

Historical Closures of Worcester Cathedral

The temporary closure of the cathedral as a result of the pandemic lockdown must be one of the few times in history when it has not been possible to maintain normal services in the cathedral. Two other moments in history where we can see similar disruption were the Interdict during King John's reign, and the state of the cathedral after the civil war.

In the year 1207 Pope Innocent III ordered the Bishops of Worcester, Ely, and London to threaten that he would place England under a sentence of Interdict. King John had clashed with the Pope refusing to accept Stephen Langton as the Archbishop of Canterbury, or even allow him to enter England. It meant that all religious offices were stopped apart from baptism, and confession for the dying. There could be no burials in church ground, and no masses for the souls of the departed.

King John countered by confiscating the land of any ecclesiastic or monastic community who refused to celebrate services during the interdict. Historian Stephen Church in his biography of John noted Worcester Cathedral priory was one of the many places that received a letter of protection from John. He presumes this was because, at least in the beginning, they ignored the Pope's order to cease services and supported the king. With no sign of the king changing course, Pope Innocent excommunicated John in November 1209. It was only when the French king prepared to invade in 1213, that John gave in to the Pope, but even then, it took one more year before the Interdict was fully ended.

Another major time of disruption was at the end of the civil war. The cathedral clergy had been supporters of the Stuart regime and its controversial pre-war religious policies. As such, they were to receive short shrift from the victors who had themselves suffered at the hands of the authorities in previous decades. The cathedral clergy were expelled, a Parliamentary survey of cathedral property was carried out, and Puritan clergy were appointed to live in some of the houses around the Green. The background in the 1650's was one of limited funds and poor governance. Nevertheless, the Puritans maintained services in their style as a letter of 13th April 1653 noted.

The Parliament also appointed a librarian John Severne to oversee the cathedral's library. However, there were no more Anglican services involving choirs or music. The organ was taken down. The liturgical innovations of Archbishop Laud's time were ended. The fabric of the cathedral would also have been damaged during and after the war, by men of both sides, sometimes acting unofficially. Only in 1660 with the restoration of King Charles II did the cathedral services return to the Anglican style.

Thanks to modern technology, in the present time, the clergy have been able to maintain services via the internet for the cathedral congregation. It has also allowed the wider community the opportunity to experience services, when they might not otherwise have visited a church.