

# “Salisbury – A Tale of Two Cities – Part 1”

Talk by Andrew Negus, March 2026



*Model of Old Sarum from Salisbury Cathedral*

Our 2025/26 programme concluded with an entertaining talk by Andrew Negus entitled “Salisbury – a tale of two cities”. The talk is the first of a series of three and is entitled “relocation”.

During the Iron Age the need for farmland, water and defence led to the settlement at what is now known as Old Sarum, where a massive hill fort was developed. In Roman times the fort does not appear to have been used very much but it was later elevated to a “burh” (fortified town) under Alfred the Great; this even included a mint. After 1066 the Norman invaders decided to use the site for a motte and bailey castle. This would have been very large and impressive but little remains today.

Even in its ruinous state the castle shows the remains of an oven and there would have had a great hall with a high table. The garderobes (medieval lavatories) still survive in some form and it looks as if they were non-flushing so would have to be cleared out by some poor individual! The well would have to be extremely deep. A bake house and brew house were also present and King John later added a separate hall on its own.

The Normans also decided to build a cathedral on the site and the bishopric was moved from Sherborne in Dorset. The cathedral was consecrated by Bishop (later Saint) Osmund in 1092 but was severely damaged in a lightning strike very soon after and had to be rebuilt, the work being completed in 1120.

The importance of the castle is shown in 1086 when William the Conqueror chose Sarum as the site to disband his army and in the same year, it was the place where the nobles swore allegiance to the King. However, the closeness of the cathedral and castle caused friction between the soldiers and the clergy. Other problems were caused by the limited water supply, overcrowding and its hilltop location which, unsurprisingly, was very windy.

In 1217 soldiers locked the gates to Sarum, denying access to Bishop Poore. Legend tells us that he was forced to sleep in a barn and in the night was visited by the Virgin Mary who told him to move the cathedral to a new site and to name it in her honour. A bowman was to fire an arrow and where it landed would be the site for the high altar of the new cathedral. The Bishop got a bowman to fire an arrow and it landed two and a half miles away! The legend is that the arrow hit and wounded a deer that ran for two miles before dying. Whatever the reasons for the new site, it was far more suitable with a water supply and access by road and river already established. The big, important, royal palace at Clarendon was only a few miles away.

The new cathedral was built using limestone from Chilmark, about 10 miles away and in 1220 Bishop Poore laid the foundation stone. The new building was enhanced by the gift of 1,400 tons of Purbeck Marble. 650 tons of lead was used during the construction. The east end of the cathedral (the holiest part) was the first part to be finished and this was highly decorated and painted. When the west end was finished in 1258, it was decorated with rows of statues, with the holy spirit in the form of a dove and Christ in majesty being placed at the highest level. Below this was a row of prophets, followed by a row of saints. The lowest row, at ground level, contained statues of bishops and kings.

The main entrance to the cathedral has an alcove for a statue of the Virgin Mary and the whole cathedral is in the same style – Early English. As the cathedral was built on shallow foundations, it originally had a separate bell tower. The stone screen in the quire provided a stunning backdrop. This was later moved into a side chapel and still shows some original paintwork. The quire contains the cathedra (bishop's throne) and a set of stalls, one for each parish in the diocese. The stalls contain a fine set of misericords which are not normally visible to visitors. The carpenters who created these were given a free reign as long as they avoided religious themes, as they were for sitting on!

The cathedral contains a few tombs of non-clerical people. One of the finest is of Sir William de Longespee from 1226. He was a knight of the realm and a major local landowner. Sir William was away campaigning for a long while and his wife resisted the approaches from another landowner. When William returned he was dead within three days. When the tomb was moved in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, a skeleton of a rat was found in Sir William's skull. When tested the rat was found to be full of arsenic, leading to speculation that Sir William had been poisoned by his rival.

Cloisters were added to the new cathedral, despite there being no monks present, probably because the bishop wanted them. One of the bosses shows six revolting dragon-like devils with only four heads between them! Another highlight of the cathedral is the Chapter House. The entrance has carvings depicting the seven deadly sins and a single column of Purbeck marble holds the roof. The walls and seats are all elaborately carved and would originally have been painted. The cathedral's Magna Carta is widely considered to be the finest surviving copy.

By 1263 the new cathedral was complete but it was then decided to add a tower with a spire – the tallest in England, despite the building not being designed to hold the weight. The stone was raised using a "manwheel" (which still survives). By 1310 the spire was complete and, as part of the topping out ceremony, they placed a box containing a piece of cloth, said to be part of the Virgin Mary's clothing. The addition of the tower and spire caused the Purbeck shafts holding the roof to bend leading to the addition of extra supports.

The cathedral close is very large and contains some very fine buildings; some are themselves of great age. A town soon started to develop around the cathedral and a market was established in 1227. The Bishop decided to plan the new city in a grid system and to divert the river to act as a sewer and to create a mill. In 1244 a bridge was built to the south to allow people to come from all directions to trade in Salisbury, the main commodity sold being wool. The new city was a success!

We look forward to the next instalment of Andrew's talks!

Alan Sandford  
April 2026