

What was the dissolution of the monasteries?

Enquiry: Why did Henry VIII make a break with Rome?

Mrs Dashwood-Anthony



Why did Henry decide to close the monasteries?

The idea of closing England's monasteries came from Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's chief adviser. Cromwell who was pushing for more Protestant reforms. To help persuade Henry to close down the monasteries, Cromwell told him that if they were closed down, the land and property that they had would be given to Henry himself. This idea was very appealing for several reasons. Firstly, Henry's aim as king was to be a powerful ruler. To do this he needed to win wars but war was expensive. Secondly, Henry thought that England would be invaded by a Catholic country, like France or Spain. So Henry needed money to spend on defence. He feared invasion because the Pope had written, but not yet issued, a message saying any Catholic leader who invaded England could replace Henry as the legitimate monarch. Therefore there is no doubt that money was one of the main reasons why Henry closed down the monasteries.



How did Henry close the monasteries?

Many monks were doing good work. But some priests were criticised for abusing their power, some had become lazy and greedy and some were not living by the *monastic rules*.

Henry knew that he would need to justify his actions for closing the monasteries and so used these criticisms of the Church as an excuse.



Closing the Monasteries:

Between 1536 and 1540 all of the monasteries were closed and Henry took their land and riches for himself. To justify this, Cromwell organised inspections of the monasteries. He sent out inspectors who had to report on how the monastic rules were being broken.

Cromwell sent back any positive reports that he received and told the inspectors to be more critical.



Cromwell's Reports:

An example of a report: *'I found the prior a very virtuous man, but his monks more corrupt than any vices both sexes. The house is well prepared but £400 in debt. I am sending to you some of their relics... they cannot say how they got them'.*

Another example of a report: *'Found the prior at that time in bed with a woman, both naked, about 11 o'clock in the morning'.*



Homeless Monks:

Henry now had the evidence that he needed. He sent his men to close the monasteries which included taking any gold, silver or jewels from the altars and even stripping the lead from the roofs.

The land was then sold. The monks were given a small amount of money and made homeless. By 1539 there was not one functioning monastery in England.



Henry VIII Becomes Wealthy:

As a result of the dissolution of the monasteries Henry became a very rich man. Previously, Henry's income was around £100,000 a year but by 1547 Henry's income was about £240,000.



What was the dissolution of the monasteries?



Comprehension questions

1. Who is believed to have persuaded Henry to close the monasteries?
2. Henry wanted to close the monasteries to get more money. What are the two reasons for Henry wanting more money?
3. What monastic rules were some monks breaking?
4. What happened to the monasteries when they were closed?
5. How much did Henry's income increase by?

