

The 1536 Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries: Same Suppression, Different Century

By

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Abstract

A case study of the priories of Boxgrove, Folkestone and Horsham shows how the 1536 closures under Henry VIII were not vindictive and followed from precedent. His closures were neither more substantial than the suppression of the alien priories during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, nor significantly different from Wolsey's closures in the 1520s. During periods of war with France, monarchs from Edward I to Henry V confiscated alien priories and made use of their revenues, eventually suppressing all aliens by 1414. Wolsey too closed several monasteries, with permission from the Pope, and redirected their revenues towards funding colleges. Tied into these closures was an aspect of reform, which was the grounds for Henry VIII's closures. The priories under evaluation began as alien priories, escaped the suppression of aliens in 1414, and were dissolved in 1536. Henry's suppressions were less an attack on monasteries for financial benefits though, and more an exercise or continuation of previous suppression policies. Ultimately, the main difference between Henry's closures and those of previous ones was scale alone.

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Introduction

Five hundred years ago, Henry VIII began the demise of monasticism in England. Beginning with the Suppression Act of 1536, and continuing with the Act for the Dissolution of the Greater Monasteries in 1539, monasteries across England were closed. However, if the Dissolutions are studied separately, the two Acts are quite distinct from one another. Whereas the latter aimed to close all monasteries, the first act specifically targeted those monasteries worth less than £200. Additionally, it specifically aimed to achieve reform with these closures as these religious houses were seen as corrupt and declining due to the laxity that had occurred among the orders. The argument that Henry was self-motivated in his decision to close the monasteries, and wanted only to fill his own coffers, is deceptive. Even if it was known for a fact that the closures were purely for reform purposes, the money from the monasteries would have inevitably transferred to the Crown. Furthermore, similar closures had previously occurred successfully prior to Henry's decision in 1536. Here, it is argued that these initial closures were justified as being a previously established policy, differing in scale only.

One predominant argument among historians, such as Robert Bucholz, Newton Key and George Woodward, is that Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries to fill his treasury from the wealth of the religious houses.¹ Henry needed money because the great wealth left to him by his father was quickly dwindling due to his foreign policy. In particular, the renewed wars with France were draining his funds and sending him into debt. Thus, closing the monasteries would allow him to re-direct their resources into the Royal Treasury. Woodward argues that the monetary distinction made by parliament – the specific reference to £200 – is evidence for Henry's desire for money. The creation of the Court of Augmentations of the Revenues of the

¹ Robert Bucholz and Newton Key, *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History* (Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 89.

King's Crown to handle the new influx of wealth also emphasizes the financial component of the closures.² Furthermore, Woodward points out how the monetary benefits linked with the removal of the richly decorated shrines would have increased the wealth usurped into the Royal Treasury.³ Benjamin Thompson also argues that financial reasons were the main factor behind the closures in his article "Monasteries and their Patrons at Foundation and Dissolution," as does Francis Gasquet in his two volume work on the monasteries during the reign of Henry VIII.⁴

Another principal argument is that Henry sought monastic reforms because the monasteries were no longer performing adequately. Elizabeth M. Hallam argues in her essay "Henry VIII's Monastic Refoundation of 1536-7 and the Course of the Dissolution" that he originally aimed to reform monasteries and to assert his authority.⁵ The concern was that monasticism was no longer being rigorously followed and would become increasingly corrupt in the sense that inmates were no longer the epitome of piety.⁶ The visitors who conducted the survey of monastic lands were arguably chiefly concerned with discovering the condition of the monasteries because they had doubts about the way they were being run, both spiritually and financially.⁷ One concern was that the monks were becoming great landowners, entering the secular realm with desires of enlarging their revenues for personal wealth rather than for the well-being of the order as a whole.

² George William Otway Woodward, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (New York: Walker, 1966), 50.

³ Ibid, 52.

⁴ Benjamin Thompson, "Monasteries and their Patrons at Foundation and Dissolution," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 4 (1994); Francis Aidan Gasquet, *Henry VIII and the English Monasteries*, vols I and II (London: John Hodges, 1889).

⁵ Elizabeth M. Hallam, "Henry VIII's Monastic Refoundations 1536-7 and the Course of the Dissolution," *Historical Research* 51 (1978): 124-5.

⁶ William Easterby, *The History of the Law of Tithes in England: Being the York Prize Essay of the University of Cambridge for 1887* (Cambridge, 1888), 28; R.W. Hoyle, "The Origins of the Dissolution of the Monasteries," *The Historical Journal* 38 (1995), 276-7.

⁷ G.W. Bernard, *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 251.

Some historians focus on the conditions of the monasteries and inmates and espouse the idea that in either case they would not have lasted for much longer. In his work *English Monks and the Suppression of the Monasteries*, Geoffrey Baskerville argues that the majority of the lesser monasteries were, to an extent, corrupt or incapable of sustaining themselves. As a result, they were bound to be dissolved.⁸ The idea of inevitability is emphasized by Thompson, who makes the case that monasteries were losing considerable local support, which he says was essential to the continuance of monastic orders.⁹ The loss of local support occurred because monasteries had fewer opportunities to offer prayers for the living since their duties to praying for past generations had increased. Further, non-resident patrons also had a tendency to “stop minding about the services, and might even forget about the houses in their patronage” because they were away from the houses for so long.¹⁰ In other words, some patrons were not around to offer support to their monasteries. Elton, in contrast, argues that while no new foundations were developed in the sixteenth century, populations within monastic orders increased and were not necessarily on the brink of collapse.¹¹ However, he does go on to point out that many houses did lack sufficient inmates to carry out their duties and that many men joined simply to advance their positions within society.¹² This, then, begs the question of why the monasteries were dissolved rather than reformed.

While these arguments are compelling, they fail to adequately address the suppression of 1536 in its proper context. First, it was distinctly different and separate from the later closures. As suggested by Joyce Youings and emphasized by Hallam, the suppressions that began in 1538

⁸ Geoffrey Baskerville, *English Monasteries and the Suppression of the Monasteries* (London: Phoenix Press, 2002).

⁹ Thompson, “Monasteries and their Patrons,” 116 and 121.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹¹ G.R. Elton, *The Tudor Constitution: Documents and Commentary*, second ed. (Cambridge, 1982), 379.

¹² *Ibid.*

were a new phase.¹³ In addition, Woodward points out that only three out of every ten houses were suppressed by the 1536 Act, with these being the smallest and least significant of their kind.¹⁴ In other words, these closures targeted weak monasteries and few financial gains were derived from them. After 1538, large-scale closures effectively put an end to monasticism in England, as well as greatly increasing the treasury. It would follow that a full-closure would indeed be either to attack the practice of monasticism or to gain their wealth and resources. The question, then, remains whether or not reform was the true intention of the first act of suppression. If reform was the predominant reason and the closures were meant to be miniscule, then they would not belong to a larger plan of closing all monasteries and usurping their properties. Furthermore, similar closures had taken place before, thereby making Henry VIII's closures in 1536 different in scale only.

Henry VIII did not act vindictively during the 1536 suppressions, but instead followed a policy set in place by previous monarchs. First, the policy of preventing revenues from being sent abroad, as well as seizing alien monasteries, led to the eventual suppression of all alien priories in the fifteenth century. Second, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey began his closures of English monasteries in the 1520s to acquire revenues to help fund the endowment of colleges. These events can be seen as the prelude to the Dissolutions of the 1530s. The suppression of alien priories coupled with Wolsey's suppressions provide precedents that were followed in 1536. Even if the initial closures in 1536 were primarily at financial benefit, it was not an attack on monasticism as a whole. Rather, it was an old policy revisited.

Three specific religious houses will be looked at closely to demonstrate that Henry did not act vindictively with his decision to close the lesser monasteries. The priories of Boxgrove,

¹³ Hallam, 131; Youings, 36-90.

¹⁴ Woodward, 68.

Folkestone, and Horsham St. Faith all belonged to the Benedictine order. Originally established as alien priories after the Norman conquests, they survived the suppression of alien priories through naturalization. They were, however, closed by the Act for the Suppression of Lesser Monasteries in 1536, with the exception of Folkestone, which had been closed the previous year. By examining these three, an argument will be made that financial need and reform attempts were equally central to the suppressions in 1536, because evidence shows that there were problems within the orders. Boxgrove proves that monasticism had indeed lost its old ideals. Folkestone and Horsham, too, show that there may have been a decline among their monastic orders. These two, however, also show that there may not be enough sources to accurately describe the situation of monasticism during the period. Secondary sources on the latter priories state a lack of or missing records to draw concise conclusions. Nevertheless, they still contribute to the study of the initial closures, especially as providing examples of previous closures. All three were chosen based on three criteria: of the Benedictine order, previous alien priories, and suppressed in 1536. They were specifically chosen to thoroughly examine the initial closures, and not as 'perfect' examples that Henry's closures were justified. The current view, however, does not intend to further the debate that Henry acted unjustly in a self-interested manner. Rather, Henry VIII's suppression was a continuation of previous procedures that produced favourable results without attacking the institution of monasticism since only a portion of the monasteries were attacked.

Chapter One:

THE PRECEDENT FOR DISSOLUTION

The 1536 Act for the Suppression of Lesser Monasteries followed from previous closures, and was thus not unprecedented. Seizure of monastic wealth in time of financial crisis had occurred before, in 1292, 1337, and 1369.¹ Until the mid-fourteenth century, English monasteries suffered no large-scale extinction, “and the number of those that had become extinct from what may be called natural causes was extremely small.”² Edward I, however, sparked a seizure of alien priories that eventually led to a large-scale closure a century later. During the wars with France, Edward implemented policies to prevent alien priories from sending their revenues to mother-houses in Normandy. These policies included the 1307 Statute of Carlisle, which sought to restrict and control the movement of English money abroad from the alien houses. Then in 1414, during the reign of Henry V, the decision was made to close all alien priories and redirect their revenues to the Crown.

The Norman invasion led to the establishment of alien priories. During the eleventh century, monasticism was regarded by society as a high ideal, being seen as the definitive form of piety. As a result, Norman conquerors established cells or priories on the lands they acquired.³ Families who governed England did not establish large monasteries, but rather founded alien priories as a branch of Norman monasteries, maintaining Normandy as their true home. Thus, lands were given to their Norman homes, and priories established in England became extensions

¹ Christopher Haigh, *English Reformation: Religion, Politics, and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 130-1.

² David Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses: England and Wales* (London: Longmans, 1953), 48-9.

³ Donald Matthew, *The Norman Monasteries and their English Possessions* (Oxford, 1962), 27.

of larger, foreign houses.⁴ Later on, as Normans began to settle permanently in England, they began to develop larger monasteries there, but the priories typically began with three or four Norman monks. Some houses became increasingly independent, and took on Englishmen as inmates.⁵ The establishment of alien priories, however, is far more complicated than the brief account provided above, cells being often founded by English patrons as well.⁶

Along with being obliged to observing their rules, alien priories served to export wealth and resources to their mother-house.⁷ There were two kinds of alien houses: regular convents that only paid a yearly tribute to the house abroad and those that were entirely dependent upon the mother-house.⁸ These ‘alien cells’ were “no more than extensions of the landed endowment of a mother-house which were run by a proctor or prior,” whereas ‘conventual priories’ were full convents which only depended on the mother-house for spiritual, rather than economic, benefits.⁹ Both types, however, made payments to the mother-house; the smaller priories depended on the mother-house to help sustain themselves, whereas the larger ones, like Boxgrove, functioned relatively independently. The outflow of revenue from England to Normandy became an important feature behind the confiscations and suppressions that took place in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Additionally, it was necessary for Norman monasteries “to maintain monks in England who could keep an eye on the property and visit the different manors.”¹⁰ But even as administrative agents, monks were still expected to observe their rule: “monks’ benefactors

⁴ Matthew, 28.

⁵ Ibid, 28-9.

⁶ Ibid, 44.

⁷ Benjamin Thompson, “Monasteries, Society and Reform in Late Medieval England,” in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, ed. James G. Clark (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2002), 172; Benjamin Thompson, “The Statute of Carlisle, 1307, and the Alien Priories,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 41, 4 (1990): 555.

⁸ Ethelred L. Taunton, *The English Black Monks of St. Benedict: A Sketch of their History from the Coming of St. Augustine to the Present Day* (London: John C. Nimmo, 1897), 129.

⁹ Thompson, “Statute of Carlisle,” 546.

¹⁰ Matthew, 43.

insisted on the performance of the work of prayer which was their spiritual protection in the conquered lands.”¹¹

The priories of Boxgrove, Folkestone, and Horsham St. Faith are useful examples of alien priories established during the Norman Conquest that escaped suppression, but met their eventual demise in 1536. Boxgrove Priory, located in Sussex, was founded by Robert de Haye, Lord Halnaker, in the reign of Henry I.¹² In 1105 he

bestowed upon the abbey of Lessay the church of St. Mary of Boxgrove, with two and a half hides of land around it and tithes, timber, and pasture, in the parish, as well as the churches of St. Peter of West Hampnett, St. Leger of Hunston, Birdham, Walberton, St. Mary of Barnham, St. Catherine of ‘Henitone’ on the Thames, and Belton in Lincolnshire, the tithes of Todham in Easebourne, and the measure of corn called ‘chorchet’ or church scot from all his manors.¹³

The Norman abbey of Lessay subsequently established Boxgrove as a priory around 1120, which was originally meant to maintain three brethren of the Benedictine order.¹⁴ Considering it was only meant to house three men, the building itself was surprisingly large. Nevertheless, its size allowed the number of inmates to increase easily. The priory was actually fairly independent, but Lessay had the right to fill vacancies and “demand the services of any brother of the Houses, with the exception of the Sub-Prior and Cellarer. It [also] received an annual payment of three

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Robert de Haye is also spelt “Haia” and the abbey of Lessay that of “l’Essay.”

¹³ “Houses of Benedictine Monks: Priory of Boxgrove,” in *A History of the County of Sussex: Volume 2 (1973)*, 56-60. <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=36584>, accessed: 22 March 2010; “Boxgrove,” in *A History of the County of Sussex: Volume 4: the Rape of Chichester* (1953), 140-150. [http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=41725&strquery=Boxgrove Priory](http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=41725&strquery=Boxgrove+Priory), accessed 22 March 2010; Lindsay Fleming, *Sussex Record Society: Chartulary of the Priory of Boxgrove VLIX* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1960), 16-7.

¹⁴ “Bowesden-Boxwell,” in *A Topographical Dictionary of England*, 1848, 320-323. <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/reprot.aspx?compid=50817&strquery=boxgrove> Accessed 22 March 2010; “Houses of Benedictine Monks: Priory of Boxgrove”; Richard Wells and Walater Peckhm, *A History of the Priory Church of S.Mary and S. Blaise, With Some Account of the Life of its Inmates* (Chichester: Moore and Wingham, 1917), 12; “Boxgrove,” VCH.

marks.”¹⁵ Due to the connection with Lessay and its annual payments, Boxgrove Priory was under the threat of suppression throughout the next few centuries.

The priory of Folkestone, situated in Kent, had slightly more complicated origins than Boxgrove’s. Folkestone was originally founded by King Eadbald as a priory for nuns of the Benedictine order around 630 AD.¹⁶ Danish attacks soon destroyed the convent, after which a priory for Benedictine monks was founded in 1095 by Nigel de Mundeville, lord of Folkestone. De Mundeville founded Folkestone Priory by granting to the abbey of Lonlay, in Normandy, “the church of St. Mary and St. Eanswith, Folkestone, and all the churches of their demesne pertaining to the honour of Folkestone, with various other possessions.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, this priory had to be re-established for a third time due to its precarious location on a dangerous cliff-side.¹⁸ In 1137, with the permission of the Lord of Folkestone – then William de Abfinicis – Folkestone Priory moved to a new church outside the castle.¹⁹

A similar story unfolds with the Priory of Horsham St. Faith in Norfolk. It was founded in 1105 by Robert Fitz-Walter and his wife Sybil, the daughter and heiress of Ralph de Cheney. St. Faith is commonly assumed to have developed as a cell of the abbey of Conches. Their story is told as follows: Robert and Sybil were travelling through France, homeward bound from their pilgrimage to Rome, when they were imprisoned by brigands. One night, St. Faith appeared in their visions and loosened their chains so they could escape. The two then journeyed to the abbey

¹⁵ Wells, 13.

¹⁶ William Dugdale, “Priory of Folkestone in Kent,” in *Dugdale’s Monasticon* vol 4, 672, <http://monasticmatrix.usc.edu/commentaria/article.php?textId=709#biblioID>; “Folkestone (St. Mary and St. Eanswith)” in *A Topographical Dictionary of England* (1848), 244-248, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/reprot.aspx?compid=50966&strquery=Folkestone>, accessed 22 March 2010.

¹⁷ “The Priory of Folkestone,” in *‘Alien Houses: The Priory of Folkestone’, A History of the County of Kent: Volume 2* (1926), 236-238. <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=38249&strquery=Folkestone>, accessed 22 March 2010; Matthew Woodward, *The Past and Present of the Parish Church of Folkestone* (London: Skeffington, 1982), 29.

¹⁸ “Folkestone (St. Mary and St. Eanswith)”.

¹⁹ S.J. Mackie, *A Handbook of Folkestone: For Visitors* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1859), 5; “The Priory of Folkestone.”

of Conches where they vowed to build a monastery in the name of God and St. Faith at their manor of Horsford.²⁰ However, as discovered by Walter R. Rudd, Robert Fitz-Walter gave his vow to *Conques*, not *Conches*, which was an important shrine of St. Faith.²¹ The misunderstanding may be due to a translation mistake. Nevertheless, it was established as an alien priory, subordinate to Conques. St. Faith was “endowed with the advowsons of Horsford, Reydone, and Moi, and certain tithes from sixteen other churches. The pope confirmed its foundation charter in 1163.”²² Not only was St. Faith subordinate to Conques, but it was also dependent on it. Consequently, “its priors were not infrequently obliged to be absent from England for periods of varying length.”²³ In some cases, houses were resumed for other purposes when there was no patron to defend the priory, but this did not occur with Horsham whose patrons did leave for periods at a time.²⁴ Originally, the priory held two monks: Barnard and Girard who had been brought over from the Abbey of Conques.

These three houses, Boxgrove, Folkestone, and Horsham St. Faith, all escaped the suppression of the alien priories that had its origins in the war with France in 1295. Prior to the eventual destruction of alien priories in 1414 by Henry V, previous monarchs took steps to redirect their funds into the royal treasury from the foreign abbeys. Foreign affiliations caused aliens to be viewed as a threat to England during times of war, and were consequently vulnerable to royal seizure.²⁵ Throughout the Anglo-French wars, alien cells and priories were confiscated, eventually being dissolved altogether by an Act of Parliament in 1414. Their inmates were

²⁰ J.H. Round, “The Early Sheriffs of Norfolk,” *The English Historical Review* 35 (1920): 483, 488; “The Priory of Horsham St. Faith,” in *Houses of Benedictine Monks: the Priory of St. Faith, Horsham*, *A History of the County of Norfolk: Volume 2* (1906), 346-349. <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=38266&strquery=horshamst.faith>, accessed 22 March 2010.

²¹ W.E. Rudd, “The Priory of Horsham St. Faith,” *Norfolk Archaeology: or Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to the Antiquities of the County of Norfolk* 23 (1929), 71.

²² “The Priory of Horsham St. Faith.”

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Thompson, “Monasteries and their Patrons,” 116.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 112-3.

allowed to return to the mother-house, and their revenues went to new monks and education purposes, such as educational establishments such as “the royal colleges at Windsor, Eton and Cambridge.”²⁶ A handful, however, managed to escape suppression through the process of “denization” or naturalization, in which the convent became recognized as an independent English religious house.²⁷

After the onset of war with Philip IV in 1294, Edward I took control of the estates of alien religious houses, sparking a century and a half of difficulty for alien inmates. The previous year all their property had been inspected and valued, revealing that the causes of the acquisitions “were the desperate financial needs of the royal Exchequers and the fear of spying and treasons aggravated by the threat of French invasion.”²⁸ Priors “within thirteen leagues of the sea or a navigable river were to be moved inland,” but those priors who promised good conduct and paid an annual farm to the Exchequer were permitted to administer their own lands. Their status, then, as alien priories was forfeited under the king’s law.²⁹ These conditions were written into the 1307 Statute of Carlisle, which forbade alien religious dwelling in the king’s jurisdiction from sending money to foreign houses.³⁰ That statute further stipulated that monasteries were founded and endowed to perform alms and piety for the souls of their founders, including their heirs. Non-performance meant that lands could be seized.³¹ Additionally, if spiritual services were not carried out for two years, the lord was allowed to recover the lands given to the monastery. The statute provided Edward I with the means to redirect wealth from

²⁶ Knowles and Hadcock, 49.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Marjorie M. Morgan, “The Suppression of the Alien Priors,” *History* 26, 103 (1941): 204-5; Taunton, 131.

²⁹ Morgan, 205-6; Thompson, “Statute of Carlisle,” 553. It was necessary to move the houses inland for security measures where the religious could be watched and prevented from communication with the French; fears of them being spies.

³⁰ Baskerville, 97; 25 Edward I, I. A.D. 1306-7, “The Statute of Carlisle,” *Statutes of the Realm*, Vol. I 150 1235-1377. *Hein Online*. <http://heinonline.org> accessed 25 March 2010.

³¹ Thompson, “Monasteries and their Patrons,” 112.

the aliens and use their revenues for his own purposes.³² Despite alien priories being restricted from sending their revenues abroad, superiors were still able to visit “their subordinate houses, taking from them moderate and reasonable expenses.”³³ Overall, it was an effective statute, because even in times of peace few revenues were exported to French abbeys.³⁴

In other words, ties were broken between alien priories and their foreign abbeys, and they were only allowed to continue by paying heavy fees to the Crown. Lands were typically restored after the wars ended, but similar procedures were carried out by subsequent monarchs when war resumed with France. Henceforth, each renewed conflict led to an urge to suppress alien religious during times of war. For example, suspicion of foreigners and spies led to Edward II seizing alien priories, and restoring confiscated properties after the war.³⁵ Alien priories were further seized between 1337 and 1360, and then again after 1369. In 1346, the commons’ petitioned Parliament for the expulsion of all alien monks, and the seizure of their estates.³⁶ Between 1377 and the close of the fourteenth century, alien priories began to be suppressed in earnest, with the French abbeys’ loss being a profit to the English church.³⁷ The lands of the alien religious were restored, however, at the onset of Henry IV’s reign. A temporary seizure of their lands once again took place with renewed warfare with France, and the ordinance of 1408 stipulated that the profits from alien priories were to go to the royal household whilst at war with the French.³⁸ His successor, Henry V, continued the temporary seizures during times of war.

In 1414, however, Henry V implemented an Act for the Suppression of the Alien Priors which officially closed down all alien cells, except conventual priories, bringing all their

³² Thompson, “Statute of Carlisle,” 548, 553; Baskerville, 97.

³³ Thompson, “Statute of Carlisle,” 544; 25 Edwardi, I. A.D. 1306-7.

³⁴ Morgan, 206.

³⁵ Ibid, 205.

³⁶ May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century: 1307-1399* (Oxford, 1959), 293.

³⁷ Morgan, 206.

³⁸ Ibid, 208.

possessions permanently into the king's hands.³⁹ The lands acquired by the Crown did not transfer into lay hands, but rather went towards the English Church and educational institutions.⁴⁰ For example, "the disposal of alien priories in the fifteenth century enabled Henry V to endow two religious houses and Henry VI two colleges."⁴¹ Thus the year 1414 marked the first major attack on the monasteries. Nevertheless, the alien religious were not, at this point, expelled from the country, but rather provided with letters of protection and thereby allowed to remain.⁴² Indeed, a process of denization begun in the early reign of Edward III saved several monasteries from destruction, albeit several smaller priories perished due to neglect and slow decay.⁴³ It is notable that English monasteries were also prone to perishing from neglect and decay, not just the alien houses.⁴⁴ Denization meant becoming a full-fledged English convent through the process of naturalization. Functioning convents gradually stopped bringing in French monks and instead replaced them with English monks, thereby slowly moving away from the jurisdiction of their mother-houses. Priories could then petition for 'charters of denization', which basically stated they were now divorced from their foreign houses and under the auspices of the Crown. Boxgrove, Folkestone, and Horsham St. Faith each received charters of denization, which allowed them to continue their houses as English priories.

Boxgrove's charter of independence (charter of denization) is dated 1340.⁴⁵ Boxgrove received letters of naturalization because its mother-house, the Abbey of Lessay, only had control over the appointment of priors. In all other respects, Boxgrove was a fully functioning

³⁹ Morgan, 209; Taunton, 132.

⁴⁰ Morgan, 210; Baskerville, 98.

⁴¹ Matthew, 116.

⁴² Morgan, 206.

⁴³ Morgan, 211; Thompson, "Monasteries and their Patrons," 115; Taunton, 131.

⁴⁴ Baskerville, 99.

⁴⁵ Edward Turner, "The Priory of Boxgrove," *Sussex Archaeological Collections Relating to the History and Antiquities of the County* 15 (1863): 85. *Internet Archive*, www.archive.org.

independent convent.⁴⁶ Additionally, “Lessay had few other churches to visit in England, so that the Normans rarely came over to interfere” with Boxgrove Priory.⁴⁷ When war broke out in 1325 between England and France, Boxgrove was no exception to the seizure of alien priories by King Edward II, and was subjected to an annual payment. In 1330, during the early reign of Edward III, Boxgrove’s lands and revenues were restored.⁴⁸ It was once again seized when fighting again broke out with France, and “in 1337 the Priory was ordered to pay a fine of £60 and an annual sum of £30.”⁴⁹ In 1338, the prior tried to prevent the seizure of Boxgrove on the pretext that his monks were all Englishmen, further asserting that they elected their own prior even though Lessay retained the right to appoint them. The king granted them their petition and remitted the charges. It was seized, yet again, during the reign of Richard II, but in 1383, it finally achieved independence from its foreign connections.⁵⁰

Folkestone and Horsham, too, were confiscated during this period. Folkestone, however, was “generally granted at farm to the prior, who paid £30 yearly for it in 1338 and £35 in 1342.”⁵¹ In 1390, the king rented the priory to the prior, bailiff, and sacrist of Westminster Abbey for £20 annually. Three years later, the king appointed a monk from Westminster as the prior of Folkestone, thus effectively putting the priory into English hands. Like Boxgrove, Folkestone was a fully independent and self-sufficient convent, and only paid a small yearly pension to its mother-house, Lonlay, “as an acknowledgement of subjection.”⁵² The yearly pension ended when Folkestone received its charter of denization, making it a full-fledged English priory. Thus, it too escaped the suppressions during the reign of Henry V. Sometime

⁴⁶ Matthew 45; Turner, 88.

⁴⁷ Matthew, 46.

⁴⁸ Turner, 102.

⁴⁹ Wells, 13; “Houses of Benedictine Monks: Priory of Boxgrove,”.

⁵⁰ Wells, 14.

⁵¹ “The Priory of Folkestone.”

⁵² Dugdale; Mackie, *A Handbook of Folkestone*, 5.

during the onset of the fifteenth century, the priory was made denizen, although a “tax of 6 marks [£4] yearly was paid regularly to the king.”⁵³

Similarly, Edward III granted custody of Horsham to the prior after seizing its possessions on condition of the prior paying £100 a year, which was remitted to £50 in 1337. In 1338, the prior petitioned to be pardoned paying £80, and it was granted so long as the priory remained in the king’s hands.⁵⁴ In 1389, the monks of the priory elected the prior for the first time. The inmates also wrote to the king asking to be naturalized. A year later, in December 1390, a grant of denization was bestowed on Horsham, freeing it from all fines and impositions as an alien priory. They still had to pay the king two marks a year however, the same as they had previously paid to the Abbey of Conques. Additionally, the priory was asked to pray for the king and queen, and the good estate of the realm.⁵⁵ Thus, all three priories had been naturalized by 1414, thereby successfully escaping the suppressions and continuing their religious lifestyles as full English convents.

The 1414 Suppression Act closed over one-hundred alien priories. Few sources establish how many alien houses were actually suppressed, but one source does say there were one-hundred seventeen priories in total in 1337. During the seizures of that year, Edward III farmed out the priories to their priors: Boxgrove was farmed for £60 and Folkestone for £30. In total, fifty-nine priories are listed as having a total of £5559 per year. However, forty-five houses were not accounted for due to a lack of records. As Chester William points out, the king, at a low estimate, received £7,000 a year. The numbers in 1414 were likely similar. How many were closed in 1414, remains questionable. It is certain that all alien houses were suppressed and that

⁵³ “Religioius Houses of Kent,” in *‘Religious Houses: Introduction’, A History of the County of Kent: Volume 2* (1926), 112-3. <http://www.british-online.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=38188&strquery=folkestonepriory>, accessed 22 March 2010; “Folkestone (St. Mary and St. Eanswith);” “The Priory of Folkestone,”; Dugdale.

⁵⁴ “The Priory of St. Faith, Horsham.”

⁵⁵ Ibid.

some conventual priories were allowed to continue. Given the above figures, it appears no more than a hundred priories were closed by Henry V. Further, even if it is assumed that Henry V received approximately £7,000 a year, the majority of the revenues went towards colleges and establishing new houses. Consequently, the money did not remain in the king's hand for long.⁵⁶

After the suppression of the alien priories, the monasteries went largely undisturbed, with a few exceptions, until Cardinal Wolsey began his suppression in the early sixteenth century. Wolsey's actions can be seen as the precursor to the Dissolutions of 1535-9. As Deirdre O'Sullivan writes, "his actions have often been taken as their model, not least because his principal assistant in 1525-29 was his successor in Henry VIII's favour, Thomas Cromwell."⁵⁷ Baskerville boldly states "The Cardinal's dissolutions...made all the forest of religious foundations to shake; justly, proving the King would finish to cut the oaks, seeing the Cardinal had begun to cut the underwood."⁵⁸ Wolsey, however, had conformed his suppressions to existing models, such as to the foundation of Magdalen College, where he studied at and was later elected fellow of in 1497. In 1458, William Waynflete, Bishop of Winchester founded Magdalen College by suppressing the small priories of Selbourne in Hampshire, and Sele in Sussex. Waynflete was not the only one to support a college with monastic resources; "the endowment of educational establishments by the laity gained increasing prominence in the fifteenth century, and in a number of instances obligations and resources were transferred from monasteries to these."⁵⁹ In 1413, for example, Edmund Mortimer had petitioned to refound Stoke-by-Clare priory in Suffolk, a former alien priory, as a secular college, which meant a

⁵⁶ Chester William New, *History of the Alien Priories in England to the Confiscation of Henry V: Dissertation* (Wisconsin: George Banta Publishing Company, 1916), 66-7.

⁵⁷ Deirdre O'Sullivan, "The 'Little Dissolution' of the 1520s," *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 40 (2006): 227.

⁵⁸ Baskerville, 109.

⁵⁹ O'Sullivan, 231.

church with secular clergy.⁶⁰ This shift from monks to secular clergy was a problem faced by monasticism, as will be shown later.

Additionally, suppressions similar to Wolsey's had also occurred throughout Europe at the time. Other prelates who were "intent upon the promotion of learning, [also] obtained licences to suppress decaying monasteries within their jurisdiction, for the purpose of founding or endowing colleges at Oxford or Cambridge."⁶¹ Cardinal Xiemenes received powers to suppress monasteries in Spain. He carried out drastic reforms of religious houses and dispatched the "unseemly" monks and friars to Morocco.⁶² Sweden provides another example. Gustavus Vasa converted "a substantial proportion of Swedish church property, including that of the monasteries, to the support of his government and the enrichment of his followers among the nobility."⁶³ Similarly, Lutheran princes in Germany profited from the anti-monastic elements of their new faith by confiscating endowments of religious houses.⁶⁴

Wolsey first received authorization to suppress monasteries in 1518 after appealing to Pope Clement VII to do so. The pope granted him powers to visit and reform religious houses jointly with papal legate Campeggio. After Campeggio left England, however, the powers devolved to Wolsey alone.⁶⁵ Six years later, on 3 April 1524, he managed to receive another bull, this one granting him the authority to suppress several monasteries and redirect their funds to the colleges of Cardinal and Ipswich. He was permitted to close St. Frideswide in Oxford and to

⁶⁰ Thompson, "Monasteries and Patrons," 114.

⁶¹ G.H. Cook, ed., *Letters to Cromwell and others on the Suppression of the Monasteries* (London: John Baker, 1965), 13.

⁶² Baskerville, 104.

⁶³ Woodward, 49.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁵ Cook, 14; Keith Brown, "Wolsey and Ecclesiastical Order: the Case of the Franciscan Observants," in *Cardinal Wolsey: Church, State and Art* by S.J. Gunn and P.G. Lindley (Cambridge, 1991), 225; Hoyle, 282.

transfer the inmates to other monasteries.⁶⁶ Further bulls between 1524 and 1529, from Clement VII, enabled him to close and seize the revenues of twenty-seven other houses – the majority of them being either Augustinian Canons or Benedictine monks. However, in most of these houses the numbers of monks had fallen to single figures, “and the net income in all but six was less than £200 a year,” with the revenue totalling approximately £2,300.⁶⁷ “[The] King gave his formal licence to the bulls and authorized the suppression of no fewer than twenty-one monasteries.”⁶⁸ Some of the smallest priories who “all but lost their *raison d’être* through decrease of personnel or misconduct, were suppressed by Wolsey in 151 and in 1524-5, and their revenues devoted chiefly to his educational schemes,” such as endowing Ipswich College.⁶⁹ At the time, this was not seen as having great future implications by other monasteries because only a few were suppressed among the approximately nine-hundred monasteries in the country. Additionally, Knowles writes that no contemporary would have seen this as a future threat because Wolsey’s actions “had no wide consequences and could point to parallels in the past.”⁷⁰ Bulls issued shortly before Wolsey’s fall implied that he had intentions of further suppressions. One empowered him to inquire into suppressing monasteries and establishing more cathedrals, and another to suppress monasteries with fewer than twelve monks and unite them to other religious houses.⁷¹

Wolsey’s suppressions were relatively minor and did not disturb religious affairs much. With a few exceptions, the monasteries were small and near the brink of collapse due to poverty

⁶⁶ Cook, 14. St. Frideswide was a small community with fifteen canons and a post-dissolution revenue estimated at £220.

⁶⁷ Cook, 14; O’Sullivan, 238.

⁶⁸ O’Sullivan, 236.

⁶⁹ Knowles and Hadcock, 51.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Baskerville, 107.

and decay.⁷² The larger ones were the Cluniac Priory at Daventry which had ten monks, the Premonstratensian Abbey of Bayham with eleven, and the Augustinian Priorities of Lesnes and St. Frideswide's with eleven and fifteen monks respectively.⁷³ As with the later suppressions, the monks, canons, or nuns were given the option of transferring to another house or going into the world with the sum of one pound.⁷⁴ The lands from suppressed houses were either sold or leased, but typically they remained in ecclesiastical hands. The significance of Wolsey's suppression, in comparison to that of the aliens, was that these were English monasteries that posed no threat to the country. Furthermore, his chief agent in these suppressions was Thomas Cromwell. "Cromwell was involved in the project from the beginning, and continued to be responsible for the collection of revenue from the former monastic estates and their management throughout the period of 1525-29."⁷⁵ In other words, Cromwell had the experience and knowledge of carrying out closures. Furthermore, he played the chief role in the 1536 Dissolution.

The procedure for the suppression of alien priories, as well as the closures under Wolsey, laid the framework from which Henry VIII followed in 1536. Priories had been closed before in a similar fashion from which Henry could have looked and discovered how to handle monasteries that may not have been functioning adequately. Even if Henry did use their resources reaped from their closures, it was again nothing new. Perhaps if all the revenues were transferred straight to church hands, Henry would not have then been seen as closing these lesser monasteries specifically for financial purposes. Monarchs from Edward I to Henry V took measures to seize alien religious houses and acquired revenues through them, especially with the closures. Further, Wolsey had the pope's permission to close certain monasteries; in 1536, Henry

⁷² Hoyle, 282.

⁷³ Baskerville, 104.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 106.

⁷⁵ O'Sullivan, 228.

was head of the Church of England and now had the powers of the pope, which enabled him to give his permission for closures. Nevertheless, Henry could have turned to the suppression of alien priories and the closures under Wolsey, as well as accounts of closures on the continent, to justify his suppression of lesser monasteries.

Chapter Two: THE DISSOLUTION

After Wolsey's fall from grace, Thomas Cromwell quickly rose to the top in Henry VIII's favour. He became vicegerent in matters spiritual for the King, which gave him the power to visit, repress, and reform monasteries, and he had the ability to appoint his own deputies to visit the orders.¹ He achieved this status after Henry became supreme head of the Church of England, absolving houses from all obedience and oaths to the bishop of Rome.² Henceforth, the stage was set for a suppression of lesser monasteries under Henry's command. On 30 January 1535 a survey, known as the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, evaluating the income of all church lands throughout England Wales became the initial step in implementing what would be the act. The survey was followed by another visitation of the monasteries, whose results led to the implementation of the act. The visitations were carried out like the typical visitations by bishops, but the motives of the visitation commissioners are in question here. If their intention was reform, then their conduct under the Act differed little from previous suppression procedures. And considering the precedent, even if financial reasons were a strong motive for suppression, Henry committed no erroneous act in his decision to have the lesser monasteries suppressed because his actions mirrored those of previous monarchs.

The *Valor* identified the number of religious communities along with details of their lands and income, which was in turn used to derive taxation, and eventually helped implement the Dissolutions.³ Its establishment was instigated by the Act of First Fruits and Tenths. In order to obtain the first fruits of each clerical benefice, as well as a tenth of its annual income, Henry

¹ Joyce A. Youings, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971), 37.

² Bernard, *The King's Reformation*, 246.

³ Youings, 15; Bernard, *The King's Reformation*, 245.

first needed to be aware of the resources held by each religious institution. At the time, it was unknown “how many monasteries there were in existence, their geographical location, how many were autonomous houses and how many were cells only, and least of all the identity and value of their lands and spiritual revenues.”⁴ While it could be assumed that the *Valor* was actually implemented in order to plan for the Dissolution, there is “no justification whatsoever for regarding it as anything more than a taxation assessment.”⁵ Nonetheless, it was the information provided by the *Valor*, and not the visitation reports that determined the outcome of each monastery.⁶

The reliability of the visitations is questioned based on the motivations behind the visitations. Historians, such as J.H. Bettey, argue that the real purpose for the visitations was to produce evidence of laxity, scandal and abuses to provide ample “evidence” for Cromwell to implement a suppression of monastic property.⁷ Youings writes, as “useful as the latter [visitations] no doubt were for propaganda purposes they were by no means as comprehensive in their coverage of the religious houses as the *Valor*, and provided inadequate information for drawing a line between the large and small communities.”⁸ Taunton agrees, arguing that Henry was a despot who wielded his power to close the monasteries on grounds of reform, while in reality, he argues, the monasteries were functioning just fine.⁹ On the other hand, historians like Bernard argue that the government did have genuine reforming intentions. These intentions are exemplified by the fact that the university curriculum was also a target of the reform measures.¹⁰

⁴ Youings, 34-5.

⁵ Ibid, 37.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ J.H. Bettey, *The Suppression of the Monasteries in the West Country* (Gloucester: Alan Stutton, 1989), 43.

⁸ Youings, 42.

⁹ Taunton, Chapter VIII.

¹⁰ Bernard, 256.

Furthermore, there is another argument that states the series of religious events taking place at the time influenced the desire to end monasticism, which is why the visitations were implemented. Thompson writes “it is easy to fasten on the mendacity of the dramatic – indeed over-dramatic – periods of the Act of 1536, and to ignore the fact that it was framed by laymen and clergy inspired by new religious ideals.”¹¹ In other words, it was the new religious ideas from Germany, such as iconoclasm, infiltrating England that influenced the closures, rather than the financial burdens of the Crown. This view implies there was indeed a larger plan to close the monasteries, not so much for financial needs as to remedy the problems between monasticism and the changing religious ideas. Reformist ideas from the Continent, such as Lutheranism, did advocate against relics and pilgrimages as well as monasteries. From this it follows that the general interest of the visitors was to find a means to “legitimately” close the monasteries in order to move away from the “pomp” of monastic orders.

Whether or not the *Valor* was the first stage of the closures remains a question. If a specific monetary value was the target of the closures, and only the *Valor* clearly distinguished the wealth and resources of the religious houses, then the visitations seem irrelevant. But of course, the visitations may have been a means to justify the closures of lesser monasteries. Nevertheless, no set plan for the closure of all monasteries was evident with the implementation of the survey. As mentioned, a survey of church lands was necessary for taxation purposes. The visitations, on the other hand, were specifically for investigating the condition of the monasteries. The three main commissioners were the priest Robert Layton, and the lawyers John ap Rice and Thomas Legh. The interests of these men, such as reforming religion, and personal gains, such as property, were closely tied to Cromwell's. Cromwell's intentions appeared to be in favour of closing monasteries because of the emphasis they placed on ritual, richly decorated

¹¹ Thompson, “Monasteries, Society, and Reform,” 195.

shrines, pilgrimage, and idolatry, these things being in stark contrast to the new Lutheran ideas emanating from Germany.¹²

Explicitly stated, the visitors were looking into the condition of the monasteries because there were doubts about the way the monasteries were being run, such as the degree of obedience being applied. Moreover, colleges were duly visited for the same purpose, so monasteries were not the only target, implying that the visitors either wanted to close certain colleges as well or that they were genuinely concerned with reform. The Visitation Commissioners had a set of articles or questions that they put to each monk. The questions inquired into various aspects of the priory. For example, inmates were asked whether divine service was solemnly sung, said, observed, and kept, as well as the qualification for each monk. They also asked for the number of inmates in the house, its income, and how the lands had been acquired. Further, were the religious fulfilling their duties to the founder's will or the statutes of the house, and was it possible to do so if the house lacked an adequate numbers of monks or nuns? Most importantly, the commissioners questioned the sincerity of the vocation of the monks and nuns. If they were not staying true to their principal vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, then it could rightly be shown that monasteries had slipped into a condition rife with corruption.¹³

The Commissioners were also given a set of twenty-seven injunctions to be administered to each monastery. These injunctions were meant to enforce stricter observance of the Benedictines' Rules.¹⁴ The religious were to continue to observe their rule faithfully, but now they were to do so under the statutes of the realm, as opposed to the jurisdiction of the bishop of

¹² Woodward, 60, 85; Bernard, 257-260; Bettey, 43.

¹³ Bernard, 249-51.

¹⁴ Bettey 44-5; Youings, 38.

Rome whose obedience they were now absolved from.¹⁵ They were forbidden to go beyond the precincts of their house, and women were forbidden from entering unless given explicit consent from the King's highness or his visitor. Refections were to be taken together with a chapter of the New or Old Testament read by the brethren, and leftovers were to be gathered by an assigned almoner who would distribute the remains among the poor. Additionally, "alms or distributions due or accustomed to be made by reason of the foundation statutes or customs of this place [were to] be made and given as largely and as liberally as ever they were at any time heretofore."¹⁶ One or two brethren were also to be sent to university so that upon their return they would be able to "instruct and teach their brethren and diligently preach the word of God;"¹⁷ but if the resources of the house were poor, then it would be unlikely that they could afford to pay for a university education. A record of the administration of the house, including all expenses, was to be kept in a great book, and no one was to be professed before the age of twenty-four. Most importantly, they were told not to "show any relics or feigned miracles for increase of lucre but that they exhort pilgrims and strangers to give that to the poor that they thought to offer to their images or relics."¹⁸

These articles differed only slightly from the various injunctions given by bishops in previous monastic visitations, and duly aimed for reform. The main difference would be that these were ordered to be administered to all the monasteries, and not simply those found to be in need of reform. Of course, that does not mean that it was assumed that all the monasteries were in a dire state. Rather, these instructions were meant to emphasize and reassert the important functions of the monasteries. Another difference is that the injunction concerning relics and

¹⁵ Frere, W.H. and W.P.M Kennedy, eds, *Visitation Articles and Injunctions, 1536-1558, Volume II* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1910), 3-4.

¹⁶ "The Visitors' Injunctions, 1535," in *The Dissolution of the Monasteries*, by Joyce Youings (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971), 150.

¹⁷ Ibid, 151.

¹⁸ Ibid, 151-2; Frere and Kennedy, 5.

pilgrimages is not one which had been pointed out before. It was a specific concern of Cromwell's because of his beliefs that relics and pilgrimages were unnecessary rituals. In any case, as the injunctions were administered and the visitations sent their reports on the houses to Henry and Cromwell, it was decided that several monasteries had become lax in their observance of the rules. Additionally, they were wasting scarce resources and concentrating more on superstitious practices than on true religion. As a result, the Act was passed as a means to reform these ill-performing houses.¹⁹

The Act was implemented due to abuses in the smaller monasteries. Specifically, it was instigated by "manifest synne, vicious carnall and abhomynable lyvyng, is dayly usyd & cōmytted amonges the lytell and smale Abbeys Pryoryes and other Relygyous Houses of Monks Chanons & Nonnes, where the congregacōn of suche Relygyous psons is under the number of xij psons."²⁰ This preamble further recognizes how past visitations, injunctions, and reforms failed to improve the condition of monasticism and several houses: "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 little or none amendment is hitherto had, but their vicious living shamelessly increases and augments." Consequently, it calls for suppressing the smaller monasteries and transferring religious persons to the "great and honourable Monasteries of Religion in the Realme," in order for reform to effectively be carried out. Here, the distinction is made between all small monasteries, in this case those worth less than £200, and great monasteries in which "religion is right well kept and observed."²¹

¹⁹ Bernard, 254-5.

²⁰ Manifest sin, vicious carnal and abominable living is daily used and committed among the little and small abbeys, priories, and other religious houses of monks, canons, and nuns, where the congregation of such religious persons is under the number of twelve persons.

²¹ 27 Hen. VIII c. 28, *Statutes of the Realm 1509-1545*, 575.

Much of the act deals with the suppressed lands and what was to happen with the lands and their resources. All lands and resources connected to the suppressed monasteries were to be transferred to the King, or any person who received the King's grants of the lands. Those who have "lately fraudulently and craftily made feoffments, estates, gifts, grants, and leases, under their convent seals...shall be utterly void and of none effect," and the King gets full use of the ornaments, jewels, goods, chattels, and debts of the governors of each monastery.²² Those with leases were not affected by the act, and were allowed to carry on as if the Act had never been passed. The tax of first fruits was discharged, and the value of the monasteries was to be ascertained by the Exchequer. Furthermore, all debts owing by the house were to be paid by the king in "as large and ample manner as the said chief governors should or ought to have done if this Act had never been made."²³ Paying off another's debts in full seems to be a bold move were the king principally after money.

The remainder of the act deals with the religious. To begin, the heads of houses were to be provided with a pension, which would not have been a financial benefit to Henry. Next, those religious who wished to leave their orders would be provided with capacities "if they will to live honestly and virtuously abroad, and some convenient charity disposed to them toward their living."²⁴ These capacities were to be granted by the royal authority through the Faculty Office, set up at Lambeth Place in 1534.²⁵ For those religious who wished to remain in their orders, they were to "be committed to such honourable great monasteries of this realm wherein good religion is observed."²⁶ If monasteries needed reform because they were simply too small, then these

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, 576.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Donald F. Logan, "Departure from the Religious Life During the Royal Visitation of the Monasteries, 1535-1536," in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, ed. James G. Clark (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2002), 214.

²⁶ 27 Hen. VIII c. 28, 576.

transfers were sensible because the larger monasteries could better incorporate them. The act also stipulated that the larger monasteries shall take and accept new numbers into their houses, living religiously for the duration of their lives. The king also reserved the right to continue any religious houses that may fall under the Act, and the Act was not to apply to the cells of the greater monasteries. To ensure the provisions of this Act were followed, the Justices of the Peace were to inquire into and deal with those who did not comply.²⁷

Given the terms of the Act, it did not appear to be in any way hinting at a wide-scale closure of monasteries, and it seems to be in the name of reform. If a long-term closure was planned, then it seems pointless to present religious with the option of transferring when they were simply to be sent to houses soon to be dissolved themselves; although, it could simply have been a ruse to suppress suspicions of future closures. Providing pensions could get costly too, although at this point only the heads of the houses were given pensions. Furthermore, the point that past visitations and reforms had failed to improve monasticism was no lie. As will be shown later, various reforms were continuously imposed upon the orders, revealing that issues such as lax observance of orders remained a prevalent issue.

Upon implementation of the act, less than the projected number of monasteries was closed. Over three hundred houses had the potential of being closed, but, of those, it appear that as many as eighty, or about one quarter, were exempted. Woodward places this number at 67, while Knowles suggests between 70 and 80.²⁸ Of the 238 houses that were suppressed, only sixty belonged to the Benedictine Order, with twenty-one houses of monks, and thirty-nine nunneries.²⁹ Favours alone did not save a monastery from being exempted. Rather, exemptions

²⁷ Ibid., 578.

²⁸ Youings, 50.

²⁹ Peter Cunich, "The Dissolution," in *Monks of England: The Benedictine in England from Augustine to the Present Day* ed. Daniel Rees (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1997), 157.

were determined by the need to house those monks and nuns who wished to transfer, but for whom there was no room elsewhere.³⁰ A lot of time and effort was invested in transferring the inmates. The problem of accommodating those who wished to retain a monastic lifestyle was undoubtedly an important factor in deciding which houses were to be exempted.

Accommodating women especially led to a considerable number of these houses being exempt.³¹

Thirteen of twenty nunneries were allowed to continue for there was nowhere else for them to go. However, substantial fines were collected from approximately half of the exempted houses.³²

Lord de la Ware attempted to save Boxgrove Priory, but his efforts largely failed. The current patron of Boxgrove, as inherited by the original founder Robert de Haye, Thomas Lord de La Warr, wrote to Cromwell, asking for exemption:

And so it is that I have a powr house called Boxgrave very near to my power house, wherof I am ffounder, and there lyethe many of my aunsystorys, and also my wyffy's mother. And for by cause hyt is of my ffoundacyon, and that my parishe church is under the roofe of the church of the said monastery, and I have made a powr chapel to be buryed yn, wherfor yf hyt might stand with the King's Gracy's pleasure, for the power service that I have doyn his Highnes, to fforebere the sub-pressing of the same, or else to translate hyt ynto a College of such nombre as the lands whyll bere.³³

The priory was suppressed regardless of la Warr's pleas, but the site and premises were granted to him. It was one of the few instances where the descendant of the founder retained the house.³⁴

³⁰ Bernard, 271.

³¹ Youings, 49-50.

³² Bernard, 273.

³³ W.H. Blaauw, "Sussex Monasteries at the Time of Their Suppression; Boxgrove – Shulbred – Bayham – Dureford – Lewes," *Sussex Archaeological Collections Relating to the History and Antiquities of the County* 7 (1854): 218; Thomas la Warr, "Thomas de la Warr to Cromwell," in *Letters to Cromwell and others on the Suppression of the Monasteries*, ed. G.H. Cook (London, John Baker, 1965); "Henry VIII: March 1536, 21-25," in *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, volume 10, ed. James Gairdner (1887). British History Online, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=75422&strquery=henry%20VIII:%20March%201536>, Accessed 25 March 2010.

And so it is that I have a poor house called Boxgrove very near to my poor house, where I am founded, and there lie many of my ancestors, and also my wife's mother. And because it is of my foundation, and that my parish church is under the roof of the church of the said monastery, and I have made a poor chapel to be buried in, where if it might stand with the King's Grace's pleasure, for the poor service that I have done his Highness, to forebear the suppressing of the same, or else to translate it into a college of such number as the lands will bear.

³⁴ Cook, 89.

The Court of Augmentations was established in 1536 to handle the new influx of wealth that would be inundating the Treasury from the Suppression Act. The court consisted of a chancellor, a treasurer, two legal officers (attorney and solicitor), ten auditors, seventeen particular receivers, and a clerk of the court with an usher and messenger.³⁵ On 24 April, it was announced that the court would carry out a new survey of religious houses. During this visitation, officials were additionally required to compile an inventory of the monastic possessions, including plates, jewels, and other goods and property, as well as to take possession of the deeds and convent seals.³⁶ Additionally, the lead was stripped from the roofs, bells were taken from the towers to be sold, and moveable crops and stock were sold to pay off the debts of the house.³⁷ As Walter C. Richardson writes, “officials of the Court were too often thought of simply [as] rapacious ministers, determined to advance their own or the king’s interests at the expense of the hapless subjects.”³⁸ Instead, it seems rational that the officials would carry out a thorough survey of the possessions to pass into Crown hands, because a closure generates a transfer of wealth. Subsequently, a transfer of wealth would require good management, and Henry’s government began to make record-keeping an important component of the Parliamentary procedure.³⁹

Along with supervising the administration of property on behalf of the Crown in order to arrange for its closure, the Court also had to ensure the proper departure of the religious – whether they were to be sent into the world, transferred, or pensioned.⁴⁰ Each monk and nun,

³⁵ Gasquet, II, 9; 27 Henry VIII, c. 27, “An Acte Establishing the Courte of Augmentations,” *Statutes of the Realm*, III 569 1509-1545, *Hein Online* <http://heinonline.org>, accessed 25 March 2010.

³⁶ Taunton, 153.

³⁷ J.D. Mackie, *The Earlier Tudors, 1485-1558* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 378.

³⁸ Walter C. Richardson, *History of the Court of Augmentations, 1536-1554* (Louisiana State University Press, 1961), 32.

³⁹ Stanford E. Lehmberg, *The Later Parliaments of Henry VIII, 1536-1547* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977), 238.

⁴⁰ Bettey, 61; Baskerville, 146-50.

then, had to decide whether or not to leave the religious life. If a grand scheme of closing all the monasteries was planned at this point, it appears pointless to present the religious with these options. Even if they did so in order to give the appearance of not having future suppression plans, the greater monasteries were closed a mere three years later; a time period too small to bother transferring monks and nuns to other houses. Further, several houses were exempted to allow for those wishing to remain in their orders to do so. Accordingly, the Court at this time was simply carrying out necessary procedures: a survey of all monastic possessions to know exactly what the Crown was about to acquire, and supervising the transition of the houses to ensure the religious were properly managed.

The 1536 Dissolution, then, was simply another suppression of priories, differing predominantly from past closures in size alone. Roughly one-hundred alien priories were closed in 1414. Henry VIII may have closed twice as many monasteries, but his intentions and procedures were quite similar to those that occurred earlier. Visitations were conducted to first evaluate the monastic properties, and then were followed up by suppressions of certain monasteries. Here, however, Henry's aim differed slightly. Whereas the 1414 suppressions were targeted at closing alien priories, the 1536 aimed for reform. Reform was not too far from the workings of Wolsey, who first attempted to reform monasteries before he ended up closing numerous houses and transferring their revenues to support the endowment of colleges. A closer look at monasticism and the condition of Boxgrove, Folkestone, and Horsham will examine whether or not the reform theory is feasible.

Chapter Three: QUESTIONING THE CLOSURES

The dissolution act presented reform as the official reason for the closures of the lesser monasteries, but determining whether or not reform was necessary remains in question. Some historians, such as Youings, view the theory that the real motive was reform as only an excuse to take the wealth and resources of the lesser monasteries.¹ Others have argued that lesser monasteries were indeed in need of reform, especially since monasticism had recently entered into a period of reform. To determine whether monasticism was in decline, and whether the question can be answered, the current debate surrounding monasticism will be examined, as well as the information available on the health of Boxgrove, Folkestone, and Horsham. If the observance of the orders was indeed lax and reform was needed, then Henry VIII's closures may have been justified. If reform was not necessary, even if monasticism had fallen into a bit of decline, then Henry's closures were unnecessary, going against the Act's stated intention of correcting corruptions that were supposedly rife among the houses.

Obviously, one of the arguments is that monasticism was in decline and so Henry was right to close the lesser monasteries. There is an assertion by historians like Clark that the monasteries began to decline over a century prior to Henry's closures.² Historians largely agree "that the monasteries of early Tudor England and Wales were no longer playing an indispensable role in the spiritual life of the country, certainly not to justify their continued enjoyment of so large a part of the landed wealth of the kingdom."³ The high ideals of monasticism were simply fading away. Standards were often low and abuses of various kinds were accepted as inevitable.

¹ Youings, 43.

² James G. Clark, "Introduction," in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, ed. James G. Clark (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2002), 3.

³ Youings, 14.

Visitation records reveal that there were “many recorded instances of moral failings on the part of individual monks and nuns,” as well as financial mismanagement in both great and small houses.⁴ A considerable number of houses were physically in bad shape by the 1530s and had likely been in a poor state for quite some time. A decrease in the number of recruits, a lack of discipline, and moral and spiritual weaknesses decreased the strength of these houses.⁵ Indeed, only eight new houses had been founded since the onset of the fifteenth century.⁶

On the other hand, there are historians, such as David Knowles, who argue that monasticism was not in decline and the closures were thus not inevitable. McKisack states “it would be a grave error to postulate an obviously impending collapse of monasticism in this century, or even a state of general decline.”⁷ Although there was a reduction in numbers, the greater houses retained a respectable complement of monks.⁸ There was, for example, a renewal of several larger Benedictine houses by the sixteenth century.⁹ Furthermore, between 1485 and 1535 men and women were still joining the religious orders, albeit in fewer numbers: “if even a noticeable number of young men and women were choosing to enter religious life at this time, when new possibilities were opening up to appeal to those who were considered secular careers, then, the attraction and the call were still recognizable forces in the sixteenth-century society.”¹⁰ In other words, while monasticism may have slowed down as far as numbers were concerned, it was still flourishing. Thus, in their view Henry VIII was merely being a despot, wielding his power to crush the monasteries, and using reform as an excuse to dissolve them.¹¹

⁴ Cunich, 150.

⁵ Youings, 29.

⁶ Mackie, *Earlier Tudors*, 373.

⁷ McKisack, 308.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Cunich, 150.

¹⁰ Joan Greatrex, “After Knowles: Recent Perspectives in Monastic History,” in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, ed. James G. Clark (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2002), 36.

¹¹ Taunton, Chapter VIII.

Both arguments concerning the health of monasticism are compelling, but the evidence presented sometimes contradicts itself. On the one hand, as Heale points out there were signs from visitation records and injunctions that the buildings were falling apart, but assessing the scale and damage of these from complaints makes it difficult to judge the accuracy of this statement.¹² Further, some houses were quite small and poor. On the other hand goes the argument that some monks were moving away from monastic ideals to secular lifestyles by becoming large landowners. As property owners, they lived amongst the secular world of affairs, concerning themselves excessively with rents, leases, litigation, local government, and matters of the state.¹³ In these instances, monks were becoming rich and powerful, subsequently allowing their rigid orders to fall into abeyance.¹⁴ While monks were meant to possess land, it was in order to enable them to better lead unworldly lives, devoted strictly to prayer and worship.¹⁵ Here, then, is the problem of whether the monasteries were actually becoming poorer or richer. The answer likely lies in the size of the religious houses. Another problem raised is whether owning an increased amount of land led to a decline in the observance of the order.

There was also a movement towards investing patronage in parish churches, and away from monasteries. Monasteries were thrust into a competitive open market with other churches for patronage because churches became the main centre of local ecclesiastical activity in late medieval England.¹⁶ Chantry priests had been fulfilling similar functions since the fourteenth century, and it was not easy to argue that the prayers of a convent had greater efficacy than those of a single priest, or so argues Woodward.¹⁷ However, “being a sound perpetual institution whose prayers would continue indefinitely into the future was one of the main advantages which

¹² Martin Heale, *The Dependent Priors of Medieval English Monasteries* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2004), 90.

¹³ Woodward, 16.

¹⁴ F.H. Crossley, *The English Abbey: Its Life and Work in the Middle Ages* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1935), 9-10.

¹⁵ Woodward, 16.

¹⁶ Thompson, “Monasteries, Societies, and Reform,” 178, 180.

¹⁷ Woodward, 41.

monasteries had over less well-endowed churches.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, Crossley right points out that the country was moving away from monasticism as the founding of chantries became the preferred form of devotion.¹⁹

Furthermore, an increasing emphasis on colleges also contributed to the decline in enrolment in monasteries. Monasteries were once the traditional means of education. The foundation of colleges gradually took the place of monasteries as the main sources for education. As Crossley writes, “several years before the debacle many religious houses were suppressed and their property given to the new seats of learning.”²⁰ The suppressions referred to here are the ones by Wolsey, as discussed above. Additionally, an increasing number of monks were attending colleges to receive an education in theology to increase their opportunities for advancement, which could take them away from their houses for several years.²¹ The consequences of this was monks leaving their orders for advancement, or not being able to contribute or take part in the observance of the orders while away at school.

There were problems with the actual observance of the orders, as well. The orders had become fairly lax: “little by little the hardships of the rule had been softened til only the form remained.”²² In a larger number of houses there was chronic mismanagement, especially of finances, a lack of discipline, and a high degree of petty squabbling. Constant divine service was required of monks, but all observances were not always being carried out in houses with fewer numbers of monks. “Numerous injunctions make clear that the night office and the seven daily hours were to be said in every cell,” but many visitation records reported how these were not

¹⁸ Thompson, “Monasteries, Societies, and Reform,” 178, 180-1.

¹⁹ Crossley, 9.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Clark, 12, 16, 20.

²² Crossley, 9.

being carried out.²³ For example, Prior Barton of St. Leonard's Stamford and his solitary companion complained of being too few in number to get up for matins.²⁴ The reduction of numbers was partly due to the Black Death. Beyond the immediate effect of killing off inhabitants, the death of elders led to less-experienced and younger monks taking over the orders. As a result, previously higher ideals of monasticism were relaxed by the new men in charge.²⁵

Henry V responded to the problems of relaxed orders by attempting to enforce the original stricter rules. He addressed some 350 Benedictine monks and prelates at Westminster on 5 May 1421, and expressed his concern that the monastic zeal of earlier days had now faded. Devotion was being replaced with negligence. The articles he proposed resembled Episcopal injunctions, with the aim of getting Benedictines to lead full monastic lives again by raising the standard of their order. In other words, his proposed document was less a radical proposal and more an appeal for a stricter observance of existing rules, such as continued prayers for benefactors, dress, and accommodation. Most of the proposals, however, were rejected, and the monks watered down the articles before accepting the heavily revised document. What his reforms showed was a lack of desire among monks to get back to the original strictness of their orders.²⁶

Furthermore, Henry V's reforms were neither the first nor the last attempt at reforming the rule. Reforms were previously carried out in the thirteenth century by the Lateran Council, which established that monks were not to be professed before twenty years of age, they were not to farm landed property, meat was to be forbidden, and all religious were to be present at divine

²³ Heale, 176.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Taunton, 132-5; McKisack, 306.

²⁶ Greatrex, 42; Christopher Allmand, *Henry V* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 278.

service.²⁷ In 1519-20, Wolsey too presented reform proposals to the Augustinians and Benedictines.²⁸ On 19 March 1519 he issued new statutes for the Augustinian canons, and two years later, on 12 November 1521, he summoned the abbots and priors of the Benedictine order to discuss reforms with them.²⁹ Wolsey wanted reform through discipline, with an emphasis on the rigorous application of the founder's rule and an enforced retreat from worldliness. These ideas for reform resembled those attempted by Henry V. Henry VIII also imposed injunctions on all the religious houses, but he also used closures as a means for reform.

Wolsey called a meeting of bishops on 9 September 1519 in the interest of reform, but as it turns out, he was more successful with his suppressions than with his reforms. The meeting largely dealt with the question of supervision, or visitation. Visitations would find problems among the orders and sought to mend them, such as monks regularly visiting nearby taverns or overly socializing with women, which disrupted the religious life of the whole house or at least its image. However, as Peter Gwyn puts it, "self-respect may be a better guarantee of the health of an institution than any amount of outside control."³⁰ It is difficult to change someone or an institution unless they are willing to change, and in this case it is implied that those who did not conform to the injunctions did not intend to better themselves. Indeed, Gwyn was right. Despite Wolsey's efforts to reform the order, in 1522 he was still criticizing the Benedictines for avarice and irregular lifestyles.³¹ Perhaps, then, suppressing religious houses with vast degrees of corruption and transferring inmates who wished to remain in the order to other, well-functioning houses was a better means for reform.

²⁷ Taunton, 28-9.

²⁸ Thompson, "Monasteries, Societies and Reform," 186; Brown, 221.

²⁹ Greg Walker, "Cardinal Wolsey and the Satirists: the Case of Godly Queen Hester Re-Opened," in *Cardinal Wolsey: Church, State and Art*, ed. S.J. Gunn and P.G. Lindley (Cambridge, 1991), 249.

³⁰ Peter Gwyn, *The King's Cardinal: the Rise and Fall of Thomas Wolsey* (London: Pimlico, 1992), 271.

³¹ Walker, 249.

The question of reform, and whether or not monasticism was declining, can be illustrated through Boxgrove, Folkestone, and Horsham St. Faith. The number of religious at Boxgrove increased at first, but began to dwindle by the end of the fifteenth century. Boxgrove initially held three monks, brought over from the Norman Priory, with the two and a half hides provided by Robert de Haye. His daughter, Cicely, increased the number from three to six, and her two sons were also quite generous to the Priory. William St. John gave endowments to enable the maintenance of thirteen monks. Additional tithes brought the total to fifteen. William's brother Robert also gave gifts to the priory, eventually enabling the Priory to sustain sixteen monks. The sixteenth monk, however, was to be a chaplain at the manor house of Halnaker.³² Nearly a century later, the numbers increased to nineteen "when William of Kainesham, Canon of Chichester, provided for the maintenance of a nineteenth in 1230."³³ These numbers fell after the Black Death. There were ten monks in 1478, and only eight by the time of the 1536 Dissolution.³⁴ The sources available do not say whether these numbers declined due to a lack of financial support or due to problems with recruitment.

Problems with the rule itself within Boxgrove are revealed through visitation records. Between 1204 and 1207, Bishop Simon found the brothers were inclined to quarrel amongst themselves, and some living in the house were not even professed. In 1275, Archbishop Robert Kilwardby of Canterbury issued a series of injunctions to the priory due to its rule being too lax. He stated the monks were living too well, and that they have been eating meat too regularly when it is only supposed to be allowed under strict conditions. Furthermore, the monks were wearing brown robes instead of the proper black, and the chaplain gossiped too much on his way to Halnaker House and was thus told to go straight to the chapel henceforth without stopping.

³² Wells, 10.

³³ Ibid., 12.

³⁴ Ibid.

The above injunctions were restated in 1299, with the addition of the prior being ordered to fill up four vacancies.³⁵ Unfortunately, there is a lack of available sources to ascertain the health of the monastery for the next century. In 1410, however, the affairs of the priory were not doing so well and as such its entire moveable goods were handed over to the Bishop, implying the house had gone into debt.³⁶ In 1478, there were only ten brothers in total, so once again the numbers had fallen from the nineteen the priory was meant to maintain. However, it was reported to Bishop Storey “that everything connected with the Priory is in good order, more so than it had been for forty years.”³⁷

The good state of the Priory recorded in 1478 did not last. In 1518, eighteen years before the Dissolution, Bishop Sherburne issued a series of injunctions from which it is clear that the house had once again fallen into a poor state. Boxgrove again lacked a full number of monks, although it did increase to 12 in 1524. A master of the novices was appointed by Bishop Sherburne to train the monks for a life under St. Benedict’s rule, as well as to emphasize that they must observe the rule more diligently.³⁸ Another problem was that religious were accepted into the order without thoroughly examining their worth and knowledge or providing them with proper training.³⁹ The monks were also to have a garden from which they were to find health and refreshment, and the prior was no longer permitted to participate in leisure activities, such as archery (which he was skilled in) unless within the walls of the convent.⁴⁰ Additionally, they were not to keep an excess of servants, an account of all expenses should be kept, and an

³⁵ Ibid, 15.

³⁶ Ibid, 18. Cecil Deedes, ed., *The Episcopal Register of Robert Rede, Ordinis Predicatorum, Lord Bishop of Chichester, 1397-1415*, vols 1-2 (London: Mitchell Hughes and Clarke, 1908), 143.

³⁷ Ibid, 19.

³⁸ Ibid., 19; William Turner, “Injunctions Given to the Prior and Convent of Boxgrave, A.D. 1518: Communicated from the Extracts Made by the Late J.B. Freeland, Esq., from the Episcopal Register, Sherburne”, *Sussex Archaeological Collections Relating to the History and Antiquities of the County* (1857): 63.

³⁹ William Turner, 65.

⁴⁰ Wells, 20; William Turner, 65.

inventory of all moveable and immoveable goods belonging to the priory was to be made. They were once again not wearing the proper articles of clothing, such as lined robes. Women were to be dealt with swiftly, and to act in no way around them that would arouse suspicion. Gambling, such as games of dice and cards, and hunting, as well as drinking and gossiping around the church and cemetery, were also forbidden.⁴¹ In other words, the brethren were leading comfortable lives and had forgotten that their first duty was to live a life near to God. It was not that they were necessarily “dissolute or wicked, but they had lost the old high ideals.”⁴² The implication is that the priory was in fact doing forbidden things, such as gambling.

By 1524, the priory was doing better, but not all of the injunctions given in 1518 were being followed. The prior, for example, was not keeping an account of the state and affairs of the house. Furthermore, the cellarer was a layman, instead of a secular monk, and there was no instructor in grammar.⁴³ The Priory church was also decrepit by this time; Boxgrove evidently had two churches, one a parish church, the other for the monks. In the latter days of the priory, the monastic church had fallen into a state of decay leading to the other church serving as both a monastic and parochial church.⁴⁴ In 1527, however, it was recorded that the buildings were only in a moderate state of repair, the priory held no debt, and the monks were “orderly in their habits and conversation, virtuous and religious in their lives.”⁴⁵ Nonetheless, there were only six canons and five novices at this time, so the number of religious was still less than that which was to be maintained. It is uncertain whether the numbers declined because they could not afford the numbers.

⁴¹ William Turner, 64-6.

⁴² Wells, 20.

⁴³ Edward Turner, 117; “Houses of Benedictine Monks: Priory of Boxgrove.”

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 117; “Houses of Benedictine Monks: Priory of Boxgrove.”

Boxgrove appeared to be in fair shape at the time of its dissolution in 1536. There were nine religious at the time, eight monks in priest's order, and one novice. There were also twenty-eight servants – ten waiting servants, eight hinds or farm servants, two women servants – and eight children, suggesting a school was connected to the Priory, possibly for choristers, and six poor persons were housed under its roof. The monks themselves were receiving small pensions of about £4 a year.⁴⁶ Debts owed by the house were valued at £42 10s 6½ d, the value of moveable goods was £83 15s, and the value of bells and lead was £13 6s 8d. The total yearly value of the house was £145 10s 2½d, and the house was reported in good condition.⁴⁷ The prior was also said to be a great husband who kept good hospitality.⁴⁸ Yet despite its good condition, Boxgrove was dissolved by the 1536 Suppression Act of the Lesser Monasteries. If Boxgrove was indeed in a good condition, then it could not have been closed on reasonable grounds. The priory did, however, have this record of going back and forth between laxity and functioning strictly according to the Benedictine Rule. It was incapable of maintaining a well-functioning priory. Thus, Boxgrove was suppressed because it produced less than £200 annually and quite possibly because of the priory's history of laxity.

Records of Folkestone show that there may have been problems with the commitment of their members. On 22 September 1511, the house was discovered to have three monks who were previously professed in other houses and orders. Willelmus Westone (William Weston) was previously professed as an Augustinian, Johannes Carter (John Carter) was previously professed as a Premonstratensian, and Thomas Seale previously belonged to a different house of the

⁴⁶ Wells, 27; "Henry VIII: July 1536" in *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, volume 10, edited by James Gairdner (1887), British History Online, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=75495&strquery=2>, accessed 24 March 2010.

⁴⁷ "Appendix, A.D. 1536." 'S' is the symbol for 'shilling', and 'd' is the symbol for pence.

⁴⁸ "Henry VIII: October 1535, 1-5," in *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, Volume 9, edited by James Gairdner (1886), *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=75671&strquery=october%201535> accessed 24 March 2010.

Benedictine order.⁴⁹ There also appeared to be no prior, so monk James Burton was appointed administrator and instructed to make a full account of the house and its inventory. Other than the lack of a prior and pre-professed monks of other houses, Folkestone appeared to be in fine shape.⁵⁰ The monks having been professed to other orders may be a sign that they had problems committing to their rules, but sources do not say why the monks changed orders.

Some visitation records of Folkestone reveal a decline in the high principles of monasticism in that house as well, while others report the house as being in a good shape. In 1491, Archbishop Morton appointed a commission to look into the conduct of the prior. The commission found and charged the prior “with various excesses and dishonest appropriations of the goods of the Priory, and in 1493 was deprived.”⁵¹ Folkestone then surrendered on 15 November 1535, a year prior to the passing of the suppression act of 1536. The value of the house had increased over time, being worth annually £26 1s 8d during the reign of Richard II, and £41 15s 10d at the time of Dissolution.⁵² The house – consisting of one hall, one chamber, a kitchen and a parlour underground – was claimed to be in utter decay, with only two religious, a prior and sick monk both of whom were guilty of serious offences. The prior at the time was Thomas Barrett Bassett, and he received a pension of £10 a year, which he was reportedly still receiving in 1553. Folkestone was received by Thomas Bedyll, who interestingly enough reported the house to be well repaired, and the prior a good husband beloved by his neighbours. Whether the house was actually in disrepair, or if Bedyll correctly reported on the condition of

⁴⁹ K.L. Wood-Legh, *Kentish Visitations of Archbishop William Warham and His Deputies, 1511-1512* (Kent: Archaeological Society, 1984), 28; “Priory of Folkestone,” BHO.

⁵⁰ “Priory of Folkestone.”

⁵¹ Mackie, *A Handbook of Folkestone*, 6; Woodward, *The Past and Present of the Parish Church of Folkestone*, 32.

⁵² “Priory of Folkestone”; Dugdale; Mackie, *A Handbook of Folkestone*, 5.

the house, is difficult to tell due to the contradictions in these sources and lack of other sources to confirm one view or the other.⁵³

St. Faith too seemed to have declined over the years, but information on the priory is insubstantial and so it is difficult to draw strong conclusions from it. Donovan Purcell writes that the priory was never large or particularly important. Its original endowments included the advowsons of Horsford, Reydone, and Mor, and certain tithes from sixteen other churches, with revenues increasing later with the support of the successive lords of Horsford and Horsham. The priory, however, never expanded beyond a prior and twelve monks. By 1390, the priory was almost ruined and divine service was nearly abandoned. However, after being granted charters of denization, ambitious alterations of the house began. The refectory was shortened and transformed into an entrance lobby, a tiled floor was placed at the west end, and new windows were put in, as well as roofing the north walk of the cloister. From the fourteenth century until the Dissolution, little is known.⁵⁴ The house was dissolved in late 1536, having an annual income of £162 16s 11½d.⁵⁵

These three examples show that there were problems among the orders, which led to a gradual weakening of the high ideals of St. Benedict's, but it is still difficult to conclude whether the laxity of the order would be enough to close the monasteries. However, if enough monasteries showed this laxity, and repeated reform attempts failed to improve their condition, it would make sense to close the lesser ones. A closure could end the questionable monasteries, transfer the devout inmates, and set an example to the greater monasteries. Simultaneously, the resources could be used by Henry as done by previous monarchs. Based on annual incomes,

⁵³ "Priory of Folkestone,"; Dugdale.

⁵⁴ Donovan Purcell, "The Priory of Horsham St. Faith and its Wallpaintings," *Norfolk Archaeology: or Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to the Antiquities of the County of Norfolk* 35 (1973): 469.

⁵⁵ Geoffrey Elton, "Communication: How Corrupt was Thomas Cromwell?" *The Historical Journal* 36, 4 (1993): 906; "The Priory of St. Faith, Horsham," BHO.

Boxgrove and Horsham appeared to be in relatively good shape, but numbers can only mean something with a clearer idea of what was needed for the priories to function. Folkestone, on the other hand, was quite poor in comparison. To demonstrate a need for reform, the visitors had to go beyond matters of wealth. The devotion of inmates also needed to be taken into consideration. The inmates at Folkestone were previously from other orders. Unfortunately not enough resources are available to adequately determine and compare the conditions of these houses. The lack of bishops' registers does not mean that there was nothing wrong with the houses. Through the few available resources, it seems there were indeed problems with the orders. The question, then, is to what degree the houses were problematic. Based on the physical condition of the monasteries and what is known about the monks, at the very least it can be concluded that monasticism was no longer as rigorous as it once was.

CONCLUSION

From the suppression of alien priories to the dissolution of the lesser monasteries, there was a consistent policy of closures utilized by English monarchs. The closures of Henry V, Cardinal Wolsey, and Henry VIII differed only in scale; although, Henry V's closures concentrated on alien priories. Additionally, by the time of the European Reformations, monastic closures were occurring throughout the Continent. Lutheran teachings, for example, proscribed such religious rituals and traditions. As a result, the closures of lesser monasteries in 1536 should not be considered as significant an event as they have been presented. The closures were based on precedents set centuries before with alien priories, religious houses in decline, and contemporary closures. While Wolsey provided the immediate precursor to the 1536 Act, the act itself simply mirrored past closures. Henry's initial closures then followed by example. The Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries can be seen as the continuation of previous suppressions, but in a different century.

The first incident of closures was in the fourteenth century. Wars with France led to English monarchs seizing alien priories. Eventually, Henry V decided to end the controversy over having religious houses in England sending revenues abroad, and suppressed all alien priories in 1414. However, he still wanted to preserve spiritual services, so some houses were allowed to remain. Boxgrove, Folkestone, and Horsham St. Faith are examples of religious houses that escaped these suppressions. Their inmates consisted of English monks, and had thereby begun to naturalize as English priories. Consequently, they managed to receive charters of denization. The revenues of those that were suppressed, then, went to the Crown which in turn distributed them among churches, new religious houses, and colleges. Previous seizures, however, had shown that the Crown was not above using revenues from religious houses for

their own financial needs. Indeed, the wars with France were costly and alien houses provided accessible wealth. Notably, farms collected from the priories during the seizures went straight to the royal treasury. Thus, the suppression of alien priories is an example of closures that were carried out for both religious and financial reasons.

The second main incident was in the 1520s, a decade prior to the Dissolution of Lesser Monasteries, as carried out by Cardinal Wolsey. Wolsey aimed to close already declining religious houses and redirect their funds towards colleges. He was able to close over twenty houses with the permission of the Pope. Henry gave his permission to close the monasteries as Pope Clement VII had as head of the church. Receiving numerous bulls from Clement VII allowed Wolsey to do away with several houses. The religious of these houses were allowed to either go into the world or transfer to other houses and continue to live monastic lives. In 1536, the religious were presented with the same options. The difference between Wolsey and the closures a decade later was with regards to Papal permission. By the time of the dissolution of lesser monasteries, England had breached its relation with the Papacy and Henry VIII had declared himself head of the Church of England. Consequently, papal permission was no longer necessary in order to close religious houses. Instead, the decision lay with the King of England. Indeed, he gave his permission to close some three hundred houses.

In addition to these precedents, monasticism had lost its high ideals. Once viewed as the ultimate way to achieve piousness, the original strictness of the orders, or at least the Benedictine orders which were studied in detail here through the three priories, had diminished. Parish churches and colleges had become the new attractions. Further, the numbers of religious among houses began to dwindle. At Boxgrove the numbers rose from an initial three monks to nineteen before falling to eight by the time of its closures. It had eleven fewer monks than it was needed

to be maintained. Horsham was a similar case. Folkestone, on the other hand, was so small and poor that it actually surrendered before the 1536 Act. The examination of the three priories revealed that monasticism had declined, although the extent of decline may be questioned. And thus, it can be argued that closing these monasteries and transferring the inmates to religious houses that maintained the strictness of their orders and continued to function well was not a bad idea for Henry. Additionally, through the process of closures, it was made evident that several inmates did not even wish to remain in their orders.

The problems with religious houses stipulated in the terms of the 1536 Dissolution Act, such as corruption, were explicit with the closures of priories as shown through the study of Boxgrove, Folkestone, and Horsham, with repeated injunctions and imposed reforms. Boxgrove, for example, had injunctions imposed on it numerous times, all of which pointed to similar problems. Attempts were also made to reform the Benedictine order as a whole. Over the years, its original zeal and strictness had been relaxed. Henry V tried to reassert the original strictness of the order, but his attempts amounted to little. Wolsey, too, attempted to address the laxity of the religious orders, but his attempts similarly failed. He mainly addressed the issue of supervision and visitation. However, as past events had shown, visitations followed by injunctions on houses in need of reform had a tendency to fail. The idea of closing smaller, non-functioning priories and transferring inmates to larger well-maintained ones was a better means of reform. Thus, Henry's closures were directly in-line with previous directives for closures. The key difference, however, was that the first dissolutions were immediately followed by a general closure of all monasteries.

The 1536 Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries should not be viewed as a first step to the closures of all monasteries in England. Instead, the hindsight should be put aside and the first set

of closures should be viewed as distinct from the Dissolutions as a whole. Whether for financial purposes or not, these closures followed previous examples. Henry VIII's actions continued a procedure of closures that were successfully utilized in the past, and the closures were relatively small compared to the destruction that would follow in the coming years.

Glossary

A

Abbey A monastic community, governed by an abbot or abbess. An abbey was distinct from a priory by its larger size, its greater autonomy, or both.

Augmentations, Court of This was a government department created in 1536 to administer the new Crown revenues from the dissolved monasteries. In 1547 it was amalgamated with the Court of General Surveyors and both were absorbed by the Exchequer in 1554.

B

Bishop The chief priest of a district (or diocese). Exercising authority over all the priests therein and sometimes monasteries too, the bishop is responsible for pastoral care and moral correction.

C

Calvinism The theology of John Calvin (1509-64), French reformer and theologian, who shaped the reformation in Geneva. He accepted various tenets of Lutheranism but added the doctrines of predestination, the certainty of salvation and the impossibility of losing grace.

Canon The word has several meanings: a. Church ordinance, law or decree; b. a cleric who works in the world but follows a quasi-monastic life, usually in association with a cathedral; or c. when used as an adjective, an equivalent of “authoritative” as in the seven “canonical hours” or holy services that punctuated each monastic day.

Canon Law The law of the church, as pertaining to faith, morals and discipline.

Cardinal Created in the eleventh century, the position of cardinal entitled its holder to participate in papal elections. It was an honour that could be attached to any clerical position, so that, for example, the man who became Pope Innocent III (r. 1198-1216) spent part of his early career as a cardinal deacon.

Celibacy (of clergy) Vow of perfect chastity required of all admitted to major orders in the Catholic church from the eleventh century onwards. Abolished in the Church of England during the reign of Henry VIII, revived by Mary I, and was known to be favoured by Elizabeth.

D

Dissolution Term commonly used to describe the dissolution of the monasteries by the acts of 1536 and 1539.

E

Ecclesiastical Related to the Church as an institutional body.

Ex-religious Those clergy who withdrew from the rule and the religious house. The problem of discovering what happened to the large numbers of ex-religious in England after the dissolution of the monasteries has long exercised historians.

F

Farm A fixed payment, typically on a leased land.

First Fruits and Tithes Beneficed clergy were obliged to pay (to the Crown after the Reformation) the first year’s revenue from their benefice as specified in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* or King’s Books and, thereafter, a tenth of this income annually.

I

Iconoclasm Destruction of images and other church furnishings and decorations considered to detract from Protestant teaching that salvation is not assisted by works or the intercession of the saints and that God alone must be worshipped.

Injunctions Royal: a series of royal proclamations on ecclesiastical affairs (1536, 1538, 1547, 1554, 1559). Episcopal or Visitation: a bishop issued a number of injunctions indicating what should be done in his diocese.

L

Legate, Papal (Legatus a Latere) A papal official whose commands could only be rejected via successful appeal to the Pope himself. In other words, an ambassador for the Pope. Cardinal Wolsey was unusual in receiving the office for life.

M

Monastery The residence of a religious community, especially of monks living in seclusion.

Monastic Orders A group of monastic houses linked by either a. a common monastic rule or b. formal structures of administration and governance (the first of these was the Cluniac order, in which

cluny is the main abbey and all other houses were priories under Cluny's governance).

Monastic Rules Guides for monastic living. The most important, often known as simply The Rule was written by St. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-c.550). Because monks and nuns follow such guidelines, they are known as regular clergy.

Monastic Schools Early monasteries often included schools, but monastic schools became especially important after Charlemagne's capitulary of 789 ordered every monastery to provide some educational training. Many monastic schools trained external students as well as monks and nuns. Monastic schools were slowly superseded, for men, by cathedral schools and universities, but they remained important in female education throughout the Middle Ages.

P

Papacy The office of the pope.

Papal Bull In a general sense, a "bull" is a document ratified by a seal (that is, a wax impression). A papal bull is an authoritative document bearing a papal seal.

Pope The bishop of Rome, considered by Catholic Christians to be the successor to St. Peter and the true head of all Christians. The fifteenth century saw General Councils (backed by the universities) laying contradictory claims. In the sixteenth century the Papacy achieved the upper hand once again, was particularly sensitive to suggestions of the revival of conciliarism and to claims by secular threats to its authority. The Henrician Reformation can be placed fruitfully within this general context. Papal infallibility was a nineteenth-century invention.

Priory A monastic community, governed by a prior or prioress. Sometimes priories were under the authority of a superior abbey, but often they were just relatively small communities.

R

Religious (regular clergy) A term used to mean those clergy who lived under a rule (for example, that of St. Augustine or St Benedict) in a religious house (monastery, convent etc.)

S

Secular Having to do with the world, as opposed to spiritual and religious matters. Served pastoral needs of the laity.

Secular Clergy All clergy who did not belong to the rule of a religious order.

Shrines Originally a chest in which a relic was kept (reliquary). It was commonly used to mean a sacred image, especially one to which pilgrimages were made. The most important English shrines were those of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury; Our Lady at Walsingham; St. Edward the Confessor at Westminster Abbey and St. Cuthbert at Durham. The Reformation rejected pilgrimages and shrines as meaningless in terms of salvation.

T

Tithe A tenth part of the produce of land; of the fruits of labour and those arising partly out of the ground and partly from work offered to the clerical incumbent of a parish benefice.

V

Valor Ecclesiasticus Official and comprehensive valuation of ecclesiastical and monastic revenues made in 1535. Popularly known as the King's Books. This valuation followed on the 1534 Act of Annates (26 Henry VIII, c.3) whereby the Crown appropriated the first fruits of every benefice (living) and a tenth of the annual income of every benefice.

Vicegerent (in spirituals) Office of deputy in religious matters created by Henry VIII and bestowed upon Thomas Cromwell in 1535. Involved a delegation of the King's prerogative as head of the church and Cromwell may have held courts similar to those held by Wolsey as Papal Legate (q.v). The vicegerency disappeared after Cromwell's fall and temporary ecclesiastical commissions exercised delegated powers.

Visitation From the late fifteenth century the college of heralds undertook visitations throughout the realm checking the claims to arms of county families and establishing the descent of these claims.

*These terms are taken from Rosemary O'Day, *The Longman Companion to the Tudor Age* (London and New York: Longman, 1995); and Judith M. Bennett and C. Warren Hollister, *Medieval Europe: A Short History* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006).

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