The Abbots and Priors of Late Medieval and Reformation England

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As Martin Heale states at the very beginning of *The Abbots and Priors of Late Medieval and Reformation England*, 'the importance of the late medieval abbot needs no particular emphasis'. This was a group of men with responsibility for the spiritual and material wellbeing of thousands of monks and canons. Their influence extended far beyond the cloister, since they were also prominent figures in local and national government (both ecclesiastical and secular). Collectively their financial resources (mostly derived from the vast monastic landholdings) outstripped those of the crown; they were also significant patrons of learning and the arts. Given all this, it is surprising that historians have paid relatively little attention to the monastic superiors of medieval England.⁽¹⁾ This volume sets out to fill a significant historiographical void, and by providing the first major overview of the role of the monastic superior in medieval England.

Heale opens his study with a chapter on 'Election and selection', which explores how men came to be abbots or priors. (Incidentally, a brief discussion of the terminology, including these two words, would be a useful addition to the introduction, especially for student readers). In theory, appointments were made by a simple electoral process, held with little external input save the granting of a licence to elect (by the patron) and the confirmation of the result (by the patron and ecclesiastical superior). During the 14th and 15th centuries, electoral freedom does seem to have been the norm for monastic elections – in stark contrast to the contemporaneous increase in royal and papal control of episcopal appointments. This is not to say that there were no potential complications: elections could be expensive and time-consuming affairs, and sometimes resulted in fierce disputes. They also provoked a range of attitudes, from religious sincerity to naked ambition, and also outright cynicism: the Meaux Abbey chronicler records how Adam of Skerne was elected as abbot in 1310 because the monks (wrongly) considered him to be a non-entity who could easily be removed from office in the future. There was a similar amount of variation in the characteristics of the men elected, although Heale's (necessarily provisional) findings suggest that if there was a typical candidate, he was a forty-something man from the middle social ranks, probably university educated, with administrative experience and local connections.

Chapter two ('Abbots and priors in their community') asks how far the superior was part of the monastic community over which he ruled. The original Benedictine conception of the abbot's role stressed his paternal and pastoral functions, but by the later middle ages he was a more detached figure. Indeed, many

superiors (especially the heads of the largest institutions) spent a considerable amount of time away from the cloister, travelling on monastic (and non-monastic) business, and residing on the monastery's estates. Nevertheless, most abbots were actively involved in the lives of their communities, having particular responsibility for obedience and discipline, learning and, most importantly, liturgy. They were also supposed to set a good example of monastic conduct for their subordinates to follow. Performing these tasks protected the community's spiritual wellbeing and ensured that abbots did not become entirely detached from community life. On the other hand, an increasing emphasis on abbatial status, and the new expectation that former heads would enjoy a comfortable retirement (rather than re-entering the cloister), helped to increase the psychological distance between superior and community towards the end of the middle ages.

As well as ensuring the spiritual well-being of his monks, the superior had responsibility for their material circumstances. In chapter three ('Abbots and priors as administrators'), Heale argues that one of his most important tasks was the careful stewardship of the monastery's endowments and possessions, in order to ensure the institution's long-term financial stability. The 13th century saw various attempts (driven by both ecclesiastical reformers and the monks themselves) to make superiors more accountable to their subordinates in their financial dealings, and to establish clearer divisions between the property of the abbot and the property of the chapter. By the 15th century, however, the concentration of administrative and financial power in the superior's hands was becoming the norm. Such centralising tendencies were not necessarily indicative of corruption, and some of the most dominant superiors were also enthusiastic reformers. Moreover, monastic authors celebrated abbots and priors who were effective administrators, and exhorted future leaders to emulate them.

Effective administration helped to fund the 'Living standards and display' which are the subject of chapter four. Abbots and priors maintained large households which (although small by secular standards), grew rapidly in the late 15th and early 16th centuries: in early Tudor England, the largest abbatial households had over 100 members. Household accounts show lavish spending on food and drink (although it is impossible to distinguish between provision for the superior and provision for his guests); entertainment was another significant outgoing. Scope for spending on clothing was more limited: superiors might wear better cloth than their monks, but irregularity of dress was not tolerated, so liturgical vestments were the only truly extravagant attire worn by abbots and priors. Accommodation was another matter, since most superiors had both spacious quarters in their monastery and numerous houses elsewhere. Furthermore, in the decades around 1500, an astounding number of monastic heads engaged in building projects which were remarkable for both their scale and quality. Many of these new buildings were branded with personal insignia, which were used on an unprecedented scale by pre-Reformation superiors. Rather than seeing such activities as evidence of increasing worldliness, Heale suggests that they were motivated by Aristotelian ideals (such as affability and liberality), and in particular by a desire to emulate the episcopate, and thus to enhance the status of the abbatial office. Abbots, he claims were 'becoming more prelatical over the later Middle Ages, rather than more worldly'. Although a cynic might suggest that the two qualities were not incompatible, the argument is certainly not without merit, and at very least provides a plausible insight into how late medieval monks justified their actions to themselves.

In addition to his responsibilities to his own institution, every monastic superior had external duties to perform, and these are examined in a chapter on 'Abbots and priors in public life.' Monastic heads were obliged to serve their order by attending general and provincial chapters, and by performing tasks including visitations of other houses. They also had responsibilities within the wider church, such as attending Convocation, participating in diocesan business, serving as papal commissioners and judge delegates, and even serving as suffragan bishops. In addition, abbots and priors provided services to the crown, attending Parliament, supporting local government (e.g. by collecting taxes and serving as JPs), and participating in royal ceremonial. Although personal inclination and ability certainly influenced the amount of external activity a superior engaged in, it was impossible to avoid all involvement in public life. Monks typically condoned and celebrated such activities, perceiving them as evidence of the health and status of their order, but there were obvious pitfalls – not least that royal service encouraged heads to consider themselves as royal servants, and to trust the crown.

Such engagement with the outside world also meant that monastic superiors were the most visible manifestations of monasticism to lay society – and consequently the most scrutinised and judged. Chapter six ('The external relations and reputation of the later medieval superior') considers lay contact with, and perceptions of, monastic heads. For the sake of his monastery, a good abbot would try to cultivate good relations with local elites, and there is ample evidence of positive interactions at this level. Monastic superiors entertained (and were entertained by) their lay counterparts; they officiated at their funerals, and were godparents to their children. They also provided valuable services to the wider community, such as the provision of references and the execution of wills. Nevertheless, there were points of conflict, with litigious abbots being a particular problem: superiors who were fierce defenders of monastic rights gained admiration within the cloister, but were viewed with hostility by outsiders. Very occasionally, dissent tipped over into violence: in the early 1430s, the prior of Folkestone narrowly avoided being thrown off the cliffs into the sea by a group of disgruntled townsfolk. Literary portrayals of contemporary abbots and priors were almost universally negative, and although Heale stresses the evidence for positive interactions, he is forced to concede that 'the sheer tenacity of certain negative stereotypes ... implies a genuine resonance with audiences'. Such stereotypes were exploited by Lollards, and then by Tudor evangelical reformers, to give 'rhetorical resonance' to their complex critiques of the monastic ideal.

In its final three chapters, the book moves into the 16th century, and examines the final decades of English monasticism. Chapter seven convincingly claims that 'The early sixteenth century' was the heyday of a new type of monastic superior, characterised by strong control of his monastery, a keen emphasis on the dignity of his office, and a position as a notable figure in secular and ecclesiastical government. This period was also marked by changing royal attitudes to monasticism, including a newly interventionist approach. Henry VII closed four small monasteries, and was much more involved in monastic elections than his predecessors. The first Tudor's novel approach was adopted by Cardinal Wolsey, whose dual position as royal minister and prince of the church justified his decision to conduct visitations and intervene extensively in elections. If Wolsey's motivations are debated (was he a reformer or merely greedy?), his legacy is clear: Thomas Cromwell. Cromwell played an important part in Wolsey's monastic interventions in the 1520s, and built on this experience when he became Henry VIII's chief minister in the 1530s. His interference went even further, and by the mid-1530s English monasteries had effectively lost their right to free election. The royal visitations of 1535–6 further undermined abbatial power by restricting their freedom of movement and encouraging monks to report their superior's failings to the crown. As a consequence of the steadily increasing incursions of the early 16th century, by the 1530s monastic heads were accustomed to receiving (and obeying) royal orders, and their ability to act independently had been substantially undermined. Both changes were to have significant consequences in subsequent years.

The events of those years form the focus of chapter eight, on 'Dissolution, opposition and accommodation'. Heale notes that monastic superiors have been heavily criticised for their approach to the Dissolution, and suggests that it is worth re-examining the process through their eyes. The initial wave of closures (1535–7) targeted smaller houses, and provoked a fairly muted response; only one or two abbots put up strong

resistance. Nor were monastic leaders prominent in the Pilgrimage of Grace: most of those who did participate subsequently claimed that they had been compelled to do so, and it is possible that more heads were involved in suppressing the rebellion that supported it. In 1537-40, as the remaining monasteries were closed by a process of 'voluntary' surrender, only a handful of superiors chose martyrdom over compliance. There were, it seems, many examples of temporary defiance, such as petitions for exemption, attempts at bribery, and the concealment of valuables. Ultimately, however, the vast majority of abbots and priors capitulated, thanks to considerable royal pressure, a culture of monastic obedience to the crown, and the provision of substantial pensions (and sometimes high positions in the Church of England) for the compliant. Their actions ensured that the Dissolution passed off quickly and largely peacefully. Yet it is hard to disagree with Heale's conclusion that, although co-ordinated resistance might have slowed the process, ultimately there was little England's religious superiors could do to stop it happening.

The last chapter uncovers 'The afterlives of abbots and priors in Reformation England', tracking their experiences in the years after the Dissolution, and finding a wide range of attitudes and experiences. Many former superiors chose to live quietly, supported by their pensions and enjoying a lifestyle not dissimilar to that of a retired pre-Reformation abbot. Others sought vicarages and rectories; some became scholars; a few transferred to secular establishments (such as cathedral chapters). What evidence is available suggests that most remained religiously conservative: a few former superiors became prominent reformers under Edward VI, and a small number are known to have married, but far more expressed enthusiasm for the brief monastic revival under Mary I. Their optimism was to be quashed by the accession of Elizabeth I, but relatively few monks lived to see the triumph of Anglicanism. Only ten former heads are known to have lived into the 1570s, and only two survived into the 1580s.

Within the space of a century, the role of the monastic superior had been transformed. At the end of the 15th century, he was a figure of power and influence; by the end of the 16th century he had become a much-maligned part of history. With *The Abbots and Priors of Late Medieval and Reformation England*, Martin Heale has made a significant contribution to our understanding of this transition, of the position of the English monastic superior in the century which preceded it, and of the ways in which this position contributed to, and influenced the course of, the Dissolution of the Monasteries. For this reason, it will be of great interest to both medievalists and early modernists, and to students of monasticism as well as of the English church more broadly.

In particular, the volume will be extremely useful to those seeking a more balanced view of late medieval monasticism than is provided by many sources. Late medieval abbots and priors have been much criticised in traditional histories of the Reformation, and whilst many aspects of pre-Reformation religion have been somewhat rehabilitated in recent decades, the monastic orders have been on the margins of this historiographical trend. Heale states that he does not seek to rehabilitate the monastic superiors, and this is certainly not a monastic version of *The Stripping of the Altars*.⁽²⁾ Yet he is considerably more sympathetic to the difficulties of their position than most historians (perhaps sometimes a little too sympathetic), and consequently this is a rather more favourable portrait of medieval abbots and priors than many readers will expect. As depicted by Heale, they were a group which encompassed both vitality and vulnerability.⁽³⁾ Most were dynamic figures, committed to enhancing the status of their office and of their monasteries, and motivated by an ideological agenda which was in accord with the values of the time. Yet – as is also made clear – they did so in ways which raised eyebrows in many quarters, and left them extremely open to criticism.

One of the most striking omissions from the book is any substantial consideration of the religious beliefs and activities of late medieval abbots and priors – an omission which is perhaps more indicative of another of late medieval monasticism's weaknesses than of any failing on the part of the author. Heale mentions in the introduction that, for reasons of space, he decided not to include a chapter on the retirement, death and commemoration of monastic superiors in this volume; it would be interesting to know whether this material sheds any light on the spiritual life of the late medieval monastic superior. Nevertheless, the lack of such material serves only to enhance the sense that late medieval monasticism had somewhat lost its way, or at

least strayed rather a long way from the original vision of St Benedict.

Indeed, the centuries-old Benedictine ideal is something else which makes only infrequent appearances in this volume, and again this is in part a reflection of late medieval attitudes. Nevertheless, Heale's (entirely understandable) decision to focus on the last century of English monasticism does create an emphasis on short-term causes and explanations, and a tendency to minimise the significance of the more distant past. For example, monastic attitudes to martyrdom had clearly evolved over many centuries, rather than reluctance to die for one's faith emerging suddenly in the early 16th century. And whilst Heale's explanation of monastic acquiescence to the Dissolution process focuses on the relationship between the religious orders and the crown in the preceding decades, there is a potentially interesting comparison to be made between the response to the Dissolution and the English church's passive acceptance of the rise of papal provision in the 13th and 14th centuries.

It is, however, an indication of the book's success that, despite its ambition and scale, it provokes a whole range of further questions about monastic superiors, and about their roles in late medieval religion and society. Hopefully some of these questions will be answered, in the not too distant future, by Heale and by those inspired by his work. For now, *The Abbots and Priors of Late Medieval and Reformation England* is to be much admired for its broad scope, deep learning, and provocative conclusions. It will inevitably, and deservedly, become the standard work on this subject.

Notes

1. David Knowles was the last historian to attempt a general treatment of the medieval abbot, in his *The Monastic Order in England* (2nd ed., Cambridge, 1963), pp. 395–410. There have, however, been numerous studies of individual abbots, including Richard Southern, *St Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge, 1990) and John North, *God's Clockmaker: Richard of Wallingford and the Invention of Time* (London, 2005).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* (New Haven, CT, 1992).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For vitality and vulnerability as the defining characteristics of the pre-Reformation church, see George Bernard, *The Late Medieval English Church: Vitality and Vulnerability Before the Break with Rome* (New Haven, CT, 2012).[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review.

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