Recycling the Monastic Buildings: The Dissolution in Southern England

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Titchfield. The gatehouse of the new residence has been carved through the centre of the nave of the monastic church.

THE DISSOLUTION

The dissolution of the monasteries was one of the most dramatic developments in English History. In 1536, the religious orders had owned about a fifth of the lands of England. Within four years the monasteries had been abolished and their possessions nationalised by Henry VIII. Within another ten years, most of this had been privatised. These developments affected local communities up and down the land, in a much greater way than the break with Rome or perhaps any other change of the reign of Henry VIII. They affected them in their economic as well as their religious life. In many cases it simply meant replacing one lord by another, but elsewhere it saw the great monastic buildings transformed, whether to ruins or to other uses. Near the monastic sites, communities suffered to a greater or lesser extent from the loss of the main employer or consumer of the locality. But how far were the monasteries replaced in these roles by new owners? Behind the national picture lies the impact of the Dissolution at a local level.

The process of dissolution began with that of the lesser monasteries in 1536, by parliamentary action. The government argued that it was a measure of reform of corrupt institutions that would only remove the lesser houses. It was not to include the destruction of greater houses where 'thanks be to God, religion is right

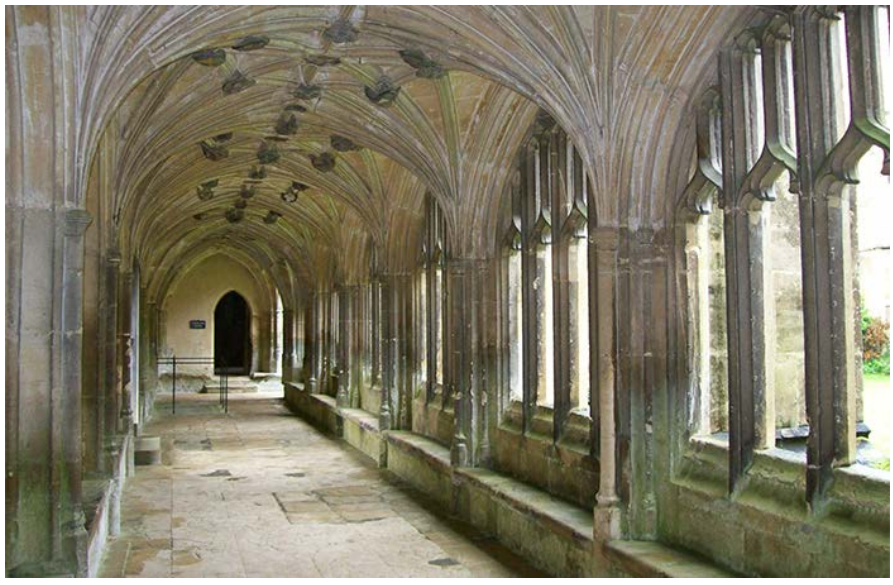
well kept and observed'.[1] These greater houses would increase in size as the existing monks and nuns would be given a choice of giving up the monastic life without compensation or moving to one of the surviving monasteries. But the parliamentary preamble gave little idea of the reality of the future, and in 1537 the dissolution of the greater monasteries began, and the process was virtually complete by the end of 1539. The parliamentary act of dissolution in 1540 served merely to provide a legal basis for what had already been done.

THE MONASTERY AS A QUARRY

But what should be done with these magnificent buildings. There was a general bout of asset stripping. At Titchfield (Hants), one of the new owner's servants commented that 'Some half a dozen neighbours to visit your manor and view our hospitality: whereas they had meet drink and lodgings and have promised to return and buy marble stones, altars, images, tables etc, upon the sale of which we propose to levy our Christmas charges'. At Amesbury (Wiltshire), paving-tiles, tile sherds, stone, timbers, for the partition of the parlour chamber, the ceiling and timber of Mistress Darell's chamber were all sold. Excavations at Battle (Sussex) suggest a similar development there, in the debris of building materials found: the fragmentary remnants of where floor tiles, copper alloy and other objects that had been collected and sold off. At Lewes in Sussex, Thomas Cromwell's officials complained that they needed more security guards because while they were at one end of the site the night-

Sherborne Abbey. Peter Broster, CC BY 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=31875364

Battle Abbey, interior. Tony Grist - Photographer's own files, Public Domain



Battle Abbey, cloisters. Tony Grist - Photographer's own files, Public Domain

(top) Sherborne Abbey. After the dissolution the townspeople were able to acquire the buildings of the abbey church, which was to become their own church, and the earlier parish church was pulled down.
(middle) Battle Abbey. Here Sir Anthony Browne built a great new range containing two floors of lodgings and a gallery, above an existing monastic undercroft. This range survived until the eighteenth century, but now only the two polygonal turrets remind us of this change.
(bottom) Lacock Abbey. The nunnery was converted into a new house of Sir William Sharrington. Here the monastic cloister was retained, as were the buildings round the cloister (other than the church which was destroyed).

time raiders were asset-stripping at the other end.

The lead from the roofs and windows went to the king. They were melted down on site as at Battle and Muchelney (Somerset). Some was reused in royal projects. Lead from Beaulieu and St Mary's Winchester were used for his new castles at Cowes and Calshot, and Hurst respectively, but most was sent to the Tower of London for future use. But, as the surviving monastic ruins remind us, the monasteries provided a huge quantity of stone that could be reused. Parts of the buildings were destroyed and, at Lewes, the letters from the Italian engineer Portinarii to Cromwell tell us of the engineering and mining works required to pull down the monastic church and, in so doing, tell us much about the church itself. The walls were undermined, and supported with timber. The props on one side were then burnt 'either with fire or with powder.... and so we reckon to bring them to the ground'.[2] At Stanley Abbey in Wiltshire, such mining operations are known from excavations and ended in disaster for one of those involved. His body was crushed by the wall he sought to destroy. Sometimes the monastic church was chosen for deliberate and early destruction, as at Lewes and Battle, while other buildings were reused. These would have generated short-term employment although not necessarily for local labour, as the presence at Lewes of Portinarii and the men that he had brought from London reminds us. At Hyde Abbey in Winchester the church was described as 'clene down', but much of the monastic buildings remained long after. In towns like Winchester, the presence of several monastic and friary ruins would have long provided a ready source of easily available stone. In the countryside cottages near monastic ruins built of reused ashlar remind us of the ready presence of cheap available stone.

Sometimes there were specific reasons why monastic remains should be destroyed and not left to decay. The stone was used for royal purposes, particularly for the construction of the chain of castles built along the south coast or for the growing number of royal palaces. Stone from St Martin's priory at Dover was used at Camber Castle, from Quarr and Beaulieu (Hants) for Cowes castle, and from Beaulieu for Calshot castle. Some of the windows of the clerestory and cloisters from Rewley Abbey found use in lighting Henry's new bowling alley at Hampton Court.[3] Stone from Stanley abbey was used for the great enlargement of Sir Edward Baynton's house at nearby Bromham.

Camber Castle. Like many others castles built along the south coast, by Henry VIII, it was partly built of monastic stone.

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One obvious method of reuse, was to convert the buildings into a great country house.

RELIGIOUS REUSE

Some of the monasteries found, and still perform, religious uses. The old monastic cathedrals like Winchester and Canterbury were converted into the churches of the new Deans and Chapter. At Winchester, Prior Basing, the former William Kingsmill, now became Dean Kingsmill. Some, like the abbey of Gloucester, or that of Bristol, became the base for one of the new bishoprics founded by Henry. In some cases the citizens were able to purchase the monastic church for their new parish church, often thus finally resolving long-standing conflict and friction. At Sherborne (Dorset), the demands and privileges of the abbey church over the population of the town had led to conflict and rioting in the fifteenth century, and a fire in which parts of the new abbey church was heavily burnt. The abbey was now sold for £1,242 to Sir John Horsey, a court figure, who then sold the abbey church to the vicar and parish for £66.13.4d. and £230 for the lead (excluding the bells which were also bought). In the end it was the old parish church that was to disappear. At Romsey the townspeople had previously been restricted to using a transept and aisle. Now in 1544, they were able to buy the abbey building, so that they could enjoy the use of the building as a whole. Other great monastic buildings survive in whole or part as modern day churches as at Christchurch (Hants/Dorset), Bath (Somerset), Tewkesbury (Gloucester), Boxgrove (Sussex), or Malmesbury (Wilts). The monastic dining hall at Beaulieu Abbey (Hants), but not its church, now serves as the parish church. Occasionally documentary or building evidence points to the presence of expansion and rebuilding after the Dissolution using the advantages of cheap second-hand stone, as in the church towers of Overton and Micheldever, Hampshire. At Morebath in Devon the new owner of Barlinch priory provided the parish church with the stone, iron and stained glass window as a gift.[4] These examples provide a reminder that the Dissolution did not entirely destroy the traditional assumptions of church life.

FROM MONASTERY TO COUNTRY MANSION

One obvious method of reuse was to convert the buildings into a great country house often by one of the influential men of the royal court. In the long run they and their families acquired a vested interest in the new religious order. In the short term, it was particularly important to replace

the councils of the abbeys by those of new influential lords who could act as a focus for defence in the critical and dangerous times of the late 1530s. For a time England seemed to face the prospect of invasion from an alliance of France and Spain. We should not expect to see the abbots, like one of their predecessors from fourteenth-century Battle, leading the troops to fight, but they and their councils provided a focus for mobilising local opposition to foreign invasion, and counties like Sussex and Hampshire were likely to be in critical danger. It was vital to establish the new political leadership of the area.

Battle abbey, itself a symbol of an earlier successful invasion in 1066, went to Sir Anthony Browne, a leading court figure and Henry's Master of Horse. He pulled down the church, converted the Abbot's building and constructed a new lodging range, largely on top of an existing monastic range in the outer court. Other parts of the monasteries gained new uses, probably including one building which under Queen Elizabeth served as a large Catholic chapel in a protestant world. An early seventeenth century life of Lady Magdalen Montague records how she maintained 3 catholic priests and a catholic chapel in which up to 120 attended. But at Battle the focus of importance seems to have shifted from the area of the cloisters to those of the outer court. By contrast many conversions took as their starting point the cloisters and the buildings around them, and transformed them into a Tudor courtyard house, as at Lacock (Wilts). Sometimes we know little of what was done, either because like William Herbert's Wilton (Wilts) or Sir John Thynne's early work at Longleat (Wilts) the remaining evidence is concealed behind later buildings and alterations, or because the buildings have been destroyed. What did Thomas Cromwell intend to do with the site of Lewes Priory? He had constructed new buildings there by the time of his execution in 1540, but the plans were probably incomplete and nothing seems to have survived. The sad history of the site culminated with a railway line being driven across the middle of the site of the monastic church in the nineteenth century!

Sometimes we can see the conversion from monastery to country house more clearly in its ruins than would have contemporaries, when the houses were in their hey-day. The ruins of two Hampshire monasteries, Netley and Titchfield, show this particularly well, although in both cases the new owners adopted different methods of converting the buildings into a courtyard house. Sir William Paulet, an important financial minister, and later earl of Wiltshire and Marquis of Winchester, converted Netley abbey. The nave became a kitchen, hall and chapel; the south transept a great chamber, the dormitory became a gallery, and the dining hall was pulled down and replaced by a new gatehouse. At Titchfield, the evidence of the buildings can be reinforced by a series of contemporary letters to the new owner, Sir Thomas Wriothesley. They show men wrestling with the problems of how to convert a monastery into a country house that could do justice to a rising court figure. They also show the familiar difficulties between patron and his officials and architect. The earliest plans in January are ambiguous but show clear evidence of debate. Wriothesely was probably proposing that the church should be converted into the hall (as at Netley), but his officials emphasised the cost of a new kitchen and the problems of disposal of kitchen waste. A cheaper conversion was suggested. By April, there had been a further change of plan, and it was this that was carried out. Now the refectory was converted into the hall with new oriel and porch being constructed. Good progress was soon made and, by 12 April, the heightening of the walls was done, the new porch was ten foot high, the oriel was begun and the roof would soon be completed. But the disputes continued on other parts of the buildings. Wriothesley's officials despaired at his absence: 'your presence here will see more of your own in an hour than at Micheldever (his other Hampshire residence) in a year'

But the new house was quickly completed. Leland commented in 1542 that 'Mr. Wriotheseley hath buildid a right stately house embattled, and having a goodly gate, and a conduit castled in the middle of the court of it, in the very same place where the late monastery of the Premonstratensians stood called Tichefeld'. When Wriothesley acquired a licence to fortify his house it was to cover what he had already done, including decorating it with towers and battlements. The heraldry of the windows, as recorded in eighteenth century drawings, also suggests that the buildings were completed and glazed by the end of Henry's reign.

We can reconstruct the arrangements of the completed house from the documentary and archaeological sources. The visitor entered the house through the great gateway, into the stone courtyard with

Titchfield Abbey. As a ruin, we can see how the monastic buildings were converted much more clearly than could visitors to the new manor house. The Tudor brickwork results from the conversion of the monastic nave into two chambers. Notice also the shaft from the corner of the monastic church.

central fountain, where once the cloisters had been. Opposite, lay the great hall with its new porch, roof and oriel. To the right hand side, the dormitory range had been converted into a gallery, parlour and other rooms, with the chapter house on the ground floor having become a chapel. The chancel and north transept had been converted into a continuation of the gallery, lodgings and study. Other lodgings, for retainers and guests, would have been found in the church range and in the western range.

Wriothesley ended up with a grand mid Tudor residence such as might have been built from scratch elsewhere but at a considerably lower price. We can now distinguish easily between the monastic stonework and the post-dissolution brickwork: this would not have been apparent to the early visitors. They would perhaps have agreed with Crayford. 'Many do praise your work, some so highly that they say no man in England without exception for the quantity of it shall have a stronger more beautiful neat and pleasant house although they or he should spend three thousand pound more than you shall'.

In the 1530s, Wriothesley was one of the rising stars of the Tudor government, and a key figure in the politics of the1540s. He did exceptionally well out of the Dissolution, setting up his family as great Hampshire landowners having acquired over a fifth of the grants of monastic manors in the county, and gaining the title of Earl of Southampton. Like other beneficiaries of the process he saw himself as a new member of the aristocracy. His new house was designed to look like a castle. Wriotheseley was not yet ennobled, but he evidently saw himself as member of aristocracy, not as a member of a new breed of Tudor bureaucrats. With its great castellated gatehouse smashed through the heart of the monastic nave, Titchfield provides us still with a worthy symbol of the dramatic impact of the Dissolution, and of the aspirations of the new owners.

The men of court and government saw the opportunity of building up blocks of land for themselves and their families. It was not just the religious radicals: when the first hints of the Dissolution reached the conservative Viscount Lisle in Calais, his reaction was to seek to acquire monastic land. In 1537 those leading rivals the conservative Duke of Norfolk and the reforming Thomas Cromwell put in a joint request for the lands belonging to Lewes Priory and its daughter house at Castle Acre. When Wriothesley, the new owner of Titchfield, fell from influence it was after heading the conservative opposition to the protestant policies being pursued under Edward VI. When Elizabeth sought desperately to carry through her religious settlement through the House of Lords, she was opposed by the catholic owners of Netley Abbey and Battle Abbey (William Paulet, Marquis of Winchester, and Anthony Browne, Viscount Montague, son of the first lay owner of the abbey buildings). The new monastic settlement of Henry VIII had created a vested interest in the Henrician changes. As Mary was to find out, she could restore the papal supremacy in 1554, but she had to give up the hope of restoring the monasteries, other than in exceptional cases. Too many religious conservatives had too great an interest in the post-Dissolution land settlement.

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So far we have largely considered large-scale conversion into a great country house. Probably more typical was the conversion of a small part of a monastery to a farmhouse or small manor house with the rest left to decay or to be used as service buildings. But such reuse is by the very nature of the surviving fragments, make it particularly difficult for us to establish what was done. Occasionally the boom-time conditions of the cloth industry led to industrial use. William Stumpe, a rich clothier, acquired the site of Malmesbury abbey. He converted parts of eastern claustral range into a private residence, but many other buildings were used for cloth production. Leland commented in 1542: 'All the abbey buildings are now the property of a man named Stumpe, who bought them from the King. He is an exceptionally rich clothier whose son has married Sir Edward Bayntun's daughter. Stumpe was largely responsible for turning the abbey church into a parish church, and its main benefactor. At the present time every corner of the enormous domestic buildings which belonged to the abbey is full of looms for weaving cloth.'[5] He also seems to have been planning similar industrial use at Osney abbey (Oxon). In urban areas where the demand for land was high, monastic sites might be divided up into several different houses, as in the conversion of Holy Trinity Aldgate and St Bartholomew's priory in London.

Malmesbury Abbey. The nave of the monastic church became the parish church, some buildings were converted into a new house and others were converted to weaving sheds for the textile industry.

AFTER THE DISSOLUTION

For the monastic sites and their dependent communities, the Dissolution began a new phase as well as ending an earlier one. For many, their future was to be shaped by the

Battle Church: The tomb of Sir Anthony Browne in the parish church reminds us that, for many of the new owners, the monastery was to be seen as the future headquarters of the family.

quirks of family history. At Battle, Sir Anthony Browne, having converted the abbey with the intention of making it the headquarters of his family, inherited the new house at Cowdray, Midhurst (Sussex), from his half-brother Sir William fitzWilliam. For a time the family used both, but from the end of the sixteenth century they were increasingly based at Cowdray, leading to the long-term decay of both their house at Battle and of the town that had grown up at the abbey gate. At Titchfield successive lack of male heirs at the end of the seventeenth century led to the break up of the estate and the destruction of much of the house. At Netley, it seems to have been rationalisation and ultimately lack of interest in such a peripheral residence that led to decay. Here it was eighteenth-century destruction that led to the creation of a ruin, and not the activities of Henry VIII. By the end of the century, this romantic, overgrown and new ruin, with its access by sea from the tourist resorts of Southampton and Isle of Wight, had become a popular place to visit. As one visitor commented: 'I was, I must confess, much more struck than on seeing Tintern, and this I can only account for by supposing the ruggedness of the area of Netley scattered over with the fragments of the pillars and the walls; and shaded by Ash trees, is more in harmony with a ruin than the smooth level green which is kept up with too much neatness at Tintern'. As a particularly noted ruin, its name had become familiar to the theatre-going world of London and Bath (W.Pearce, *Netley Abbey an operatic farce in two acts*, 1794), and to the novel-reading public not merely of Britain but of Paris, Berlin and Philadelphia (Anon [R.Warner] *Netley Abbey: a gothic story,* 1795, and subsequently translated and reprinted). The monastic buildings continued to wield their influence, long after the Dissolution and the subsequent stately home had gone.

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