

The Dissolution of the monasteries in Tudor Nottinghamshire
A seven-week scheme of work for key stage 2 and 3 history
Lesson 6 –
What was the Dissolution of the monasteries and why did it take place? (1 of 2)

Objectives - The children will learn:

to identify and describe the reasons for some of the main events and situations in the period studied.
to make links between some of the main events and situations in the period studied.
to select, organise (upper and intermediate levels only) and to present historical information.

Resources

Information sheet – ‘Why did the Dissolution of the monasteries take place?’
Picture of Henry VIII from www.abcgallery.com/H/holbein/holbein59.html (Accessed 18/7/05);
Picture of Thomas Cromwell from www.englishhistory.net/tudor/citizens/cromwell.html (Accessed 18/7/05);
Information sheet for upper level, writing frame for intermediate level, playscript for lower level;
Key vocabulary word list written on pieces of paper for classroom display;
Plain paper for the children’s own playscripts or the playscript provided.

Teaching activities

This activity can be carried out at three levels. (More detail on this period is given in the ‘England’s monasteries – 1066 to the Dissolution’ section on pages 120-124.)

Upper level

Introduction

Read the ‘Information sheet - Why did the Dissolution of the monasteries take place?’ to the class or work through an enlarged copy as a shared reading activity. Discuss the text while reading it, asking what is happening, why is it happening and how the characters might feel. Ask ‘Who are the most important characters in the ‘story’?’ (Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell, House of Lords in Parliament, abbots, prioresses, royal commissioners.) Stick the character names from the key vocabulary list on the board as they are identified, as well as the pictures of Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell.

Main activity – Groups of 3

Tell the children they are going to work in groups of three to write, redraft and perform a playscript telling the story of either:

- Sections A, B and C, taking on the characters of Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell and an archbishop in parliament.
- Section D, taking on the characters of Thomas Cromwell, a royal commissioner and an abbot or prioress.
- Section E, taking on the characters of Thomas Cromwell, a royal commissioner and an abbot or prioress.

The children will need copies of the appropriate sections from the ‘Information sheet - Why did the Dissolution of the monasteries take place?’

The Dissolution of the monasteries in Tudor Nottinghamshire
A seven-week scheme of work for key stage 2 and 3 history
Lesson 6 –

What was the Dissolution of the monasteries and why did it take place? (2 of 2)

Intermediate level

Read the 'Writing frame' to the class or work through an enlarged copy as a shared reading activity. Discuss the text while reading it, asking what is happening, why is it happening and how the characters might feel. Ask 'Who are the people in the 'story'?' (Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell, abbot, prioress, monk, nun.) Stick the captions from the key vocabulary list on the board as they are identified, as well as the pictures of Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell. Tell the children they are going to work in groups of 4-5 to write and perform a playscript telling part of the Dissolution story. Give each group the relevant sections from the writing frame on page 65 to guide them. They do not need the 'Why did the Dissolution of the monasteries take place?' sheets.

Lower level

Read through and discuss the playscript provided, asking what is happening, why is it happening and how the characters might feel. The children then practice performing this in groups of 4 (Henry, Thomas, Commissioner, other parts).

Using ICT in this lesson - Alternative main activity

Use a word processor to produce and redraft the playscript. Use techniques such as bold, underlining and changing font size to make the script easy to read. Import pictures from the national portrait gallery website: www.npg.org.uk (accessed 18/7/05). This will give an idea of what the characters may have looked like and aid getting into role. Suitable pictures can be found by using 'search the collection' then 'advanced search' and entering, Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell, abbot, archbishop or bishop under 'name of person' or 'profession'. Dates given for the sitter's birth and death can be used to find people who would have been alive at the Dissolution (1536-1540).

Key vocabulary

playscript, writing frame, Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell, House of Lords, parliament, abbot, prioress, royal commissioners, archbishop, bishop, monk, nun

Plenary / assessment questions

Choose groups to perform to the rest of the class. Ask if any of the characters should have behaved in a different way or shown different feelings. How should they have behaved and why? Ask why the 'Dissolution' was called this. Make a link with breaking a solid up and making it seem to disappear by dissolving it.

A.

Henry VIII talks to Thomas Cromwell about his problems.

Henry's problems

- Henry needs money to defend England against France, which is a Catholic country. France might attack because Henry has divorced his first wife, Catherine of Aragon and married Anne Boleyn after the Pope said he could not.
- Henry needs money so he can do what he wants without having to ask parliament if they will give or lend him the money.
- Henry needs money to help pay for wars in Scotland and Ireland.
- Henry needs money to pay back what he had borrowed to build new palaces and castles.
- Parliament does not want to give or lend Henry money every time he wants it.

B.

An answer to Henry's problems

Henry and Thomas Cromwell talk about a solution to Henry's problems.

They decide that the monasteries have lots of money so Henry could take it off them.

Most people outside the monasteries would not mind because:

- The monasteries are not as popular as they used to be with rich people. Many people think the monks are breaking religious rules. To be close to God they have to work hard and be poor. They are not poor and they do not work very hard so they are not much closer to God than anyone else. This means that fewer rich people are giving them money (endowments) to pray for them. People can pray themselves and be just as close to God.
- The monasteries are unpopular with many poor people. The monks are getting less money from the rich in endowments so they need to get money from somewhere else. In the early 1500's they started to charge people who rented land off them more money.
- Many monasteries are small. What they own is only being used by a few monks or nuns. The things they own could be used better, so it makes sense to close these small monasteries and let the monks and nuns go to other monasteries if they want to. The church had already closed and sold some of its own small monasteries. It spent the money on building colleges and schools, and nobody minded.

These could be used as excuses to get rid of the monasteries.

C.

But

Taking on all the monasteries at once could be a problem as there are nearly 1000 of them in England and 30 out of 70 members of the House of Lords in parliament are bishops or archbishops in charge of groups of monasteries. If Henry wants to close any monasteries, parliament will have to agree.

D.

So Henry decides to close the small monasteries first

Henry puts Thomas Cromwell in charge of getting rid of the monasteries.

Thomas Cromwell sends royal commissioners to all the monasteries in 1535 and 1536 to find out what they own, how much money they have coming in, and to report on what is happening inside the monasteries.

The royal commissioners report back to Thomas Cromwell and the king in 1536. They say the monks and nuns are seriously breaking the rules they should be living by. The king asks Parliament to pass the Act of Suppression. This says that all the small monasteries, those with an income of less than £200 a year, should be closed. This is about 30% (3 out of every 10) of the monasteries. The bishops and archbishops in parliament agree to this because none of them run a small monastery so the changes do not affect them very much.

The monks and nuns can move to one of the larger monasteries of their order if they want to, and are given some money so they can get there as well. The person in charge of the monastery is given a pension and can retire. Any of the ordinary monks or nuns that do not want to go to another monastery can leave and will be given some money to help them start a new life.

Henry makes sure that nobody will lose out because of the changes so most people in the small monasteries do not complain much.

After these monasteries are closed the king takes all the buildings, land, money and everything else they owned for himself.

Some of the small monasteries stay open because they paid some money to the king. In Nottinghamshire, Newstead Abbey, Beauvale Priory and Wallingwells Nunnery did this.

They thought if they paid they would be allowed to stay open forever but they were all dissolved three years later in 1539.

E.

Then Henry decides to close the rest of the monasteries

In October 1536 there is a rebellion against Henry in the north and east of England, but not in Nottinghamshire. This is because Henry has dissolved most of the smaller monasteries.

The rebels open some of the small monasteries again and some of the larger monasteries help them to do it. Henry is very angry. In early 1537 he has the leaders of the rebellion, and the abbots and prioresses that have helped them arrested. Some of them are put to death for treason and the monasteries of the abbots and prioresses that helped the rebels are closed.

Henry thinks this is a good chance to get rid of the rest of the monasteries and take their money.

In 1538 Henry orders Thomas Cromwell to send the royal commissioners out again to visit all the monasteries that are left, both big and small. Their job is to persuade the abbot or prioress to give their monasteries to the king. They do not have to do this but:

- **If the abbot or prioress agrees quickly** all the monks or nuns will get pensions and things like the monasteries furniture, books, tablecloths and kitchen equipment will be divided up between them. They might also get some cash to spend straight away and the monks might be given a new job as a vicar.
- **If the abbot or prioress does not agree quickly** the people in the monastery might only get enough money each to buy some new clothes for their new life outside the monastery.
- **If the abbot or prioress does not agree at all** they might be put to death for treason, like those that helped the rebels, and the monks or nuns will have to leave with nothing.

By the end of 1540 the royal commissioners have persuaded all the monasteries and nunneries in England to give everything they owned to the king and to be dissolved.

Lesson 6 - Why did the Dissolution of the monasteries take place?

Writing frame

A. Henry VIII talks to Thomas Cromwell about his problems.

Henry's problems

- Henry needs money to protect England if France attacks because he has divorced Catherine of Aragon when the Pope said he could not.
- Henry needs money so he can buy whatever he wants without having to ask parliament for the money.
- Henry needs money to help pay for wars in Scotland and Ireland.
- Henry needs money to pay back what he has borrowed to build new palaces and castles.

B. An answer to Henry's problems

Henry and Thomas Cromwell talk to each other. They decide that the monasteries have lots of money so Henry could take it off them.

Lots of people outside the monasteries will not mind because:

- Many rich people think the monks have too much money.
- Many poor people living on monastery land think the monks are charging them too much rent. Other poor people think this as well.

These could be used as excuses to get rid of the monasteries.

C. So Henry decides to close the small monasteries first

In 1535 Henry puts Thomas Cromwell in charge of getting rid of the monasteries. Thomas Cromwell says the monks and nuns in the small monasteries are seriously breaking the rules they should be living by. Henry says they must close.

The monks and nuns in the small monasteries are given a choice. They can move to a larger monastery if they want to. If they do not want to go to another monastery they are given some money to help them start a new life.

When these monasteries are closed the king takes all the buildings, land, money and everything else they own for himself.

D. Then Henry decides to close the rest of the monasteries

In 1538 Henry orders Thomas Cromwell to give the abbot or prioress of the large monasteries reasons why they should give their monastery to the king. They do not have to do this but:

- **If the abbot or prioress agrees quickly** all the monks or nuns will get some money to live on, as well as some of the monastery's things to keep for themselves. Some of the monks might be given a new job as a vicar.
- **If the abbot or prioress does not agree quickly** the monks or nuns might only get enough money each to buy some new clothes for their new life outside the monastery.
- **If the abbot or prioress does not agree at all** they might be put to death for treason, and the monks or nuns will have to leave with nothing.

The abbot or prioress might ask the monks or nuns if they think the monastery should be given to the king straight away or not.

By the end of 1540 all the monasteries have been given to the king and he has closed them.

Playscript

Scene 1 – At the palace

Henry VIII talks to Thomas Cromwell about his problems

Henry (In a loud voice) – Thomas, Thomas Cromwell, come here, I need your help.

Thomas Cromwell (Enters quickly) – Here I am your majesty, how can I help you?

Henry – Thomas I need more money. Now I've divorced Catherine of Aragon the French might attack England. I must have money to build ships and castles to protect us. I need money to fight wars in Scotland and Ireland. I need money to pay back what I have already borrowed. Where will I get it all from?

Thomas – You could ask parliament to lend you some money. They have done before.

Henry – But what if they don't this time? Anyway, I don't want to keep borrowing money off them. I want lots of money of my own. But where can I get it?

Thomas – How about taking it off the monasteries. We can sell their things and make lots of money.

Henry – But what about parliament? We can't take the monasteries money and things away from them unless parliament agrees. We will have to find a good reason to close the monasteries down.

(Pause while Henry thinks.)

Henry - Send commissioners to all the monasteries. Find out how much money they've got and if they're doing anything wrong. I want an excuse to close them down.

Thomas – Yes your majesty.

Playscript

Scene 2 – In parliament

The small monasteries get closed down

Thomas (To parliament) – My lords, the commissioners have visited all the monasteries in England. They have found the monks in the small monasteries are breaking their rules. Some are not saying enough prayers. Some even have children. These monasteries should be closed and everything they own should be given to the king.

Parliament – We agree.

Henry (Quietly) – Well done Thomas, now I have more money of my own. But I want more. Now we must close the large monasteries. Send the commissioners out again. Tell them to persuade the large monasteries to close and give me all their money and everything they own.

Scene 3 – At a large monastery

The large monasteries get closed down

Commissioner – I have come with a message from the king. He wants you to close down and give him everything you own just like the small monasteries did. If you agree straight away he will give you some money to live on every year for the rest of your life. If you do not agree straight away you will get less money. If you take too long to agree we will take everything off you anyway and give you nothing. Now make your mind up.

Abbot – I have no choice, you can have everything.

Commissioner – You have made the right decision. You must go now. You will get your money to live on later.

Henry – Excellent, now all the monasteries in England are closed and I have all their money and everything that used to belong to them.