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The Dissolution of the Monasteries

Why and how were the monasteries dissolved under Henry VIII?

In 1540, the last religious house in England was closed in a process known as the Dissolution of the Monasteries, which took only four years to close 825 religious houses and evict nearly 10,000 nuns, monks and friars. A common misconception of the Dissolution is of Henry VIII's commissioners marching in, executing the monks and smashing the choirs and cloisters. In reality, for the majority of religious houses it was a quieter, more bureaucratic affair. So why and how were the monasteries dissolved?

The religious houses of England and Wales owned huge tracts of profitable farmland, and at their height brought in almost one-fifth of the entire national income. By 1534, Henry VIII had not only broken with Rome and declared himself the head of the Church of England, he'd also depleted the nation's coffers through protracted and expensive wars with France. He considered that the monasteries' wealth would be better off in the Crown's hands and ordered a survey of the wealth and income of all the monasteries.

The following year, Henry ordered a report on the state of the monasteries and the conduct of the monks. The commissioners who compiled the report understood what was required of them, and excelled themselves in describing religious houses that were stews of iniquity, violence, gambling and fornication. Monks were alleged to have numerous mistresses apiece;

abbots were accused of selling off the church plate; the buildings were falling down and there were even reports of deliberate poisoning. The stage was set for the suppression of the monasteries, but the decline had started centuries earlier.

Allegations of bad behaviour in religious houses were not new. As early as 1177, there were accounts of the monks at Canterbury gorging themselves on meat and wine and ignoring the rule of silence. Rumours that nuns and monks had abandoned their vows of chastity rumbled on through the years: the Abbess at Littlemore Priory at Oxford was said to have borne several children; and monks were often accused of seducing local women. The popular belief was that life in religious houses was cushy, and there was some truth in that: monks and nuns were expected to undertake hard manual labour in the fields, hospitals and kitchens, but increasingly this work was done by lay servants and the monks and nuns were living lives of idleness, missing mass, taking holidays, going hunting, and eating a diet high in meat, fish and wine.

Unsurprisingly, tensions erupted between some local populations and religious houses. For some, the monastery was also their landlord, and they resented the relaxation of monastic discipline when they themselves were living lives of hard work, poverty and frugality. The wealth and influence of the monasteries caused bitterness, which on occasions broke out into violence: at Sherbourne in 1437 the townspeople set fire to the abbey church. Bequests to religious houses dwindled, and by the fifteenth century were negligible, as patrons preferred to found a hospital or school instead. Further, the arrival of the printing press in 1476 meant that the monks' role in copying books was now obsolete.

Despite all this, most religious houses maintained their numbers. Younger sons who wouldn't inherit land, unmarried and unmarriageable girls, and widows were attracted to the religious life. Wayward daughters might also be placed in a nunnery to prevent them embarrassing their families. There were practical reasons why the religious life appealed, including protection, security, healthcare and education, but piety itself cannot be underestimated. Belief in God was strong during the Middle Ages, and the religious life offered a chance to devote oneself to God's service.

Some of the monasteries owned religious relics such as the bones of saints or scraps of cloth from the Virgin Mary's cloak, and acquired huge fortunes from the pilgrims who visited the relic's shrine. Hailes Abbey owned a relic known as the Holy Blood – a phial of Christ's blood said to have been collected during the crucifixion. This relic was so holy that merely seeing it meant that on death you went straight to Heaven and avoided doing penance in Purgatory. Other religious relics had healing properties and were taken to the sick or to women in childbirth to bring about an easier labour. The shrines to these relics were typically elaborately decorated in gold, silver and precious stones. However, from the mid-fifteenth century religious relics were criticised as fakes, a scam perpetrated on the gullible to bring in income for the monasteries. Relics became regarded as blasphemous, and many monasteries hid their relics away, and the numbers of pilgrims diminished.

Increasingly, the relevance of the monasteries was questioned, and the catalogue of bad behaviour and mismanagement provided adequate excuse for Henry VIII's government to

suppress the smaller religious houses. In 1536, monasteries with incomes less than £200 per year were closed and the monks and nuns transferred to other religious institutions. Many welcomed the closures: some religious houses had only two religious personnel who were glad to be sent to larger establishments. A few petitioned against closure, citing the charitable work they performed in the local community and arguing that the closure would cause hardship to the poor, and were successful in their appeals. The small number of monks and abbots who opposed closure were brutally executed by hanging, drawing and quartering. Their fates encouraged others to allow closure to go ahead without murmur. In total, around 600 smaller religious houses were closed, and their lands and wealth transferred to the Crown.

Henry VIII's advisor Cromwell then set about dismantling the shrines and destroying the relics. Some abbots, such as Abbot Sagar at Hailes Abbey, voluntarily declared the relics to be fakes and handed them over. The Holy Blood of Hailes was taken to London and analysed, and said to be duck's blood and saffron. It was thrown into the fires at Smithfield. Other relics were confiscated and destroyed, and the precious metals and jewels of the shrines were seized.

Cromwell then turned his attention to the remaining religious houses, those with great individual wealth, and soon wholesale Dissolution was underway. In the majority of cases this was an entirely bloodless process. Regional commissioners were appointed who visited each religious house in turn, dissolving them. Most abbots knew it was unwise to oppose Dissolution, and voluntarily signed the document of surrender. This transferred the abbey to

the Crown. They then handed over the abbey's seal, which was a symbolic surrender, and the monks, nuns and friars were evicted.

As soon as the monastery was dissolved, all its property including doors, tables, blankets, hinges, buckets, and piping was auctioned off, the auction being held in the cloister or chapter house. Lead was stripped from the roof and sent to London to be melted down. Valuables and animals were also sent to London to be sold. In some cases, the fabric of the building was torn down and the stone used for other buildings, for example Henry VIII's Nonsuch Palace was built of stone from Merton Abbey. However, the cost of demolishing all the monasteries was prohibitive. Some of them were left to rot, and were inevitably plundered for building material by locals. Others were gifted to favourites of the king, or sold off and converted into grand houses. Some abbey churches, such as Gloucester and Chester, became cathedrals.

If Dissolution occurred without dissent, the nuns and monks were granted pensions. A basic pension for a monk was £5 a year (about the same income as an unskilled labourer), and for a nun was £3 a year, though some abbots were granted huge pensions: the abbot of Bury St Edmunds received £330 a year. Many monks found jobs as priests or teachers, and some pooled their resources. Pensions were still being paid to former nuns and monks in the sixteenth century: the last pensioner died in 1607. In addition, pensions were also paid to corrodians: lay people who gave land or money to the abbey in return for living the remainder of their lives within its walls.

Though Dissolution was predominantly a bureaucratic process, there were abbots, such as those of Glastonbury, Colchester and Reading, who refused to surrender, claiming that the king had no right to take the abbeys. The commissioners looked for charges to bring against them, charging the Abbot of Glastonbury with embezzlement and stealing the abbey's property. He was condemned, dragged to the top of Glastonbury Tor, and executed, his head exhibited on the abbey gate as a warning. The others, too, were executed.

Various documents relating to religious houses exist. To find details of ancestors who were nuns or monks, start with the National Archives and their online search facility (<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>) which will tell you what's available and where it's kept. Some records are held by the National Archives, others by local record offices, and some are in cathedral archives. Try searching under the monastery name – this will reveal court cases which might name the abbot or individual monks; bishops' inspection reports; grants of land to the monastery; and lists of pensions paid post Dissolution to former nuns, monks and corrodians. If your ancestors lived near a monastery but weren't religious personnel themselves, it's still worth checking the archives as you may find your ancestors mentioned in tenancy disputes with the abbey.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries wasn't the frenzy of smashing up and executing monks that we often imagine, but a much quieter affair where abbots realised their time was up and appealed the commissioners in order to secure pensions for themselves and their fellow monks. Though Henry VIII's greed was the catalyst for the process, the relevance of the monasteries and the relics they held had been in decline for some time before they were abolished forever.

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