

Wymondham Abbey Resources

THE DISSOLUTION OF THE MONASTERIES

The Dissolution and the Reformation

Between 1536 and 1539, all monasteries in England were forced to close, surrendering their buildings, estates and valuables to King Henry VIII. Several uneconomic or corrupt monasteries had, in fact, already been closed in the early 1500s with the full support of the Roman Catholic church authorities. The Dissolution was not linked (or, at least, only indirectly) with the Protestant Reformation, which did not begin in England until after King Henry's death ten years later. The closure of Wymondham Abbey certainly left its mark on the townspeople – in fact it was something of an economic disaster from which the town did not recover for several generations. But, as far as church worship and doctrine were concerned, the only change was the official introduction for the first time of an English Bible in 1538. The Latin Mass continued in use until Archbishop Cranmer introduced the First English Prayer Book in 1549. Many people were probably completely unaware of any change of status or authority in the church.



Left: monks attending Mass

Why did Henry VIII close the monasteries?

Money had a great deal to do with it. The monasteries were immensely wealthy, while Henry was a spendthrift, and always short of cash. The seizure of the monasteries enabled him to reward his loyal followers, and replenish the treasury from sales. However, the king did not benefit as much as he should have done. Thomas Cromwell *right*, the government official responsible for organising the sell-off, managed to line his own pocket with the proceeds, as did many minor officials lower down the scale. John Flowerdew, who was in charge of the sale at Wymondham, certainly cheated his royal masters as well as the Wymondham townspeople.



The break between Henry VIII and the Pope also gave the king a new opportunity and excuse to seize monastic property. Henry's first marriage to his brother's widow, Catherine of Aragon, had failed to produce a male heir. To many English people, this predicament threatened impending disaster, and looked like a judgement from God (you were not supposed to marry your sister-in-law!). In 1534, Henry asked the new Pope Clement VII to annul the marriage, something which in normal times would have been readily granted. Unfortunately, these were not normal times. The Pope was at that moment a prisoner of the Emperor Charles V, who happened to be also the uncle of Queen Catherine. He refused the divorce. The King, with the ready support of almost all English church leaders, therefore persuaded parliament to pass the Act of Supremacy. This declared that the King, not the Pope, was "supreme head in earth of the Church of England." On 31 August, 1534, the abbot and ten monks of Wymondham met in the chapter house and formally subscribed to the Act.

Kings of England (as of every other land) had always exercised considerable authority over the church. In 1448, when the monks of Wymondham sought to become an independent abbey rather than a priory of St. Albans, it was the king's permission they first sought before approaching the pope for ratification. Clearly, the King's new position from 1534 gave him much greater power still. On the other hand, it also potentially put the monasteries in opposition to the king – many monasteries also owed allegiance to heads of religious orders who were almost all based abroad and often senior papal appointments. The monks and nuns of England faced a serious conflict of interest after the Act of Supremacy!

How were the monasteries closed?



The first stage of the Dissolution began in 1536. A team of royal “visitors”, agents of Thomas Cromwell, visited every smaller monastery in the land. Their report claimed that “manifest sin, vicious, carnal and abominable living is daily used and committed amongst the little and small abbeys” - allegations which, in most cases, were grossly exaggerated. This was the justification for the 1536 Act of Suppression of about 400 smaller monasteries, defined as those with an income of less than £200 per year (Wymondham’s income was just over this sum, so was not immediately affected). The king was probably testing the water at this stage. Officially, the reason for the suppression was reform, claiming that monastic money would be put to better uses (it was not). Henry may not yet have intended to suppress the larger monasteries, and in three cases even re-founded monasteries he had just closed!

The fact that the king encountered so little opposition (apart from the “Pilgrimage of Grace” in Yorkshire) no doubt encouraged him to force closure onto the larger monasteries in 1539, and the whole process was completed by 1540. In all, some 800 monasteries in England and Wales closed, and the Crown gained assets to the value of some £100,000 per annum. About 10,000 monks and nuns were ejected and either found new jobs as parish priests or cathedral canons, or pensioned off. The process was on the whole peaceful - very few monks resisted, only three abbots (Reading, Colchester and Glastonbury) to the point of martyrdom.

What happened in Wymondham?

The monks of Wymondham must have early on realised that their end was inevitable. In 1538, like many other monasteries, they decided to hand over their possessions to the king freely and in advance, perhaps hoping for better settlement terms. Most of the monks became parish clergy elsewhere. The last Abbot, Eligius (Louis or Elisha) Ferrers, became Vicar of Wymondham when that post fell vacant, enjoying a handsome pension of £60 13s 4d. (For comparison, a labourer typically earned about £5 per year). The terracotta sedilia (seat) on the south of the present high altar is traditionally associated with Ferrers and may have been salvaged by him from the monastic church.



It is hardly surprising that the Wymondham monks gave in so readily. Bishop’s visitations in the previous twenty years had revealed a sadly lax state of affairs, but had done little to improve matters. The monks apparently led quite secular lives, neither observing the daily offices (services) in church, nor serving the local community. Their duties to support the poor and provide a schoolteacher were neglected. Probably few townspeople lamented the passing of the monks as such, though they were to suffer from the loss of trade which followed the closure.

What local people did resent, however, was the high-handed and dishonest way in which the king’s agent, John Flowerdew of Stanfield Hall, handled the sale. The parts of the church which had always belonged to the town (the nave and north aisle) were safe enough, but the townspeople raised money to purchase the south aisle, south transept, the abbey steeple and bells (that is, the now ruined east tower) and a large quantity (17 “fodder” – about 17 tons) of lead from the roofs. Flowerdew, however, hastily pulled down the buildings and poured the lead into a hole in the ground, where it was rediscovered by chance in the 19th century. The Ketts, the influential Wymondham family who eleven years later became involved in rebellion, were particularly incensed. Within living memory, Kett children, descendants of the Tudor Ketts, were forbidden ever to speak to the Flowerdews. John Flowerdew did his job quickly and thoroughly. The church was dismantled first, perhaps to ensure that monks would never return there. The remains of the other Abbey buildings were used as a quarry for generations to come – 18th century prints show walls surviving to a considerable height where little now stands.

Useful website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissolution_of_the_Monasteries