Westminster Abbey
Learning

Monks at Westminster Abbey visual sources activity – teachers' notes

Thank you for downloading this resource. We hope that it will be a useful teaching tool in your classroom.

As we continue to grow our free catalogue of teaching resources, we'd really appreciate a few minutes of your time to let us know what you liked and what could be improved. Please complete this five-question survey.

In the year 960 a small group of Catholic, Benedictine monks built a wooden church on Thorney Island, the site of the present Westminster Abbey. In the 1050's, King Edward the Confessor built a great stone church on the site as well as his palace. Two hundred years later, King Henry III rebuilt the church in the new Gothic style. By the early 1500's, Westminster Abbey was one of the wealthiest monasteries in England, controlling land all over the country. The Abbots of Westminster were men of great influence and power.

King Henry VIII was crowned at Westminster Abbey in 1509. At the start of his reign, Henry was close to the Pope and proclaimed his Catholic faith publicly. By the 1530's, Henry's desperation for a son and heir led him to leave his wife and to re-marry. This is something the Pope would not support. Henry VIII broke away from the Pope's authority and in so doing, he decided to close all the monasteries in England, since the monks owed their allegiance to the Pope.

This 'dissolution' or 'dissolving' of the monasteries took place between 1536 and 1540. The wealth and the lands of the monasteries was handed over to Henry VIII. Westminster Abbey was closed in January 1540. The monks agreed to sign the Deed of Surrender, which was signed in the Abbey's Chapter House. The monks were forced to leave and find alternative work and accommodation. The building itself survived, yet all over England other monasteries were torn down. The ruins can still be seen today.

This activity asks students to investigate some key questions in relation to the dissolution of Westminster Abbey:

- What did the monks of Westminster Abbey do?
- How important was Westminster Abbey?
- What did the monks of Westminster Abbey believe?
- What happened to the monks of Westminster Abbey?
- What happened to Westminster Abbey after the monks left?

There are several ways of completing this activity:

- Print out the images and questions onto A3 paper and set up tables so that students work in small groups, each working on one image and associated questions. Set it up as a carousel activity, with groups moving around the room until they have viewed all the images.
- Use the whiteboard to display images in turn and discuss the questions as a class.

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You might wish to create a table and then use the suggested questions to structure the activity.

Below are some background notes and suggested questions on the images you may find useful.

Background notes and suggested questions

Image 1 is an artist's impression of the interior of Westminster Abbey. The image shows ten monks of Westminster Abbey wearing the black habits of the order of St Benedict. The monks in the background are processing with candles. The monks in the foreground are distributing bread to the poor.

- Who are the people?
- What is happening in this scene?
- Where could this be taking place?

Image 2 shows further artist's impressions of the monks of Westminster Abbey.

2a The image shows monks in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey. Some are writing and illustrating manuscripts by hand. The others are teaching the novice monks. Monasteries were centres of learning; monks were some of the few people who could read and write in Latin. Many of the oldest schools in the country have their origins in monasteries.

2b The image shows monks looking after the sick. Monks grew herbs in the Abbey garden and were very knowledgeable about the healing properties of plants.

2c The image shows monks welcoming pilgrims to the Shrine of St Edward at Westminster Abbey. They cared for the special objects used in church services as well as keeping the buildings clean and safe.

2d The image shows the monks of Westminster Abbey at work.

- What jobs are the monks doing in each image?
- Why are these jobs important?

Image 3 is a modern illustration of the early Tudor Abbey. The Abbey church can be seen next to the Palace of Westminster. The buildings were close together allowing monarchs easy access to the Abbey. The Abbot of Westminster entertained King Henry VII in his house in the Abbey grounds on several occasions. The Abbey estate included a mill, extensive gardens, ponds, a gatehouse as well as accommodation for sixty monks and the Abbot's House.

- The Palace of Westminster was a very important royal palace, located next to the river. Can you find it on the image?
- Can you find Westminster Abbey on the image?
- How close are these two buildings?

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Image 4

The Abbot oversaw all the monks at Westminster Abbey. Abbots of Westminster had special permission to wear tall hats called mitres, like the Pope in Rome. By the 1500's, Westminster Abbey was one of the richest monasteries in England. Important royal visitors often stayed at the Abbot's house. Abbot Islip was a close friend and advisor of King Henry VII. Both Abbot Islip and King Henry VII spent a lot of money on building new parts the Abbey.

4a) Effigy of King Henry VII. An effigy is a sculpture of a person who has died; effigies of powerful people were often made to go on the top of a coffin at a funeral. This effigy head is all that remains of Henry VII's funeral effigy. The full effigy would have been placed on top of his coffin during the procession into the Abbey for burial. Henry VII spent a fortune building a new Lady Chapel at the east end of Westminster Abbey so that he and his family would have a fitting burial place. The Lady Chapel was described as 'the wonder of the world' as it was so beautiful and filled with Tudor imagery such as the Tudor rose. Henry was buried in the Abbey in 1509.

4b) Abbot Islip entertained King Henry VII at his house in the Abbey. Documents show that Henry's favourite meal of marrowbone pudding was served. Abbot Islip paid for the Abbots house to be enlarged. He also laid the foundation stone of King Henry's new Lady Chapel in 1503.

4c) The photograph shows a room in the Abbot's House often used for entertaining. It was built in the 14th century. The wood panelling is original; Henry VII and Abbot Islip would have dined in this room.

- What might the King and the Abbot have talked about?
- Why might Abbots of Westminster get to wear the special hat (the mitre)?
- Why do you think statues of both the king and the Abbot were made for the Abbey?

Image 5

The Liber Regalis (Royal Book) was made in 1382. The book gives instructions for how to run a coronation and was made for Westminster Abbey, the coronation church. The book is beautifully illuminated using gold leaf and expensive paints. The pages were made from parchment (sheep skin). Books were very rare and expensive in the medieval period. Only a few people could read and write. Monks were highly educated and most medieval books would have been made in monasteries.

- This book was made for Westminster Abbey in 1382. What do you think it was about?
- Who might have written and illustrated books like this one?
- Could most people read and write at this time?

Image 6

6a The image is part of a wall painting at Westminster Abbey. It dates from the 13th century and shows a monk in prayer. Originally the Abbey would have been covered in wall paintings. Today, only a few

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survive. The image of the monk is located in a small side chapel used for private prayer. Monks prayed every three hours throughout the day and night.

6b The document translates as *'I Brother Hugh promise **stability** and obedience according to the **rule of St Benedict** before God in this monastery'.*

Stability - monks promised to stay in their monastery for the rest of their life. Novice monks (beginner monks) could be as young as seven years old.

Rule of St Benedict - monks promised to follow the teachings of St Benedict, a monk who lived in Italy almost 1,500 years ago. He said that **prayer, work and helping the community** were the most important things for monks to practice daily.

- If you had to pick three rules for living a good life today, what would they be?
- The monks did have some time to rest and play. A favourite game involved moving small round stones around a board with holes in it. Can you think of any games that people play today that don't need any special kit?

Image 7 This modern window depicts the scene when King Henry VIII's men visited Westminster Abbey in 1540 to obtain the signatures of all the monks on the Deed of Surrender. This document officially handed the keys of the monastery over to King Henry VIII and meant the closure of Westminster Abbey. The 'dissolution of the monasteries' had far-reaching consequences as monasteries across the country were closed; their treasures, buildings and lands taken by the king.

In 1540, something very shocking happened at Westminster Abbey. Look carefully at the stained-glass window.

Can you find images of:

- Monks
- Abbot (in his tall hat called a mitre)
- Men who worked for King Henry VIII

The monks were forced to sign a piece of paper which meant they would have to leave the Abbey and the monastery would be closed.

- What do you think might have happened to any monks who refused to sign?

Image 8

8a Photograph of Westminster Abbey today

8b Photograph of the ruins of Whitby Abbey

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Across England, monasteries were physically torn down, their stones taken and used to build private houses. The ruined monasteries can still be seen today, all that is left of these once powerful institutions. Westminster Abbey survived, not as a monastery, but as a church run by priests. As the coronation church, and royal burial place (including Henry VIII's own parents and grandmother), it would have been unthinkable for Henry VIII to have demolished the building. In 1560, Henry's daughter Elizabeth I refounded Westminster Abbey within the Church of England.

- Can you think of any reasons why Westminster Abbey might have survived?
- What happened to many other monasteries?

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