

# The Cathedral Cat

Exeter Cathedral has some strange and entertaining tales to tell. Unearthed by a distinguished scholar, they are gathered together in this new collection

Visit Exeter Cathedral today and you will be in the company of visitors from all over the world, speaking in hushed tones and gazing in wonder at its imposing edifice, humbled by its past and piety. And yet, if you dig a little deeper into the cathedral's past, you will find much humour and humanity in the stories it can tell, stories that will have you chuckling and searching out the little tell-tale signs that the men (and women) involved in its past had a taste for the bizarre and the wonderful. *The Cathedral Cat*, by Canon Professor Nicholas Orme, is a collection of 16 stories, which tell this little-known, alternative history of the cathedral.

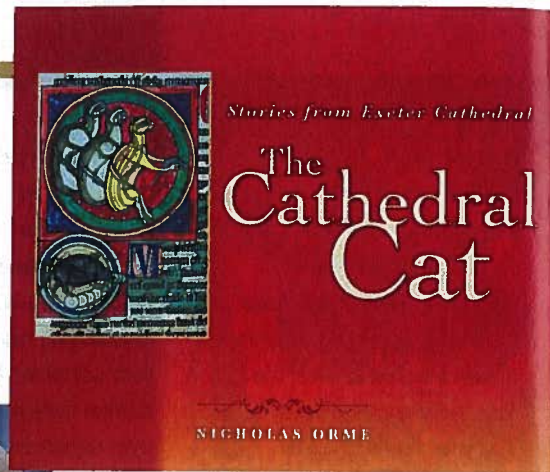
Take, for example, the cat. Not unusual, perhaps, for a cathedral or church in medieval times to have one in order to keep vermin at bay. But the Exeter cat was a member of staff and was paid 13d (old pence) four times a year! The cat was meant to catch much of its own food (mice and pigeons), but no self-respecting cat expects to feed itself altogether, and the cathedral vergers would have spent a penny a week on meat to keep the cat faithful to its 'manor'.



The mourning swans at the feet of the Countess of Devon's tomb. Her family claimed to be descended from swans

And it is not just the records that tell us about the cat. There is a cat-hole in the tower door in the north transept that can still be seen today, and a carving of 'One-eyed Tom' in the chapel of St James. Tom was the head verger's cat during and after the First World War. He lost his eye, we are told, in a fight with an owl for a rat and a carving of the rat in question sits in the corner of the chapel opposite Tom.

Also unearthed is the significance of the two beautifully carved sad swans that sit at the feet of the Countess of Devon on her tomb in the south transept, 'their necks entwined for comfort or protection and drooping for sorrow'. Swans were an emblem of the Countess's family, the Bohuns, and the emblem was chosen to



make a statement about the history of the family and its romantic origins – and the Bohuns displayed this badge because they claimed to be descended from swans!

More of these entertaining stories feature in the book. There is the man who arranged to have himself displayed as a carving of a decaying corpse, and the bishop who was cursed by a witch. We also learn how the choristers took over the cathedral on 28 December each year, electing their own 'boy bishop', leading the services, roaming the streets begging money, and ending the day with a feast.

The book ends with John Betjeman's mischievous visit to Exeter in the 1930s and with the absent-minded bishop of Exeter, Lord William Cecil, who rode around the city on a yellow bicycle, regularly lost his railway ticket, and allegedly once telegraphed his wife saying: 'Am in Ilfracombe. Why?' □

**JULIE SWALES**

*The Cathedral Cat: Stories from Exeter Cathedral* by Nicholas Orme is published by Impress Books, priced £7.99. 978-0-9556-2394-3

PHOTOS: JULIE SWALES



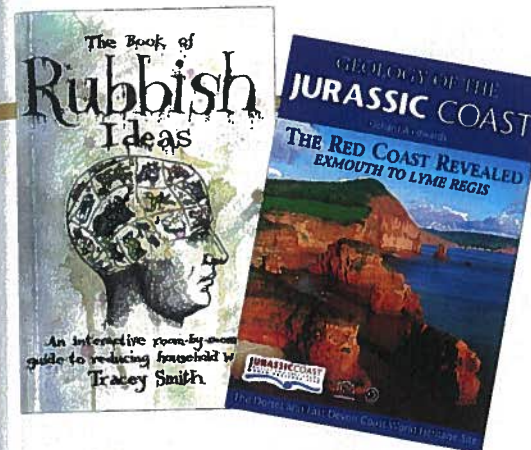
Right A medieval version of a cat flap. This one, in the door to the tower in the north transept, allowed the cat to extend its rounds upstairs

Left One-eyed Tom, the head verger's cat, and the rat he caught... both carvings are in the chapel of St James



# Stocking Fillers

Whether you are looking for a book for a budding geologist or eco-warrior, an artist, photographer or DIYer, here are some great Christmas present ideas



## The Book of Rubbish Ideas

This is a room-by-room guide to reducing household waste. From bedroom (throw a clothes swap party) to bathroom (keep old toothbrushes for cleaning tricky spaces), and study (shred bank statements and add to the compost heap) to kitchen (join a local veg box scheme), there are loads of ideas here for cutting through the clutter.

By Tracey Smith. Sawdays £6.99. 978-1-9061-3613-0

## Geology of the Jurassic Coast

This well-illustrated guide describes the rocks and landscapes of the World Heritage 'Red Coast'. University of Plymouth's Professor Iain Stewart, geologist and TV presenter, writes in his preface: "Travelling the 155km of foreshore that twists and turns its way from Exmouth to Lyme Regis is not simply a journey through some of the most sublime coastal scenery in Britain, it is also time travel of the most fabulous kind... you dip in and out of 265 million years of history." This guide will prove invaluable on such a long journey.

By Dr Richard Edwards. Coastal Publishing, £9.95. 978-0-9544-8454-5

## Using Natural Finishes

From the Westcountry to New Mexico, for centuries buildings have been constructed using the materials to hand. In this book, a follow-up to *Building with Cob*, the authors discuss traditional methods of using lime- and earth-based plasters, renders, paints and washes. Along with detailed recipes and techniques, case

studies and beautiful photographs, whatever size project you are embarking on, from painting a single wall to rendering a straw-baled building, this book will become your bible.

By Adam Weismann and Katy Bryce. Green Books, £20. 978-1-9003-2216-4

## Lost Crafts: Rediscovering Traditional Skills

Our modern age has led to most of us becoming increasingly out of touch with the traditional skills practised by our self-sufficient forebears. Could you, for example, make paper, build a wooden boat, light a fire without matches, or milk a cow? From her home on Dartmoor, Una McGovern has researched 100 of these activities and pastimes and provides enough practical information to attempt them for ourselves. Beautifully illustrated, this is a timely publication as more of us are looking to



relearn the simple, practical skills that will help us towards more sustainable living.

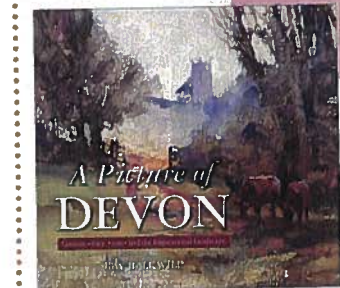
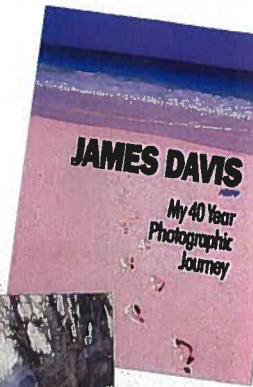
By Una McGovern. Chambers, £25.

978-0-5501-0426-7

## James Davis: My 40-year Photographic Journey

This collection from travel photographer James Davis, now settled in Braunton, features the author's pick of

imagery from his extensive travels over the past 40 years. But these are not perfect photographs of gorgeous



landscapes, rather they are images of incidentals that tell the story of a world that is at the same time beautiful and harsh. People, places and the passage of time are all captured here in an intriguing mix.

By James Davis. £01271 814118, £25.50. 978-0-9558-8050-6

## A Picture of Devon

'Paint what you love, and love what you paint' was the Ruskin dictum and in this book you will find art that expresses the best of our county from painters with a passion for it. Bringing their expertise and creative eye to the rich subject of the Devon landscape, this collection of paintings by 22 present-day artists is bound to inspire you. In addition, the book covers the particular challenges that the various types of landscapes present and provides insight into the artists and their techniques.

By Ray Balkwill. Halsgrove, £34.99. 978-1-8411-4734-5

KATE WOOD