

# LIFE IN A MONASTERY



The word 'monk' means solitary (on one's own). Ever since the beginning of Christianity, there have been some men and women who have 'felt the call' to withdraw from the outside world and devote their lives to prayer and the worship of God. The earliest monks lived in caves or built themselves small stone houses called cells.

The first monks to visit Britain belonged to the Order of St Benedict. The **Benedictine Monks** wore black habits, and became known as 'Black Monks'. However, some monks felt that many Benedictine monasteries were not following the rules of St Benedict as strictly as they should be.

As a result a new group of monks called **Cistercians Monks** or 'White Monks' came to England and founded monasteries that were run on very strict rules.



The **Carthusian Monks** that followed later were even stricter. A monastery is sometimes called an 'abbey' or a 'priory'. Monasteries for women are also sometimes called 'nunneries' or 'convents'.

## VOWS

Any man who wanted to become a monk or any woman who wanted to become a nun, had to make four vows (promises) that they had to keep for the rest of their lives.

- Stability.** - They had to promise never to leave the monastic life.
- Obedience.** - To God, the Abbot and the rules of the Order and monastery.
- Chastity.** - Never to marry.
- Poverty.** - They were banned from possessing worldly goods.

## The Importance of Monasteries

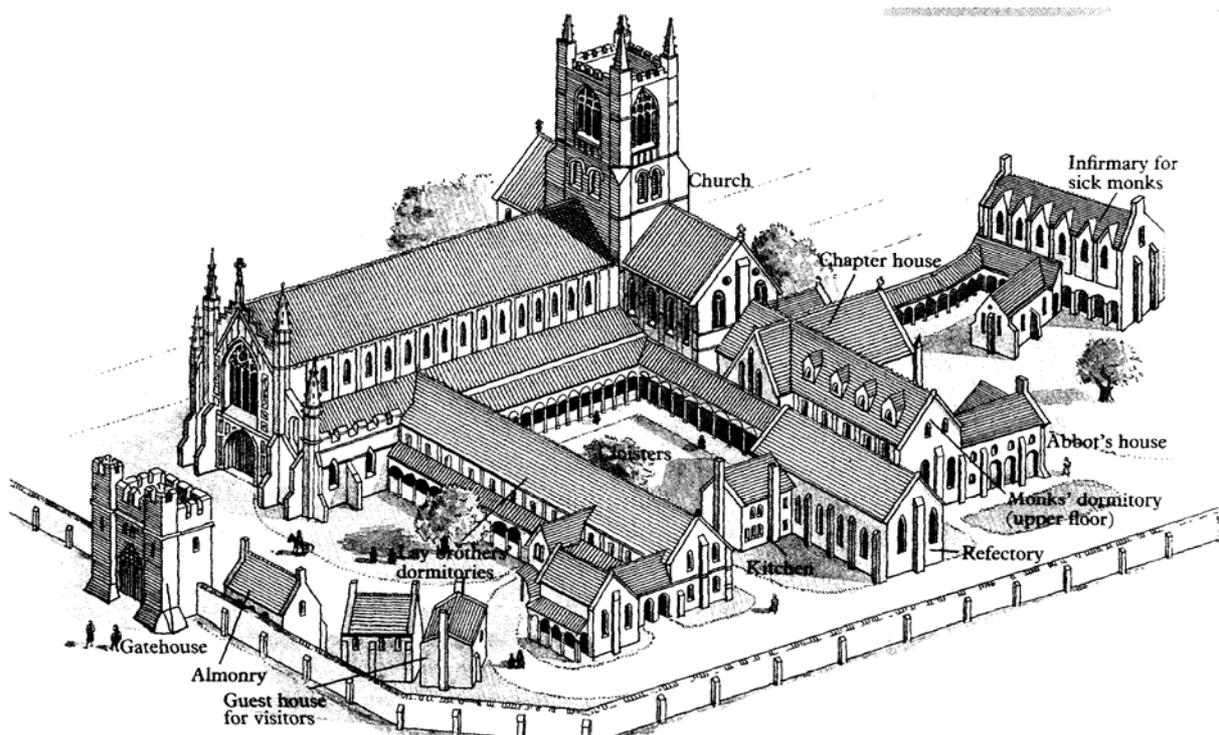
A monastery existed to serve God in a number of ways.

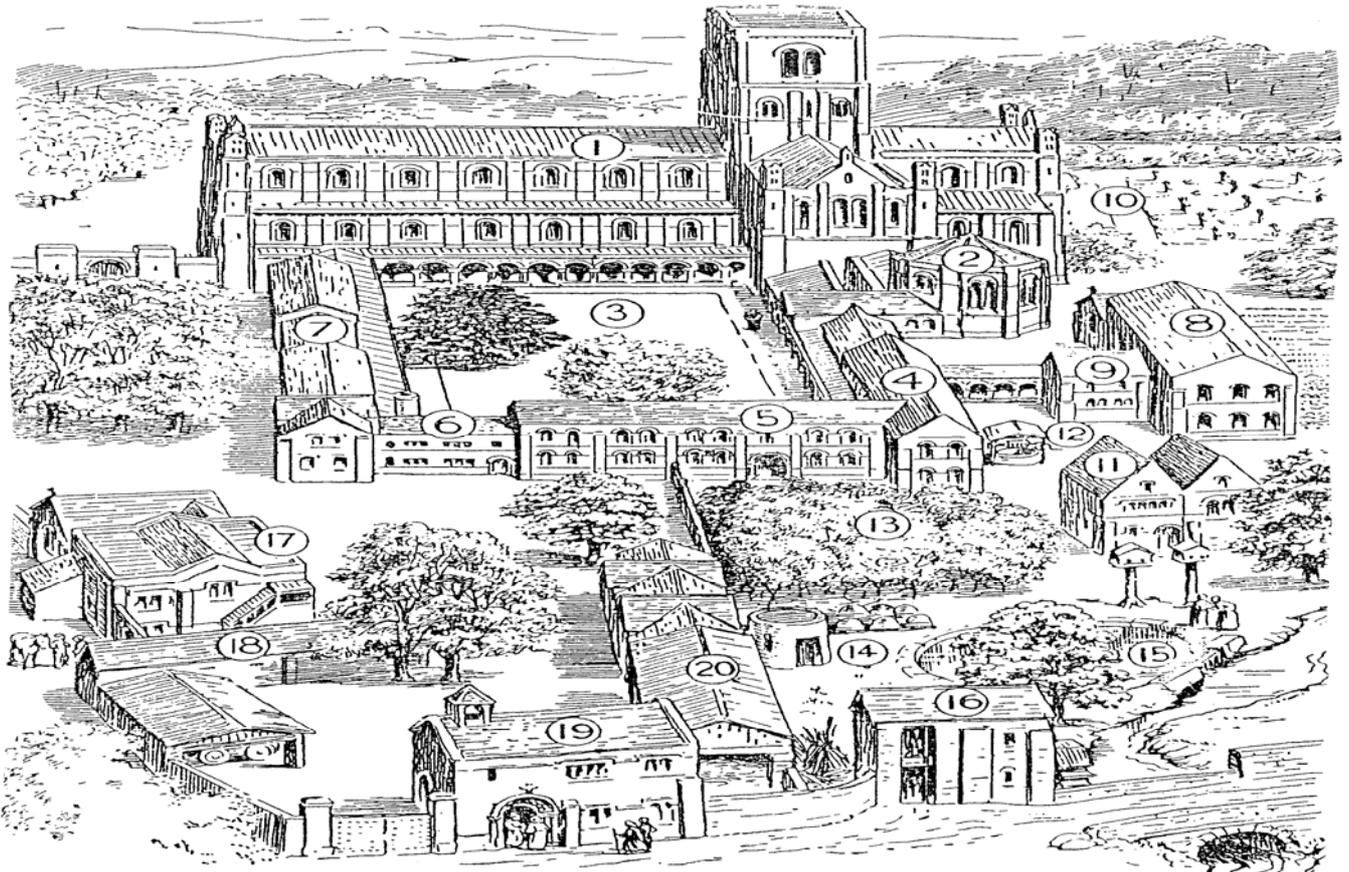
- To **worship and praise God**
- To **help** the poor, elderly and sick.
- To look after and help **travellers**
- To maintain learning and to educate people
- To feed and cloth the inhabitants of the monastery to ensure that they could carry out their duties.

- ⇒ The Medieval monastery played an important part in relieving the suffering, poverty and ignorance that was prevalent in those days of war and hardship.
- ⇒ The monks were experts on medicine and farming techniques.
- ⇒ They offered shelter and hospitality to the poor.
- ⇒ They were often the only hospital around.
- ⇒ The monastery offered a certain number of places for teaching pupils the elements of reading, writing, and Latin. This was virtually the only source of education in the Middle Ages. There was many a baron who could not read or write.
- ⇒ The monasteries set a rare example of hygiene and cleanliness. Rivers were tapped to provide a supply of fresh water.
- ⇒ Since the monks were some of the very few who could read and write, they have provided us with invaluable information in the form of books, pamphlets and pictures.
- ⇒ Monks also promised to look after elderly (rich) people in exchange for a gift of money or land. This was called a corrody. This was rather like a medieval insurance policy that was only of benefit to those who could afford it.

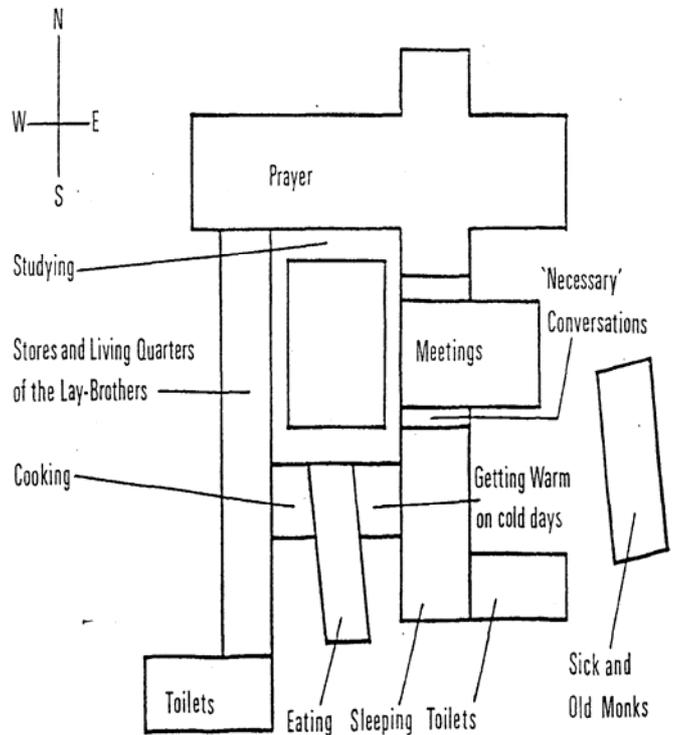
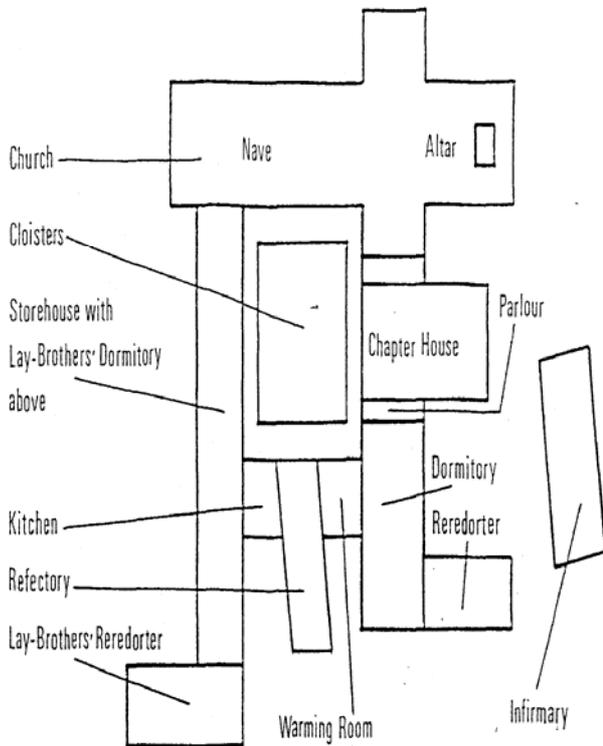
## The Layout of a Monastery

Most monasteries were built to a similar design, although some variations occurred owing to the slope of the land or the position of a river.



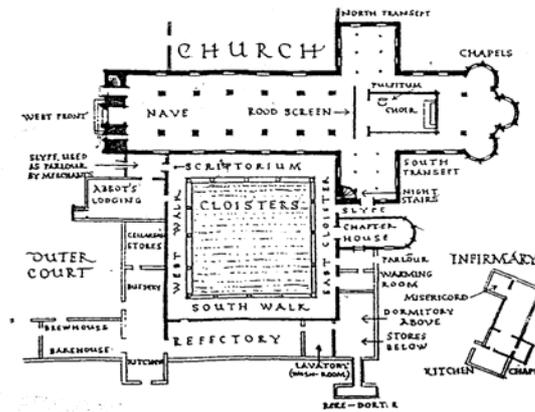
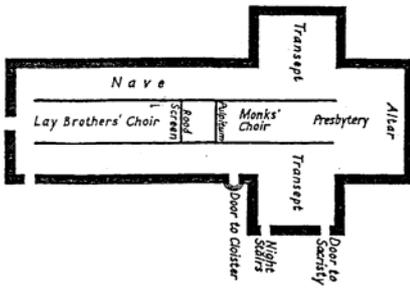


- |                  |               |                    |                |                 |
|------------------|---------------|--------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| 1 Church         | 5. Refectory  | 9. Misericorde     | 13 Orchard.    | 17 Guest House. |
| 2 Chapter House  | 6. Kitchen    | 10. Cemetery       | 14. Prison     | 18. Stables.    |
| 3 Cloister Garth | 7 Cellar      | 11. Abbot's House. | 15. Fish Pond. | 19. Almonry     |
| 4 Dormitory      | 8. Infirmary. | 12. Well           | 16. Mill.      | 20. Barn.       |



## CHURCH

The most important building was the **church**. It was always built in the shape of a cross.



The altar stood in the **presbytery** and the two arms of the cross were called **transepts**. The monks always sat in the **choir** on the eastern side. They sat facing each other in rows of seats

called **stalls**. Two screens called **pulpitum** and **rood-screen** divided the choir from the main part of the church, the **nave**, where visitors sat and the **Lay Brothers Choir** where lay-brothers sat.

## CLOISTERS

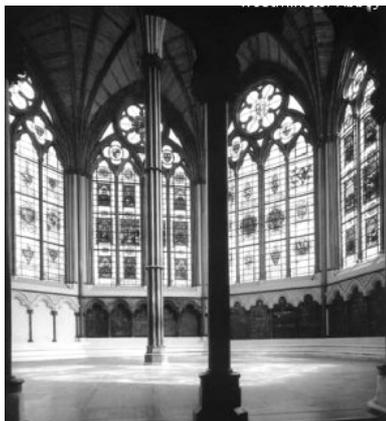


At the centre of all monasteries were the **Cloisters**. It was built on the sunny side of the church. The cloisters were built in the form of a square with an open space in the middle. This open space was covered with grass and planted with trees, and was known as the **Cloister Garth**. Each side of the square was called a walk. Round these covered walks, were grouped all the main buildings. In the cloisters the monks walked, meditated and worked, and they looked inwards, at the green lawn and not outwards at the world. Each monk had his own special seat in the cloister. In the **East Walk** the novices were given their



lessons, grouped around their teacher, sitting on stone benches. Before libraries were built, shelves were cut into the walls to store books on. The **West Walk** was the busiest area of the cloister as it led to both the **Chapter House** and the **Refectory**. Here the young monks and lay brothers sat. The **North Walk** was where older monks sat. The **South Walk** was kept as a passage. Wooden partitions placed against the walls provided seclusion. These areas were called **carrels**. Behind wooden desks at which the monks worked were large wooden book cupboards called **ambries**

## The Chapter House



Here the monks held their daily meetings. The abbot sat in his high seat and everyone else had his own seat in order, from the oldest down to the newest. First, the abbot would read the names of the special saints for the day, and they all said prayers for the faithful monks who had died in the monastery. Then a chapter from St Benedict's Rule was read and this is why it is called the Chapter House. Sometimes the abbot would preach a sermon. Then they turned to practical business. Each monk was told what he was doing that day. Any discipline matters were also dealt with now. All novices were asked to leave and then wrongdoers were punished. Often a monk who knew he had done his work badly, or talked when he shouldn't have, or fallen asleep during a service would confess his sins and be pardoned. Some wrongdoers, who did not own up, would be punished by living on bread and water for several days, eating meals alone, being sent down to the lowest place, or being whipped. Now and again a monk was imprisoned in a little stone cell, or in extreme cases expelled from the monastery. Whatever happened in the Chapter House, everyone had to keep silent about it after they had left the meeting. Previous Abbots were often buried under the Chapter House floor.

## Refectory. (Refectorium, Frater, Fraternity or Frater House)



The place one goes to be restored. This was the dining room where the monks took their one or two meals a day in silence. It was a long room with long, narrow tables and benches. The monks washed their hands in the lavatory and then they entered the refectory and bowed before the high table. They stood in silence at their place (the eldest near the high table and the youngest by the door). The Abbot or Prior would then enter and a bell was rung (at the beginning and end of every meal) as a signal for saying grace. Meals were served by lay brothers. A junior monk would read scriptures out aloud from the pulpit as the other monks ate. Meat was hardly ever eaten, but ample fish was supplied. The prior and senior monks sat at a high table called a **dais**. The abbot often ate in his own lodging.

## Lavatory

Monks were fastidious about their cleanliness. Before and after meals they washed their hands in the lavatory, which means washing place. This was a long room with a raised trough or perhaps marble sinks. Running water was supplied to the lavatory and monks dried their hands with towels. These towels were kept in cupboards nearby. The Monks had their baths in the **bathhouse**

## Rere Dorter or Necessarium

The Monk's toilet situated at the rear of the dormitory (dorter) in a convent or monastery. Normally there was running water and proper drainage.

## **Almonry**

Situated on the west side of the monastery. This was where the poor were given doles of food and clothing.

## **Parlour or Locutory**

This was a talking room where monks could meet relatives and callers. Visitors entered via a far door.

## **Warming Room (Calefactory)**

Where the monks could meet and talk on cold days.

## **Dorter (Dormitarium)**

This was the monks' dormitory, which was always situated as near to the church as possible, on the east side of the cloisters. The dorter was one long room often 200' long extending over the Chapter House, Parlour and Warming Room. It was divided into cubicles. Each monk has a pillow and a blanket, but no mattress, only a mat! The younger monks were placed between the older ones. Besides the beds there was little other furniture, no mirrors, chests, cupboards. The walls were bare, apart from a crucifix hanging at one end. There were night stairs that led to the south transept of the choir.

## **Scriptorium**

Before the invention of the printing press, books the main source of knowledge were hugely expensive, handwritten by monks in the scriptorium. The monks copied the Bible, into Latin, on to sheets of vellum, fine calf skin, with illuminated lettering to start each chapter.

## **The Hierarchy of a Monastery - Abbot or Abbess**



He was the head of the monastery and chosen by the other monks for his kindness, goodness and leadership qualities. They were often very powerful landowners and many were bishops. His word was law in a monastery but he was trusted not to give out commands that were impossible to carry out. The Abbot had power not only over the Abbey, but also over the town. He collected taxes from the townspeople and chose who was to be mayor. The Abbot was often allowed to mint coins and a mint would be set up in the abbey grounds. The Abbot was also responsible for looking after important visitors. Kings of England would stay at the Abbey, sometimes for weeks at a time. The Abbot also went to Parliament which was unusual. He often had his own lodgings, where he entertained guests and invited monks. Many abbots became very rich, ruled many manors and were friends of nobles and kings. In smaller monasteries, an abbot would live with his monks. He was like a father to all the monks.

## **Prior**

He was the second in command. Often in charge of larger monasteries as the abbot would often be away on business. Sometimes a monastery would become so large that a 'house' **Priory** would be set up away from the monastery and a prior would run it. As prior he was in charge of the day to day running of the monastery, locking the doors at night and was therefore the last to bed. He directed the monks' work, giving them the tools that they needed and checking that they were doing the work allocated to them. He was responsible for talking to monks who were slacking. A **sub-Prior** helped him in the abbot's absence.

## Sacristan or Sacrist



Looked after the church building, the holy vessels of the altar, the holy bread and wine, the valuable linen, robes and banners. All these were kept in the Sacristy. It was his duty to ensure that the church was clean and that fresh supplies of hay or rushes were placed on the church floor. He was also responsible for the lighting in the church, buying wax for the best candles and tallow for the ordinary, everyday candles. He also had to buy oil for the cressets, which were little, stone saucers in which a wick floated in the oil.

## Sub Sacristan

He was responsible for the ringing of the bell throughout the hours of night and day which called the monks to services. In winter, he was expected to supply hot coals in iron dishes to warm the hands of those serving at the altar.

## Infirmarian

He was responsible for looking after and caring for the sick. He worked in the infirmary. The infirmarian became skilled in medicine, first-aid and simple operations and many people from outside the monastery would have sought his advice on medical matters. The infirmary had its own chapel, bathhouse, refectory, kitchen, and a herb garden (herbarium) would have provided plants for medicines and ointments.



## Precentor or Cantor



He trained novices to sing and chant in the right way. He chose the music for the services and had a special seat in the church from where he led the singing. When the monks went around the monastery singing in procession, the precentor would walk up and down the line to keep the singing together. He also used to hear beforehand the monks who had to read aloud in church or at dinner, to make sure they could read without stumbling. He looked after the books, arranging

them on shelves, in their correct places, making sure that they did not get damp or eaten by mice. He was responsible for making sure that damaged books were repaired. He also used to mix the ink (oak galls and Gum Arabic) and get the parchment ready. Parchment was the skin of sheep or calves, scraped and rubbed until all the hair was off and it was quite smooth and shiny.

## Almoner



The almoner was responsible for looking after the poor. He gave away food, clothing, scraps from the kitchens and worn garments. The poor queued up daily to receive their 'dole' or gift. The food the poor receive would be porridge, bread and beer or pottage, a soup made of beans and peas. The almoner was also responsible for looking after pilgrims, lepers and beggars.

## Hospitaller or Guest master

Looks after pilgrims and travellers since there are very few inns around. They were provided with a meal and a room in the guesthouse, for which they only expected to pay for if they could afford it. He was also responsible for making sure that the roads to the monastery were kept in good repair. He also posts monks to act as guide directing people to the monastery.

## Cellarer / Caterer / Larderer



Looked after the cellars and storerooms, where food, ale and wines were kept. He was responsible for the ordering and transporting of all food and drink, and often clothes, wood, ploughs and carts. Some items had to be fetched from the markets. A great deal of the food was grown in their own fields, but the cellarer had to make sure there was enough corn, flour, beans and other essentials in the bins, and when they were empty to bring in more from the barns or more distant granges. This was a difficult job to do, particularly if it

was a large monastery with up to 150 mouths to feed. In a large monastery a sub-cellarer would assist. At dinner he stood by the kitchen to see that enough food was handed through and that it was good. He never left the monastery without the abbot's permission, and when out would stop and say the proper services at the right time by himself. He carried a key to the stores that were locked at all times.

## Kitchener

He collected food from the cellarer and saw to the cooking. Other workers did most of the cooking, unless a very important guest was attending, and in such circumstances the kitchener would cook. The abbot often had his own cook and there was also a fish cook, and the infirmary cook. The kitcheners had to ensure that the plates were clean and not cracked. The kitchener also had carriers working for him and they brought in food for the cooks, wood for the fires, and took away refuse and ashes. A young boy called a turnbroach, turned the spits in the kitchen. Pudding Wives made the pastry for the cooks.



## Salter

He worked in the kitchens salting the meats for winter storage and made some of the sauces to go with different dishes. He was also known as the mustardarius as he was responsible for making mustards which went with salted meats.

## Refectorian



In charge of the dining-room and made arrangements for serving meals, table linen, cutlery and crockery. He had to make sure that the floor was covered with rushes, that there were flowers or sweet smelling plants or herbs on the tables, and that each monk had his cup and spoon and a loaf of bread, wrapped in a clean napkin. He also had to make sure that the salt was dry and that there was hot water and clean towels in the lavatory for monks to wash their hands before dinner.

## Pittancer

Responsible for organising pittances.

## Chamberlain



He provided clothes, boots, shoes, fur caps, linen and bedding to the monks. He had to supply hot water for feet-washing on Saturdays, head shaving every three weeks and bathing four or five times a year. Laundresses helped him with the washing of clothes and linen.

## Librarian

He was in charge of books and manuscripts in the library.

## Master of the Novices

He organised the education of young men and boys who were studying to become monks.



## Novices

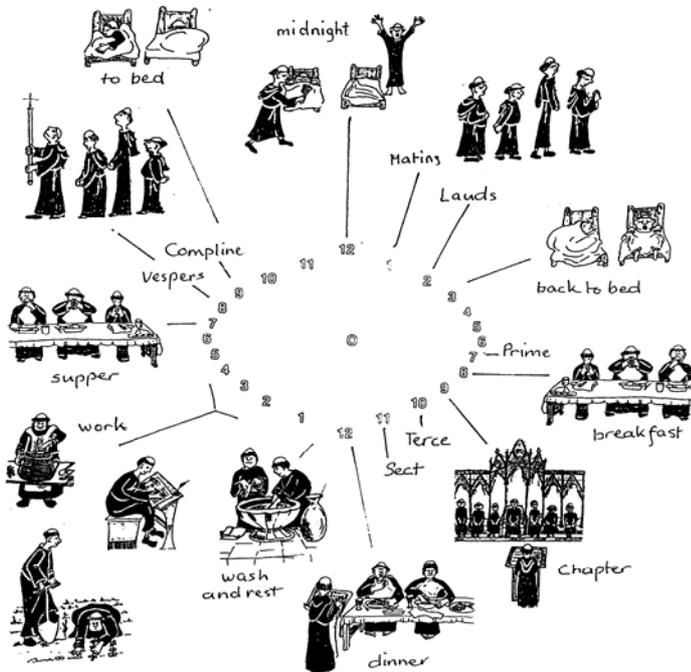
St Benedict's Rule says that if a man knocks at the gate of a monastery asking to become a monk, then they must keep him four or five days to see if he is patient and really genuine. After that he can become a novice. At first, he had the top of his head shaved, a universal sign called a **tonsure**. The remaining band of hair was meant to represent the crown of thorns placed on Christ's head at his crucifixion. He was then given a **habit**, a long robe with wide sleeves and a hood. The colour varied depending on his religious order. After two months, the novice will be asked whether he can obey the rules of the monastery. If he wishes to leave he can do so at this point. After a year, (if suitable) a novice took his vows of chastity, poverty and obedience to God, the abbots and the rules of the monastery. He then received a **cowl**, a large hood and became one of the brothers of the convent. Convent originally meant a religious community of monks or nuns.

## Lay-Brothers

In many monasteries, non-monks were employed to do some jobs, particularly the rougher and more unpleasant ones. Porters, gatekeepers, chief baker, cooks, swineherd were some such examples. They were called lay-brothers. They were not as educated as the monks and could not read or write. They came to the monasteries because they wanted to serve God. Like the monks, they took solemn vows, but they had much less to learn as they did not sing such long services. Many held their position for life and handed them down to their sons. They got up later than the monks, said their own services quietly in their own part of the church, up to Prime (6am) and then went out to work in the fields or workshop. During the day they said their services (Tierce, Sext and None) wherever they happened to be. They normally joined the monks for Compline at 8pm. They had their meals in their own refectory and because of their hard work, they were allowed half a pound of best bread and as much coarse bread as they could eat. They had their own chapter meeting but only three times a year and their own dorter. They dressed differently from the monks, wearing a tunic, stockings, boots, hood and cloak. This made it easy to tell the difference between lay-brothers and monks.

## A Day in the Life of a Monk.

It is almost impossible to write an account of a typical day in the life of a monk. Daily life varied depending on whether it was Summer or Winter. There were also differences between the religious orders, and from one century to another. There were at least three different orders of monks in Britain, Benedictines, Cistercians and Carthusians. There were even variations within individual monasteries of the same order. However, in all monasteries there were eight services of worship and a mass that was attended by all monks.



- At around **midnight**, the sub-sacristan rang the bell and the sleepy monks began their long day, by walking down the **night stairs** from their dorter to the choir of the church. Any monks who were late or overslept had their names taken by a monk called the **Circa**. A monk's day was broken up by eight church services.
- The first was **Matins**, which lasted from 1am to 2am. Although everyone stood all through the services, the monks had misericords which meant they could rest their rear on a small shelf.
- This was followed by **Lauds** 2am to 3am
- After this the monks were allowed to go to bed until daybreak, when another bell would ring at 6am for **Prime** at about 6.30pm.
- At 7am to 8am there was time for **reading** and **meditation** in the cloisters.

- At 8am, breakfast (**mixture**) of a piece of bread and a small amount of ale.
- At 9am the monks went to the **Chapter House** where they remained until 10.00am. Notices were read out, punishments administered and daily tasks allocated.
- At 10am, monks would attend **Tierce**. (10-10.30am). This was immediately followed by **mass** to which lay-people were admitted into the church.
- 10.30am - 11.00am, Monks are allowed to chat in the cloisters.
- 11am -11.45am, light work could be carried out.
- At 11am, the monks attended the **Sect** Service that was followed by **high mass**.
- **Lunch (Prandium)** at about midday during which Bible readings were read out aloud, during an otherwise silent meal. Lunch was often later (1pm) in the winter.
- 12.30pm, working monks went to dormitories to wash and change into working clothes.
- 2pm- 5.30pm was **Working time**. Both manual and farming tasks were carried out. Reading, writing, painting, carving, gardening, bee-keeping, fishing and looking after the sick. Young monks were allowed to play bowls and skittles.
- At 3pm **None** Service took place for non-working monks.
- At 7pm **Dinner** took place, followed by reading from the scriptures. Dinner consisted of bread, soup, vegetables and wine or ale. No meat was to be eaten except by sick monks in the infirmary.
- 7.30pm, **Walking** in the cloisters, or in the warming room in winter.
- At 8pm, (6pm in winter) **Vespers** service took place.
- 9pm, (7pm in winter) the last service of the day, **Compline**
- 9.30pm, (8.30pm), **Bedtime**. Monks had to sleep in their shirts, drawers and gaiters, and had to take their shoes off once in bed. The **Circa** would check that they were all in bed. No candles were allowed for reading.

Many monks had important jobs to do within the monastery. They would not be expected to attend all the services. However, there was a group of monks called the **Cloister Monks** whose primary duty was worship and study.

## Monk's diet.

Monks were forbidden to eat meat, particularly four-footed animals, but they did eat chickens, geese, ducks and other birds such as swans, peacocks, doves, pigeons and blackbirds. Remember, potatoes had not been introduced to England and therefore they ate peas, beans, cabbage, bread, cheese, eggs and fruit and fish. Special dishes called 'pittances' were eaten on feast days. These were extra tasty meals. Meat was given instead of fish, wine replaced beer and spiced cake replaced bread. Gradually these pittances became more common, often once a week. A light meal called 'Cena' was served on Summer afternoons. Monks were fond of food and liked luxuries such as spices, sugarloafs, rice, oranges, nuts that the cellarer would buy at special markets. At bedtime all monks had 'collatio' a hot drink and a piece of bread.

## Monk's Dress

The monk's **habit** consisted of a linen undershirt and pants, grey woollen breeches, a thick short **tunic**, thick woollen **stockings**, night shoes and a long robe, the colour depending on his order. He also wore a large hood called a **cowl**, a **girdle**, a **leather belt** and a knife for eating. He also has a **scapular**, a piece of cloth that hung down the back and front. This protected his habit when working.



### Tonsure

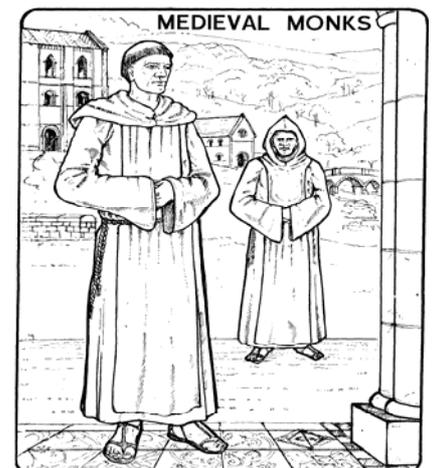
The hair was cut like this to represent the 'crown of thorns' worn by Christ when he was crucified.

### Cowl

This was a hood.

### Girdle

The monks wore a simple belt to show that they still belonged to the world. On it hung the cross, the symbol of being a monk.



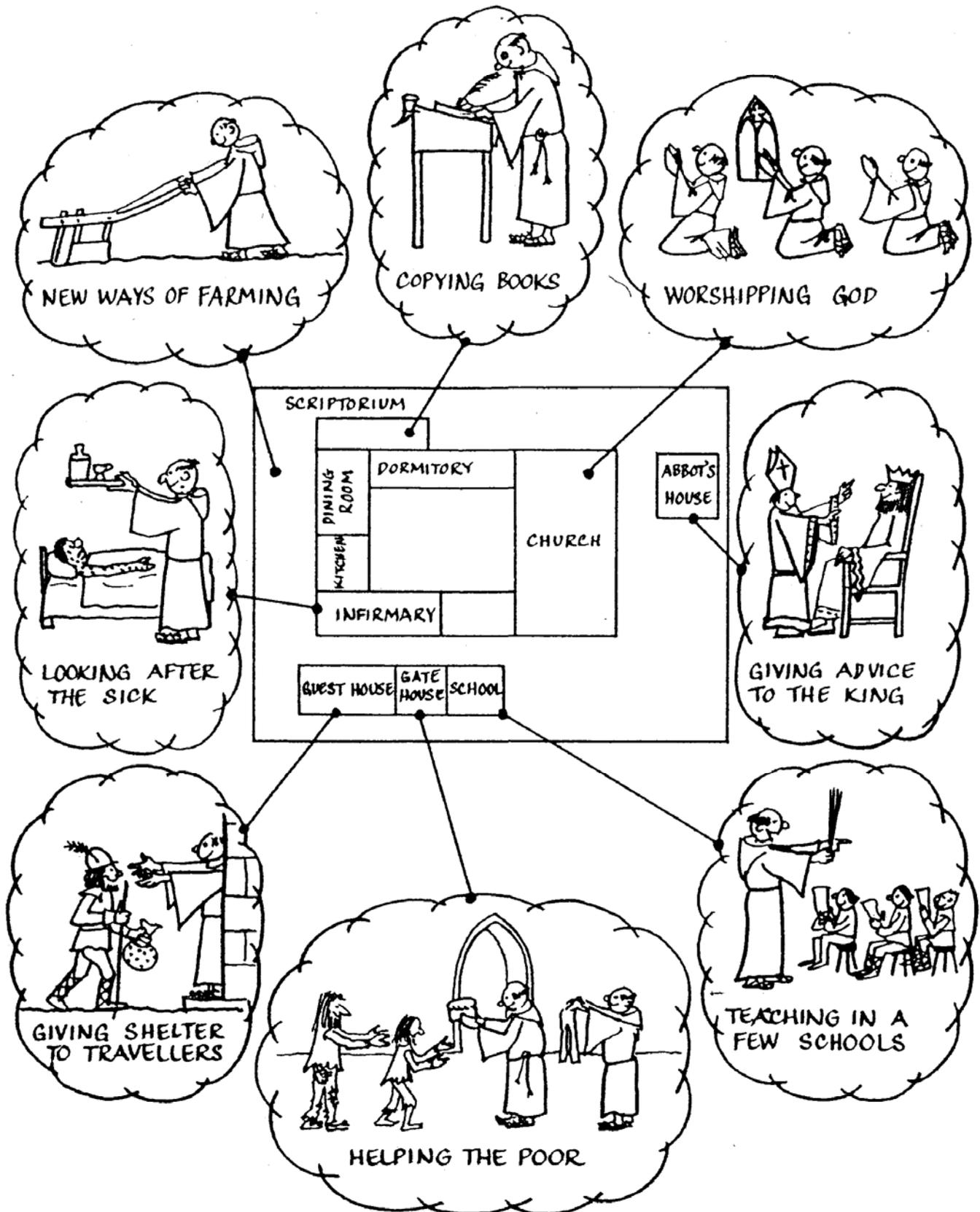
### Habit

The monks wore the simplest robe they could. It was made of rough cloth so that it would irritate their skin and remind them all the time of the suffering of Christ.

### Sandals

These simple shoes reminded the monks that they had to be humble like Christ.

# HOW THE MONKS HELPED THE COUNTRY



## Friars

The friars or mendicant orders were an early 13<sup>th</sup> Century attempt to revive some of the beliefs of the early Church and of Christianity. As with the monastic orders that had preceded them a reforming spirit motivated them and so long as this spirit lasted, then their work was valuable.

The two most important orders of friars were

1. **Dominican** (Friar Preachers or Black Friars) reached England in 1221
2. **Franciscan** (Friars Minor or Grey Friars) reached England in 1224

It is interesting to note that there were no friars in England until the 1220's and therefore Friar Tuck in Robin Hood was an anachronism (out of place chronologically) as Robin Hood was based at the end of Richard I's reign 1189-1199 and the beginning of John's reign 1199-1216.

John's reign was peppered with religious troubles. The dispute over the vacant Archbishopric of Canterbury led to an interdict and excommunication between the years 1206-1213.

These troubles in England showed that the **English Church needed revitalising and stronger control and leadership** from within. Compared with France and Italy the standard of learning among the clergy in England was low. The existing parishes inadequately served the ever-growing towns. There was a danger that **people might turn to different beliefs**. The friars had much work to do, and within fifty years forty Dominican and sixty Franciscan houses had been founded throughout England. By 1300, the friars were at the peak of their power, influence and popularity in England. The Dominicans were fantastically well run, and what the Franciscans lacked in this respect they made up for with sanctity and humility. It wasn't until the mid-fourteenth Century that abuses began to be seen amongst the friars and their popularity and support began to dwindle.

The friars unlike the monks **worked in the world** and deliberately sought centres of population rather than the remote and isolated places in which the monasteries were set up. The friars lived in houses under the control of a prior and were bound by the **vows of poverty, chastity and obedience**. The Dominicans were educated preachers who preached and taught in the urban parishes where the parish priest often lacked education and skill. Dominicans based much of their teaching on the work of **Thomas Aquinas**, a Dominican working in Paris. However, Thomism as it was called was never fully accepted in England.