

Raymond Fowler Interview, 05/11/2019.

Mr Raymond Fowler, Born 1935.

One-time custodian of St Swithun's in Worcester.



The beginning of his association with St Swithun's was in introducing Paul Vaughan (composer) to the building. Paul was very taken with the building and was doing Three Choirs Festival Fringe and used the building for a whole week with lunchtime and evening concerts. The following year Raymond had an assistant who came to live at his house for a week to share key holder and stewarding duties during the Fringe. This was a CCT building at the time so post-1977.

Paul Vaughan introduced the Gentlemen of the Choir of King's College Cambridge to St Swithun's and walked in procession with them down the High Street just before midnight and the choir sang Complin in the church. Raymond remarked that people coming out of the pubs thought this was all very strange. The following year Gentlemen of St John's College Cambridge and the year after that a local choir did the same thing, procession and then Complin at midnight. About 100 people in attendance for a candlelit choir and service which he says was very atmospheric.

For the above Raymond was volunteering his time but then, in his retirement from the Cathedral, the CCT then employed him as Custodian. After a few years he then received a short note from CCT saying that his services were no longer required – no explanation given. He continued from that point as a volunteer for St Swithun's.

Friends of St Swithun's created around 2006 and Raymond's main role was doing the annual even-song where they invited the Mayor to do a procession with mace bearers and then refreshments afterwards. This carried on unbroken until 2017, always as near St Swithun's-tide as possible (July 15th). The Gentlemen of the Cathedral voluntary choir would sing.

The organ. FOSS raised lots of money for the restoration of the organ and Raymond was involved in this. The importance of the organ and it's age mean that it's easy to get high profile organists to come along and play it. Raymond spoke about the organ lunchtime recital program which happens during three months of the Summer on a Friday of each month attract around 30 people which he says is good numbers and shows that it has a following.

I mentioned to Raymond that when the church was rebuilt it was done by a new emerging business class in Worcester who wanted their own place to worship. Raymond then talked about pew rents which were charged from that time, giving families exclusive rights to certain pews.

I asked Raymond how long he thought the church thrived after the rebuild. Raymond thinks that originally St Martin's was the 'mother' church and St Swithun's staffed by people from there. He said that later on there was a role reversal where St Swithun's became the mother church and St Martin's was a chapel of ease.

Talking about the age of the church Raymond notes that the north wall and tower were both early [we now have more detail about all of this].

I asked him about burial practices at the church. He notes that many of the ledger stones say things like 'buried in a vault near this site' raising the possibility of large vaults beneath. He mentions that the cellar of the building next door had access to the vaults [now partitioned off with a breeze block wall].

Talking about the Vicarage on St Swithun's Street which I'd seen marked on an early plan. In conversation with an early incumbent who was given the Vicarage on that street Raymond recalls that this person refused to live in it as it was not a good standard of property. That person then purchased their own house elsewhere. That incumbent was Vicar of both St Martin's and St Swithun's.

Raymond recalls that the Cathedral Archaeologist had tried to save the Cathedral Lichgate prior to its demolition for the Lichgate Shopping Centre. When it was demolished we also lost the city cemetery which was there.

Raymond talks about the gentlemen's toilet which used to be very near to the West door at St Swithun's. It had steps down. This is now gone but is mentioned in the other interviews as a reason why people didn't get married at St Swithun's as getting wedding photos without featuring it was difficult.

Raymond talks about questions the visitors ask when they come to St Swithun's. He says they always ask how old it is and he answers that the land was given by the Priory for the creation of St Swithun's in 1126. Regarding the 1735 rebuilding he mentions that post-Reformation Cathedrals were looking for a new role. He says that the Cathedral was not operating as a parish church at the time of the rebuild, St Michael's had that role – the Cathedral's immediate parish consisted only of the residents of Cathedral Close. He points out that the rebuilt church was a one-room church (no aisles) and was designed for the modern form of preaching, hence the triple decker pulpit.

St Swithun was Bishop of Winchester and died in 862. He wanted to be buried in the churchyard which is what happened. Later on the monks dug him up and moved him inside the church to create a shrine, legend has it that he was displeased and then it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. The folklore is now that whatever the weather is on St Swithun's day that will be the weather for another 40 days.

The six bells in the tower had been re-hung not long before St Swithun's was vested to the CCT in 1977. This means that the bells are in good order. Some of the bells at St Swithun's were cast in Worcester in 1654 and others date from 15th century. Raymond is keen that they are used regularly to keep them properly serviced. He recalls hearing the peel of six when he was walking in Worcester one day and eventually located the point of origin at St Swithun's – he remarks how good they sound in the city.

Regarding the clock Raymond says he doesn't know of any other church with two clock faces which are so far apart and connected by a single long shaft.

The font lid – he says that the font lid is made of mahogany. A theory proposed by a man from Fladbury is that a piece of mahogany came up on the river Severn as ballast and was turned into the font lid for St Swithun's.

END of interview.