

Medieval Sourcebook:

The Suppression of Glastonbury Abbey

1539

Glastonbury Abbey was one of the largest and most famous English Benedictine Monasteries. It was reputed as home of the Holy Grail. Under Henry VIII, in the most successful land grab in English history, Henry VIII and his chief minister Thomas Cromwell suppressed the monasteries. This act gave the Tudor monarchs immense wealth - perhaps one third of the Land in England. It also, effectively, required the Protestant Reformation to come to England. Although Henry maintained a Catholic faith, he allowed his son to be raised as a Protestant. To maintain political support, Henry, Edward, and later Elizabeth awarded monastic lands to members of the English aristocracy (hence the number of English Stately homes called "Abbey"). This disbursal of Church lands meant that the entire English upper class was committed to maintaining separation from Rome, and "Protestantism" became a defining feature of English national identity.

*Traditional English historiography has painted a somewhat dismal picture of later medieval English Catholicism. Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars* has largely put such claims to rest. There was little popular dissatisfaction with Catholic religious practice in general, nor monasticism in general.*

What follows then, represents a tragedy.

Letter of the Vistors Sent to Examine the Abbot of Glastonbury,

To Thomas Cromwell, September 22, 1539

Please it your lordship to be advertised, that we came to Glastonbury on Friday last past, about ten o'clock in the forenoon; and [because]...the abbot was then at Sharpham, a place of his, a mile and somewhat more from the abbey, we, without any delay, went into the same place, and there...examined him upon certain articles. And [because]...his answer was not then to our purpose, we advised him to call to his remembrance that which he had as then forgotten, and so declare the truth, and then came to him the same day to the abbey; and there of new proceeded that night to search his study for letters and books; and found in his study...a written book of arguments against the divorce of his king's majesty and the lady dowager, as also divers pardons, copies of bulls, and the counterfeit life of Thomas Becket in print; but we could not find any letter that was material. And so we proceeded again to his examination concerning the articles we received from your Lordship, in the answers whereof, as we take it, shall appear his cankered and traitorous heart and mind against the king's majesty and his succession; as by the same answers, signed with his hand, and sent to your lordship by this bearer, more plainly shall appear. And so, with as fair words as we could, we have conveyed from him hence into the tower, being but a very weak man and sickly...We have in the money 300*l.* and above; but certainty of plate and other stuff there as we know not, for we have not had the opportunity for the same, but shortly we intend (God willing) to proceed to the same; whereof we shall ascertain your lordship so shortly as we may. This is also to advertise your lordship that we have found a fair chalice of gold, and divers other parcels of plat, which the abbot had secretly hid from all such commissioners as have been there in times past; ...It may please your lordship to advertise us of the king's pleasure by this bearer, to whom we shall deliver the custody and the keeping of the house, with such stuff as we intend to leave there convenient

to the king's use. We assure your lordship it is the goodliest house of that sort that we have ever see. We would that your lordship did know it as we do; then we doubt your lordship would judge it a house meet for the king's majesty, and for no man else: which is to our great comfort; and we trust verily that there shall never come any double hood within that house again. Also this is to advertise your lordship, that there is never a one doctor within that house; but there be there baschelors of divinity which be but meanly learned, as we can perceive. And thus our Lord preserve your good Lordship.

Letter of One of the Visitors, Richard Pollard

To Thomas Cromwell, November 16, 1539

Pleaseth it your Lordship to be advertised that..[On November 15] the late abbot of Glastonbury went from Wells to Glastonbury, and there was drawn through the town upon a hurdle to the hill called the Torre, where he was put to execution; at which time he asked God for mercy and the king for his great offences towards his highness...Afore his execution [he] was examined upon divers articles and interrogatories to him ministered by me, but he could accuse no man of himself of any offence against the king's highness, nor would he confess no more gold nor silver nor any other thing more than he did before your Lordship in the Tower...I suppose it will be near Christmas before I shall have surveyed the lands at Glastonbury, and take the audit there....

From T. Wright, ed. *Letters Relating to the Suppression of Monasteries*, (London: Camden Society, 1843), pp. 255-56, 261-262, Reprinted in Leon Bernard and Theodore B. Hodges, eds. *Readings in European History*, (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 241-42.

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