

— CHRISTOPHER MORRIS

'Right Well Kept': Peterborough Abbey 1536 - 1539

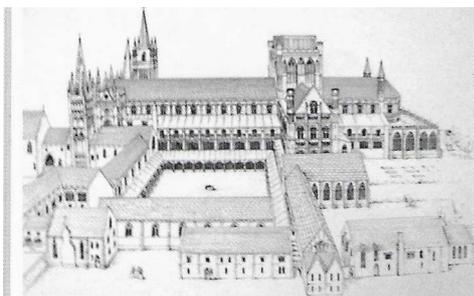
How typical was the experience of Peterborough Abbey in the dissolution of the monasteries?

Although the reasons for and the process of dissolution in Peterborough Abbey compare closely to all other religious houses, the consequences were unique. Peterborough received favourable treatment and so emerged from the dissolution as one of six abbeys to be transformed into new cathedrals. The changes imposed on Peterborough were less disruptive in terms of architectural modifications, the religious community, economic sanctions and material confiscations.

In April 1536, there were more than eight hundred monasteries, abbeys, nunneries and friaries that were home to more than ten thousand religious but by April 1540 there were none left. The experience of Peterborough Abbey varies from most. Some of the smaller houses were re-established 'in perpetuity' under a new charter. However most properties were confiscated and the inhabitants swept away before being able to repay the sums borrowed in order to purchase this concession. A small group of monasteries, some sixteen in all, stood in a class by themselves by reason of their continued or revived existence in another form. They represented the only material benefit accruing to the church from the great monastic confiscation and were effectively the 'sum total of the salvage effected from the great wreck'.¹ Just six remained as religious establishments. One of these, Westminster, lasted only ten years as a bishopric; therefore the only genuinely 'salvaged' ones were Gloucester, Chester, Bristol, St Frideswides (later Oxford) and Peterborough.

Because Peterborough was transformed into a new cathedral, it shared its fate with only five other abbeys, however it was atypical of these also. In these new cathedrals, the arrangements were conservative and an endeavour was made to give them an educational colour. Peterborough was typical of this in that the King's School was founded 'under the wing of the Cathedral',² also, like Gloucester, it went through an intermediate stage of collegiate existence before becoming a cathedral. The clergy of Peterborough 'handed him [King Henry] the keys on 29th November 1539' and the cathedral was established in September 1541.³ Westminster was quick to surrender its status and become a cathedral, but it did not last. In Bristol and St Frideswide's the break was more complete and more than two years elapsed before the cathedrals came into being. Chester was left in a state of 'suspended animation'.⁴ The others were established in a haphazard way, however the consolidation of Peterborough was a relatively smooth process and it was the exception, in that it soon conformed to the normal type of cathedral establishment.

Because Peterborough was a large abbey, it was spared the accusation of 'manifest sin, vicious, carnal and abominable living... daily used amongst the little and small abbeys'.⁵ Two thirds of the abbeys were small affairs, had no large estates and only a few religious living in them. At its peak, in the twelfth century, Peterborough had at



The abbey at the time of the Reformation



least eighty monks and there were always many affiliated servants. By the reformation, there were only thirty-two monks, but up to one hundred and thirty individuals in the community. According to the Act for the suppression of the Lesser Monasteries of 1536 Peterborough was a 'great and honourable monastery, right well kept'. It was therefore treated entirely differently and less callously from the start of the dissolution.

The status of the religious leaders in Peterborough was typical in that they had not previously represented any threat to Henry, even though part of his motivation to dissolve the monasteries was that the church represented an alternative source of loyalty for most of the population. At the time of his 'breach with Rome, Henry saw the monasteries as 'one of the great bulwarks of the papal system' and had described the monks as 'the great standing army of Rome'. However few clerics embodied a significant challenge to Henry. Thirty of the most senior abbots (including Peterborough's) took up seats in the House of Lords, lived the lavish lives of lords in their homes, away from the monks. Generally the lower clergy were uneducated, taking on a role similar to that of a country parson. The majority had sworn allegiance to the King after the Act of Supremacy and the few that had refused were executed on grounds of treason. These included Bishop John Fisher. The deaths of three abbots of Glastonbury, Colchester and Reading for constructive treason came in the winter of 1539. Peterborough's was one of twenty Abbots who signed a letter to the Pope in support of Henry's case. These signatories had taken a step that it would be difficult to retrace along the road of submission to the King resulting in The Submission of the Clergy (1532). The many differences between the churches secular interests resulted in disunity within its organisation and so, with the exception of a few leading officials, it was powerless to intervene in Henry's schemes. Nothing in the whole business of dissolution is 'more revealing and more sordid'⁶ than the way that some of the

(above left) The 15th century Lectern survived the Reformation, but lost its branching Candelabra to Cromwellian soldiers in 1643.

(above right) Many traces of the monastic building survive in the Precincts buildings. Here later buildings were inserted into the aisles of the Infirmary. The central 'nave' remained roofed until the 17th century. The infirmary chapel, dedicated to St Lawrence, survives as part of the Canons residence beyond the wall.

(bottom right) The cloister and chapter house were demolished on the orders of parliamentary commissioners during the Commonwealth.

abbots and priors of houses, great and small, accepted rich prizes for the abandonment of the service of God. The clergy in Peterborough and across the country were 'children of their age and country' and it was this that made the dissolution and other religious changes of the reign of Henry not only possible, but also relatively easy of accomplishment.

There is evidence of widespread active resistance against the work of destruction but Peterborough yielded to Henry's wishes with a distinct degree of ease. The

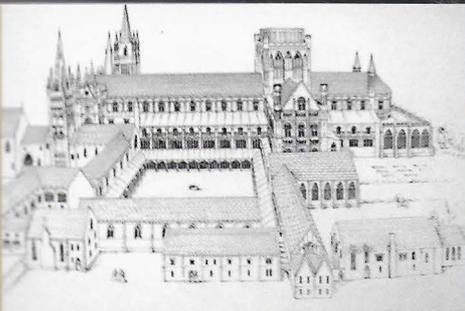
Pilgrimage of Grace in October 1536 was a popular rising and constituted acts of defensive protest by the threatened monasteries. Peterborough came under considerable pressure, particularly considering that the bailiff for the abbey's lands was implicated in the Lincolnshire rebellion and summarily executed late in 1536. Like all of the monasteries, Peterborough had already been subjected to pressure from the Kings officials during The Visitations. Following an official visit to Peterborough Abbey in 1518, the Bishop of Lincoln reported numerous disorders. Even though by 1536 John Bridges felt that 'the monks of this convent (Peterborough) do not stand charged with excesses or impurities of any kind', there was 'fear and terror in Peterborough';⁷ so the mood within the abbey was characteristic of all the others at the time, despite its privileged position.

There is a stark contrast between the acts of opposition and the acquiescence that took place in Peterborough. This is principally because of the superior, John Chambers, whose compliance with the directors of the dissolution ultimately served to protect both his position and the abbey in which he dwelt. Cardinal Wolsey appointed Chambers, a native of Peterborough, in 1528 and so he was 'manifestly in favour with the ruling powers'.⁸ This relationship was strengthened with such acts as to have all of the monks profess for the king in 1534. Peterborough was clearly in goodwill with Wolsey, who kept his Easter there in 1530. Gunton is openly critical of Chambers for 'complying' and 'demeaning' himself to Henry and also criticises the motives of his capitulation.⁹ Because of Chambers' desperation to protect himself (or his church), this would inevitably have changed the natural and typical process of dissolution that Peterborough would have experienced without him. Therefore, what favoured Peterborough was the way that its superiors were actively involved in sustaining the institution.

Many of the monasteries took alarm and made fresh friends on a lavish scale to try and protect themselves. Following early dissolutions there was 'panic-stricken wire-pulling' with a view to saving monasteries from the 'hammer of the great tyrant', at which Chambers had proved himself a past master. The effect of the dissolution on the religious and social communities across the country was considerable, but the personnel changes experienced by Peterborough were minimal. A good deal of the ancient privilege was preserved to the city and soke of Peterborough and the same befell the guilds that had grown up under its shelter. The dispersed religious were supposed to receive some 'benefices' but few did. Chambers on the other hand was initially awarded a pension of £260 per year. It was common amongst the surviving monasteries for the monks who remained to be only the most useful and intelligent members of the old community, but in Peterborough the monks had a larger share of the new resident community than any other. Knowles states that the surviving monks in the new sees found themselves living 'a life that had changed little from that in the monastery' and because Chambers became the first bishop of Peterborough, little changed here in the co-ordination of religious life. Some twenty monks became bishops in the first ten years after the dissolution but Chambers was the only one in the whole country to continue *in situ*, confirming that the sense of continuity in the religious community of Peterborough was more prevalent than any other

Prior to 1536, Peterborough had advantages over a typical abbey that made it able to survive the dissolution. It was fortunate to be conveniently situated for a much-needed new diocese, since the demographic changes had outgrown the previous allocation of seventeen sees. It was geographically privileged to exist in the previously huge diocese of Lincoln, which was carved up following the dissolution. The process of dissolution was defined by regional officers and involved the systematic liquidation of the religious houses and their buildings, but due to the fate of Peterborough to survive, its building and structure fared the better. The clergy of Peterborough Cathedral gradually came to dwell in separate lodgings carved out of the old buildings. The Bishop's palace was built encompassing the abbot's lodging and the deanery was constructed on the site of the priory. The buildings of Peterborough were regarded as 'notably beautiful workmanship but were in a very ruinous condition'¹⁰ to such an extent that the first years allowance was redirected to restoration. Subsequently, the structures of Peterborough, which Henry is reputed to have described as 'one of the goodliest monuments in Christendom', were actually improved following the dissolution.

There is no doubt that the effects of the dissolution on Peterborough abbey were far less severe than the majority of monasteries. Because of its situation before 1536, it was only subjected to 'constitutional changes and certain deprivations'¹¹ and so it was indeed specially favoured. The 'grotesquely obsequious' behaviour of Chambers was vital in protecting Peterborough Abbey and the



Right Well Kept



It has been suggested that the recent burial of Katharine of Aragon in the Abbey church (29th Jan 1536) played an important part in the inclusion of Peterborough as one of the new Henrician Cathedrals, but there is little contemporary evidence for this. All Photographs supplied courtesy of Andrew Watson, Cathedral Education officer, Peterborough Cathedral.

monks from the 'spoliations in train... and the crash of falling masonry echoing in the lands'.¹³ It also meant that the exact method of dissolution was entirely different and less damaging than any other. Knowles describes the whole dissolution as a case of '*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*' and Peterborough Abbey's experience was certainly typical of this. After the confusion of the dissolution, the spiritual life of Peterborough Abbey continued as normal and doctrinally, little had changed. Therefore, in some ways the experience of Peterborough was actually more typical of the churches entirely unaffected by the dissolution.

Further Reading

- K.E. & R. E. Roberts, *The Story of English Towns: Peterborough*, (SPCK 1920)
- T. Ireson, *Northamptonshire*, (Robert Hale Limited 1954)
- D. D. Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England: The Tudor Age*, (Cambridge 1971)
- S. Gunton, *The History of the Church of Peterburgh*, (Chiswell, London 1686)
- C. Haigh, *English Reformations*, (Oxford 1993)
- G. R. Elton, *The Tudor Constitution*, (Cambridge 1960)
- A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, (BT Batsford Ltd. 1964)

References

- ¹ Haigh, 1993, p.25
- ² Roberts, 1920 p.77
- ³ Roberts, 1920 p.71.
- ⁴ Knowles, 1971 p.391
- ⁵ First Act of Dissolution 1536
- ⁶ Knowles, 1971 p.200
- ⁷ Roberts, 1920 p.88
- ⁸ Roberts, 1920 p.56
- ⁹ 'Probable it is that Abbot John loved to sleep in his own skin, and desired to die in his nest wherein he had lived for so long' Gunton 1686 p.57
- ¹⁰ Roberts, 1920 p.77
- ¹¹ Roberts, 1920s p.60
- ¹² (Roberts, 1920 p.75)
- ¹³ Knowles, 1971 p.160

Christopher Morris' Essay won second place in The Historical Association's A Level competition 2004. He was a Sixth Former at Oundle School, Peterborough.