



Leeds Liveable City Competition

# ‘Leeds Minster: Keeping Faith with the City’

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## Leeds Minster: Keeping Faith with the City

Leeds Minster stands on the site of the Anglo-Saxon parish church and can justifiably claim to be the place where Leeds began over a thousand years ago. Like much of the east end of Leeds, the church has been rebuilt many times and the present Grade 1 Victorian Church is probably the fifth to have occupied this spot. Even so, it is still the oldest building of any size in this part of the city and as such a key landmark and point of reference.

The question remains as to how it should feature in plans for Eastside? This paper draws on the experience of operating the church and explores how it might contribute to the liveability of the city.

### Historical Setting

By the time that the medieval church was built in the 1330s, the commercial heart of Leeds had already migrated from Kirkgate to Briggate. As business continued its westward migration through the following centuries, the area surrounding the church became characterised by riverside warehouses and tightly packed terraces and the Calls assumed a less than savoury reputation! The church too became less fashionable as the merchants moved out to the suburbs. However, in 1837 a new Vicar of Leeds was appointed who would transform its fortunes. Within four years of his arrival, the Reverend Dr Walter Farquhar Hook had replaced the crumbling old church with a new one – at the time, larger than anything built by the Church of England since St. Paul’s Cathedral. It was dedicated to serving the people of Leeds and especially those who occupied the crowded streets which made-up the Victorian east end. Mission churches and boys clubs were founded and great efforts made to serve the area. ‘Woodbine Willie’, the famous wartime padre, learned his calling in those same Leeds streets. Hook, went on to build over twenty church in Leeds, sub-dividing the once sprawling parish as he did so, until the Leeds Parish occupied a relatively small geographical area to the centre and east end of the city.



In the absence of an Anglican Cathedral in Leeds, the church played an important role for the city and Diocese. It still does, but the reshaping of the Leeds townscape and the development of more complex transport systems has made the site somewhat isolated. The building of the railway embankment in 1859 cut straight through the graveyard and obscures a view of the church that would have been the focal point when looking down Kirkgate. Slum clearance relocated the families that lived in the crowded terraces on the doorstep of the church, and the ‘urban highways’ completed the boxing-in of the church by river, rail and road.

In recent years, the renovation of riverside warehouses into offices and apartments means that the area is smarter than ever, and a young resident population enjoys the benefits of city living. But a good deal of dysfunctionality remains, principally the intrusive road traffic, the disconnection of the area and the poor quality of the public realm. These problems have been well-documented.

Here are some reflections on these issues and some possible solutions with particular reference to the Leeds Minster site.

### 1. Landmarking the Minster

Eastside marks one of the historic entry points to mediaeval Leeds and the East Bar marker stone set into the wall of the graveyard is one of the few tangible reminders that remain. However, Leeds Minster still acts as a gateway which reinforces a sense of arrival for visitors coming to Leeds from the south and east, with clear views of the church for those arriving by car, train or coach. With support from local businesses and the Waterfront Enhancement Scheme, the exterior lighting of the church was renewed in 2019, which enables this sense of arrival to be maintained after dark.



Sightlines of the Minster are offered from Kirkgate, Leeds Bridge and the ring road and these should be maintained and enhanced where possible to make the most of its role as one of the place-markers for the Eastside area.

### 2. Tourism and destination management.

The east end is not an obvious focal area for visitors and is seldom presented as such. However, our experience is that the hotels situated on the waterfront and the ring road are popular with leisure visitors whose walking route into the city passes through these eastern fringes of the city. In fact, at least half of the visitors to Leeds Minster who call-in during the day are from overseas, a daily reminder that historic churches are a popular draw for visitors. This offer is complemented by pubs, cafes and restaurants in the Calls area as well as Leeds Market, showing the potential for the area to be developed as a visitor destination. A similar cluster of culture and

commerce is on offer around the Playhouse and Wardrobe, albeit with a greater emphasis on the night-time economy.

While the history of this part of the city goes back to the earliest days of Leeds, more interpretation could be incorporated into the public realm to give a greater sense of place and heritage.

### 3. Amenities

Great destinations also need an attractive setting if people are expected to enjoy spending time there. While people enjoy the experience of being in a church, theatre or restaurant, being outdoors in Eastside is much less positive. The road noise, pollution and the anxiety associated with being so close to fast moving traffic does not encourage people to feel relaxed outdoors. The public realm is designed for those passing through (usually at speed) and not for anyone who might be inclined to stay a while (why would they?). Public outdoor space is sparse or somehow privatised within inward-looking developments.

Proposals to reduce the area devoted to traffic and create more liveable public spaces are to be welcomed. The immediate environs of the Minster are a case in point. The churchyard behind the Minster is a small greenspace with mature trees and shelter from the wind, but Penny Pocket Park between the Minster and the Bus Station has an air of neglect and is more often than not used as a hangout by people living on the streets. Investment and management to make this a safe place for all as a Minster park or gardens, with the possibility of creating natural habitats is an aspiration which could complement measures to reduce traffic flows.

### 4. Animating the area

Leeds Light Night shows the potential to reimagine buildings and public spaces. For the last two years, Leeds Minster has been a partner in this initiative, attracting over a thousand people over the two evenings in early October. This shows that people will come to the area if there are positive things to see and do which are well marketed and presented. Animation activity of this nature and public programming are essential to reclaim the public realm and challenge public expectations of what they may find.



### 5. Parish Connections

Taking a boarder view of the area, the parish boundary continues northwards along the A61 on Regent Street beyond the A64 and into Burmantofts and Lincoln Green. The nature of these arterial roads is such that this has reinforced a very different

character to communities beyond the A64 which are typically poorer and more culturally diverse than the those living in the newer apartments closer to the river.

St. Peters Primary School on Cromwell St. has close relations with the church and regularly takes pupils on the fifteen-minute walk to the Minster, negotiating bridges, car parks and pelican crossings on their way. They demonstrate that it is possible to negotiate a way through the district and more should follow their example, but improved walking routes and less road traffic would help to bring more connectivity to the parish and our local communities.

6. Linkages to the waterfront  
Looking to the south, further connectivity can and should be made with the south bank of the river. The character of Dock St is very similar to the Calls, and more could be done to reinforce the connections between the two. The redevelopment of the Tetley site will further inform 'what works' and the planned incorporation of green spaces is to be welcomed.



### **How do others do it?**

There are numerous examples of cities that have attractive outdoors spaces the support the visitor economy as well as creating great places to live. Here are a few examples where churches and projects which provide a focus for liveable city centres:

City of London Churchyards

<https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/services/environment-and-planning/planning/heritage-and-design/Documents/hes-churchyards-intro.pdf>

Birmingham Cathedral Square

<http://www.birminghamcathedral.com/cathedralsquare/>

Leeds Anglican Diocese

<https://www.leeds.anglican.org/environment>

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