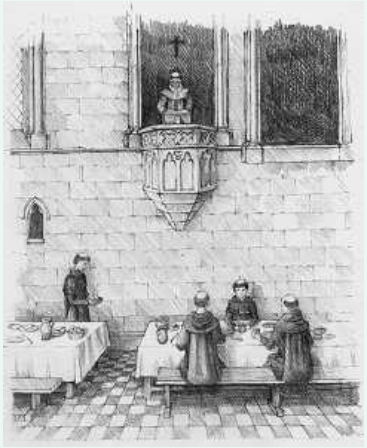
Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

MONASTERY H35/A



In the third century Egypt some Christian men began to withdraw from society to spend their time in meditation and prayer. They were called hermits, from the Greek word for desert, because they lived alone in waste places beyond the edge of settlements. Gradually these individuals began to gather in groups and in this way the first monasteries were born.

The idea proved very popular. By the fifth century the monastic movement had even spread outside the borders of the Roman Empire to Ireland, where St Patrick converted the Irish people to Christianity. Communities of women, called nuns, also spread rapidly across Europe.



Whether the community was made up of men or women the aim was the same - to dedicate one's life to living in the presence of God through prayer. At first each community would have been fairly loosely organised, but over time rules began to be developed to bring a sense of order and discipline to these early monasteries. The Benedictine Rule was created in about 529 AD. St Benedict proposed a daily pattern of church services, interspersed with periods of manual work and study. Monks were expected not to own any property, or to marry and to be obedient to the head of the community where they lived. Food was simple and for certain periods of each year monks were expected to fast, which meant living on little more than bread and water.

Today the Benedictines are still one of the main monastic groups in the Roman Catholic church. However, over time other groups developed, often with slightly different patterns of life and worship - Augustinians, Carthusians, Cistercians - to name but a few. The different orders wore different coloured clothes (called habits). The Benedictines wore black and were known as the Black Monks, for example, while the Cistercians wore white.

Top: Traveling by boat from London, this would have been the view of Reading Abbey in the years just before the Reformation, as seen from the River Kennet.
Bottom: The monks ate in silence during their meals, read to from the scriptures

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The model in this box shows the classic design of a monastery in western Europe in the Middle Ages.



The most important (and recognisable) building was the Church. Benedict's Rule laid down that monks should attend church for services eight times each day, beginning in the middle of the night. Monks did not have rooms of their own but slept in a Dormitory adjoining the church. This made it easy for the monks to get up in the middle of the night and attend the first service of the day, called Matins.

The room projecting from the Dormitory was the Chapter House. The monks were meant to meet here each day. Decisions could be made and any monk who had broken a rule would be rebuked and punished.

The Refectory was where the monks ate. Although they had to eat simple food, they were not expected to cook it! It should be remembered that monasteries employed many servants to attend to their needs. The monastery would be surrounded by many other more functional buildings - stables, a brewery (as weak beer was safer to drink than water), barns, workshops and so on.

Storerooms were needed to keep everything from food to writing materials.

The corridors which ran around the garden in the centre were known as the Cloisters. As monks were not allowed to leave the building very often and this space provided an area for fresh air and exercise. The corridor against the wall of the church, which generally faced south, was often filled with desks. This was where trainee monks (called novices) were taught to read and write, and where older monks studied and copied out manuscripts.

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Not all monasteries follow this square-pattern.

Monasteries in the Orthodox tradition - the churches of Egypt, Greece and Russia, for example - are not laid out in this way.

St Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) founded an order which was very different from the model created by Saint Benedict. For Benedict the monastery was to be secluded from the world. Francis felt monks should not own any property, including a monastery building. In the earliest days of his movement his followers wandered about in the world and begged for their food. They were meant to live like first disciples of Jesus and teach people about Christianity.



Fairly quickly, however, the Franciscan Friars, as they were known, began to own buildings, although their friaries did not follow the plan found in Benedictine monasteries. As friars specialised in preaching, their churches were often quite broad so that lots of people could be packed in. Greyfriars church, at the end of Friar Street in Reading, belonged to the Franciscans and is of this kind.

Other groups of friars which developed later were the Dominicans, the Carmelites and the Capuchins.



Top: A modern drawing of a monk walking through a Cloister. Bottom: Model of Reading Abbey, showing the main church buildings. Very little of this grand building complex survives today. Reading Gaol covers the garden and infirmary (on right). Modern offices cover much of the rest.

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READING MUSEUM SERVICE

MONASTERY H35/A

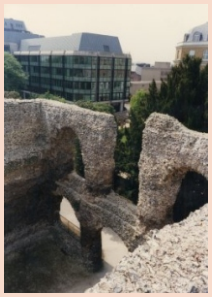
Reading became an important town because of the huge monastery which King Henry I ordered to be built. Henry himself laid the foundation stone on 18 June 1121, but work on the abbey church was not completed for over forty years. On 19 April 1164, Archbishop Thomas Becket hallowed the church in the presence of Henry II.



Henry built the abbey as a place for him to be buried in. In return for the gift of buildings and land the monks were expected to pray for the soul of the dead King. Unfortunately, Henry died from food poisoning after eating 'a surfeit of lampreys,' of which he was excessively fond, in December 1135 in Normandy. Several Norman monasteries wanted Henry's body buried within their walls, but it was mummified for transportation back to England, although his bowels, brains, heart, eyes and tongue were interred at Rouen Cathedral.

Henry's daughter, the formidable Matilda, gave Reading Abbey the hand of Saint James which she had been given as a wedding present when she married the Holy Roman Emperor Henry V. This relic became a focus of pilgrimage to the abbey for a short period.

For over five hundred years the daily cycle of prayer was followed in Reading's abbey. In 1539, however, Reading Abbey was closed down by King Henry VIII. Most monasteries had been founded by Kings and aristocrats - it was an expensive undertaking! By the late Middle Ages monasteries owned a huge amount of land which they had been given over the centuries. Some Kings and aristocrats wished to get their hands on this wealth. Henry V, for example, dissolved many monasteries which were subsidiary houses of monasteries in France. Henry VIII took the process even further and during his reign the rest were closed. Henry VIII, like Henry V, spent most of the money on his wars with France.



The walls of Reading Abbey, which once towered over the small wooden houses of Reading town, were quickly dismantled. Today most of what remains is the rough stone filling of the abbey's walls - and some beautifully carved stones in the Museum of Reading.

Top: The funeral in 1136 of the founder of the Abbey, Henry I, who was buried before the High Altar in the Abbey Church. A modern reconstruction painting by Harry Morley. Bottom: The Chapter House as it appears today - closely hemmed in by modern office buildings.