, and since cathedrals are the repositories of our history to a unique degree, it is important, at this stage, to consider to what extent we are losing evidence for which there is no other source.

ICOMOS' Charter of Cultural Tourism, issued in 1976, states:-
"ICOMOS feels directly concerned by the effects, both positive and negative, on the heritage, due to the extremely strong development of tourist activities in the world....."

Hence the significance of the English Tourist Board's initiative in promoting the survey, 'English Cathedrals and Tourism' for which I was consultant, and for which I carried out a survey on damage inflicted by visitors in four of our most heavily visited monuments; St Paul's and Canterbury Cathedrals, Westminster Abbey and St George's Chapel, Windsor, all buildings which most notably enshrine our national identity. We hoped that, by drawing attention to the dangers and opportunities generated by 20 million visitors, action would be provoked and solutions found. Our wide-ranging recommendations pointed the way to a number of these solutions. In some directions, much has been achieved, and the report has generated new policies. Cathedral museums and exhibitions, shops and restaurants have improved; security in libraries has become better. Income from tourists has increased dramatically; controls have become more realistic, the design of guide books has improved; the use of buildings in cathedral closes is gradually becoming less restrictive, and the control of cars in these visually sensitive areas is better. Only in the control of damage and pollution by visitors has very little been done, and this is where the greatest dangers to the fabric lie.

We hoped that experiments in the use of silanes to harden the surface of ledger stones, controls to divert the crowds from sensitive areas, mats to clean shoes of grit and other substances at cathedral entrances, and above all, the recording of inscriptions and locations of historically important stones and monuments would have progressed. Unfortunately this has not happened.

ICOMOS UK has recently set up a Committee on Cultural Tourism, which will attempt to monitor damage to a number of historic buildings and sites, in an attempt to quantify the problem, and to put forward some solutions.

"Dommages et Causés par les Visiteurs du Nouveau Monde aux Cathédrales du Moyen Age en Angleterre"

Par Jane Fawcett, ICOMOS UK. Précis.

Le Moyen Age avait sans doute déjà conscience des problèmes de conservation et les réparations nécessitées par l'afflux de visiteurs- au'il s'agisse de pèlerins ou de touristes- ont toujours été effectuées depuis cette période. Mais c'est seulement au cours de la dernière décennie que l'augmentation spectaculaire de visiteurs dans nos cathédrales a été la cause d'un processus visible de détérioration.

Le chiffre de 20 million de personnes commence à avoir des conséquences dramatiques sur le plus résistant des sols. Le processus est lent, mais il est irréversible. La destruction d'un témoignage historique est toujours un problème sérieux: les cathédrales sont les dépositaires de notre histoire, il est important, à ce stade, de considérer dans quelle mesure nous sommes en train de perdre un témoignage historique pour lequel il n'existe aucune autre source.

Le Charte du Tourisme Culturel de l'ICOMOS, publiée en 1976, arrivé à l'initiative de l'Office du Tourisme Britannique, lequel a suggéré un rapport intitulé: "les cathédrales anglaises et le tourisme". J'étais l'un des rapporteurs et j'ai donc fait une enquête sur les dommages causés par les visiteurs dans quatre de nos monuments les plus visités: les cathédrales de St Paul et Canterbury, l'Abbaye de Westminster et St George's Chapel à Windsor, bâtiments qui sont aussi les dépositaires de notre identité nationale. Nous espérons que, en attirant l'attention sur les dangers et sur les possibilités offerts par 20 millions de visiteurs, il serait possible d'agir et de trouver des solutions.

Nos recommandations ont été à la source d'un certain nombre de ces solutions. Dans certains domaines, des progrès considérables ont été faits. Le rapport a été aussi à l'origine de nouvelles décisions. Les musées et les expositions, les boutiques et les restaurants ont été améliorés; la sécurité a été renforcée dans les bibliothèques. Les revenus résultant du tourisme ont considérablement augmenté; les contrôles ont été plus sérieux, les guides de meilleure qualité. L'utilisation des bâtiments aux abords de la cathédrale devient peu à peu moins restrictive et le contrôle du parc automobile dans ces zones visuellement importantes, est meilleure. Beaucoup reste à faire cependant dans le domaine de la pollution par les visiteurs et c'est là le plus grand danger pour le bâtiment.

Nous espérons que les expériences faites: l'utilisation des silanes pour durcir la surface des pierres de refent, les contrôles pour diriger et éloigner la foules des zones sensibles, la multiplication de tapis et paillasons pour essuyer les chaussures des visiteurs à l'entrée de l'édifice et surtout l'archivage des inscriptions sur les pierres et les monuments, auraient progressé. Malheureusement il n'en n'a pas été ainsi.