

The History of Cathedrals Plus

The Pilgrims Association was founded in the very early 1980s by a group of heritage and cathedral representatives called together under the auspices of Lord Sandford and Robert Aagaard. The intention was to create an organisation which could be a voice and advocate for Cathedrals and Greater Churches who welcomed visitors. It was at a time when the 'heritage sector' was beginning to be recognised in the tourism market and there was a general increase in visits to properties which fell under this banner - including cathedrals. It was felt that without representation churches could easily be overlooked by decision making bodies.

The day to day running of the organisation and recruitment of members was undertaken by Dorothy Jamal - a doyen of using cathedrals for education - as secretary, and Jessica Jacobs (representing St Paul's Cathedral) as treasurer. The role of secretary was later taken over by David Earham. Jessica Jacobs continued to be involved for many years, even after being replaced as treasurer, and on her death left provision in her will to pay for the 'Jessica Jacobs Memorial Lecture' at our conferences. The Chairs in those early days included Steven Smalley (Chester), Keith Jones (Exeter and York) and Jonathan Meryick (Canon of Rochester and Dean of Gloucester).

One of the main functions of the Pilgrims Association at that time was the provision of an annual conference. Later a conference looking at education was added, but this was held every two years on the basis that "there was not enough in education to have something to talk about every year" !

By the 1990s it was found that the organisation was being confused with a number of other charities with similar names and it was suggested (possibly by the Charity Commission) that a change of title should be investigated. After much debate the new name of 'Cathedrals Plus' was proposed. The intention of the 'Plus' was to include other buildings and organisations which were members, but not cathedrals. This was not a universally liked change - particularly by those who fell into the 'Plus' group. But the new name was eventually accepted by the group as a whole and also by the Charity Commission. During this transition the secretaryship was passed to Judy Davies at Chester Cathedral. Barry Palmer (Westminster Cathedral) continued as Treasurer.

As the role of education became increasingly important in the life of cathedrals, Education staff began to be recruited as Council members and the Education Conference became an annual event - but still separate from the 'main' conference.

During the 1990's, a trial three-day conference was held in Salisbury Cathedral, with two days for visitor representatives and two days for education representatives - overlapping on the middle day. But eventually it was felt that the best way to proceed was to share expertise and experiences and just have a single annual conference with themes of relevance to both Education and Visitor management colleagues.

During the pandemic, we had to move to one-day online conferences but we returned to an in-person gathering in 2023 in Westminster Abbey, followed by residential at Worcester 2024 and Peterborough in 2025.

Paul Hammans served as Secretary for several years, handing over to Jackie Holderness and Sarah Page following the pandemic. The role of Chair passed from Charles Taylor of Peterborough to John Davies of Wells, then Canon Jane Brooke of Chester and in 2024, to Anthony Cane, Dean of Portsmouth. Tony Austin temporarily took on the role of Hon Treasurer in 2022 until Clark Brydon of Saint Patrick's Cathedral assumed the role in April 2025.

Cathedrals Plus continues to recover its membership numbers following the pandemic and now includes the four UK nations and the Republic of Ireland.