

# Cathedral city conferencing

**PHILIP COOKE** OFFERS A VIEW FROM ENGLAND'S CONFERENCE CLOISTER

Conference planners searching for an inspiring venue won't go far wrong if they choose one of England's cathedral cities – places of great geographical, spiritual and historical significance that have been at the heartbeat of human affairs since the dawn of recorded history. These cities form a distinguished group. Not every city has a cathedral, not every cathedral is in a city and not every cathedral city can claim to be historic and, while there are only about 20 such cities in the UK, the strength of their names alone makes them instantly recognisable.

The list of such cities includes Canterbury, Chester, Durham, Exeter, Gloucester, Lincoln, Oxford, Salisbury, Worcester and York.

Organisers from overseas should know these cathedral cities are surrounded by beautiful English countryside, are dominated by the soaring towers of their Norman or medieval cathedrals and have a historic core full of interesting hotels, restaurants, shops, theatres, museums and marketplaces.

Cathedral cities in England typically contain between 100,000 and 150,000 fairly prosperous, well-educated and welcoming residents and, as they are the administrative centres of rural counties, they also house an array of sporting, cultural, commercial, governmental and financial institutions.

All these places are accessible because the national rail and road systems were designed to serve their commercial



needs. Before that, ancient roads and trackways brought medieval pilgrims and travellers, to their gates and before that the Roman Legions.

Many meeting planners will be familiar with these places through the pens of Chaucer, Dickens, Hardy and Shakespeare and from contemporary film and TV. You simply can't buy this kind of brand understanding and status.



**Top:** Blackfriars Priory and, above, Gloucester Cathedral

## Interweaving space and time

Something special happens when people meet in historic buildings, especially those that have been used for human congress for hundreds of years.

The acoustics might be lousy, the floor uneven and the heating inefficient, but conferences held in places like Oxford's 13th century colleges, York's 15th century Mansion House and

Salisbury's 18th century Guildhall (complete with ghost) will have a special atmosphere that somehow reminds us of the transient nature of things – and of our lives – and this sense of perspective can be very helpful when meeting others and trying to resolve disputes and complex issues. This is really what makes historic cathedral cities special. These buildings have changed, but essentially are unchanging and act upon us in all four dimensions, providing reference points for our lives in both time and space.

Of course, there are problems to consider, and many of our historic cathedral cities are being threatened by overdevelopment, overcrowding and, especially, inadequate traffic management systems that are still based on narrow medieval streets.

In response to these pressures an organisation called the Historic Cathedral Cities Alliance (HCCA) was formed last year with the aim of protecting and enhancing historic cathedral cities and helping resolve the economic, cultural and social pressures that threaten them.

Surely, the conflict between economic growth and sustainable development grows ever more challenging, but cathedral cities' popularity as MICE destinations must be regarded as a good thing, as is the time-honoured tradition of hospitality within them. ■

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