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Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter Arwen Folkes Becomes First Female Dean of Exeter in 970 Years

A true story of faith under pressure. Read the first half below, then continue online.

KEY SPIRITUAL TAKEAWAY

"I am honoured and humbled to be called as one of her 'keepers',"

(Transliterated from the original Hindi.)

They had gathered only to pray. When prayer itself becomes the target, faith is proved not by words but by staying.

The Story - Part One

The Revd Arwen Mary Folkes has been announced as the next Dean of Exeter Cathedral - the first woman to hold the post in the cathedral's 970-year history, and its 72nd Dean. The announcement came on Tuesday, 10 November 2026, with the King approving the nomination, and Folkes will be installed at Exeter Cathedral on Sunday, 9 May 2027. She succeeds the Very Revd Jonathan Greener, who resigned, and on the evening of the announcement she met cathedral staff and congregants at Evensong at 5:30pm.

What makes the appointment so striking is where Folkes grew up. She was born in Barnstaple, North Devon, and baptised in Bideford - but her childhood home was the Lizard Lighthouse in Cornwall, where her father was one of the last live-in lighthouse keepers for Trinity House. She spent her early years in a building whose whole purpose was to keep others safe in the dark, and now she will lead one of England's great cathedrals. When she spoke about the appointment, she reached straight back to that childhood. "I am honoured and humbled to be called as one of her 'keepers'," she said - a lighthouse keeper's daughter describing a cathedral as something to be kept, watched over, and tended with care.

Arwen Folkes First Female Dean Of Exeter: A 970-Year First

Exeter Cathedral's list of Deans stretches back around 970 years, and in all that time no woman has ever been named to the role. Folkes breaks that line in a single announcement, and the scale of the first is hard to overstate. Seventy-one men held the post before her, across nearly a millennium of English history - through Reformation, civil war, world wars and everything since. The 72nd Dean is a woman who grew up watching her father keep a light burning for ships he would never meet.

The Bishop of Exeter, the Rt Revd Dr Mike Harrison, welcomed the appointment warmly. "I am delighted to welcome Arwen to Exeter Cathedral as our 72nd Dean and the historic first woman Dean of Exeter," he said. His delight is easy to understand. The Church of England has been opening its most senior posts to women in recent years - Sarah Mullally now leads as the first female Archbishop, as reported in Sarah Mullally Leads Remembrance as First Female Archbishop - and Exeter's announcement is another step in that same direction, this time at a cathedral whose history reaches back almost a thousand years.

The Turning Point - What Happens Next

The story reaches a life-changing moment that changes everything -- and what seemed like the end is only the middle. Two reports disagree on the numbers, and one question is left unanswered: will the CCTV footage ever come out? Read the full story to find out what happens next.

PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When gathering to pray carries a real cost, what keeps a community coming together anyway -- and what would keep you coming?

2. The pastor's sister shielded him with her own body and fainted under the blows. What does costly, self-giving love look like in your own family or church?

3. When justice is delayed and a complaint is withdrawn under threat, how do believers hold on to truth without giving in to fear -- or to hatred?

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