

# The Archbishopric of York

Archbishop Sentamu's period of office as Archbishop of York comes to an end this month, and he is succeeded by Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford. Archbishop Stephen will be Primate of England. The Archbishop of Canterbury, as the more senior of the two, is Primate of All England. These two titles – Primate of England and Primate of All England – which seem to make a rather odd distinction, were adopted in the fourteenth century as part of a solution to a long-running dispute about seniority.

The problem originated with Pope Gregory the Great. When he sent Augustine to England as a missionary, he intended that there should be an archbishop in London and another in York. Both had been prominent 'headquarter cities' in Roman times, and no doubt Gregory's choice reflected some continuing memory of this in Rome at the end of the sixth century. However, times had changed, and England was by now divided into competing small kingdoms. For various reasons, Augustine actually established his mission in the kingdom of Kent (which did not include London), and set up his cathedral within the walls of the old Roman city that served as the capital. We know it as Canterbury; and it is for these historic reasons that in the south we have an Archbishop of Canterbury. England became a unified country in the mid-tenth century, but this was under the Kings of Wessex, whose capital was Winchester. So it remained until London took over the role after the Norman Conquest. At that point, it became expedient for the Archbishops of Canterbury to have a palace near the king: hence Lambeth Palace, where Archbishops of Canterbury still live, diagonally across the Thames from Westminster. In the north, conversion to Christianity took a rather different course and it was not until the early 730s that one of the bishoprics of the kingdom of Northumbria was raised to the status of an archbishopric – the Archbishopric of York.

But who was senior? Gregory had intended that this would be whoever had been in post the longest, so it would vary between Canterbury and York depending on patterns of succession. With York not becoming an archbishopric until the eighth century, that was not put into effect, but the Archbishops of York never forgot Gregory's intention and they periodically rebelled against being subordinated to Canterbury: older, much closer to the seat of power, and in a richer and more densely populated part of the country. Matters rumbled on until the fourteenth century when Pope Innocent VI decreed that the Archbishop of Canterbury should have precedence with the title of Primate of All England, and that York should be styled as Primate of England. There's nothing odd about 'Primate' ('First') for an archbishop since he is the 'first' within his own province. So the Archbishop of York is a Primate of England (that is, a Primate within England, being the Primate of the Northern Province). 'All England', by contrast, signals the supremacy of Canterbury.

Gregory also intended that the northern and southern provinces should be approximately equal in size. They are not, and never have been. The Northern Province has eleven dioceses (plus the diocese of Sodor and Man) and the Southern Province has twenty-nine (plus the diocese of Europe). Both archbishops serve as presidents of General Synod, but when General Synod meets in York in July, it is the Archbishop of York who takes the chair, while the Archbishop of Canterbury does so when it meets in London each February.