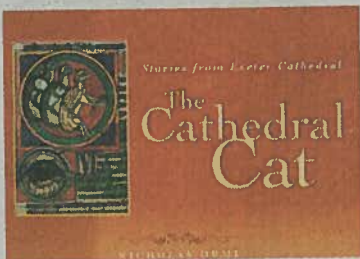


# Cats were within a whisker of a job



**The Cathedral Cat: Stories from Exeter Cathedral**  
By Nicholas Orme  
Impress Books, £9.99

EVERY cathedral has a cat in it, whether by accident or design, but in days of old Exeter's ecclesiastical moggies were considered so important that they were put on the payroll.

As long as there have been large churches, their human guardians have needed the help of cats, not only to keep rodent invasions at bay, but also to scare away birds.

As far back as the 11th century, there was a cat at the abbey of Bec in Normandy where a monk called Lanfranc took its feline hunter away with him, wrapped in a cloth and mewing loudly, to help catch unwanted pests on one of the abbey's estates.

But records of church cats in medieval England are difficult to find, which makes the discovery of references to Exeter Cathedral's cat during the 14th and 15th centuries of special interest. That interest, however, becomes positively intriguing when we learn not merely that a cat existed, but that it held a position as a member of the cathedral staff – with a regular salary.

Leading historian Nicholas Orme, Emeritus Professor of History at Exeter University, found the evidence while reading through old cathedral accounts, written in Latin, which survive from 1305 to 1467. For nearly all this time they include a regular payment of one shilling and one penny – 13d – each quarter of the year to the "custoribus et cato" – the custors (vergers) and the cat.

For a brief time, the payment was actually doubled to two shillings and two pennies – 26d – which the distinguished academic reckons involved the appointment of a second cat to the staff.

The evidence, he says, shows that the cat was a junior adjutant to the custors, but exactly how much of the payment was actually passed on to the moggie is never directly revealed. However, the records do provide a clue, as the professor explains in his enthralling book of stories about the cathedral's past.

In 1384, he says, the treasurer Robert Broke, who was in charge of the cathedral's interior, protested to



The carving of Tom, the cat that killed the rat, can be seen in the chapel of St James

bear his accustomed financial burdens, including an annual payment of 4s 4d "for the cat" (pro cato). The chapter, in their response, tried to make fun of this particular point by referring to the cat as a little one (catulo).

Nevertheless, the treasurer's use of the phrase "for the cat" is copied by some of the accounts, which occasionally substitute it for "and the cat". This suggests that the whole sum was indeed intended for the cat's benefit and worked out at exactly a penny a week.

"The cat would have been required to be partially self-supporting, in order to keep down the birds and rodent, but no respectable cat expects to feed itself entirely and no doubt the weekly penny was spent on cat's meat for its dinners, as a due reward for its services," says Prof Orme.

Unfortunately there are no medieval carvings commemorating the cat's contribution to cathedral life at Exeter. But there is clear evidence that a moggie worked there from the days to the north wall of the

chapel of St James was rebuilt after the Second World War. In the north-west corner of the chapel is a memorial to one-eyed Tom, who belonged to the head vergers, E R Hart, during and after the war.

The cat lost an eye in a fight with an owl for a rat, which is represented on a corbel in the opposite north-east corner of the chapel.

"Tom looks fierce on his carving, but one lady who attended the cathedral as a girl in the 1930s said that he liked people and would come and sit on the seat beside her," the author says.

"The dean and chapter no longer employ a cat officially, although one or two may often be seen about the cathedral precincts. These, like Tom, belong to members of the cathedral staff or else they are interlopers: secular cats from the world beyond the close. The true 'cathedral cat' lives only in the archives."

Sixteen stories make up the book and they relate to places and objects that can still be seen in and around the cathedral or are gleaned from its library and archives.

cursing of Bishop Hugh Oldham by a Crediton witch, and a pair of mourning swans that stand at the tomb of Margaret, Countess of Devon, who died in 1391. The reason, according to the tome, is that her own family, the Bohuns, claimed to be descended from swans!

But not all the tales are from distant times. Soon after the death in 1936 of Lord William Gascoyne-Cecil, then Bishop of Exeter, two



sculptures of bearded saints were put into the cathedral. Both were modelled on the cleric. His chief impact on the diocese, says Prof Orme, was as a personality rather than a leader. Bearded and unpredictable, he looked like a patriarch or prophet.

And he was also absent-minded. Once his wife allegedly received a telegram from him, which pleaded, "Am in Ilfracombe: Why?" And on another occasion, he was supposedly travelling by train when he was asked to show his ticket.

He searched his garments with mounting anxiety and lack of success, until the inspector said kindly: "Don't worry, my lord. We know who you are."

"That's all very well," said the bishop, frowning, "but I need the ticket too. How else do I know where I'm going?"



The cat hole through the tower door in the north transept at Exeter Cathedral. Right – the tomb in St Saviour's Chapel of Bishop Hugh Oldham, who was cursed on his deathbed by a Crediton woman he had tried for witchcraft. Below – the mourning swans at the feet of the Countess of Devon



## Giving a voice to the silent names

THE names on Tavistock's war memorial, like many thousands on similar monuments across the country, are mute testimony to the sacrifices and horrors of the conflicts of the last century.

Now those names have been given a voice thanks to two local historians – Alex Mettler and Gerry Woodcock.

The pair embarked on a journey of discovery to find the human stories behind the names – to paint a picture of those who

**Lest We Forget, The Tavistock Fallen of the Second World War**  
by Alex Mettler and Gerry Woodcock  
**Tavistock Local History Society, £14.95**

Now the 40 who are named as casualties of the Second World War appear in the companion work, Lest We Forget.

record great acts of heroism or qualities of sainthood... Rather our aim was to present the fallen in their local context," say the authors.

"Some people believe that the passage of the years makes it less useful for such events as these to be recorded.

"The authors of this book take the opposite view."

The book sets the scene with a chapter on life in Tavistock during the war, together

