

What distinguished abbeys from priories in medieval England?

The simple answer to this question is that an abbey was an enclosed religious house of monks (or nuns, or canons who followed a monastic rule) which, in Benedictine tradition, should have at least 12 religious, headed by an abbot or abbess. A priory was in some sense a lesser religious house headed by a prior or prioress (i.e. a rank below abbot or abbess). In practice the position was rather more complicated, mainly because of variations in practice among the various monastic orders (and because monastic houses with the status of abbeys may have retained their title if their number of religious fell, which occurred in some English monasteries in the later Middle Ages). Priors were also deputies to abbots in the larger abbeys.

Among Benedictine houses, abbeys were autonomous monasteries, and the majority of priories were dependent on an abbey, which restricted their status irrespective of size, while a few priories, such as Dover, appear always to have been independent. Among the many priories in the former group, Great Malvern priory was dependent on Westminster Abbey and Leominster priory was dependent on Reading Abbey. After the Norman Conquest, there were many English priories dependent on mother houses in France, known as alien priories. Dependent Benedictine priories in France were often very small, perhaps with only 2-3 monks. Such dependencies of French abbeys in England are often difficult to identify. Hence, for example, the question arises over whether the dependency of Bec Abbey at Tooting constituted a priory or was just a manor belonging to the abbey, with its own chapel (as discussed by Graham Gower in London Archaeologist summer 2012). Some alien priories were dissolved in the later Middle Ages, such as Ogbourne St George in Wiltshire, Bec Abbey's principal dependency in England. Some became independent priories, such as Boxgrove priory in Sussex, originally dependent on Lessay. A few became dependent on other abbeys, such as Pembroke, originally dependent on Sées, later on St Albans. The last alien priories were outlawed in 1414.

A special case among the Benedictines was that of cathedral priories, i.e. those cathedrals served by monks (and not secular canons as was the standard throughout Europe). These were Bath, Canterbury, Coventry, Durham, Ely, Norwich, Rochester, Winchester, and Worcester. To these can be added Carlisle, which was served by Augustinian canons regular. In all of these, the bishop (or archbishop) was the titular abbot, but the prior was effectively in charge of the monastery. Christ Church Cathedral Priory in Canterbury was among the richest monasteries in England, and had various estates in Surrey.

Among other orders, all Cistercian houses had the status of abbey, despite nearly all having a mother-daughter relationship with the house from which they were founded. By contrast, Cluniac monasteries were nearly all priories, indicating their dependence on the mother house at Cluny. This even included Lewes Priory, the first and largest Cluniac house in England, which became one of the richest monasteries in the country. It experienced problems at various dates as it was technically an alien priory, until it broke from this status in 1351, although it retained the title of priory. A partial exception to the Cluniac pattern was the royal foundation of Reading Abbey, which followed Cluniac practice but was always independent of Cluny. Bermondsey Priory, which ceased to be a dependency of Cluny in 1380, was raised to the status of abbey in 1400. The heads of the nine Carthusian monasteries in England (charterhouses) all had the title of prior, even though they all had considerably more than 12 monks.

The vast majority of the houses of Augustinian canons (priests who lived according to the rule of St Augustine) were priories, reflecting the comparatively small-scale origin of many of their houses. Only a few, such as Bristol, Cirencester, Leicester and Waltham, had the title of abbey. In Surrey, Merton remained a priory despite being the second richest house of the order by the Dissolution. Southwark Priory was also substantial, while Newark was moderately so, and Tandridge and Reigate were on a more modest scale. Nearly all the houses of the Premonstratensian canons, who were not present in Surrey, were by contrast abbeys.

The heads of houses of friars (Franciscan, Dominican, Carmelite, Austin) were generally termed priors, although their houses were known as friaries rather than priories (though the park where the surviving choir of the Franciscan friary in Chichester stands – the former castle, where the friars were given land in the bailey – is known as Priory Park).

Most nunneries were headed by a prioress, although a few, especially among the rich foundations of Wessex royalty, such as Romsey, Shaftesbury, and Wilton, were abbeys.

In summary, abbeys were in principle bigger than priories, but much depended on the practice of the various orders.

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