

England's Monasteries – 1066 to the Dissolution

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Following the Norman Conquest, England experienced 300 years of monastic growth up to the middle of the 14th century. The resulting 650 monasteries in England, together with around 200 friaries and 150 nunneries housed around 14,000 men and 3000 women. Most of the houses in Nottinghamshire were relatively small; however their study still reveals an important part of mediaeval and early Tudor life.

The monastic day was divided between prayer, work and study under a rule based on personal poverty, chastity, and obedience to the head of the religious house who acted in the role of Christ.

The various religious orders followed one of two rules or a variation on them. One of these was given by St. Augustine and was followed in some form by Augustinian (Newstead, Thurgarton, Worksop, Felley, Shelford), Premonstratensian (Welbeck) and Gilbertine (Mattersey) canons who established themselves near where they could work with the poor and sick. The other major rule was that of St. Benedict, followed in various forms by Benedictine (Blyth, Wallingwells), Cistercian (Rufford), Carthusian (Beauvale) and Cluniac (Lenton) monks. These monks sought more remote locations so they could benefit mankind through prayers on their behalf.

The canons and most of the monks lived communally inside a monastery constructed around a central cloister. The Carthusian monks by contrast followed a more isolated life in individual cells around their cloister. Here they lived, ate, worked and largely prayed alone, only coming together for three of the nine daily church services. The effect the different lifestyles had on the design of the monastic buildings can be seen by comparing the plan of the Cistercian Rufford Abbey on page 40 with that of a Carthusian Priory (Charterhouse) on page 129 and 130. Apart from the living accommodation the most noticeable difference is the size of the church. All Carthusian churches were small revealing the less prominent role they played compared to those of other monastic orders.

The range of monastic orders developed over the centuries as a reaction against some existing orders becoming wealthy and less strict in following the austere way of life set down by St. Augustine or St. Benedict. An example of this was the creation of the Cistercian order in the 12th century as a reaction against the increasing affluence of the Benedictine's and an attempt to return to a stricter interpretation of St. Benedict's rule. However the social conditions in England from the Norman conquest to the late 13th century resulted in the monastic orders, including the Cistercians, becoming wealthy despite their original intentions. Examples of this wealth can be seen in the allowance given to the prior of Blyth (p.131) and the level of endowments given to various houses, for example Lenton (p.133).

The Nottinghamshire monasteries were nearly all founded during the 12th century by Norman lords.

Supporting monasteries with foundation charters and endowments, particularly of land and churches with their incomes, was popular for two reasons. The foundation of a monastery brought social prestige while also guaranteeing perpetual prayer for the souls of the benefactors, their ancestors and descendents as at Beauvale (p.127). These prayers were considered important, particularly by the Norman lords following the conquest, as they meant forgiveness of sins and access to heaven. The power of prayer was believed to be particularly potent when performed by the poor, particularly monks, whose voluntary poverty brought them even closer to God. The individual sections on Lenton (p.133) and Welbeck (p.142) give clear examples of prayer being bought. Endowment of a religious house 'In short...bestowed the accolade of social respectability in this world and the ultimate insurance policy in the next' (Marcombe and Hamilton (Eds) 1998, p.3).

Many of Nottinghamshire's religious houses were built in the west of the county on the geologically distinct area of Sherwood sandstone that is not particularly suitable for growing crops. This suggests that founding patrons usually gave poor quality agricultural land in the

foundation charters; despite this they always made sure there was a water supply. As much of the land was unsuitable for growing crops many of the monasteries became directly involved in running their own livestock farms, particularly sheep as wool production was a lucrative mediaeval industry. Rufford, Thurgarton, Worksop and Welbeck were all involved in large scale sheep farming.

The popularity of the monasteries and endowments to them continued throughout the 13th century. However, this century also saw the start of monastic decline.

In 1279 King Edward I passed the Statute of Mortmain requiring a Crown licence before gifts of land could be made to a religious house. Before the licence was granted a fine had to be paid and any land that was given without a licence was forfeit to the Crown. This effectively reduced gifts of land to religious houses.

Natural events also adversely affected the monks. Following the mediaeval warm period Britain was affected by the severe winters and poor summers of the little ice age from the late 1200's to around 1500. The consequences of this period included frequent famine due to poor harvests and an increase in disease.

In the late 13th century an epidemic of sheep scab affected much of England. Many monasteries were successful sheep farmers and had entered into agreements where they were paid several years in advance for their wool. However if they could not provide the wool they had to either return the money they had received or else purchase the wool from another source. As most monasteries had already spent the money they had been paid in advance, and buying available wool would have been more expensive than returning the payment, they accrued debts as in the case of Lenton (p.133).

The Hundred Years War with France from 1337 to 1453 resulted in financial hardship for many monasteries as their property was temporarily taken over by the crown to finance the war in progress. Monasteries with direct French control such as Blyth (p.130) and Lenton (p.133) fared particularly badly. Blyth priory had to bear the expense of the prior travelling to London to plead for the return of property each time it was taken by the crown and the war was still in progress. If the property was returned this carried the extra expense of a fine.

In 1348 the first major outbreak of the Black Death swept the country causing the population to collapse by at least a third and leading to widespread social change. The lack of tenants for rented farmland reduced cash income as well as the services provided in part payment. These were often in the form of labour on demesne land, the land the monasteries farmed themselves, as can be seen in the sections on Blyth (p.130) and Thurgarton (p.140). Rents, the income from endowments and food prices also fell, further reducing monastic income. Conversely wages rose to increase expenses while existing obligations such as supporting corrodians (Blyth p.130), annuants (Beauvale p.127), showing hospitality to travellers (Worksop p.145 and Blyth p.131) and providing alms (Worksop p.145 and Felley p.132) remained. There were further outbreaks of plague across the country in 1361 and the 1370's exacerbating the situation.

The number of monks would also have been reduced by the plague, 'nearly a third of the beneficed clergy in the deanery of Retford were replaced between March 1349 and March 1350, suggesting that the Black Death was rampant in north Nottinghamshire' (Marcombe and Hamilton (Eds) 1998 p.71). Replacing the monastic population that had succumbed to the plague was difficult and in many places impossible. The increasing cost of labour made a secular career seem more attractive to many potential monks and lay brothers. This further increased the monasteries expenses as they now had to employ more servants. From the late 14th century onwards attitudes to the monasteries also began to change due to the growth of Protestantism. This attacked the fundamental reasons for supporting the Catholic Church of which monks were a part.

Between 1374 and 1384 the Oxford theologian John Wycliffe argued that the Catholic Church behaved in an unscriptural way. This included the taking of money to pardon sins, the veneration of saint's relics and poor moral standards among the clergy. This last point in particular was later used as a main justification for the Dissolution.

Wycliffe and his followers were eventually crushed by the Pope with Crown support. However in 1517 Wycliffe's ideas were resurrected by a German monk called Martin Luther. Luther made many criticisms of the Pope and the Catholic Church, two of which have particular relevance here. The first of these concerned the practice of pardoning sins in exchange for money. This included prayers by monks for the souls of benefactors and forgiveness of sins in return for the giving of endowments for the foundation or support of monasteries.

These endowments which paid for expensive and highly visible building programmes among other things also eventually undermined the position of many monks. They were no longer perceived to be voluntarily poor and therefore closer to God through their imitation of the poverty of Christ. This meant that their prayers were considered by many to be no more effective than anyone else's.

Luther also criticised the Pope as Wycliffe had done for restricting people's access to the bible by not allowing it to be translated into languages other than Latin or Greek. Like Wycliffe, Luther argued that God interacted with humans through the bible. If its message was mediated by a worldly and therefore sinful church, such as one that became rich through selling the pardoning of sins for money, then this message would be tainted and unable to reveal the true path to salvation.

These criticisms attacked some of the fundamental reasons for supporting the Catholic church of which monks and nuns were a part.

Henry VIII initially disagreed with Luther and wrote a book attacking his views in 1521. As a result of this the Pope granted Henry the title 'Defender of the Faith'.

However, soon afterwards Henry began to develop Protestant sympathies, but for political rather than religious reasons.

In September 1527 the Pope refused Henry an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. In response Henry arranged an annulment through Thomas Cranmer, who Henry had made Archbishop of Canterbury, and in January 1533 he married Anne Boleyn. This led to Henry's excommunication from the Catholic Church in July the same year as the Pope considered Henry to have married Anne while still married to Catherine. In response Henry concluded the process he had begun in 1531 of making himself head of the church in England instead of the Pope by passing the Act of Supremacy in November 1534.

Because Henry's Protestant tendencies were political rather than religious there was little immediate change in church practice in what had previously been an almost exclusively Catholic country. All the changes had been based around changing the leadership of the church from the Pope to the king rather than changing the church itself.

Henry continued to persecute Protestants as he had done when in the Pope's favour but he now also persecuted Catholics who opposed his religious supremacy. He was particularly suspicious of monks and nuns while also realising they had great wealth. This could be used to help pay debts accrued through palace building as well as wars with France, Ireland and Scotland.

Although the monasteries were not as wealthy as they had been, many suffering additionally from poor financial management as at Newstead (p.136), their property and endowments remained valuable.

In the 1520's Cardinal Wolsey, and other church authorities before him, had closed small under-occupied houses with insufficient income. They then transferred the occupants to larger houses, using the endowments and other assets for different purposes. 'Cardinal Wolsey...closed no fewer than 29 assorted religious houses in order to endow a grammar school at his birthplace, Ipswich, and another new college (Christ Church) at Oxford' (McIlwain 1993 p.10). This created a precedent that would be followed in the Dissolution.

In autumn 1534 the First Fruits and Tenths act was passed which imposed a tax on the whole clergy of 10% of net annual income. To enable this tax to be collected, Royal commissioners were appointed to carry out an assessment during the spring and summer of 1535 of religious income and to determine its source. This record, the Valor Ecclesiasticus, was followed by another round of visitations mainly carried out by Legh and Layton, the royal commissioners, during the autumn and winter of 1535. The resulting

Compendium Compertorum focused on the quality and morality of life being practiced inside the religious houses. The largely unfavourable Compendium Compertorum can be contrasted with earlier ecclesiastical visitation reports as at Worksop and Rufford. Many of these show only minor infringements of religious rules and that when these as well as more serious issues arose they were addressed by the higher religious authorities. The criticisms made by Legh and Layton are almost exclusively for the more serious sexual offences as well as emphasising that many of the monks did not want to continue a monastic life. These unfavourable reports are not surprising considering they were being compiled for the king's vicar general, the Protestant Thomas Cromwell, as a justification for the Dissolution of the smaller houses.

Based on these reports the Dissolution began in 1536 with the passing of the Act for the Suppression of the Lesser Monasteries.

This act related to those houses with an income of less than £200 a year and was presented as a measure of reform, although many modern commentators regard the expropriation of assets by the Crown as the main purpose.

When the smaller monasteries were closed the incumbents were given the choice of leaving monastic service, with compensation, or going to a larger and more moral house. All the assets of the smaller monasteries were to become Crown property. Some of the smaller monasteries such as Wallingwells (p.142) and Newstead (p.137) paid a fine in return for exemption from closure. But this only bought temporary relief until 1540 at the latest when the Dissolution of all the monasteries was completed.

Despite Legh and Layton being equally critical of the larger monasteries, this process made no attack on them. This was because the support of the 30 bishops or archbishops out of the 70 members of the House of Lords was needed to pass the Act for the Suppression of the Lesser Monasteries through Parliament.

This stage of the Dissolution only removed the smallest and least important 30% of the religious houses nationally. All the monks and nuns leaving religious service had some financial provision made for them. Those who wanted to continue the religious life could do so and the new owners of the monastic sites were encouraged to retain the lay employees or else they had to be paid off.

Although careful provision was made for all concerned an open uprising against the Dissolution took place in the north of England in October 1536 but this did not directly affect Nottinghamshire. This was called the Pilgrimage of Grace and had as one of its main objectives the reinstatement of the religious in their former houses. The uprising failed leaving many of the larger houses that had supported it with charges of treason against their superiors, some of whom were executed. Their houses were dissolved and those living there expelled without any financial provision or option to go to another house. Sympathy had been shown to the uprising by some of the monks at Furness Abbey near Barrow-in-Furness but no plausible charges could be brought against the abbot. However knowing the treatment of some of the other large abbeys the abbot probably felt that Furness would have a similar fate eventually. He voluntarily surrendered the abbey to the Crown in 1537, possibly in the hope of lenient treatment.

This set a precedent. In 1538 the royal commissioners revisited all the remaining religious houses both large and small, encouraging them to surrender voluntarily. Quick surrenders as at Worksop (p.145) and Thurgarton (p.141) were rewarded with relatively generous pensions. Resistance to Dissolution and the king as head of the church in England resulted in worse terms being offered and even expulsion from the monastery with nothing or execution for those who continued to resist. The harsh treatment of those who held out against the king can be seen through the examples of Lenton (p.134) and Beauvale (p.127). By October 1538 nearly 20 English monasteries a month were being voluntarily dissolved.

Monastic ceremonies were now being openly attacked as irrelevant. Those claiming to have religious relics, making them centres of pilgrimage for those who wanted forgiveness for their sins or to be cured of an illness came in for particular criticism and ridicule as

centres of superstition. In Nottinghamshire relics were identified by Legh and Layton at Wallingwells (p.142), Thurgarton (p.140), Rufford (p.138) and Shelford (p.139).

The final surrender came in March 1540 with the Dissolution of Waltham Abbey in Essex, leaving no religious houses anywhere in England or Wales.

Once a house had been dissolved all gold, silver, jewels, fine cloth and some of the books were taken to London as Crown property. Bells were recast as cannon and lead from the roofs of buildings not to be reused was turned into shot. Some of the buildings were reused as farm buildings or converted into houses for the new lay owners as at Newstead (p.137), while others were plundered for building and road stone over subsequent centuries. Some of the monastic churches were reduced in size and converted to parish use as at Blyth (p.131), while in other parts of the country fourteen have become cathedral churches. Former monastic land was mostly sold to secular local landowners for the equivalent of 20 years rent. As the preference was to sell farms as a going concern, the new landowners had first choice of purchase on buildings, livestock and household contents such as furniture. Some of this land was sold on quickly in smaller parcels, increasing the numbers who benefited from the Dissolution.

Many of the former monks found jobs as parish or chantry (private) priests. The abbot of Rufford became rector of Rotherham while the prior of Felley became rector of Attenborough in Nottinghamshire. Others found secular work, particularly as clerks or schoolmasters due to their reading and writing skills. Prospects were less for nuns who had to rely on their smaller pensions and support from their families unless they got married. 'For all its impact on the Church, the Dissolution staved off royal bankruptcy for perhaps a generation at most. The crown took on not only monastic properties, but also a fairly extensive pension bill. This and the demands of war against France and Scotland forced the government to put the estates on the market and by the end of Henry VIII's reign very nearly two-thirds of them had been sold (in many cases cheaply). Had the Crown been able to retain possession until all the pensioners had died off, it would have acquired a very useful permanent endowment which might have released it from permanent financial dependence upon Parliament – and thus altered the whole course of English constitutional history'.

(McIlwain 1993 p.19) Section in brackets inserted.

Units of mediaeval money and common prices in the 14th century

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1 pound = 20 shillings (s)

1 mark = 13s 4d

1 shilling = 12 pence (d)

Animals

Ox 13s
Sheep 1s 5d
Pig 2s
2 chickens 1d
12 eggs 1d

Buildings

Cottage £2
House with shop and work area £10 - £15
Merchant's house £33 - £66

Clothes (wealthy peasant)

Shoes 6d
Woollen garment 3s
Fur lined garment 6s 8d
Tunic 3s
Linen chemise 8d

Miscellaneous

Brass pot 2s
Towel 6d
Stool 4d
Ceramic cooking pot ½ d

Wages

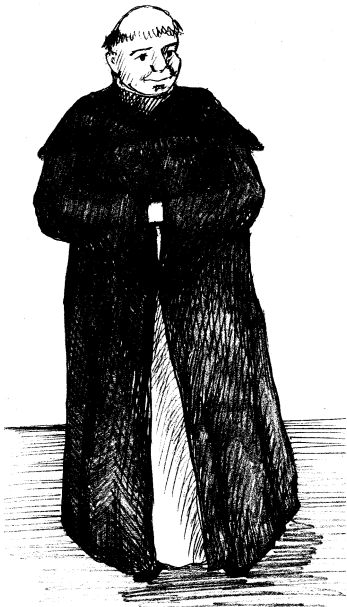
Master mason 4d/day
Master carpenter 3d/day
Thatcher 4d – 5d per day
Chantry priest £4 13s per year

Carter, porter, groom 5s – 8s per year
Kitchen servant 2s – 4s per year
Boys and pages 1s – 6s per year

Source: Hodges K. 'List of prices of medieval items'. Available at: www.luminarium.org/medlit/medprice.htm (Accessed - 28/7/04)

Pictures of the different orders of monks and canons

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Augustinian canon



Benedictine monk

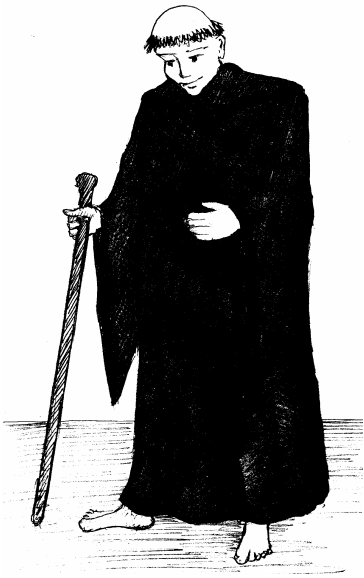


Carthusian monk

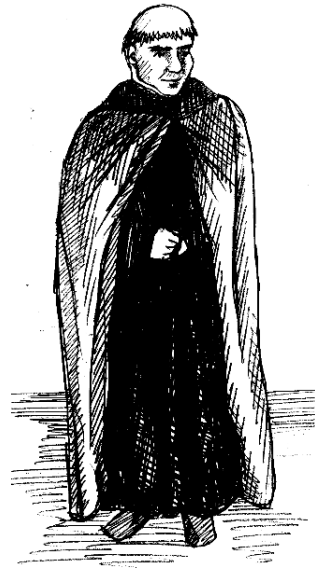


Cistercian monk

Pictures of the different orders of monks and canons



Cluniac monk



Gilbertine canon



Premonstratensian canon