

Tudor Religion

Life in a Monastery

Monasteries were often built in isolated places. They were places where monks could lead a life of contemplation, thinking about God and spending time in prayer and worship.

A variety of orders of monks and nuns established communities in The British Isles. Although the orders differed in their religious observations and rules, they all followed similar patterns of daily life. Monastic life was generally one of hard physical work, scholarship and prayer. Some orders encouraged *lay brothers*, monks who did most of the physical work in the fields and workshops in the monastery. Fully-fledged monks could then concentrate on prayer and learning.

The day of a monk or nun was regulated by regular prayer services in the abbey church. The services took place every three hours, day and night. When the services were over the monks would be occupied with tasks, which maintained their community.

During the Dark Ages and the Medieval period monasteries were practically the only places of learning. Monks were by far the best educated members of society. Monasteries acted as libraries for ancient manuscripts. Many monks were occupied with painstakingly copying out sacred texts in a room called the scriptorium. Monks created *illuminated* manuscripts, beautifully illustrated bibles and prayer books. These manuscripts are among the most precious artefacts of early Christian Britain.

When Henry VIII broke away from the Roman Catholic church in the 1530's, the rich monastic houses were one of his first targets. A few of the abbey churches, near large towns, survived. But those that were isolated were demolished.

Throughout the Tudor period the shells of these buildings were used as a source of building material.

In 1534 Thomas Cromwell was appointed by Henry VIII, as the vicar-general in spirituals. He has special authority to visit monastic houses. Preachers were commissioned in 1535 to blacken the name of monks and nuns. The people were told if the abbey were dissolved there would never be taxes again. All monastic buildings with an income of less than £200 per year were to be given to the king to be dealt with at his pleasure.

1. What is a monastery?
2. Describe monastic life.
3. What is a *lay brother*?
4. Why do you think the life of a monk was so hard?
5. What do you think monks did in their spare time?
6. Why was a monastery a place of education?
7. Why do you think that monasteries held the first libraries?
8. Give the meaning of *illuminated*.
9. Why do you think Henry VIII targeted monasteries?
10. Give a synonym for *demolished*.
11. What happened to the actual building materials of the monasteries?
12. Why do you think preachers were told to blacken the names of monks and nuns?
13. What sorts of things might they have said?
14. How were the people bribed to be quiet and not protest?
15. How could a monastery be saved from destruction?