

LIONEL GREEN tackles the question “What really is the difference between a priory and an abbey?”
ABBEYS AND/OR PRIORIES

When is a priory not an abbey? This depends on the superior, for an abbot governed an abbey but a prior governed a priory. The full answer is more involved because abbeys also had a prior.

Benedictine houses

Most pre-Conquest monasteries were important foundations whose superior was an abbot or abbess assisted by a prior or prioress. From AD 664 all religious followed the Rule of St Benedict, although following the Norse invasions which began after AD 787 regular monastic life ceased to exist in most parts until the tenth century.

Daughter houses of monasteries began as cells (with fewer than four religious), but many grew in importance to have a prior in charge (a priory), and a few secured independence. Most autonomous houses were abbeys, and all dependent monasteries were priories. There were few abbesses in post-Conquest nunneries.

All monastic cathedrals were priories, because the monastery was governed by the prior. The bishop was the titular abbot, but not necessarily a member of the community.

Many foundations (of all orders) were termed ‘alien priories’, because their mother house was elsewhere than in England. Most of these were only cells, and the monks were mainly Frenchmen. Boxgrove in Sussex was alien until it became denizen as a Benedictine priory in 1339.

Cluniac houses

All Cluniac houses were priories, because they were under the Abbot of Cluny. Daughter houses of Cluny and La Charité were alien priories, but only Bermondsey of the Cluniac houses achieved the status of an abbey, in 1399, having become denizen in 1381. Even the senior Cluniac monastery in England, Lewes (founded in 1077), remained a priory.

Cistercian houses

All Cistercian houses, regardless of size, were abbeys.

Carthusian monks

All Carthusian monasteries were priories.

Augustinian canons

Most Augustinian convents began as priories. Only about 18 (of over 200) achieved abbatial rank, and four of these were in royal patronage from their foundation.

Premonstratensian canons

Most establishments were abbeys, with a few cells and priories. The abbots were expressly forbidden to wear the mitre, ring and gloves properly pertaining to bishops¹. (See **Mitred abbeys** below)

Gilbertine canons

All Gilbertine canons lived in priories, but the superior was the Master.

Arrouaisian and Victorine canons

These 12th-century foundations of St Nicholas of Arrouaise and St Victor of Paris followed the regulations of Citeaux (Cistercian) and were thus abbeys. When the houses were subsumed and followed the Augustinian Rule, they retained their titles as abbeys.

Benedictine nuns

Amesbury was an abbey from 980 until 1177, when it was refounded as a priory, following the expelling of all the nuns. Farewell was reduced to a priory in the mid-13th century because of a lack of numbers.

Augustinian canonesses

Canonsleigh was a priory of canons until 1282 when it became an abbey of canonesses. Burnham and Lacock were the only other Augustinian abbeys for canonesses.

Mitred abbeys

Many important monasteries applied to the Pope for enhanced status, which when granted enabled the abbot and his successors to wear episcopal insignia. The procurement was costly and grounds for claiming this status would include the size of the community, historic importance, competence of the abbot or prior, adequacy of buildings, sufficiency of endowments for the future, and the backing of the Pope. The Pope would licence the prelate to wear some or all of the episcopal insignia, which consisted of sandals, tunic,

dalmatic, gloves, staff or crosier, ring and mitre. A mitred abbot was exempt from any episcopal visitation or control. The monastery henceforth was termed a 'mitred abbey'. The insignia were only worn within the monastery on special occasions and in state pageants and processions.

During the Great Schism (1378-1417) Boniface IX had financial problems and began selling papal privileges on a large scale. Many monasteries used the opportunity to raise their status.

The successful applicants within the Augustinian Order were Bridlington² (1409), Bristol (1398), Bruton (1511), Butley (1398), Cirencester (1416), Kenilworth (c.1410), London Aldgate (1452), Norton (1391), Oseney (1481), St Osyth (1397), Taunton (1499), Thornton (1518) and Waltham (1184). Although Bridlington, Butley and Norton were granted the status of mitred abbeys they chose to retain the title of 'Priories'. Bodmin was unsuccessful in 1206, when the Pope's legate's report was unfavourable, and Walsingham's application in 1384 was refused when the bishop accused the prior of dissipating revenues in trying to procure such a privilege. Prior Snoring was deposed in 1387. The foundation charter of Cartmel (1190) stipulated that "the priory shall never be made an abbey".

Mitred (Parliamentary) Abbeys

Certain prelates were summoned by the king to attend Parliament, and they held the rank of a baron in the Upper House. Numbers were increased as monasteries flourished, until in 1300 a total of 80 abbots and priors were summoned. In 1327 Edward III reduced the number to 25 abbots and 2 priors. From 1265 until 1327 the Prior of Merton attended Parliament as did the abbots of Chertsey and Waverley. The only Augustinian mitred abbot attending Parliament from 1327 represented Cirencester and Waltham.

Merton Priory or Merton Abbey?

A few priories were of such importance that it is difficult to understand why they remained such. Merton was never governed by an abbot, but there are odd references to Merton 'Abbey' from the 15th century (1409, 1410, 1497, 1521, 1525, 1535)⁴. In 1537 a book on surveying was published, and the title page states that it was "compiled by Sir Richard Benese Channon of Merton Abbey beside London". The building accounts of the proposed Nonsuch Palace at Cuddington refer to "uncovering the body of the church at Merton Abbey"⁵. The antiquary John Leland visited Kingston when compiling his *Itinerary* at the time of the Dissolution and makes reference to Merton Abbey⁶.

The early misuse of the name of Merton Abbey was probably due to ignorance of the term. Its use would then begin to be adopted as acceptable or even desirable. Canon Richard Benese thought so. There may also have been an element of local snobbery.

The ruins of many dissolved monasteries were used to construct, or adapted into, desirable residences. At Merton were two buildings adopting names like Abbey House. One may have been the former Guest House and the other the Gate House of the priory.

Other post-Dissolution "Abbeys"

There were similar occurrences at other priories. "Abbey Houses" were built at Barnwell, Buckenham, Calke, Calwich, Upholland, Walsingham (east range) and Wroxten. At Calwich the buildings were owned by Merton Priory in its last years (1537-38). The priory church was converted into a residence (see Bulletin No 126) and became Calwich Abbey. Similar conversions took place at Anglesey (chapter house and dormitory), Bolton (gate house), Ixworth (east range), Launde (south chapel), Llanthony (west range), Mottisfont (church and west cellarage), Much Wenlock⁷ (prior's lodgings) and Newstead (claustral complex). All these priories were promoted to "abbeys" where no abbot ever existed, and all, except Much Wenlock (Cluniac) and Upholland (Benedictine), were Augustinian foundations. But this is understandable because of the preponderance of Augustinian priories.

The "promotion" by the new house owners may have been influenced by the thought that there was little point in being a "priory" when it could be an "abbey". Strangely, the majority are now tourist attractions. Anglesey (NT), Bolton, Calke (NT), Hexham, Llanthony (EH), Mottisfont (NT), Much Wenlock (EH/NT), Newstead and Walsingham.

References:

1. W H St John Hope in *Archaeologia Cantiana* XV 1883 (p59 for Premonstratensian Abbots)
2. Although granted the status of mitred abbeys, Bridlington, Butley and Norton all retained the title of Priory.
3. J C Dickinson, *The Land of Cartmel* 1980 p11
4. A Heales, *Records of Merton Priory* 1898
5. PRO E101/477/12 April 22 to May 20 1538
6. J Leland, *Itinerary* 1710 Pt viii fol.25
7. In 1522 the prior secured the personal right to use the mitre, but resigned in 1526, and the right lapsed.