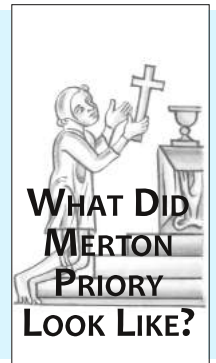




Merton Priory

TEACHER'S INFORMATION PACK No.3



This topic explores what Merton Priory might have looked like, and why it was the size and layout that it was. To help us reconstruct it, we will explore what priories were and their functions; the aesthetics behind religious buildings; the political, as well as spiritual, side of the Priory; and archaeological finds. The topic covers several KS2 and KS3 subjects:

- **History:** local history study of an aspect of history or a site significant in the locality; Britain's changing landscape; understanding methods of historical enquiry and using evidence.
- **Geography:** types of settlement and land use, economic activity including trade links, and the distribution of natural resources including energy, food, minerals and water
- **DT:** strengthening, stiffening and reinforcing complex structures; understand and use mechanical systems, e.g. gears, pulleys, cams, levers and linkages
- **Science:** forces: gravity, friction, opposing forces and equilibrium; mechanisms: levers, pulleys, wheels.

How can we find out what Merton Priory looked like?

Archaeology: digging up remains tells us all sorts of things. The Museum of London excavated Merton Priory extensively and found evidence of various buildings and building stages, food remains, broaches, buckles, skeletons and so on.

Comparing other buildings: although every monastery in England was destroyed between 1538 and 1540, some remain more intact than others - e.g. Fountains, Bury St Edmunds, or Castle Acre. Many were attached to cathedrals and large parish churches, and some became cathedrals. These churches survive, although the monastic buildings, apart from the cloisters, do not. See Bristol, Canterbury, Norwich, Shrewsbury. There are also monasteries in France which still exist.

Function: we know what sort of things happened in monasteries - prayer, looking after the sick, etc - so we can assume the existence of certain buildings, e.g. a church and an infirmary.

Documents: there is lots of documentary evidence about Merton Priory, from charters about it to mentions in wills or royal business. Some state what buildings there were; from others, we just have to guess.

One thing we know about Merton Priory is that it was big. But what does big mean?

We could be talking about the *physical building*. That was pretty big. The church was the same length as Westminster Abbey (100m). That's long! The Priory had extensive buildings in its precinct.

We could also be talking about the *wealth* of the Priory. It had lots of manors and other income, and was one of the richest priories in the realm.

We could be talking about *political importance*, and there were many significant events that Merton Priory and its canons were involved with (see **Teacher's Pack no.2**).

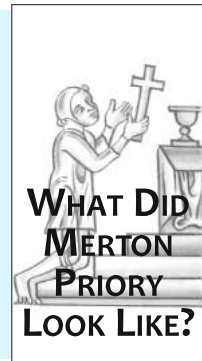
Of course, its wealth and importance contributed to the size and grandeur of its buildings. Not only were priories and churches built for the glory of God - and therefore had to be glorious! - but they were also status symbols. It was not just a matter of showing off - in mediaeval England, you had to live up to your wealth and social status. If you were a lord, you were expected to live like a lord - to have servants, horses, a fine house or three, to entertain, etc. You could be stripped of your title if you did not! In order to live up to their obligations of hospitality, the canons of Merton had to provide comfortable, fashionable buildings with all the mod cons. It had to be fit for a king - because the king had a habit of staying there.





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The Population of Merton Priory

The number of canons at Merton varied from 15 to 40, but seems usually to have been between 20 and 30.

The **prior** is in charge of the Priory - its spiritual side, its buildings, its finances. He is elected by the canons, and they meet every day to discuss business in the Chapter House. He is often given royal business to do, and sometimes summoned to attend councils or Parliaments.

The **sub-prior** is the prior's deputy, and in charge when the prior is away. He is also responsible for maintaining the priory church and the buildings.

The **cellarer** is responsible for all the material things in the Priory. This includes procuring food and drink, clothing, repairs, pigments for making inks and paints. He'll be in charge of the valuables that people like the king leave at Merton for safe-keeping. He is also the chief accountant. Not surprisingly, the position of cellarer is a stepping-stone to becoming prior.

The **precentor** helps services run smoothly, so he's got fingers in several pies. He is the music master, in charge of the singing school and of training the canons to sing; he makes sure that all the liturgical texts and music are prepared for services, and that everyone knows what to do. He's helped by the **cantor**, who leads the canons' singing in services (they sing a lot) and the **deacon** and **sub-deacon**, who lead parts of the services.

The **infirmarian** is in charge of the Infirmary and all those canons (and guests) who are ill or very old.

The **novice master** is in charge of novices, young or old, and for their education; the Priory's school-master.

The **librarian** is in charge of the library, keeping manuscripts in good condition (he hates damp!) and acquiring new ones; he works closely with the canons in the Scriptorium.

The **hosteller** looks after the guests - and since Merton's reputation for hospitality is high, it's an important job.

The **kitchener** is in charge of the canons' food. The refectorian prepares and clears the Refectory, where the canons take their meals (in silence, listening to a reading). They don't like rats or cockroaches.

The **sacristan** keeps the priory Church in good order - the silver polished and the vestments looking smart. He is also the canon given guests' valuables to look after.

The **almoner** looks after the poor. He has an almonry, where they can visit (he'll even wash their feet), and he is in charge of the alms collected for aiding the poor.

The **chamberlain** makes sure that the canons have clean bedding and habits; hot water for washing and shaving, and so on. The canons have quite a few servants between them, so he gets a bit of help.

The **circator** has to keep the canons in order, and present them at Chapter when they step out of line.

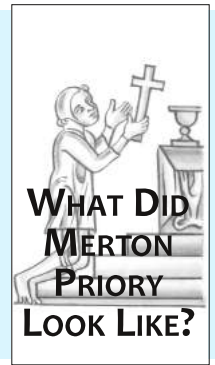
To become a canon, you serve as a **postulant** for 6 months, a **novice** for a year and then you can take your vows.

Guests can stay for a night or for years. Laymen can become **corrodians**, long-term guests, paying a *corrody* (a nice fat fee) to have their own hotel room and a daily ration of bread and ale. The king imposes a *corrodian* on a prior's appointment - a good way of rewarding his retired servants - which is a bit of a nuisance, because it costs the Priory.



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The Buildings.

The Church was 360 feet (110 metres) long. It was cruciform, with a nave and presbytery being intersected by north and south transepts. The high altar was in the presbytery; there were other altars in smaller chapels in the transepts. Important people were buried in the church. The church would have been very colourful, with lots of wall paintings, paintings and icons, tiles and stained glass.

The Chapter House was also colourfully decorated, with stained glass and a mosaic floor. Priors and some of the more important canons were buried there. The Chapter House was used for daily meetings and Collations, and for visitors' meetings and weighty business. Originally square, it was given an apse in the 14th century.

The Cloister: the cloister was a set of corridors between various monastic buildings. It was square, with four sides, bordering the church, Chapter House, and east, west and south ranges. In the middle of the cloister was the **cloister garth** or yard - probably a herb and vegetable garden. The **dormitory (dorter)** was in the east range, and the **frater** or **refectory** (dining hall) in the south range. The cloister contained several **carrels**, individual studies in which reading and writing could be done. Off the cloister, there was also probably a separate **scriptorium**, a proper book-production room, and possibly a school room and a library.

The Infirmary complex: this was the hospital. It had a hall to house the sick, a chapel to heal their souls, a kitchen, latrine block, blood-letting room, bath-house and gardens. The hall was heated by a big hearth in the middle of the room. The hall began to be partitioned off in the 14th century as privacy became fashionable. The novices' dormitory might have been here. The infirmary had a cloister - bigger than the monks' - with its own garden, for growing medicinal herbs and for helping patients to recover.

The Reredorter was the loo block. The latrines were on the upper floor, above an undercroft. The stream below took all the waste via the fishponds into The Pickle.

The Mill and Fishponds: The canons diverted a stream off the Wandle so that water could power their mill and so that they could have ponds for the fish they ate.

The Kitchen and Brewhouse: it is unclear where these were, but they were both vital parts of a monastery!

Storage barns and buildings: one of these was between the infirmary and the river; there would have been many more for grain (the granary), other goods, and, of course, animals - including the prior's stables.

Corrodians

In 1239, William and Theophila de Southwark gave their Southwark property to the Priory in exchange for a cottage at the Priory and a daily ration of bread and ale and other food, and of brushwood. Various other people paid lump sums to the Priory to retire to its precincts - the Priory would supply food and drink and fuel; with its huge infirmary it supplied health-care, and with its huge church, soul-care. What the Priory supplied them was called a *corrody*, and they were corrodians.

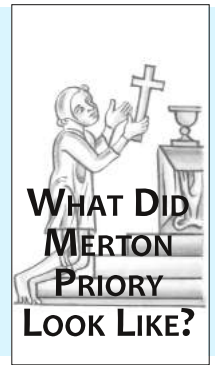
Some corrodians didn't pay. They were forced on the Priory by the king, and were his retired servants - in effect, they were a royal tax, and they were certainly a drain on the Priory's resources. Perhaps because of the king's impositions, corrodies were barely profitable by the late 14th century, and the Bishop of Winchester forbade Merton granting them without his licence (this didn't stop the king, however).

So, part of our site, then, was a retirement village, with small dwellings and gardens.



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Grave matters

To the north and south of the Church transepts were the Priory graveyards. The more important inhabitants of the Priory were buried in either the Church or the Chapter House. Some of the skeletons excavated show signs of an arthritic condition caused by eating too much animal fat! Other skeletons have well-healed fractures, which suggest that the infirmarians were rather good at setting bones and avoiding infection.



Photographs of the bones excavated can be seen at

<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections/other-collection-databases-and-libraries/centre-human-bioarchaeology/osteological-database/medieval-cemeteries/merton-priory-photographs>

and

<http://www.hobleysheroes.co.uk/1987-88-merton-priory-dgla>

Sickness and Health

The Infirmary was large. It might have housed the novices as well as infirm canons - and some lay corrodians. It had its own chapel, and probably had a blood-letting room, baths and a room for laying out corpses. Since the infirm were allowed a more meaty diet, it's no surprise to find evidence of meat-eating, and the infirmary kitchen drains turned up remains of goose, hare, rabbit, chicken, cattle, sheep, pig, eel, plaice, and even a swan...

The drains also turned up lots of black mustard seeds. Mustard was used to cure coughs, swellings, and arthritic conditions. (Being hot and dry, it was held, by humoral theory, to be good for cold and wet ailments.) One man was buried wearing his hernia belt. A lovely pair of bone spectacles was also dug up. Urine flasks were also unearthed. Uroscopy was one of the primary diagnostic techniques of the period.



Food and Drink

The Priory had to feed itself. It owned manors with fields for grains and animals, but food was grown within the priory walls, too. There would have been vegetable plots, an orchard, a herb garden for cooking and medicine, and fishponds. The Priory also had its own brewhouse: ale was the main drink, although it was (usually) much less strong than it is now. There was a watermill and grain store, too. Horses (and mules and donkeys) were the main form of transport, and the Priory would also have had stables and paddocks.

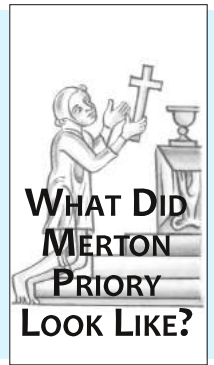


Watermill from the Luttrell Psalter (14th century). Note the eel nets, too. ©British Library.



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Building phases

12th century: At first, all buildings were wooden. A stone church was started in 1125, and took about fifteen years to build, although the church kept being altered throughout the century. Work started on the **cloisters**, but the rest of the monastery was still wooden. See also Waltham Abbey, Lilleshall Priory, Buildwas Abbey. This style is **Norman** (or *Romanesque*), going into **Transitional**.

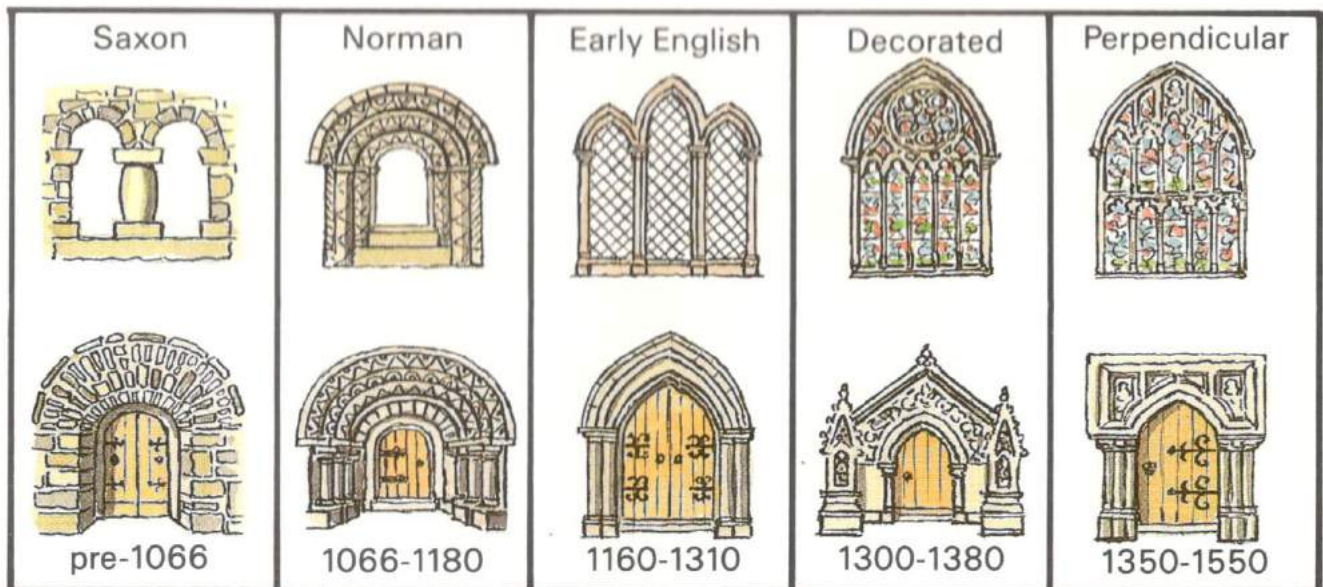
13th century: The **church** was extensively rebuilt (it had to be - in 1222 the tower blew down), and the stone **cloisters**, **chapter house** and **infirmary** were built. Henry III 's quarters were also built. See Salisbury Cathedral. This is the period of **Early English**.

14th century: The church was expanded at the east end, and a **Lady chapel** added. The **chapter house** was enlarged; the cloister, infirmary cloister and kitchen, and reredorter were rebuilt; the infirmary hall was partitioned in line with new fashions for privacy. See Bristol Cathedral. The architectural style is now **Decorated**.

15th century: Repairs were done to bits of the church, including buttressing; the infirmary was further divided. This is the **Perpendicular** period.

16th century: the demolition of Merton was done carefully and over a couple of years. Its stones went to build Nonsuch Palace.

For further visual information on Merton, see our video, **Merton Priory: History Unearthed**, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAOUxRFqU4c>.



Resources:

For resources and lesson ideas, see Teacher's Pack no.1: What did Merton Priory Look Like?
For buildings materials, see Teacher's Pack no.3: Stone