

The Dissolution of the Monasteries

What Caused Henry VIII to Order the Dissolution of the Monasteries?

- Henry VIII had **fallen out** with the **Pope** over his **divorce** with Catherine of Aragon. Henry felt let down by the Pope. The monasteries were the last bastion of Papal authority in England and recognised the Pope as the head of the Church in England. Henry would not tolerate this.
- The early monasteries had provided hospitals, charity, shelter and education amongst many other things. The wealth they had amassed had led to **laziness and greediness** amongst many monks. Also there were rumours that nuns and monks were not following their vows of chastity. These developments had resulted in a drop in the popularity of monasteries.
- The Church owned up to 30% of the land in England, and the monasteries took much of this up. They were **enormously wealthy**, and Henry believed he could put their wealth to better use.
- **Thomas Cromwell** had different motives. He was an **Evangelical** and **dislike monasteries**.

How did Henry go about the Dissolution?

Establishing the Facts

- Early in 1535, **Thomas Cromwell** was **appointed Vicar-General**.
- Cromwell immediately ordered a survey to establish how wealthy the monasteries were. These results were compiled in July 1535 and a book called '**Value of Church Property**' was published. The monasteries were valued at £100,000 a year from land and £25,000 from other means.
- Later in the year, another group of men called '**Intendants**' visited the monasteries to investigate the rumours about idleness, greed and debauchery. They reported back that the monasteries were 'idle, corrupt and useless'. There were allegations of monks fathering children and of monks getting married. They wrote their Findings down in a book, known as the '**Black Book of the Monasteries**'
- Henry and Cromwell now had the evidence they needed to act. Some did however report back that 'religion is well kept and observed'.

Dissolution of The Lesser Monasteries. 1536

- In 1536, Parliament passed an Act that permitted the dissolution of all monasteries that had an income of less than £200 a year.
- **376 monasteries were closed.**
- 2000 monks were pensioned off or sent to larger monasteries or nunneries.
- Henry and Cromwell were very cautious and calculating. They deliberately chose the smaller monasteries first in order to test public opinion and because they felt that the Tudor treasury was not yet ready to cope with the larger amounts of money that would come from the larger monasteries.

The Pilgrimage of Grace. 1536

- In the south and east of England little opposition was seen against the dissolutions.
- However in the north things were different.
- Two rebellions broke out, one in Lincolnshire and one in Yorkshire.
- The rebellion in Lincolnshire was easily dealt with, because it lacked leaders of any quality. 50 rebels were executed.
- However, the Yorkshire rebels were a different matter. **Robert Aske**, a lawyer and landowner managed to get together an army of 40,000. They adopted a banner showing the **five wounds of Christ**.
- He referred to his followers as **pilgrims and not rebels**. They were doing God's work. He wanted no killing and stealing.
- By October 24th, Aske and his army had **captured York**, and were joined by the Archbishop of York, and Thomas Darcy, a powerful local Baron.
- His main demands were as follows:
 1. The **restoration of the Pope's authority** in England.
 2. The **removal of Cromwell** from power.
 3. The **immediate stop to the dissolutions**.
 4. **Parliament** was to be called to discuss **new laws**.
 5. **Mary Tudor** to be **legitimised** and renamed as **heir to the throne**.
- **Henry** had an army of only **8000 in the north** and this was not large enough to deal with the rebellion. He had to stall Aske. He sent Thomas Howard, the Duke of Norfolk to discuss terms with Aske. He agreed to the terms that Aske stated, saying that nobody who took part in the rebellion would be punished.
- A few days later, Henry met Aske, and even gave him a gold chain as a sign of friendship and said that Aske could have everything he wanted so long as the Aske's followers dispersed back to their homes. Henry promised to have **Jane Seymour crowned Catholic Queen of the North**.
- In truth, Henry had **no intention of keeping his side of the bargain**, despite the faith which Aske had put in Henry's word.
- Aske dismissed his army, and then Henry acted by sending in his army.
- **Aske was captured** and held in prison for 6 months. He was then dragged through the streets of York and then left to hang from a tree, loaded with heavy chains. He took three days to die. Henry ordered that one man should be hanged from every village that had taken part or supported the rebellion. Over 200 rebels including some monks were hanged. The other leaders were also executed.
- The **pilgrimage achieved nothing** and received no support from other parts of the country.

What were the consequences of the failure of the Pilgrimage of Grace?

- It sealed the fate of the monasteries in England
- A 'Council of the North' was set up to rule the north of England.
- The involvement of monks in the revolt gave Henry and Cromwell further ammunition for their continued program of dissolutions.

The Dissolution of The Larger Monasteries.

- In 1538, 250 friaries were closed down.
- This was followed in 1539, by the closure of 645 greater monasteries.
- The Abbots of Woburn, Glastonbury, Colchester and Reading all attempted to resist the closures. All of them were hanged at the gates of their monasteries in order to teach a lesson to other would be troublemakers. The Abbot of Glastonbury was dragged through the town, hanged, beheaded and his head impaled on his abbey gates.
- The buildings were stripped of doors, lead, timber, glass, art and literature, gold plate, silver, gold and jewellery. Livestock was seized.
- Thomas Cromwell was a ruthless man and the plans were carried out in a very efficient, if bullying manner.

What Effect Did The Dissolutions have in England?

- The treasury now had an enormous amount of additional money. Some of this money was put forward to build schools and colleges. Some money was set aside for the creation of new bishoprics. This was done to limit any criticism. However, much of it went towards the construction of Henry's Royal Navy.
- Henry gained an enormous amount of land. However, he needed money urgently to fund the war with France and Scotland. Therefore he sold the land to over 40,000 people including nobles, merchants and self-made men. Sadly, Henry squandered the money on futile, fairly unsuccessful wars. If he had held on to the land it would have provided him with a larger amount of money over many years.
- Henry had inadvertently created a group of landowners who would always be opposed to the return of the Catholic faith. They would be unwilling to give up their land in the future.
- 7000 monks were pensioned off. Even in 1551, this pension scheme was costing the treasury £44,000 a year. Most monks were treated well.
- Abbots lost their seats in Parliament.
- Some monks went to work in local parish churches.
- Other monks wandered around the country as vagabonds.
- Many of the lay monastery workers found themselves without jobs and they too became vagabonds. Unemployment and poverty increased.
- The closure of the monasteries resulted in a reduction of hospitals, schools, places of accommodation, and caring for the poor.
- In some places where the monastery was the centre of life, the community collapsed.
- Sheep farming increased, producing enormous profits for landowners. Sheep farming requires fewer workers and therefore this situation also added to the unemployment problem.
- Resulted in the loss of works of art and literature that were destroyed.
- Beautiful buildings were left ransacked to scar the countryside for centuries.