

MONASTARIES IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

How and why Christianity spread during the Anglo-Saxon times. The people of England gradually converted to Christianity. Many churches, chapels and monasteries were built across England. One king, Alfred, did more than any other to embed Christianity in England. Later, following the Norman Conquest, King William I, ordered a huge building scheme to have monasteries and churches built across the country. From this point onwards, the Catholic Church would play a central role in people's lives, being responsible for treating the sick, providing education and collecting tithes.

Monasteries and convents - Monasteries were places where monks lived. Monks devoted their lives to God and doing his work. They also provided help and support to their local community. At a time when there was no healthcare provided by the government, monasteries had an infirmary, where they would look after and pray for people who were sick. Monks were some of the only literate people in England. They played an important role in copying out and preserving the works of ancient Roman and Greek writers, so these ideas could be learned from in the future. Women who wanted to devote their lives to God could become nuns. Nuns lived in convents and carried out a range of activities such as farming, preparing food, prayer and healthcare. Like monks, nuns had to give up any wealth or material possessions they owned when joining a convent. The importance of the Church in the Middle Ages the Church played a significant role in people's lives. Its calendar provided the basis for religious holidays and the clergy had regular, weekly contact with people through church services. The Church conducted key events in people's lives, such as: baptisms, marriages, funerals. It was also an essential meeting place for people of the community, and a place where people would go to hear news and share stories. Most people in the Middle Ages were illiterate, so relied on the priest in a church service to read the Bible to them, and tell them the key messages it contained. Services were conducted in Latin - the language of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. As people were attending church services on a weekly basis, this gave priests a huge amount of influence over people's lives. Church services on a Sunday contained a sermon from the priest, where he would tell the congregation how God wanted them to live a good life.

At church, people learned about Purgatory, a place where they believed sins were punished and where a person's soul was purified before it could go to Heaven. Wealthy people would leave money to the Church in their will so that priests would pray for their souls, in order to spend less time in Purgatory. When the Crusades began in the late 11th century, the Church encouraged people to go and fight in the Holy Land, telling them God would reward them after their death for their commitment for fighting for Christianity.

How the Church was organised - The Pope was the head of the Catholic Church and lived in Rome. He set out rules and guidelines that would be put into action by church leaders and personnel across Europe. In England, the Archbishop of Canterbury was the most senior member of the clergy. He would be responsible for the coronation of the king or queen of England and managed other clergy in England. There were frequent clashes between the Church and monarch during the Middle Ages. These disputes were often over power and who should make key Church appointments. An example of such a dispute occurred between King Henry II and Archbishop Thomas Becket. Henry II was keen to have greater control over the Church and appointed his friend, Thomas Becket, to the most important job in the Church - Archbishop of Canterbury. However, Becket refused to do what Henry wanted, and, over the next few years, their relationship deteriorated to the point where Becket was murdered by a group of knights who were loyal to the king.

Pilgrimages - A pilgrimage is a spiritual journey to a place of religious significance. It could be the location of a miracle taking place, or a significant holy site. Pilgrimages were common in the Middle Ages, not only for Christians, but also in other religions. For example, Canterbury Cathedral became a Christian pilgrimage site following the murder of Thomas Becket.

When did the Church's influence begin to change? - The Church played a significant part in the lives of people in England throughout the Middle Ages. When Henry VIII became King of England in 1509, he split the Church away from the Pope, leading to the creation of the Church of England. This is known as the Reformation. As part of the Reformation, Henry also took over church land, including all monastic institutions, leading to many monasteries and convents being closed down. This took away a crucial source of support from many local communities, who used monasteries as a source of healthcare and support in times of need.

The Church remained an important institution in England, but some of its influence had diminished. The Head of the Church of England was the monarch, rather than the Pope. This gave the King or Queen of England more power over church policies.