



### Change at Westminster Abbey teachers' notes

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### Follow-up questions

1. To what extent did the wealthy monasteries (such as Westminster Abbey) pose a threat to the authority of the monarch?
2. Who would have been impacted by the closure of Westminster Abbey in 1540?
3. 'Changing the word 'Pope' to 'Rex' was a purely political move'. Discuss.

### Transcript

Westminster Abbey operated as a Catholic Benedictine monastery from its foundation in 960AD until 1540. Throughout that 600-year period, the rhythms of monastic life continued here unchanged. The monks began the cycle of daily prayer with Matins at midnight and ended with Compline around 8.00pm. Every morning the monks gathered in the Abbey's Chapter House to hear the Rule of St Benedict read aloud before 'Ora et Labora', prayer and work, began. The numbers of monks fluctuated but typically there were between 40 and 60 monks, led by the Abbot. The Abbot of Westminster was answerable directly to the Pope in Rome, but he also acted as a special advisor to the King and host to the King's visiting dignitaries. This was partly due to the proximity of the Abbey to the Palace of Westminster and partly due to its unique status as the coronation church.

By the 1500's Westminster Abbey was one of the wealthiest of the wealthy monasteries in England. Between 1517 and 1519 King Henry VIII completed two massive building projects at the Abbey: the stunning Lady Chapel at the east end and the Nave of the main church at the west end. We can see the Tudor rose proudly displayed in both. With so much money and attention focused on it, the Abbey's future must have felt secure. Yet sweeping change was just around the corner. Few could have predicted that 20 years on, the Abbey, along with all other monasteries and nunneries in the country, would be shut down.

This beautiful page is from the Litlington Missal, a 14<sup>th</sup> century illustrated service book made to sit on the High Altar for use by the Abbot and monks. Everything about this book is handmade from the parchment pages so carefully stretched and cleaned to the stunning hand-painted illuminations. If you look carefully at the text that accompanies the Crucifixion image; the writing is in Latin. Do you notice anything irregular about the handwritten words?

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Nine lines up on the left-hand column, you may notice that the original text has been rubbed away and a scribe has overwritten something in a different hand. Can you spot the Latin words Regina and Rex? This page contains the prayers and words said at the mass. Originally prayers would have been said for the Pope as head of the worldwide Catholic Church. Here we can see clearly that the word Pope has been scrubbed out and the words Regina (Queen) and Rex (King) have been added instead.

After the Supremacy Act of 1534 granted Henry VIII the title Supreme Head of the Church, and in so doing replaced the Pope, it became common practice for readers and scribes to erase references to the Pope in manuscripts and printed books. These prayers would have been said at every mass and to most non-readers the prayers would have been learned by rote. Many would have accepted the slight change in the liturgical response without giving it much thought. But what looks at first glance like a tiny change in the text would have huge ramifications for centuries to come as the 600-year-old tradition of monastic life in England came crashing down.

On 16<sup>th</sup> January 1540, the 24 monks of Westminster Abbey, led by Abbot William Boston processed into the Chapter House and signed their names on the Deed of Surrender, handing over control of the Abbey to Henry VIII's ministers. The rest as they say is history. The monastery closed and the monks were dispersed in an act that was repeated right across the country's monastic foundations. Many monasteries were physically pulled down. Here at Westminster, the building survived probably because of its status as the coronation church and of course as the royal burial place. But change meant that the monks no longer walk its stone floors.