

# Dissolving the Dissolute? Henry VIII and the end of English Monasticism

## The Monastic Scene

Glastonbury, the Somerset town best known today for its Festival, once enjoyed far greater wealth and celebrity as a religious centre. In 1191, graves purporting to be those of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere were discovered within the grounds of Glastonbury Abbey. Edward I was present when the remains were re-interred in a new shrine in 1278. Henry VII's visit in 1494 seemingly confirmed the Abbey's prestige and importance. A generation later, however, Glastonbury Abbey shared the fate of all English monasteries when it was dissolved during the reign of Henry VIII.

Glastonbury was a Benedictine foundation. Other orders that flourished after 1066 included the Gilbertines, Augustinians and Cistercians. English monasticism peaked in the mid-fourteenth century when there were nearly 1,000 religious houses. The Black Death provided a check, but there were still 825 when Henry VIII ascended the throne. They were home to approximately 7,500 men and 1,800 women.

The focus of the monastic day was religious contemplation. Prayer and worship began at 2 a.m. with the first of eight daily services. Monastic horizons in reality, however, ranged far more broadly. Collectively, the monasteries owned 5–15 per cent of all the land in England. Thus abbots were landlords and estate managers. Abbot Dodsworth of Roche in Yorkshire, for example, liked to oversee harvesting in person. Heads of houses might also act as the font of local justice, whilst 30 sat in the House of Lords. Religious houses also provided charity – worth between £7000 and £10,000 per annum. They were also the likeliest source of medical and educational provision, with perhaps some 2,000 charity scholars in 1535. In some cases monasteries even sold annuities. In 1535 Kirkstall Priory in Yorkshire was providing 51 at a cost of £58 per annum.

## Saints and Sinners

The question as to how well the monasteries matched up to their ideals has been clouded in the past by much religious partisanship. Protestant propagandists would have endorsed the words attributed to Thomas Cromwell in the novel *Dissolution*, which condemned the religious houses for their 'Deceit, idolatry, greed, and secret loyalty to the Bishop of Rome ... The monasteries are a canker in the heart of the realm ...'. But such sentiments are incompatible with the rebel lawyer Robert Aske's 1537 encomium that through the monasteries people 'not only had worldly refreshing in their bodies but also spirituall refuge ... Also the abbeys was on of the bewties of this realme to al men and strangers passing thre the same ...'.

Modern research is unsurprisingly cautious in its judgements on the question. How can one compare so many houses which varied so much in size? The top 20 had incomes in excess of £1000 per annum. They each employed over 100 people, headed by stewards, bailiffs and receivers. At the other end of the scale there were 87 houses worth less than £30 per annum. There is also a serious evidential problem. Monasteries were subject to periodic visitation by bishops, but we can hardly expect them to have been particularly objective. In any case, there is only sporadic survival of visitation records. Alongside them, we have the seemingly damning picture painted by royal visitors in 1535, but this, as will be seen below, was an exercise as rushed as it was prejudicial.

The safest conclusion, in dealing with such a large body, is to recognise that we can find a whole spectrum of experience. Some individuals were outstanding: Miles Coverdale, best known for his translation of the Bible, was an Augustinian friar. Individual houses also earned renown. Whalley in Lancashire distributed 22.1 per cent of its income on charity, far above the average figure of 2 or 3 per cent. The Carthusian house at Mount Grace in Yorkshire even had a waiting list for admission. But excellence can be juxtaposed with shortcomings. Abbot Hexham of Whitby capped a colourful career by working in league with French pirates. Less sensationally, the prioress of Campsey Nunnery was allegedly parsimonious in matters of hospitality. Most failings were surely of a similarly minor nature, such as the nuns of St Mary of Carrow, Norwich, who in 1526 chanted too quickly.

The famous preamble to the 1536 Act of Suppression condemned the lesser monasteries for their 'manifest sin, vicious, carnal and abominable living'. This charge cannot be substantiated. Monasticism was not in terminal decline. The religious houses had their critics, but they were not generally unloved. If they were guilty of anything, in view of what was about to happen, it was complacency. We must therefore look elsewhere for the causes of their demise.

### **Men and Motives**

Notwithstanding that popular feeling against the monasteries was limited in 1536, there is no denying that hostility towards the monastic ideal did form part of anticlerical literature. It is to be found in the writings of Erasmus as well as Simon Fish's 1528 Supplication of the Beggars which described monks as 'counterfeit holy and idle beggars'. There were also precedents for closing monasteries. Bishop John Fisher had dissolved two nunneries as part of the endowment for St. John's College, Cambridge. Less friendly precedents are to be found in parts of contemporary Europe such as Sweden and Switzerland. Religious reform generally, of course, was on the march by 1530. Thomas Cromwell, the single most important figure in the dissolution apart from Henry VIII, was one of its lieutenants. His injunctions of August 1536 instructed clergy not to 'extol any images, relics or miracles for any enticement or lucre, nor allure the people by any enticements to the pilgrimage of any saint'.

Henry himself, however, at least before the 1530s, was a loyal son of the Catholic Church. For this reason, a broad consensus exists around the primary motive for the dissolution being financial. Henry was certainly avaricious, and Cromwell's boast of providing him with untold riches is well known. But Henry was not simply looking to hoard money. He needed it. It cost £25,000 a year to garrison the Scottish border, whilst the Irish rebellion of 1534 had cost over £38,000 to suppress. Longer term, his desire was for a more forward foreign policy. As the dangerous taxpayers' revolt in the wake of the 1525 Amicable Grant had shown, however, reliance upon the political nation to fund his ambitions was uncertain. An assault upon clerical wealth thus suggested an answer to several problems. It was also partly self-defeating, for as the inroads on the Catholic Church quickened, so the risk of intervention by the major Catholic powers increased – necessitating yet further expenditure on coastal defence.

There is finally a constitutional point which coincided with Henry's overweening ego. Henry's Break with Rome was grounded upon his claim to recognise no earthly overlord, evidenced principally in the 1534 Act of S u p r e m a c y which vested him with the power to 'visit, extirp and redress' as Supreme Head of the Church of England. Monasticism, in being a supranational institution, was a glaring anomaly to this claim. It is true that heads of religious houses overwhelmingly accepted the Supremacy, but no less true that most opposition to the train of religious reforms before 1536 had come from religious orders, specifically the Observant Franciscans and Carthusians. The actual, as opposed to the theoretical, threat may well have been dealt with by 1536, but he was not to know that.

### **The End of the Lesser Monasteries**

Evidence that action was being mooted against clerical wealth comes in a conversation recorded by Chapuys, the Imperial ambassador, in March 1533. Henry reputedly told him that he would 'reunite to the crown the goods which churchmen held of it'. Over the course of the next year or so, Chapuys continued to report rumours of how some councillors were urging Henry to translate this into fact. He cannot have been surprised, therefore, when in September 1534 Henry told him that he 'will distribute among the gentlemen of the kingdom the greater part of the ecclesiastical revenues to gain their good-will'. This should not be taken literally, though an anonymous memorandum from about the same date did moot the possibility of confiscating all episcopal lands in recompense for which bishops would have been placed on a fixed salary.

Less radical counsel prevailed, for when action came it was both later and more limited than Chapuys had feared. The legislative springboard was the Act of First Fruits and Tithes of late 1534. In imposing what was effectively an income tax of 10 per cent upon the church, the government recognised that it needed an accurate measure of what that could realise. To that end Thomas Cromwell initiated a census of clerical wealth – the Valor Ecclesiasticus – undertaken for him by the local gentry from January 1535. This was largely completed within six months and revealed a figure approaching £200,000 per annum.

By this point it had been decided that the politic course of action for the present would be an assault upon the weakest religious houses. It could not be announced in such stark terms, so Cromwell adopted the decidedly unhistorical approach of finding facts to fit predetermined conclusions. Within six months, from the late summer of 1535, all the monasteries were apparently subjected to a comprehensive inspection, a fact the more remarkable given that the vast bulk of the work was undertaken by only four men. Richard Layton and Thomas Legh apparently visited over 120 houses in the north in under 70 days. Whether through zeal or powers of imagination, damning 'evidence' aplenty was available in time for the opening of parliament on 4 February 1536.

The 1536 Act which suppressed the lesser monasteries was both rushed and contradictory. Its preamble, for example, defined 'small' as those houses containing fewer than 12 persons, whilst the main body of the measure fixed upon an income of less than £200 as the crucial dividing line – by no means the same thing. The difference mattered, for those houses left standing were described – perhaps an unwise hostage to fortune – as places where 'religion is well kept and observed'.

But the obfuscation in the 1536 Act was partly by design. It is true that the number of abbey closures was unprecedented in scale, but that fact was embedded in language of reasonableness and moderation. Thus it was emphasised that the cankered part of monasticism was being cut out for the better survival of the whole, or as the Act put it, those houses 'now being spent spoiled and wasted for increase and maintenance of sins, should be used and converted to better uses, and the unthrifty religious persons so spending the same to be compelled to reform their lives.' What this meant in reality, after various exemptions are taken account of, is that some 243 houses were dissolved. To sweeten the pill of dissolution, the Crown took on those houses' debts whilst their heads received not ungenerous pensions. Ordinary members of the communities peremptorily ended were given the option of transfer to another religious house (an option exercised by perhaps nearly three-quarters of those affected), or of being released from their vows of monastic obedience and receiving a small payment to assist in setting themselves up in a new vocation. Contemporaries might have been forgiven for thinking that the Supreme Head was embarking upon an overdue act of enlightened reform. Even abbots in the House of Lords could lend the measure their support, according to Edward Hall, 'in the hope that their great monasteries should have continued still'.

### **The End of the Greater Monasteries**

That the abbots' hopes proved vain owed perhaps more than is usually allowed to the great rebellion of 1536-7 known as the Pilgrimage of Grace. It is true that modern research has shown the Pilgrimage to be complex in origin. It is true too that monks were not in its vanguard, nor indeed particularly involved at all. One exception was Abbot Adam Sedbar of Jervaulx who, under duress, sent meat and drink to rebel leaders in February 1537. But to the authorities in London, the role of monasticism in the Pilgrimage appeared ambivalent at best. Community leaders such as Sedbar were expected to confront the King's enemies, not temporize with them. Laments for the demise of the smaller houses are to be found prominently amongst the various articles drawn up by the Pilgrims, a lament fleshed out passionately by Robert Aske during his interrogation in spring 1537. In the five counties most affected by the Pilgrimage, the rebels briefly re-founded 16 of the 55 houses dissolved in 1536. At the very least Henry could use this renewed challenge to his personal authority and constitutional status as a pretext to wreak vengeance on monasticism. But his anger was genuine. On 20 October 1536 he instructed the Earl of Derby to take action against Sawley Abbey, one of those briefly re-founded, by taking 'the said abbot and monks with their assistants forth with violence and without any manner of delay, in their monks' apparel, cause them to be hanged up as most arrant traitors and movers of insurrection and sedition accordingly.'

Other reasons which had contributed to the downfall of the lesser monasteries also remained after 1536. If finance really was the driving force, it simply made no sense to be content with the spoils of the poorer religious houses whilst leaving the more lucrative ones untouched. Expenditure had certainly continued apace: the cost of suppressing the Pilgrimage of Grace has been put at around £50,000. Diplomatically too the outlook darkened in the late 1530s, for after two years locking horns in northern Italy, Francis I and Charles V agreed a truce at Nice in June 1538. A Catholic crusade against England was a distinct possibility in both spring and autumn 1539: the wealth of the larger religious houses would be invaluable in building the necessary coastal defences. Religious reform continued as well. Cromwell's injunctions of September 1538 commanded priests to stick to scripture and to condemn 'wandering to pilgrimages, offering of money, candles, or tapers to images or relics, or kissing or

licking the same, saying over a number of beads ... or in such-like superstition.' This was an explicit attack upon a major monastic function. As Hugh Latimer put it, 'The founding of monasteries argued purgatory to be, so the putting of them down argueth it not to be.'

The only motive identifiable before 1536 but conspicuous by its absence when it comes to the larger houses is the moral case, itself proof of its specious nature in 1535-6. The larger monasteries were to be officially condemned, not because of individual failings, but because monasticism itself was now viewed as being anomalous. As Biddlesden Abbey's September 1539 deed of surrender put it, 'Our pretended religion ... practised and used many days doth most principally consist in certain dumb ceremonies.'

What remained to be decided in 1537 was timing and tactics. Though a handful of abbeys, including Sedbar's Jervaulx, were forfeited to the Crown for treason in spring 1537, one lesson which Henry and Cromwell appear to have drawn from the Pilgrimage was that a piecemeal and circumspect approach was best. Action is only really discernible from the autumn of 1537, perhaps triggered by the birth of Prince Edward on 12 October, an event which gave Henry the confidence of knowing that he at last had a male heir to whom the Royal Supremacy would pass. At any event, on 11 November 1537 Lewes surrendered voluntarily to the Crown. Two more houses did likewise by the end of the year. During 1538-39, the trickle of surrenders became more akin to a flood. The surrender of the last abbey, Waltham, in March 1540 spelt the end of English monasticism.

It is unclear whether accident or design explains the choice of method adopted for the suppression of most of the larger monasteries. That it was effective is indisputable. Closing houses one by one was unlikely to provoke coordinated resistance, the more so given that the surrenders purported to be voluntary. Where parliamentary statute had been used to effect wholesale closures in 1536, in 1539 parliament was merely asked to confirm individual acts of surrender. The reality was that a good deal of manoeuvring underlay the apparently supine behaviour of the heads of the larger houses. Cromwell had moved to secure the election of his nominees to vacant headships since his rise to preeminence: his nominees could reasonably be expected to do his bidding. For others, pensions remained on offer for them and their communities, but none could know if this was a finite policy. Hence the rush to agree terms with the regime in 1538-39, for virtually nobody can have believed Cromwell's circular of March 1538 denying that wholesale dissolution was intended. For those less amenable to royal wishes, a mixture of cajoling and bullying from Cromwell's commissioners usually sufficed. A bare handful resisted, of which the great abbey of Glastonbury was one. On 19 September 1539, its sickly and aged abbot, Richard Whiting, was arrested and sent to the Tower charged, somewhat improbably, with stealing from his own abbey. A chilling memorandum of Cromwell's a month later reads simply, 'Item, the abbot of Glaston to be tried at Glaston and also executed there with his complices.' On 15 November Whiting suffered the full horror of Tudor justice when he was hung, drawn and quartered.

## **Conclusion**

Had English monasticism not gone down in the 1530s, there is general agreement that it would not have survived the reign of Elizabeth. Whether its destruction from the mid 1530s was intended all along by Henry VIII, or whether he really did believe the events of 1535-6 to be an end in themselves is far more debateable. The cynics were given anonymous voice even as the lesser houses were being closed in 1536, for according to Edward Hall, 'One said in the parliament house that these were as thorns, but the great abbots were putrified old oaks, and they must needs follow.' Certainly there were elements of cynicism in royal policy, none more so than when it was claimed that the houses left standing in 1536 were in good order. On a lesser scale, the promise to 'use and convert' monastic wealth for Godly ends in the 1536 Act was not borne out by subsequent events: only 14 abbey churches became or continued as cathedrals, Chester being an example of the former and Winchester of the latter. Why too, it has been asked, did the government go to the trouble of setting up a major new body, the Court of Augmentations, if it was not intended all along to close all the monasteries? The corollary of such a question was that the time and trouble taken to pension or relocate those dispossessed in 1536 was dissembling of the first order.

The same point, however, has been adduced to suggest that Henry was quite genuine in his stated desire to preserve monasticism. He was even to found an abbey in 1536. But the context quickly changed, with the experience of rebellion and demands on the royal finances unassuaged. The 1536 dissolutions also whetted

previously unrecognised appetites amongst the gentry and others for land. Though Henry and Cromwell were the major players they were not the only ones. Neither were they necessarily in total control of events. The Break from Rome was a Pandora's Box, and the events of the 1530s did constitute a religious revolution. Revolutions have a habit of devouring their children – as Cromwell found to his cost in 1540.

On balance the truth about the 1530s is perhaps best explained a little like events 400 years later with the controversy surrounding Hitler and the origins of the Second World War. In the same way that Hitler had no blueprint for dominating Europe, so there was no Henrician blueprint for the dissolution of the monasteries. Henry, like Hitler, knew where he wanted to go, but had little specific idea when and how to get there. But ruthless opportunism and piecemeal progress brought results, albeit not always the ones which he envisaged.

### **Issues to Debate**

- Was the ending of the religious houses inevitable?
- How far was Henry VIII the driving force behind the Dissolution?
- How far did the balance of motives for dissolving the monasteries change between 1535 and 1540?