

# IV A study in depth: The Dissolution of the Monasteries 1536—40

## Introduction

The dissolution of the monasteries was a revolution in land ownership second only to that which followed the Norman Conquest. Possibly because it is one of the best documented episodes in Tudor history it has generated a whole series of debates amongst historians who have been concerned with problems such as the causes of the dissolution, or rather dissolutions of 1536 and subsequently; the impact on the land market of the sale of monastic property; and the social, or other, consequences of the latter. A related problem is the connection, if any, between the dissolution and the rebellions and unrest of 1536—7.

An earlier generation of historians saw the dissolution as the essential concomitant of the Henrician Reformation. Their view was that once Henry VIII had assumed the Supreme Headship of the Church then monastic communities represented a political threat to the crown as cells of papal cancer in need of excision. This operation was successfully carried out between 1536 and 1540, after hastily conducted royal visitations of the monasteries, often inconsistent with a conscientious handling of the evidence, had provided sufficient excuse that the inhabitants were no longer fulfilling their vows. The enforced sale by the crown of vast amounts of monastic property, at far less than its real market value, the greater part of it by 1547, was poor economics but politically a master stroke ensuring the permanence of the Henrician Reformation by the simple expedient of selling shares in it. Those who had purchased monastic property now had a 'vested interest' in its continuation. The dissolution was, in effect, and probably in intention, a gigantic bribe to the laity to induce them to acquiesce in the revolution effected by Henry VIII. From the very beginning of the Reformation Parliament there had been those who had 'thirsted for land wherewith to make themselves gentlemen', and one consequence of the suppression of the monasteries was to be the creation of a new and politically ambitious landed class, the 'gentry', whose economic basis was to be their careful management of medium-sized estates of which ex-monastic property formed a major portion.

Research over the past quarter of a century has altered this picture at practically every point. The dissolution is now seen as neither an integral,

nor an essential, part of the Henrician Reformation in England and Wales. Indeed, it is argued, it might well have taken place if there had been no breach with Rome at all and it might well have remained final even if that breach had been healed by Henry VIII himself or Mary Tudor. By no stretch of the imagination can the monasteries be regarded as representing a political challenge to the royal supremacy. Though a high proportion of those who were executed for refusing to accept Henry's supremacy were monks and friars they were, in total, only a mere handful who belonged to the Carthusian and Reformed Franciscan orders, both renowned for their rigorous observance. In any event, would dissolution have been the right way to deal with the politically disaffected? Would dissolution and the dispersal of the monks have induced papally-orientated monks to be any more loyal to the regime which dismissed them? (In fact, one of the consequences of dissolution was to drive some of the dismissed religious into association with the northern rebels in the Pilgrimage of Grace). Dissolution was, therefore, more likely to create than to remove opposition to the royal headship. It is now known that the enforced sale of monastic land did not have the effect of depressing land values; and to argue that by selling off the property of the monasteries Henry VIII created a class with a 'vested interest' in the Reformation is now seen as a misconception. Those members of the Commons in Mary's third parliament who were ready enough to restore the royal supremacy, nevertheless refused to entertain any proposals for the restoration of the properties of the religious orders. In doing this they were not necessarily displaying their protestant sympathies, but their good business sense, into which considerations of faith did not enter. Among the biggest buyers of monastic lands are to be found as frequently those who later became recusants as those who became puritans. It is now almost a truism that conservatism in matters of religion was no bar to the acquisition and retention of monastic lands.

The emergence of the 'gentry' as the dominant class may to some extent have been assisted by the acquisition of additional monastic acres in the 1540s, and later, which clearly helped to change the balance of social groups; but this is not the whole story. It can be argued that the transfer to the crown of the monastic estates delayed, rather than accelerated, the emergence of the gentry as a political force by deferring the day when the crown's financial dependence upon parliamentary grants gave the gentry their political opportunity.

### Further Reading

'Traditional' interpretations include A. F. Pollard, *Henry VIII* (1902), and A. D. Innes, *England under the Tudors* (1905). G. R. Elton in *Reform and Reformation* (1977) lucidly summarises what is now known about the topic. A valuable summary of scholarly findings with illustrative documents is Joyce Youngs, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (1971). See also G. W. O. Woodward, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (1966), with selected documentary material; and Geoffrey Baskerville, *English Monks*

and the *Suppression of the Monasteries* (1937). A. G. Dickens and D. Carr, *Reformation in England to the Accession of Elizabeth I* (1967), contains a documentary section on the dissolution; whilst A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (1972) has a stimulating section on the topic. The classic work by M. D. Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, III, *The Tudor Age* (1959) has recently been re-issued in an abbreviated and illustrated form as *Bare Ruined Choirs* (1977). For the relationship between the Pilgrimage of Grace and the dissolution see C. S. L. Davies, 'The Pilgrimage of Grace reconsidered', *Past and Present*, 41 (1968); and Anthony Fletcher, *Tudor Rebellions* (1968).

## I The Valor Ecclesiasticus 1535

On 3 November 1534 parliament passed, as well as the Act of Supremacy, the First Fruits and Tithes Act (26 Henry VIII, c. 3) which imposed on the clergy both secular and monastic a tax of one tenth of their net annual income as well as making over to the crown the whole of the first year's income from any new ecclesiastical appointment. Commissioners were appointed comprising the bishop and local gentlemen on 30 January 1535 to make a nationwide inquiry into the true annual value of each ecclesiastical benefice and 'abbey, monastery, priory, and house religious and conventual, as well charter-houses (Cartusian) and others'. It would be a safe assumption that at this time no one in England knew how many monasteries there were in existence, their geographical location and least of all the value of their landed and spiritual revenues. Detailed instructions were prepared in the form of questionnaires and on the completion of their inquiries (which was not until the autumn) the commissioners were instructed to prepare 'a fair book of the auditor's fashion', that is a valuation showing the extent and source of gross income, less allowable deductions. The inquiry revealed that in 1535 the total annual income of all the religious orders was somewhere in the region of £160,000 to £200,000 or about three quarters as much again as the average annual income of the crown at the same date.

### An Extract from the 'Valor Ecclesiasticus': the Royal Commissioners' Valuation of the Resources of Walsingham Priory<sup>1</sup> in 1535

Priory or Monastery of Walsingham Richard Vowell prior there  
It is valued in SPIRITUALITIES IN THE COUNTY OF NORFOLK

5 Rectory of All Souls in Great Walsingham and the  
rectory of St. Peter's there, as well as the rectory of  
All Souls in Little Walsingham, with the priors  
tithes (£3) there, £59. 10s. 5d.  
10 Tithes of wheat sheaves appertaining to the church of  
Walon, £2  
(Total) £61. 10s. 5d.

## TEMPORALITIES IN THE COUNTY OF NORFOLK

Manor of Great Ryburgh, valued in rents and farms  
p.a., £32. 14s. 7½d.  
15 Farm of the grain mill there, 113s. 4d.  
Sale of wood in an average year, 76s.  
Profits of the Court there in an average year, 8s. 8d.  
In all £42. 12s. 7½d.  
Manor of Little Ryburgh Woodall, valued in rents  
and farms p.a., £4. 19s. 4¾d.  
20 Sale of wood in an average year, 14s. 9d.  
In all £5. 14s. 1¾d.  
(Twelve more manors and odd rents follow)  
(Total) £446. 14s. 5½d.

### DEDUCTED OR ALLOWED ACCORDING TO THE STATUTE (OF FOUNDATION)

25 Sinodals paid: (in all) 6s. 8d.  
Procurements paid: (in all) 30s. 6d.  
Annual pensions paid: (in all) 54s. 3d.

30 Distributed of old at Houghton St. Giles for the soul of William Lesham  
esquire by the founder's provision, 13s. 4d. Given of old to certain poor  
men out of the manor of Peterston by the provision of the founder, King  
Henry VI, 17s. 4d. Distributed to poor men at Bedingham at the feasts of  
St. Mary and on Perseceves Day for the souls of Edward I, Edward II and  
John Uvedale, knight, by the founder's provision, 12s. 6d.

35 (In all) 43s. 2d.  
Stipends, etc. (In all) £13. 13s. 4d.  
Rents paid (Total) £23. 19s. 11½d.  
40 Fees (to various bailiffs) (Total) £10. 15s.  
(Total) £55. 2s. 10¾d.  
And there remains clear per annum £391. 11s. 7¾d.  
The tenth of this is £39. 3s. 2d.

Also, (belonging to) the prior of Walsingham there is valued in

### OFFERINGS

45 In the chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary last year £250. 0s. 12d.  
To the Holy Milk of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
there the same year, 42s. 3d.  
In the chapel of St. Laurence the same year, £8. 9s. 1½d.  
50 (In all) £260. 12s. 4d.  
of which the tenth is £26. 0s. 15d. (sic)  
*Valor Ecclesiasticus*, Record Commission edition, 1810-34, Vol  
III, pp 385-8

<sup>1</sup> The priory was dissolved on 4 August 1538; the shrine had been dismantled on 14 July.

## Questions

- a What questions must have been asked by the commissioners in order to produce the answers given?
- b What proportion of the priory's total income came from (i) spiritual sources (ii) temporal sources (iii) offerings at the shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary?
- c What was the net annual income of the priory and how was this figure determined?
- d The *Valor Ecclesiasticus* included the proportion of total income which the monasteries were legally obliged to devote to charitable expenditure; the national average was less than 2.5 per cent. (i) What was the figure for Walsingham? (ii) Does the low national average figure mean that the lot of the poor cannot have been considerably worsened by the dissolution of the monasteries? (iii) 'In the north parts much of the relief of the commons was by succour of abbeys' (Robert Aske). Comment.
- \* e 'Whatever its future utility may have been there is no justification whatsoever for regarding the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* as anything more than a taxation assessment.' Do you agree?

## 2 The Royal Visitation of the Monasteries 1535-6

At the same time as the compilation of the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, Thomas Cromwell was making use of the powers which had been conferred on him when in January 1535 he had become Vicar General, or the king's vicegerent in matters spiritual. Making use of the duty placed upon the crown by the Act of Supremacy 1534 (26 Henry VIII, c. 1) 'to visit, repress, redress, reform . . . the church, he appointed deputies (not local men on this occasion) who were to visit as many religious houses as they could in the time available. The king's visitors began their work in the south and west in the late summer of 1535 and ended in the north in February 1536—the same month in which the final session of the Reformation Parliament (4 February to 14 April) began.

The work of these visitors has been condemned as worthless by many historians because of the speed of the inquiry. The northern visitation was carried out by Richard Layton and Thomas Legh who, between 22 December 1535 and 28 February 1536, a period of two months and six days, claimed to have reported on more than 120 religious houses scattered over a wide area at an average of nearly two visits a day. Their *Compendium Comperitorum* or 'Book of Findings' has been regarded as of dubious value.

In defence of the visitors, however, recent authorities have suggested that when their findings are compared with those of two other sets of contemporary reports, earlier and admittedly more favourable bishops'

visitations and those of the suppression commissioners after 1536, then their results are not by any means as unacceptable as has been claimed. In any event, even if the conventional view be accepted — that their mission was really to gather sufficient evidence to condemn the religious in the eyes of parliament — for the testimony of the king's visitors to have been at all credible to contemporaries, the religious must have had no very outstanding reputation for virtue to begin with. Unfortunately the monasteries were judged as a whole by the excesses which the few permitted, and in an increasingly secular age there was widespread lack of public sympathy for the religious ideal.

### St Edmund's Monastery at Bury, November 1535

Please it your mastership forasmuch as I suppose ye shall have suit made unto you touching Bury ere we return, I thought convenient to advertise you of our proceedings there and also of the competes of the same. As for the abbot, we found nothing suspect as touching his living, but it was detected that he lay much forth in his granges, that he delighted much in playing at dice and cards, and therein spent much money, and in building for his pleasure. He did not preach openly. Also that he converted divers farms into copyholds, whereof poor men doth complain. Also he seemeth to be addicted to the maintaining of such superstitious ceremonies as hath been used heretofore.

As touching the convent, we could get little or no reports among them, although we did use much diligence in our examination, and thereby, with some other arguments gathered of their examinations, I firmly believe and suppose that they had conferred and compacted before our coming that they should disclose nothing. And yet it is confessed and proved, that there was here such frequency of women coming and resorting to this monastery as to no place more. Amongst the relics we found much vanity and superstition, as the coals that Saint Laurence was roasted with all, the paring of S. Edmund's nails, S. Thomas of Canterbury's penknife and his boots and divers skulls for the headaches; pieces of the holy cross able to make a whole cross of; other relics for rain and certain other superstitious usages, for avoiding of weeds growing in corn, with such other. Here depart of them that be under age upon an eight, and of them that be above age upon a five would depart if they might, and they be of the best sort in the house and of best learning and judgement. The whole number of the convent before we came was lx. saving one, beside iii that were at Oxford. OFELY I have written to your mastership by my fellow Richard a Lee. And thus Almighty God have you in his tuition. From Bury, v. November (1535).

Your servant most bounden,  
JOHN AP RICE.

John Ap Rice to Secretary Cromwell, *Letters relating to the Suppression of the Monasteries*, ed. Thomas Wright, Camden Society, 1843, pp 85-6

## Questions

- a Why has John Ap Rice decided to write to Cromwell at this time?
- b 'Their principal task was to gather material designed to bring celtibacy and relics into disrepute and the religious orders with them.' What evidence is there in this letter to support this view of the visitors' main aims?
- c On what sorts of evidence does Rice base his statements? Does his case carry conviction?
- d What motives have been ascribed by historians to Thomas Cromwell in ordering this visitation?

### 3 Dissolution by Statute

At some point very early in 1536 or possibly late in 1535 the decision was taken, probably on financial grounds, to proceed with the 'resumption' or confiscation of the landed endowments of some of the houses of the regular clergy. The problem was two-fold: which? and how? In the event the Crown shrank from making subjective judgements, and avoided trying to decide the future of each house on its merits or demerits, and introduced a statute which drew certain lines of demarcation though these were shot through with inconsistencies. The act did not provide for dissolution in so many words but the clear assumption was that, deprived of their lands, the religious communities would disappear and this is what in fact happened.

The total number of monasteries actually suppressed totalled some 243 or approximately three out of every ten religious houses throughout the country.<sup>1</sup> Not all the houses which should technically have been dissolved were: between seventy and eighty or more than one fifth of those which 'qualified' were exempted (although only fifty one in the end received patents) under section XIII of the statute which gave the Crown discretion to exempt certain houses by letters patent under the great seal from the operation of the act. A great deal of attention has been focused on this 'exemption' clause. It has been seen as an attempt to solve the 'accommodation problem' created by the large number of religious — 70 per cent of the inhabitants of seventy eight houses in the six counties for which the evidence survives — who wished to exercise their option under the statute to remain in the cloister, by transferring to another house, (though when the act was formulated the magnitude of this problem could hardly have been foreseen). Significant inferences have been drawn from the very inclusion in the statute of the option to transfer itself. If the 1536 Act was merely the first stage in a planned total dissolution then it would hardly have been worthwhile to provide alternative accommodation; it would have been simpler (but not cheaper) to provide a pension without option (as was done between 1538—40). The presence of

an option clause, it has been argued, seems to indicate therefore that no more than a partial dissolution was intended in 1536.

Alternative interpretations are that the government anticipated large 'fines' for exemptions (and £6000 was actually paid in this way between 1536—8); or that the 'exemption' clause is best explained as a way of retaining some freedom of action for the crown, even a way of retreat if there should be undue popular opposition to the whole process of dissolution.

<sup>1</sup> In 1530 there were at least 825 religious houses in England and Wales: 502 monasteries, 136 nunneries, and 187 friaries, containing 7,500 men and 1,800 women, or one in 375 of the total population

#### *The Suppression Act of 1536 — Preamble*

An act whereby all religious houses of monks, canons and nuns which may not dispend manors lands tenements and hereditaments above the clear yearly value of £200 are given to the King's Highness, his heirs and successors for ever.

- 5 Forasmuch as manifest sin, vicious carnal and abominable living, is daily used and committed amongst the litle and small abbeyes, priories and other religious houses of monks, canons and nuns, where the congregation of such religious persons is under the number of twelve persons, whereby the governors of such religious houses and their convents spoil, destroy, consume and utterly waste, as well their churches, monasteries, priories, principal houses, farms, granges, lands, tenements and hereditaments, as the ornaments of their churches and their goods and chattels, to the high displeasure of Almighty God, slander of good religion and to the great infamy of the King's Highness and the realm if redress should not be had thereof: and albeit that many continual visitations hath been heretofore had by the space of two hundred years and more, for an honest and charitable reformation of such unthrifty, carnal and abominable living, yet nevertheless litle or none amendment is hitherto had, but their vicious living shamelessly increaseth and augmenteth, and by a cursed custom so rooted and infested that a great multitude of the religious persons in such small houses do rather choose to rove abroad in apostacy than to conform them to the observation of good religion: so that without such small houses be utterly suppressed and the religious persons therein committed to great and honourable monasteries of religion in this realm, where they may be compelled to live religiously for reformation of their lives, there can clse be no reformation in this behalf: IN CONSIDERATION whereof the King's most royal Majesty being supreme head in earth under God of the Church of England, daily finding and devising the increase, advancement and exaltation of true doctrine and virtue in the said Church, to the only glory and honour of God and the total extirpation and destruction of vice and sin, having

knowledge that the premises be true, as well by the comperta of his late visitations as by sundry credible informations, considering also that divers and great solemn monasteries of this realm wherein, thanks be to God, religion is right well kept and observed, be destitute of such full numbers of religious persons as they ought and may keep, hath thought good that a plain declaration should be made of the premises as well to the Lords spiritual and temporal as to other his loving subjects the Commons in this present Parliament assembled; whereupon the said Lords and Commons by a great deliberation finally be resolved that it is and shall be much more to the pleasure of Almighty God and for the honour of this His realm that the possessions of such spiritual religious houses, now being spent, spoiled and wasted for increase and maintenance of sin, should be used and converted to better uses, and the unthrifty religious persons so spending the same be compelled to reform their lives; And thereupon most humbly desire the King's Highness that it may be enacted by authority of this present parliament that his Majesty shall have and enjoy to him and to his heirs for ever all and singular such monasteries, priories and other religious houses of monks, canons and nuns of what kinds or diversities of habits, rules or orders so ever they be called or named, which have not in lands and tenements rents tithes portions and other hereditaments above the clearly yearly value of two hundred pounds . . . .

27 Hen. VIII, c. 28: *Statutes of the Realm*, iii, 575

**Questions**

- a How does the preamble define 'little and small abbeys, priories and other religious houses' (lines 6-7)? What then would be the definition of a 'great and solemn monastery'?
- b On what evidence ('having knowledge that the premises be true') is the case against the small monasteries stated to be based?
- c 'When it came to the point it was the information contained in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* and not the reports of the Visitors which determined the fate of each community.' Explain and comment on the likely fate under the terms of the 1536 Act of (i) an abbey with more than twelve inhabitants worth less than £200 a year, accused of 'vicious and carnal living' (ii) an abbey with less than twelve inhabitants worth more than £200 a year, accused of 'vicious and carnal living' (iii) an abbey with more than twelve inhabitants worth more than £200 a year, accused of 'vicious and carnal living'.
- d Is there any evidence in the preamble to support the view that if Henry VIII's government had rested content with the partial dissolution it achieved in 1536-7, Henry VIII would have gone down in history as an 'astute and humane reformer'?
- e What reasons have been put forward by modern historians for the dissolution of certain monasteries in 1536?

**4 The Work of the Suppression Commissioners 1536**

No community was to be dispersed under the 1536 act, unless it was a question of voluntary surrender, until the property of the house had been surveyed again and certain other information obtained. Commissioners were appointed on 24 April 1536, the same day on which the new Court of Augmentations was established specifically for the purpose of supervising the transfer to the crown of the properties and possessions of the dissolved religious houses and administering them thereafter. The commissioners for each area were made up of the appropriate regional receiver and auditor of the Court of Augmentations plus one of the clerks who had been employed in the compilation of the relevant part of the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* and three local gentlemen. Instructions were issued concerning the procedure to be followed and the kind of additional information to be obtained. When these inquiries were completed (the inquiry ended in Hertfordshire in the spring of 1537) a 'brief certificate' was sent to the Court of Augmentations where the final decisions concerning dissolution, or exemption were made. Following a decision to dissolve, the commissioners returned to organise the dispersal of the religious, make initial arrangements for the leasing of buildings and land, and the removal and sale of property and livestock. In most areas the work of dissolution proceeded smoothly, but in the autumn of 1536 the process was halted by the outbreak of the Lincolnshire rebellion and the Pilgrimage of Grace.

**Extract from the Returns of the King's Commissioners for the County of Sussex, 1536**

COUNTY OF SUSSEX: The brief certificate of the Commissioners appointed for the survey of the monasteries and priories within the County of Sussex as hereafter shall appear

- 5 The priory of Tarrington: Black Canons of the order of St. Augustine. £75. 12s. 3½d.
- The clear yearly value at the first survey, £82. 9s. 4½d.
- The clear yearly value of the same house at this new survey
- 10 with £6. 17s. of increase, viz the demesnes 40s. Religious persons, 6; whereof priests, 5, novices, 1, Incontinent, 1, desiring capacities, 4, and the others desire to go to other houses; Servants, 12; whereof waiting servants, 2; hinds, 8; women servants, 2; and a prior quondam having a pension by resignation of £10.
- 15 Bells, lead (hill) and other buildings to be sold, by estimation, £20
- The house wholly in ruin.
- The entire value of the movable goods, £39. 5s. 2d; in store with farmers, nil; debts owing to the said

house £13.3s.6½d, woods there, 60 ac., all above  
20 years' age, at 13s.4d. the acre, £40.  
Common, 80 acres, Parks, none.  
Debts owing (by the monastery)

£12. 16s. 8d.

Public Record Office, Suppression Papers(SP5), 3/128, Cal-  
.. ended in *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, XI, p 591

### Questions

- a What sort of information is contained in the 'brief certificate' which is not to be found in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (extract 1)?
- b Suggest reasons for the discrepancy between the 'yearly value' as revealed by the first survey (*Valor Ecclesiasticus*) and the 'new' survey (lines 6-8).
- \* c What was the importance of the new Court of Augmentations?

## 5 The Final Dissolution 1537-40

In the last weeks of 1537 the first indications of a change in government policy towards the monasteries became apparent. Until now there had been no indication on the part of the government of any advance beyond the policy of partial dissolution begun in 1536. There were still over 500 religious houses of various kinds. It is not possible to say for certain when a decision to dissolve the remaining houses was taken, or if such a decision was consciously taken at all. But in late 1537 and early 1538 there began to appear signs which strongly suggest that total dissolution was by then the ultimate aim.

10 Firstly in November 1537 the process of dissolution began again. There were to be no further acts of suppression (the act of 1539, 31 Henry VIII, c. 13, sometimes called the second dissolution act did not in fact transfer to the crown any monastic property). This time the process was carried out by 'voluntary' or 'induced' surrenders - a precedent set  
15 already in the spring of 1537 with the 'voluntary' surrender of Furness Abbey<sup>1</sup> - and now almost all the greater abbeys were eventually to come into the hands of the crown as a consequence of similar acts of surrender.

On 11 November the precedent set at Furness was repeated at Lewes in Sussex and so began the long series of surrenders which continued almost without interruption right through 1538, 1539, and the early months of 1540, ending with the surrender of Waltham Abbey on 23 March 1540. The religious orders in England and Wales were at last extinct - for alongside the suppression of the larger abbeys there also took place  
25 between 1538-40 the suppression of the 180 or so houses of the mendicant friars up and down the land.

<sup>1</sup> This arose out of the abbey's suspected sympathy with the Pilgrimage of Grace.

### (a) *The Surrender of the Abbot and Monks of Biddlesden 1538*

Forasmuch as we, Richard Grene, abbot of the Monastery of our Blessed Lady Saint Mary of Biddlesden, and the convent of the same monastery do profoundly consider that the manner and trade of living which we and other of our pretended religions have practised and used many days doth  
5 most principally consist in certain dumb ceremonies and in certain constitutions of Rome and other forinsecal potentates, as the abbot of Citeaux and other in only no solid and not taught in the true knowledge of God's laws, procuring always principally to forinsecal potentates and powers which never came here to reform such discord of living and abuses as now have been found to have reigned among us, and therefore,  
10 now assuredly knowing that the most perfect way of living is most principally and sufficiently declared unto us by our master, Christ, his evangelists and apostles, and that is most expedient for us to be governed and ordered by our own Supreme Head under God, the King's most noble grace, with our mutual assent and consent do most humbly submit  
15 ourself and every one of us unto the most benign mercy of the King's Majesty, and by these presents do surrender and yield up unto his most gracious hands all our said monastery, with all the lands spiritual and temporal, tithes, rents, reversions, rights and revenues we have in all and every part of the same, most humbly beseeching his Grace so to dispose of  
20 us and of the same as shall seem best unto his most gracious pleasure.

And further in like humble manner desiring his most noble Grace to grant unto every one of us under his letters patent some annuity or other  
25 manner of living whereby we may be assured to have our sustenance in time coming.

And further to grant unto us freely his licence to change our habits into secular fashion, and to receive such manner of living as other secular priests be wont to have, and all we and every one of us shall faithfully pray  
30 unto Almighty God long to preserve his Grace with increase of much felicity.

In witness whereof we have subscribed our names and put our convent seal into these presents the 25 day of September in the thirtieth year of the reign of our sovereign lord King Henry the Eighth.

Rymer, *Foedera*, XIV, p 610

### (b) *The Surrender of the Grey Friars of Bedford*

Forasmuch as we, the Warden and friars of the house of St. Francis in Bedford . . . do profoundly consider that the perfection of Christian  
5 living doth not consist in dumb ceremonies, wearing of a grey coat, disguising ourselves after strange fashions, ducking and beeking, in grinding ourselves with a girdle full of knots, and other like papistical ceremonies, wherein we have been most principally practised and misled  
10 in times past . . . being minded hereafter to conform our self unto the will and pleasure of our Supreme Head under God in earth . . . do surrender . . .

Rymer, *Foedera*, XIV, p 611

(15)

## Questions

- a What evidence is there in these two documents of an apparent desire on the part of the religious to be released from a life of 'idleness and superstition'? Contrast the preambles to these deeds of surrender with the preamble to the act of 1536 (extract 3).
- b Is there any evidence in §(a) that total abolition was now the ultimate intention of the government? (Refer again to extract 3.)
- c There are certain similarities of wording in extracts §(a) and §(b): what would this suggest?
- \* d Suggest reasons why the friaries were not dissolved until 1538–40.
- \* e What was the significance of the statute of 1539 'which has often been mistakenly regarded as a second act authorising the dissolution of monasteries'?

## 6 The Disposal of Monastic Lands

... Until late in the nineteenth century historians commonly believed that there was little to be said about the disposal of the monastic lands. It was considered a sin or a crime on the part of Henry VIII and those who had benefited at the expense of the church. 'Spoliation', 'pillage' and 'sacrilege' were the words most frequently used in discussing the matter; it was deemed self-evident that the nobility and gentry close to the court had received handsome bargains in land through Henry's largesse and that as far as the nation at large was concerned little benefit had resulted . . . .

10 As long as historians and antiquarians drew their inspiration from established oral traditions about the fate of the lands, from a few easily accessible documents and, particularly from ruined monastic sites, no different interpretation was possible . . . . But a sweeping mistake had been based on what later turned out to be only a small part of the evidence.

15 More recent approaches to the subject reflect the growing sophistication of historical method at large: the quest for further source materials; the analysis of old sources in new ways; the attempt to apply techniques from other disciplines (such as mathematics and statistics); the regular reshaping of historical consensus on the issues raised and a developing awareness of their complexity.

20 Our field of study may instructively be compared with an archaeological site. For generations men were satisfied with established tradition as to its nature and content and a few pieces of evidence found near the surface were enough to confirm their beliefs. But in the past century or so successive specialists have cut cross-sections through parts of the site, from differing angles, and reported their findings. Each in turn felt that his own cross-section might hold the clue to the real nature of the site as a whole, only to discover later that the next man's findings in some respects

30 modified or contradicted his own. This model is also valid in other respects: for instance, some of the evidence no longer survives and some of it is buried so deep that it may never be unearthed. The final report has yet to be written but we already have a formidable amount of analysis before us to warn that there is no simple answer to most of the questions we should like to ask and that we can only begin to understand the whole 'site' by noting the angles and limits of some of the cross-sections . . . .

35 Only towards the end of the nineteenth century did historians really become aware of the wealth of surviving evidence on the disposal of the monastic lands. . . . There was now too much material . . . for any one scholar to master, producing a definitive monograph on the monastic lands which would not be overtaken by subsequent research. But a start had to be made somewhere . . . .

40 A. Savine of Moscow University produced a masterly study of *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (1909) and went on to study the letters patent by which the Crown granted away many of the lands. His research at once demonstrated that the accepted tradition was wrong: much of the land had been sold by Henry VIII or exchanged for other plots then in private hands. Much less had been given away than earlier scholars had assumed. Other writers have gone on to show that good (i.e. market) prices were paid for most of the lands sold; that sales began in earnest after Cromwell's fall and accelerated from 1543 as warfare made increasing

45 inroads into revenue . . . .

50 Given this new understanding of the evidence, it was clear that scholars had to work on selected regions, attempting to assimilate every layer of evidence, rather than hope to cover the whole country. . . . But . . . considerable regional variations in the findings. . . . make it dangerous to rely too heavily on figures produced for any one area. A vertical specialisation (by area) . . . has almost as many pitfalls as a horizontal one (by type of document). Yet without such studies we should never get any

55 nearer to our final report on the impact of the dissolution on English society.

60 Historians are now agreed that most of the land disposed of by Henry VIII went to persons already well placed in the social or governmental hierarchy. Most of the nobility . . . acquired lands by gift, exchange or purchase. But the majority of sales were made to gentry, courtiers, crown officials, lawyers and townsmen, many of whom already had strong local connections. . . . It is likely that men who already had the spending power would soon have deployed their assets in some similar investment even without the dissolution which, however, must have speeded up the process. . . . For some, receipt of the land was the clinching factor which raised their social status. . . . But for others, similar purchases in the private land market could equally well achieve the same result. . . .

70 In an important local study J. E. Kew has recently shown that, at least in Devon, there were more dealings in the private land market, in terms of both the numbers of transactions and the amount of land changing hands, than in the crown land market following the dissolution. If this was so

over the whole country it would further minimise the special role of the dissolution in affecting the social balance. Kew's work shows that we may not view the dissolution in isolation from other economic and social developments. Recurring to our archaeological analogy, there might well be important evidence over the hedge in an adjacent site! . . .

Historians discussing the rise of the gentry or the 'crisis of the aristocracy' have differed widely in their interpretation of factors affecting mobility within and between classes and even in identifying the component parts of a given class. But it is generally agreed that such processes can only be safely studied over a long time-scale, taking as many individual examples into account as possible . . . Few studies in the disposal of monastic lands have continued beyond the year 1558 . . . The long term effects of the dissolution have, therefore, not been systematically explored. . . . The full impact of the dissolution on English government and administration cannot be ascertained from studies confined to the reign of Henry VIII, nor can the impact on English society be fully understood without taking into account later sales and the leases by which so much of the property was held until well after the reign of Henry VIII. Only recently have scholars begun to extend their horizons in these directions and little of their work has yet been published. . . .

But the general conclusion which may be drawn . . . so far is that we must not be misled into thinking that small samples of the surviving evidence are necessarily typical of the whole. More studies, local and central, are still needed. More evidence is still to be quarried and there may be valuable clues also in neighbouring fields. Above all, we must not select too short a time-scale for our studies.

Christopher Kirching, 'The Disposal of Monastic and Chantry Lands', in *Church and Society in England: Henry VIII to James I*, eds Heal and O'Day, 1977, pp 119–28

### Questions

- a What views about the disposal of monastic lands were held 'until late in the nineteenth century' (line 1)? What criticisms could now be made of those views?
- b Comment on Kirching's examples of 'the growing sophistication of historical method' (lines 16–21).
- c Summarise the present state of knowledge about the disposal of monastic lands and the impact on English society.
- d How does this topic illustrate the advantages and the disadvantages of the study of local history?
- e Will it ever be possible to write a 'definitive monograph' (line 40) or a 'final report' (line 32) on this — or any other — topic?

(17)

## The Mid-Tudor Crisis

(i) 1547–53

### Introduction

On 27 January 1547, King Henry VIII, the 'Selling of Tudor England',<sup>1</sup> died and left to a sickly nine year old boy the crown and an 'evil inheritance'.<sup>2</sup> Henry bequeathed a heavy debt, a debased coinage, a shaken administrative system, an unsettled doctrine and a nation divided in religion. There was an uneasy truce with France and a war with Scotland. Within three days of Henry's death, Edward Seymour became protector of the realm, after a coup, engineered by himself. This raised the possibility of a factional struggle, complicated and intensified by religion, taking place against a background of acute social and economic problems.

The whole economy appeared to be upset. 'Greedy cormorants (have) enclosed from the poor their due commons (and) levied greater fines than heretofore. . . . Rents were increasing. Manufactures seemed to be declining and exports falling. Prices were high and rising, as was unemployment, and wages were inadequate. In the countryside there was universal discontent, though, arguably, the economic problems were being felt even more keenly in the towns and boroughs of the land, compounding the urban decay which had developed since the 1520s.'<sup>3</sup>

'Scarcity, famine, sickness be plagues of god', sent upon the people for their wickedness, wrote John Hales, about 1549, the year which saw the first of three consecutive bad harvests, the first English Prayer Book, and risings in Somerset, Wiltshire, Hampshire, Kent, Sussex, Essex, Devon, Cornwall, Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Yorkshire, East Anglia, Leicestershire and Rutland.<sup>4</sup> The 'English sweat', absent since 1529, made an unwelcome return in 1551. A second, revolutionary, Prayer Book in 1552 was followed by the death of the 'boy tyrant'<sup>5</sup> in 1553.

To contemporary writers the religious question, not always divorced from social and economic problems, was paramount. Some recent historians writing on the mid-sixteenth century have seen a unity in the era the keynote of which was 'crisis', but Professor Elton has warned, 'The question remains whether difficulties really run deep enough to enable us to speak of a crisis at all. True the notion has got established among historians . . . (but) we are in danger of accepting yet another Tudor orthodoxy too trustingly.'<sup>6</sup>