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English Lesson Dean Of Westminster Abbey Speaks Here

BY KIT HUFFMAN

The Lexington branch of the English Speaking Union played host to an eminent member of the English-speaking world Tuesday night, March 18.

The Very Rev. Dr. John Hall, dean of Westminster Abbey, spoke about the history, architecture and mission of the abbey to about 100 members and invited guests. In his slide-illustrated talk, Hall noted that the abbey is a "Royal Peculiar," meaning that it is responsible to the sovereign alone, as distinct from St. Paul's Cathedral, for example, which is the hub for parish churches in the area. He spoke of the abbey's three-fold role: to serve the sovereign, now Queen Elizabeth II; to welcome the millions of visitors who come to see the abbey's sculpture, paintings and stained glass, as well as the famed Poet's Corner; and, most importantly, to continue to function as a place of worship.

Hall's appearance in Lexington was the result of chance circumstance, followed by initiative. Last October, Joy Harris, an active member and past president of the Lexington ESU, traveled with fellow member Carolyn Worrell to Seattle, Wash., to attend the national ESU convention. There, they met Hall and his assistant Valerie Humphrey, who is director of the abbey foundation, a fundraising arm. Learning that Hall and Humphrey would be returning in March to the U.S., with Hall scheduled to visit Washington, D.C., and Richmond, Harris soon invited the duo to travel across the Blue Ridge to Lexington.

"We were very lucky to have the opportunity for the dean to speak to us," said Rose Gordon, president of the Lexington ESU. Noting that the branch

holds about seven events a year, she said that Hall's talk, while not originally scheduled, was a highlight for the group, as well as generating interest from the community at large.

The talk took place at Virginia Military Institute's Moody Hall, followed by a reception and dinner. Afterwards, Hall spent the night at the home of the Rev. David and Melissa Cox, and Humphrey stayed at the home of Worrell.

Hall became dean of Westminster Abbey in 2006, after serving for eight years as chief education officer for the Church of England. Education remains a chief interest, and the first of three projects he initiated was an education center at the abbey, completed in 2010. The other two projects were the abbey's first-ever restaurants, providing a place where visitors can "refresh themselves," he said; and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries, to be located high up in the triforium. Work on the galleries begins this year, with a hoped-for opening in 2018. All of the additional facilities are important, Hall said, noting that the abbey had 1.35 million visitors just last year.

The first church on the site was a Benedictine church dating to the 10th century. The present building was begun by King Henry III in 1245. Westminster Abbey and its antecedent have been the location for all of the royal coronations since that of William I in 1066. Most royal weddings have also taken place in the abbey, including the 2011 marriage of Kate Middleton and Prince William, which Hall helped officiate.

Remarking about the George C. Marshall Museum next door to Moody Hall, Hall said that

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Image courtesy of www.london-gb.com



THE VERY REV. Dr. John Hall (fourth from left), dean of Westminster Abbey, gathers with members of the Lexington branch of the English Speaking Union on March 18 before giving an illustrated talk about the history, architecture and mission of the abbey. With him are (from left) Rose Gordon, president of the Lexington ESU; Melissa Cox, who, with her husband the Rev. David Cox (fifth from left), was host of Hall for his overnight stay; Joy Harris, past president of the Lexington ESU who initiated Hall's visit; and Valerie Humphreys, director of the abbey foundation. (Kit Huffman photo)