



MEDIEVAL MONASTERIES

IT'S PRAY TIME!

Medieval England saw its fair share of bloody battles and crown-grabbing conquests, and life for most people was a daily agricultural grind. But it wasn't all fighting and farming – Christianity was a huge part of medieval life, too.



Some men and women took vows to devote their entire lives to God. Priests took services in churches and lived among ordinary people, but monasteries were home to monks and nuns who followed strict rules about how they should spend their time. And they mostly spent it praying, as well as going to church and copying out manuscripts. They might get involved in other work too, like looking after animals, cleaning and brewing beer. Monasteries were also expected to help the poor and give shelter to travellers.

Monasteries came in all shapes and sizes, but they were often big, beautiful and located in isolated spots where holy men and women could go about their holy business in holy peace and quiet.

MONASTERY MANIA

The first monastery in England was St Augustine's in Canterbury, founded in about 598 by Augustine himself. Some early monasteries were home to both men and women, like Whitby Abbey. Lindisfarne Priory is another well-known early monastery – but sadly, it's mostly well-known for being violently raided by Vikings in 787.



Monastery mania really kicked off in England after the Norman Conquest of 1066. William the Conqueror founded Battle Abbey on the very spot where King Harold was killed during the Battle of Hastings. He wanted to atone for all the deaths he'd caused, because he was worried about where he'd end up after he died. Paying for a monastery was thought to be a pretty good way of getting back into God's good books. Many other monasteries were founded by other wealthy people during the 12th and 13th centuries.



MONK-EYING AROUND

Despite their holy vows, over the centuries some monks did let standards slip, and inspectors found plenty to complain about. At Hailes Abbey inspectors complained about monks who were gossiping, not kneeling deeply enough, slurring the words of their prayers, singing badly and missing church services. In monasteries across England there were reports of monks gambling, drinking in taverns, wearing forbidden clothes and having sexual relationships with women and other monks. These were in the minority, though.

AND THEN THERE WERE NUN

But all this bad PR was dredged up by King Henry and his pals during the 1530s. Henry had declared himself head of the church, meaning he could ignore the pope and do away with traditions he didn't like.

By this time the monasteries were well past their peak, but they were still rich and owned lots of land. Henry and his ministers wanted that for themselves – and they took it. During the 1530s they seized the land, expelled the monks and nuns and knocked down the monasteries or turned them into houses. For better or worse, Henry and his men put an end to a way of life that had existed in England for nearly 1,000 years.

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