The Dissolution of the Monasteries

These notes are background information for the teaching activity ‘What effect did the dissolution of the monasteries have on British society?’

**Timeline**

**1524-28** Wolsey’s Dissolutions 29 lesser monasteries (those with less than 12 people) were dissolved by Wolsey and Cromwell. This was so Wolsey could raise money to build a school in Ipswich and found a college at Oxford. They were described as ‘decayed’ and both legal and papal permission was given for their dissolution.

In **1530** there were about 800 religious houses in England and Wales. This comprised around 456 monasteries, 136 nunneries, 10 double houses, and 187 friaries although the numbers vary in different sources.

**1531** Henry VIII is awarded the title of ‘Supreme Head of the Church in England and Wales’ and a grant of £100,000 from the church (in return for withdrawing charge of praemunire – recognising an external authority without permission of Crown - penalty being surrender of all property to Crown).

**1532** Church lost independence of its legal system. Cromwell is in power and the decision is made to break with Rome. Henry VIII liked the idea of caesaro-papism; one person as religious and political leader.

March **1533** Act of Appeals – legal powers of the Pope were transferred to the Archbishop of Canterbury - within 2 months Henry VIII’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon is dissolved.

**1534** Act of Supremacy created which recognised that the English monarch was also head of the Church of England. Act of First Fruits and Tenths, a permanent system of high taxation of all clergy – much higher than taxes on laymen - increasing royal income by 40%, is introduced. Some scholars estimate that as much as one third of the land in England was in Church hands at this time.

**1535** Valor Ecclesiasticus and The Visitation - this was a survey of the monasteries, done by local gentry acting as unpaid commissioners, to assess payments due under 1534 Act. The visitations were done by representatives of Cromwell; his two main representatives were Thomas Legh and Richard Layton. They visited the monasteries to ensure the survey was correct. This survey was very complete and is believed to be accurate, it found that:

* total income of religious houses £160,000 pa, 3 times that from royal estates
* 0.25 of the income of an individual religious house went to its head (abbot or Prior)
* income came from rents, tithes, pilgrimages and bequests
* the population of England was 3.5 million, c10,000 (0.003%) of whom were monks, nuns etc.

**1536** – Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries – This time defined as those with an income less than £200 pa. There were over 300 in England – not all were dissolved, 60/70 survived but had to pay to be made exempt. Once a monastery had been dissolved the Commissioners visited quickly and took all the valuables before the monks could sell them off for their own profit. Valuables included gold plate and ornaments, lead from the roofs and windows, the bells - even door knobs. The Head of house got a pension – monks could go to larger houses or leave monastic life – but still could not marry. This has been seen as smash and grab for cash – there was probably no plan to dissolve the rest of the monasteries.

**1536** – Court of Augmentations set up – to deal with transfer of land from Church to Crown. In October there was the Lincolnshire Rising – an uprising against the closure of Catholic religious houses, 40,000 supporters marched on Lincoln Cathedral demanding the freedom to worship as Catholics. This led to the Pilgrimage of Grace in Yorkshire, from October to December. This was an uprising, supported by the gentry, it aimed for a show of force that would get the Crown to stop the dissolutions, get rid of some advisers, and bring back Roman Catholicism. It failed.

**1537** - Cumberland Rising – this was only partly anti-dissolution, there were also more general socio economic grievances and the fear that Crown would attack parish churches after monasteries.

**1538** - Start of the dissolution of the larger houses – this was done piecemeal, there was no specific Act. It was partly vengeance for the Pilgrimage of Grace and also because Henry VIII and Cromwell wanted the money – any who opposed were tried on trumped up charges and executed in their own monastery e.g. Glastonbury, Reading and Colchester. Most monasteries decided to surrender rather than risk this fate. The buildings were deliberately destroyed to prevent monks returning. Abbots got a pension and were not worse off, a monks pension was the same as the wage of manual worker

**1540** – The last surviving house was dissolved – it was Waltham Abbey. By now over 800 monasteries had gone in less than 5 years (in England, Wales and N Ireland)

**1543-47** - Two thirds of all ex-monastic land was sold to pay for defences/wars with France and Spain/the navy

**The process of dissolution** – (6-7 weeks from announcement to the monks leaving)

It was much the same in every case,

The chief commissioners paid two official visits to the scene of operations during the progress of the work.

* On the first day they assembled the superior and his subjects in the Chapter House, and announced the closure/accepted the surrender.
* They called for and defaced the convent seal, the symbol of corporate existence, without which no business could be transacted
* They desecrated the church
* They took possession of the best plate and vestments "unto the King's use"
* They measured the lead upon the roof and calculated its value when melted
* They counted the bells (to work out their worth/make sure the monks couldn’t sell/melt them first)
* They appraised the goods and chattels of the community.

They then moved on to the next monastery leaving behind them subordinate officers and workmen to carry out the designed destruction by;

* Stripping the lead from the roofs and pulling down the lead gutters and rain pipes
* Melting the lead into pigs and fodders (types of moulds the lead was poured into)
* Threw down the bells, broke them with sledge-hammers, and packed the metal into barrels ready to be sold on to a dealer.
* Collecting the furniture and selling it, together with the window frames, shutters, and doors by public auction or private tender.
* When all this had been done, the commissioners returned to audit the accounts and to satisfy themselves generally that the work of devastation had been completed.

**The Effects of Dissolution**

**Buildings and landscape**

* Architectural and cultural vandalism – monastic buildings were deliberately destroyed, treasures broken up or sold, libraries broken up and books destroyed
* Buildings were used as quarries – stone was robbed or mined and reused in other buildings. This happened in areas where stone was scarce and some monasteries pretty much disappeared. If the stone was not needed then often buildings were left to fall down over the centuries – there were professional demolition teams but demolishing a building was expensive.
* Mansion houses built nearby using materials from monasteries or parts of the monastery buildings were converted into large houses.
* Some monasteries bought by local communities to use as parish churches - in some cases the monastic church had already been divided into 2 - one part for the monks and one for local parishioners – sometimes the parish part was kept and the monastic part demolished.
* Some people bought monastery buildings to convert to agricultural or industrial uses

**Religious Effects – churches, cathedrals and monks**

* 8,000 monks and friars were dispossessed – all but 1,500 found other jobs – mainly as priests - most got pensions. Even in 1551, this pension scheme was costing the Treasury £44,000 a year. Most monks were treated well. They were not allowed to marry.
* 2,000 nuns did badly - they could not marry or get a job, leaving tem destitute.
* Abbots lost their seats in Parliament - this lessened the religious influence in government.
* It is hard to know what happened to lay people who worked at monasteries – they probably got jobs with new owners.
* Pilgrimages and chantries both declined after 1536 – also less people wanted to be priests.
* 6 monastic churches became new cathedrals/bishoprics; Bristol, Chester, Gloucester, Oxford, Peterborough and Westminster (later a church)
* Some priories became secular collegiate cathedrals; the prior was replaced by a Dean and the monks by a chapter of canons e.g. Canterbury, Carlisle, Durham, Ely, Norwich, Rochester, Winchester and Worcester

**Social Effects**

* End of monastic charity lead to an increase in poverty in the 16th century – according to the Valor Ecclesiasticus only 2% of a religious house’s income was given to the poor which would suggest it did not make a lot of difference. There were other reasons for the rise in poverty; rising population, pressure on land, rising inflation. Laymen continued to endow charities and fund hospitals as the monasteries had done. It seems that the end of monastic charity for the poor may have increased poverty somewhat but it did not create poverty. The effect was worse in the North.
* End of places of refuge and shelter for travelers and pilgrims – some monasteries had provided inns or accommodation, often in the gatehouse.
* End of care for the sick and needy – all monasteries had an infirmary for sick monks – some had hospitals – it is not clear whether these cared for local people as well as the monks.
* Some schools and colleges were founded or re-endowed by the Crown using cash from monasteries – less than had been promised beforehand. More schools were re-founded during the next reign with the disposal of the chantries. The new landowners were not always keen on allowing children from poor backgrounds to go to school; meaning education was more restricted rather than less

**Effects on landowners, gentry and society**

* Doubled Henry’s income – he gradually sold off the monastic land and property he got – mainly at full market price – none really given away as favours – he sold the land to over 40,000 people including nobles, merchants and self-made men. If he had held on to the land it would have provided him (and his heirs) with a larger amount of money over many years. Virtually all of the monastic lands were sold by 1603. Henry spent half – two thirds of the money on wars and the navy.
* Increase in number of landowners – many merchants, 2nd sons etc. able to buy land – this may have helped England to develop peacefully – this may not be a big effect – most of the land was bought by existing landowners. 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.
* New landlords were more ruthless than monks – they enclosed land for sheep and put up rents leading to more poverty and unemployment? Probably not. Many did enclose land but monasteries had begun doing that anyway and inflation would have led to rises in rent anyway.
* In some places where the monastery was the centre of life, the community collapsed.

**Resources/references**

**General** – \* websites that have a list of monasteries and what happened to them

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/history/research/english-monastic-archives> \*

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abbeys_and_priories_in_England> \*

<http://cistercians.shef.ac.uk/> \* only Cistercian – detailed account of 5 abbeys in Yorkshire

<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/roche-abbey>

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10455a.htm>

<http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/DissolutionOfTheMonasteries.html>

<http://www.pastscape.org.uk/News.aspx?id=NewsItem13>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b009jtq1>

**Archive sources for researching an individual abbey**

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/dissolution-monasteries-1536-1540/> says which documents have what information

**Deeds of surrender**

<http://cistercians.shef.ac.uk/kirkstall/history/dissolution/appendix1.php>

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/catalogue/DisplayCatalogueDetails.asp?CATID=5313&CATLN=3&FullDetails=True>

**Booklist**

English Heritage Book of Abbeys and Priories, Glyn Coppack, 1990, Batsford, ISBN 0 7134 6308 2

The Abbeys and Priories of Medieval England, Colin Platt, 1984, Bath Press, ISBN 1 85152 9047

Discovering Abbeys and Priories, Geoffrey N Wright, 2004, Shire Books, ISBN 0 74780589 X