The Dissolution of the Monasteries

Introduction
In Britain as on the Continent, the Middle Ages were a golden era of monasticism that saw the flowering of grand foundations of surpassing architectural beauty. Ironically, the dawn of the English Renaissance signaled their demise.

In January, 1535, the newly appointed Vicar-General of the English Church, Thomas Cromwell, sent out his agents to conduct a commission of enquiry into the character and value of all ecclesiastical property in the kingdom. Overtly, they were reformers, exercising the new powers accorded to the Crown by the Act of Supremacy: "from time to time to visit, repress, redress, reform, order, correct, restrain and amend all such errors, heresies, abuses, offences, contempts and enormities . . . which ought or may be lawfully reformed." But Dr. Richard Layton, Dr. Thomas Legh, Dr. John London, and the other tough-minded and venal officials chosen for the job had no doubt what the Crown expected of them. It took them only six months to submit for Cromwell's scrutiny an accurate and detailed tax-book, the Valor Ecclesiasticus. Along with it came evidence of corruption and scandalous immorality in England's monasteries.

Such evidence was not hard to find, for by the 16th century many of the religious houses had long since lost their sense of purpose. Some, as landlords, oppressed the local population with exorbitant rents. Heavy debts encumbered others that had been poorly managed. For a thousand years communities of English monks had pursued God's work in what Alfred the Great had once called "a marvellous freedom from the tumult of the world," but their number declined steadily after the Black Death. During Henry VIII's reign, the ancient tradition came to an abrupt and sometimes violent end. Within five years, Cromwell's agents had closed down every religious house. Where such visionary marvels of medieval architecture as Rievaulx and Fountains Abbey once soared skywards, only ruins remained. Exposed to time and the weather, these became symbols of transient glory, but also, from our perspective, signs that England had passed out of the Middle Ages into a new era.

A number of volatile forces--political, religious, social, and personal--contributed to the relative ease with which Henry accomplished the Dissolution. The momentum for change had begun building some years earlier when Henry married his brother's widow, Katherine of Aragon. After 18 years, Katherine had still not given Henry a son. Increasingly anxious to secure an undisputed succession, the King then fell passionately in love with Anne Boleyn. Reasons of the heart combined with reasons of state to strengthen his desire for divorce.

Only the Pope could annul the marriage, however, and so Henry and Clement VII spent years in fruitless negotiations until Thomas Cromwell proposed a radical solution to his King's problem.

The son of a blacksmith, and a self-confessed ruffian, Cromwell had knocked about Europe as a soldier of fortune before putting his shrewd mind to work as an attorney. Eventually he became secretary to Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, the King's Chancellor and papal legate. Henry blamed Wolsey for failure to secure his divorce, arrested him, and ordered his execution. Wolsey died in November 1530, on his way to the scaffold. A loyal and capable administrator, Cromwell survived Wolsey's fall to work his way into ever more influential positions at court. Eventually he recommended to the King that he free himself from papal authority by assuming absolute control of his own church.

The Break with the Church
Henry soon had pressing reasons to act. Already pregnant, Anne secretly married the King in
January, 1533, so that she might give him a legitimate heir. Two months later, Parliament passed the Act in Restraint of Appeals, a statute master-minded by Cromwell that gave the Crown jurisdiction over ecclesiastical issues and made it a treasonable offence to appeal to Rome. This cleared the way for the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, to declare the King's divorce absolute and final. Soon afterwards, he recognized the validity of the King's marriage to Anne, whose daughter Elizabeth was born that year. The Roman church, in turn, excommunicated Henry, whom it had once championed as "Defender of the Faith," and the Anglican schism reached a conclusion that would have been unthinkable only a few years earlier, when the Act of Supremacy declared him to be "the one supreme head on earth of the Church of England."

Such radical developments did not go unresisted. Most famously, Thomas More and the saintly Bishop John Fisher went to the block rather than renounce their spiritual allegiance to Rome. Yet most of the country seems to have acceded to changes prompted more by political than by religious considerations. The mood of England may have been far from the revolutionary zeal of the continental Protestants, but a profoundly anti-clerical prejudice had long since taken hold, particularly in the south where such reforming scholars as John Colet and Desiderius Erasmus gave a sharper intellectual edge to popular feeling. A pamphlet of the time, titled The Supplication of the Beggars, shows how little respect remained for arrogant abbots, ill-educated priests, and the church courts that governed, taxed, and often oppressed the domestic lives of the populace. Its author, Simon Fish, had won popular acclaim by impugning the greed and licentiousness of the abbots, priors, friars, and Summoners, and urging the King to seize the wealth of these "puissant and counterfeit, holy and idle beggars." So Cromwell had the climate of the times on his side when, having stripped the Roman church of its judicial authority, he moved to put its riches at the disposal of the King's hard-pressed exchequer.

The seizure of church property for state purposes was not in itself a new idea. Two centuries earlier, at the height of the Hundred Years War, Henry V had ordered the closure of all priories owing allegiance to a mother house abroad, though he put the wealth he took from their coffers to charitable uses. Cromwell must also have learned much about the business of appropriating ecclesiastical property from Cardinal Wolsey, who had himself dissolved 29 religious houses in the previous decade. So Cromwell's agents went out well prepared with searching questionnaires, knowing just what to look for.

They turned in damning reports. "So beggary a house I never see, nor so filthy stuff" was their verdict, for example, on the great abbey that had been founded at Battle outside Hastings by William the Conqueror nearly 500 years earlier. At the Cistercian Abbey of Hailes, they examined what had been treasured for centuries as one of the holiest relics in the land—a vial containing some of the precious blood of Christ—and declared it to be mere honey, clarified and coloured with saffron. Such hostile testimony gave the King all the evidence he needed to break up communities that might otherwise constitute an effective papal garrison in England, while at the same time providing himself with revenue from the sale of huge landed estates owned by the monasteries.

**Monastic Plunder**

Hoping to minimize resistance, Henry closed the smaller houses first. Statutes of 1536 dissolved 327 establishments, transferred their estates to the Crown, and pensioned off the displaced monks. But when the conservative Catholics of the northern counties saw the priories closing they rose up in revolt. Robert Aske, a pious lawyer with a following of 35,000 yeomen and monks, seized York and then marched south under a banner depicting the five wounds of Christ.

Hurriedly assembling the King's forces against the rising, the Duke of Norfolk met Aske at Doncaster and delayed the advance of his "Pilgrimage of Grace" by apparently acceding to his
demands. These included the dismissal and punishment of Cromwell, the restoration of papal jurisdiction, and a Parliament free from royal interference. Trusting assurances given on the King’s behalf, Aske persuaded his followers to disperse, but his trust was misplaced. Within months he had been summarily tried and executed at York. The abbots of Kirkstead, Whalley, and Jervaux and many other leaders of the rebellion were publicly hanged all across northern England.

The southern counties gave no significant support to the uprising, giving Henry the confidence to proceed with the dissolution of the larger monasteries. Alarmed by the consequences of rebellion, Furness Abbey had already surrendered voluntarily to the King, but Cromwell ordered the trial and execution of the Abbot of Woburn for refusing to accept the King’s supremacy. Having set this stark example of what resistance might bring, he sent his agents out to the remaining houses carrying a prepared document of surrender. In most cases frightened abbots gladly signed and accepted the honours and pensions offered in return for submission, but three great monasteries tried to make a stand against closure.

At Glastonbury, a sacred site so ancient that its spiritual authority had once rivalled that of Rome, Cromwell's agents tried Abbot Richard Whiting for treason, then dragged him through the streets and onto the Tor where they hanged him and dismembered his body. The abbots of Reading and Colchester also chose to die rather than submit, but their martyrdom achieved nothing, and with the surrender of Waltham in March 1540 the last monastery closed. The stones of the abbeys were carried off for building elsewhere, their libraries scattered, the choirstalls chopped up for firewood, their icons smashed, their paintings defaced. Around 5,000 monks, 1,600 friars, and 2,000 nuns were pensioned off, while others who had depended on the monasteries for welfare simply joined the ranks of "sturdy beggars."

An act of 1539 had secured the estates of the dissolved houses for the Crown, and if the King had been less pressed for cash he might have kept more of their revenues for himself. Instead, he sold the bulk of them at knock-down prices. Men such as the Duke of Suffolk, who acquired the lands of 30 monasteries, made huge fortunes from the spoils. Jack Horner entered folk-memory by the way he "pulled out a plum" from the Glastonbury estates. The King's own treasury profited by about one and a half million pounds. At the same time, the dispersal of the great monastic holdings earned the Crown the loyalty of a grateful squirearchy who now had their own sound economic reasons for supporting and maintaining the break with Rome.

That break left the English church in confusion over theological issues, however, and Henry's court remained a battleground between the radicals, led by Cromwell, and a more conservative faction that gathered around the Duke of Norfolk. As a commoner governing noblemen, Cromwell had made powerful enemies, and when he lost favour with the King after arranging the disastrous marriage with Anne of Cleves, his position became dangerously exposed. The last English abbey had been closed for only four months when this shrewd, self-made man, who had become the revolutionary architect of the Anglican schism, was arrested and condemned on charges of treason and heresy. Cromwell went to the scaffold in July 1540, claiming that he would die in the Catholic faith.

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