

Wymondham Abbey Resources

WHO WERE THE MONKS?



Monks and nuns were members of religious orders, living together as communities under the direction of a leader known as an abbot or abbess (for abbeys) or prior / prioress (for priories). Wymondham was initially a priory, but became an abbey in 1448. Their purpose was primarily to pray for the wider community, and particularly for the souls of their founders and benefactors. This was known as *Opus Dei*, the Work of God. There were several religious orders (such as the Benedictines, Cistercians, Cluniacs and Carthusians), which followed slightly different rules, though most were modelled on the **Rule of St. Benedict**, which dates back to about the year 530. There were also orders of friars (e.g. Franciscans, Dominicans, Carthusians, Augustinians), whose purpose was preaching to the wider public, and who therefore did not live an enclosed community life. In 1536, when the closure of monasteries in England and Wales began, there were about 800 monasteries (including nunneries and friaries) with a total of some 10,000 monks, nuns and friars. During the medieval period, there were as many as 85 different religious houses in Norfolk alone, though not all survived into the Tudor period.

WHO BECAME MONKS?

Anyone who felt that God was calling them to a religious life could, in theory, join a religious order. In practice, most came from the better-off sectors of society – the traders, farmers, merchants and gentry as they were usually expected to bring with them a small endowment of land. In early medieval times, young children were sometimes “donated” to monasteries as “oblates” – to be educated in the monastery which they would later join as monks. This practice had largely died out by the 1400s, and most recruits were young adults. Some recruits joined in later life, sometimes leaving behind wives and children. Monks were usually well-educated, as a monk’s life required a high level of literacy for reading (and singing) the scriptures and daily offices, for writing of books in the days before printing, and for all the business side of running the monastery estates and keeping accounts of expenditure.

In medieval times, becoming a monk offered security, a degree of comfort, educated companionship, often beautiful surroundings, adequate food and medical care, and protection from the uncertainties and unpleasantness of life outside. Senior monks had positions of interest and responsibility within their communities, and those who became abbots had real influence locally and sometimes nationally. Abbots of leading monasteries sat in the House of Lords. For women, becoming a nun meant escape from a life of subservience to one where they were able to exercise responsibility, make decisions and take control of their own lives. For men and women alike, joining a religious order was a “positive career option”. Some monks and nuns were undoubtedly very holy people; others were not. However, the accounts of corruption and lax living that were circulated at the time of the dissolution were exaggerated for political reasons. In fact, monasteries had been undergoing a period of reform and were generally in better shape than for some time. Bishops conducted occasional “Ofsted inspections” of monasteries. In 1514, things had been so lax that a sort of Episcopal “special measures” were applied. But reports on Wymondham from 1520 and 1526 show that the abuses and irregularities had been remedied. Almost the only complaint was that some of the windows were broken, allowing pigeons to enter the church and “defile” the books.

WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE IN A MONASTERY?

Monks lived a communal life in which everything, in theory, was shared. They prayed together, worked together, ate the same food together and shared a common dormitory for sleeping. There was little or no privacy in the monastery, and absolutely no private possessions. Every day, after the morning mass, the monks would gather together for a meeting in the **chapter house**. A chapter of the Rule (usually the Rule of St. Benedict, the “rule book” followed at Wymondham) was read out. After this followed a sort of business meeting, as well as an opportunity for any disciplinary matters to be dealt with. The ruined arch on the SE side of Wymondham *right* was the end wall of the chapter house, and some of the windows now on the south side of the church were re-used from this building when it was demolished. The abbot (or prior) presided over the chapter meeting. All wore the same simple robes (the habit), which varied slightly from order to order. The Wymondham monks were Benedictines, also known as Black Monks, so they wore black habits. Round their waist they wore a rope with three knots, reminding them of their vows (promises) of poverty, chastity and obedience. When working, the monks wore a sort of over-garment called a scapular which was easy to wash and protected their habit from dirt. Monks slept fully dressed, ready to be woken for the first service of the day at 3 am.



WHEN DID MONKS PRAY?

Church services and private prayer dominated the life of medieval monks. Communal prayers averaged about five hours per day, while private prayer and contemplation could take up to four further hours. Most of the services lasted at least half an hour and consisted of Bible readings, the singing of psalms and various prayers and sometimes hymns. They sang through the whole book of psalms every week. They were chanted by the monks (unaccompanied plainsong chants) in the choir stalls – in Wymondham these were just to the east of the east tower. Monks were supposed to stand for the singing, but often the seats were hinged with little ledges underneath (called *misericords* from the Latin word for mercy) so that they could prop themselves up. It must have been hard to stay away, and if the seat came crashing down, then the abbot would know!

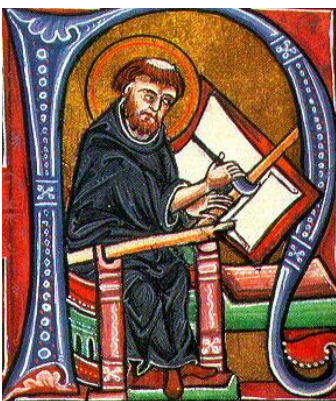
A monk's day began with the ringing of bells, some time between midnight and two a.m., signalling the first prayers of the day called **Mattins**, followed by **Lauds**, which included hymns, psalms and readings. After a short sleep, prayers were again held at sunrise with a service called **Prime** at around 6 am. This was followed by **Terce** at about 9 am, and **Sext** at midday. Before this, the monks conducted the **Chapter Mass** (similar to the Catholic or Anglican Eucharist of today) followed by the daily meeting in the chapter house. The mid-afternoon service of **None** was held at about 3 pm, followed by **Vespers** at about 6 pm. The day ended with **Compline** at dusk, after which the monks retired to the dormitory for the night.

If anyone was late and missed processing with the other monks, he would have to come in alone to the chapel and stretch himself out on the floor in the middle of the choir, as a sign of apology for being late. When the sub-prior gave a signal, the latecomer was allowed to rise and go to his place. Alongside the official liturgy, private prayer, especially mental prayer, always held an important place, with the monks spending many hours in personal contemplation of God and their faith. In practice, the rules were not always followed – one of the complaints against the monks of Wymondham in 1514 was that they found excuses to skip the services!

WHAT ELSE DID THEY DO?

Most of the monks' day centred round the **cloister**, which was used for reading, work and private prayer. This covered walkway round an open grassy lawn usually (as at Wymondham) lay on the south side of the church to get the maximum light and sunshine during the day. All the principal monastery buildings – the church, the refectory, the chapter house, the dormitory (with toilets at the south end) – could be entered directly from the cloister. It usually included built-in book shelves, where the monks could keep the books they were currently reading or writing, and wash basins with piped water just outside the **refectory**. Both these features can be seen in the cloisters of Norwich Cathedral, which was also a former Benedictine abbey. (In Wymondham, water was piped to the monastery from a spring near the Lizard). Monks took their meals in the refectory – in silence: they took it in turns to read aloud from religious books so that the monks could listen and learn even while eating. **Meals** consisted mainly of bread, eggs, cheese and fish, but not normally meat, except on special occasions or for sick monks. Most of the food was grown on monastery lands nearby. There were fishponds in the meadow between Wymondham monastery and the river. The cloister was also an area kept private for the monks so that they could work undisturbed. It was also a place for domestic activities, such as the weekly “maundy”, when monks washed each others' feet, and shaving with sharp razors. Monks heads were regularly shaved to create the round bald “tonsure” which marked every professed monk.

The monastery “admin offices” were also in, or just off, the cloister. Some of the more senior monks were known as “**obedientiaries**”, with particular areas of responsibility. These included the infirmarer (who looked after sick monks), the cellarer (who looked after the cellars and drinks), the kitchener (responsible for food), the almoner (who gave alms to the poor), the fraterer (responsible for the serving of food in the refectory) and the sacrist (who looked after the vestments and utensils used in services and kept the church clean). These officers of the monastery had to keep detailed accounts of their work, usually on long rolls of parchment known as obedientiary rolls. Many of these survive (including a few from Wymondham) and give historians a detailed insight into the running of monastic houses.



An important part of the monks' work was in copying **books**. Until the introduction of printing in the late 1400s, all books were written by hand. Often they were illuminated with brightly coloured initial letters or even illustrations. Monasteries like Wymondham had a “scriptorium” where inks and writing materials were prepared and books written and bound in leather. Producing a single copy of the Bible, for example, would be many months work for a team of monks. It also took a whole flock of sheep to produce enough vellum for every page. The present muniment room at Wymondham preserves just two pages from a service book which are known to have been produced here.

Useful websites:

General intro: <http://www.britainexpress.com/History/medieval-monastery.htm>

General intro: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monastery>

Rule of St. Benedict <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/rul-benedict.html>