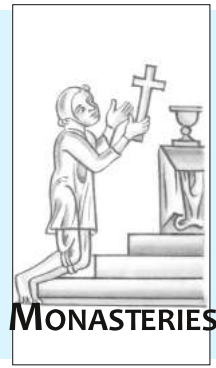




# Merton Priory

## TEACHER'S INFORMATION PACK No.1



In mediaeval Europe, people followed the Christian Catholic faith. They believed in one God, whose son Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, and who ruled over everything. God was good, as well as all-powerful, and liked you to be good, too. You could do good deeds, or think good thoughts. You could ask God for aid, and pay your respects to him. To help you to do this, people built churches and gathered there every Sunday to pray together.

If you lived a good life, you would go to Heaven, and live happily ever after. If you were bad, you would go to Hell and burn for eternity. If you were good and bad, like most of us, then you would spend some years in a state called Purgatory, where your bad bits would be purified: this could be speeded up by living people praying for you. Here is a picture which sums this all up. It is a doom painting (the Day of Judgement) in La Brigue, France.



[https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapelle\\_Notre-Dame-des-Fontaines\\_de\\_la\\_Brigue](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapelle_Notre-Dame-des-Fontaines_de_la_Brigue).

Not everyone could spend all of their time praying to God. Mediaeval society was divided into three sorts of people: those who worked (from peasants through craftsmen to rich merchants), those who fought (knights, lords, kings), and those who prayed. Those who prayed could be parish priests and other clergy, but they could also be monks.

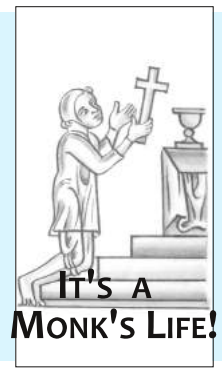
Some people wanted to lead a life of contemplation away from the world. Some became hermits, living alone, but many formed themselves into communities called conventual communities. These were the monks, nuns and canons. There were lots of types, or orders, of monks and nuns (a bit like different schools - basically the same, but with individual differences). The **Augustinian canons**, or canons regular (regular = following a rule), appeared in England in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. They were a cross between monks and priests, which meant they could celebrate Mass. (Historians still debate exactly what was different about the Augustinians from some other orders, as it is not always clear.) Some canons were very active in the wider community, some were parish priests; others collected alms for the poor; some practised medicine; some were teachers - Merton Priory had its own school. The canons of Merton would also go out on royal business, as ambassadors.

Merton strictly speaking wasn't a monastery (the canons were not monks); it's more correct to call it a convent, despite our one-sided idea of what a convent is (monastery will do, though). The head of a monastery, or convent, was either an abbot (/abbess) or a prior (/prioress). Merton, being a priory, had a prior. Abbeys and priories are virtually the same - a priory was usually a daughter house (a branch) of an abbey, but not always. Merton was a foundation on its own, without a mother house. Monasteries increased throughout the Middle Ages as the idea of Purgatory developed: more lay people (non-churchmen) wanted churchmen to pray for their souls. Augustinians were popular in England, with over 200 Augustinian foundations throughout the country.



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The two big names in monasticism were St Benedict (480-547) and St Augustine (354-430). Both set out similar ideas of how to live, ordering the day around the Divine Office (see below). The Augustinian order was in some ways less strict than the Benedictine, but both rules required chastity, fasting, abstinence and humility. That notwithstanding, Augustinians tended to come from wealthy backgrounds, and many had servants.



Canons wore a black cassock with a surplice over it, and an almuze on top. They would wear a cloak if they were outside, and special clothes (vestments) if they were celebrating Mass. They were to have no private property, and only had two meals a day, consisting largely of vegetables, bread, fish and eggs (and sometimes some meat). Their drink allowance was 1 1/2 gallons (nearly 7 litres) of beer a day.

The canons would attend a cycle of 7 services a day - the Divine Office. This began sometime around midnight with Matins and then Lauds. At daybreak (or 6a.m. in winter), there was Prime, and then a morrow (morning) mass. The canons would then meet in chapter, and then go straight to Terce (about 9a.m.). After this was the high mass, and then, at midday, Sext. Now, finally, the canons could eat!

After dinner was either work or, in summer, a snooze. At 3p.m. was None, followed by a drink and some work. At about 5p.m. was Vespers, and then supper (unless it was a fast day - in which case, you just got your midday dinner). The canons went into the chapter house again to hear the Collation, and then they went - via the frater for a gulp of beer - to Compline. The canons were all tucked up in bed by about 9p.m.

A good web page on a (Benedictine) monk's day is: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/timelines/zt99v4j>

When they were not attending the Divine Office, the canons were expected to pray, read and carry out various works. These included teaching, charity, copying and illuminating manuscripts, making garments, carving, collecting alms for the poor, and looking after the sick. As said before, the canons of Merton might also have done a bit of royal business, not least looking after significant guests and hosting important meetings. Some canons were sent as ambassadors on business abroad.



All canons attended chapter. This was the meeting of the canons, called 'chapter' because a chapter of the Bible was always read out; this was followed by any convent business, from finance to telling off canons who had misbehaved.

Every so often, canons would let blood, to rebalance their humours. This they did in the infirmary, and were allowed a little recovery time and an augmented diet. Canons who were ill were also given extra rations.



Merton Priory had a population of around two dozen canons, sometimes more, sometimes fewer. This was augmented by servants, and by novices (student canons). It had its own fishponds, and owned various manors, mills and granges (farms with big storage barns). At its dissolution in 1538, Merton Priory was the second-richest Augustinian priory in England.

On the following page is a day in the life of one of Merton's canons. A black and white version is available for colouring in!

