

When and why did the Cistercians decline?

The decline of the Cistercian order is a multi faceted issue that has many different parts which must be discussed to reach the cause of the decline of the Cistercian order. The decline of the Cistercian order in the United Kingdom is most commonly attributed to the dissolution of the monasteries that was caused by king Henry VIII during the first half of the 16th century. This decline was orchestrated by the then Chief Minister of England: Thomas Cromwell. The dissolution of the monasteries was done primarily as a ploy to raise money for the crown as opposed to the dissolution being done for any religious or theological reasons.¹ Furthermore, the factors of the Black Death and the International tensions between England and France that occurred towards the end of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth century also weakened the Cistercian order and helped contribute to the Cistercian decline.

While the Dissolution of the monasteries brought about the end of the monastic way of life in Britain it did not do so for religious or theological reasons but was instead done as a way of raising money for King Henry VIII and to refill the Crown Treasury after Henry VIII's failed wars in France and his other large, frivolous expenditures that he made on frivolous events such as the large feasts him and his court were known for.² This can be seen through the fact that before the dissolution of the monasteries, Henry VIII commissioned a survey of the wealth of the monasteries in Britain. This survey was called the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* and documented that the monasteries of England were worth about £320,000 or around ten times greater than the yearly income of the crown³. This shows a clear reason why Henry VIII and his Chief Minister Thomas Cromwell dissolved the monasteries in England and this in turn shows when and why there was a large decline for the Cistercians. There is also the fact that the Cistercians were well known for their business dealings and their reputation for being rich. This would have impacted the decision made, by King Henry VIII and his Chief Minister Thomas Cromwell, to start the dissolution of the monasteries due to their own sheer greed and hunger for money. Furthermore the decision by King Henry VIII and Chief Minister Thomas Cromwell to dissolve the monasteries can also be seen as a way to secure their own power and by extension weaken the Catholic Church on the European mainland.

In opposition to this idea of a cistercian decline is the fact that there are still houses of the Cistercian order that exist in the modern day. These houses are commonly referred to as Trappist Houses⁴ and are most commonly associated with the production of beer in the modern age and are therefore widely appreciated for this talent due to the fact that trappist beer is brewed in the traditional way and according to beer connoisseurs this gives the Trappist Beer a more complex flavour profile.⁵ The popularity of the Trappist beers in the

¹ Cistercians in Yorkshire Project Team "Dissolution of the Monasteries"

<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/blogs/cistercians/dissolution-of-the-monasteries/> [accessed 24/3/24]

² "Henry VIII spent 'almost entire year's tax' on Christmas" <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42429199> [accessed 24/3/24]

³ Cistercians in Yorkshire Project Team "Dissolution of the Monasteries"

<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/blogs/cistercians/dissolution-of-the-monasteries/> [accessed 24/3/24]

⁴ "O.C.S.O" <https://ocso.org/> [accessed 24/3/24]

⁵ "There is nothing quite like a Trappist Beer" <https://www.beertourism.com/blogs/news/there-is-nothing-quite-like-a-trappist-beer#:~:text=So%20what%20makes%20Trappist%20beer,for%20their%20complex%20flavour%20profiles.> [accessed 24/3/24]

modern world shows that there has not been a decline of the Cistercians because they are very much active in the modern day and are well regarded. This is in direct opposition to the idea that there was a decline of the Cistercian monastic order due to factors such as the Dissolution of the Monasteries that was undertaken by King Henry VIII and his Chief Minister Thomas Cromwell. To counter this argument about the lack of decline within the Cistercian order there is the fact that the cistercians were completely removed from England from between the closure of the last cistercian monastery as part of the dissolution in 1540⁶ to the reintroduction of monastic life to the British Isles in 1835 with the foundation of the Mount Saint Bernard Abbey.⁷ This could be seen as clear evidence that there is a very significant decline within the cistercian community around the middle of the sixteenth century. With this in mind, it is also clear that this decline was forced upon the Cistercian houses by King Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell, the then Chief Minister of England. To add to the modern decline of the Trappist houses and the Cistercian order there is the fact that many of the modern Cistercian houses have been forced to become somewhat commercialised to survive. An example of this is the Mount Saint Bernard Abbey in Leicestershire that has a gift shop that is prominently advertised on their website.⁸ The gift shop at the Mount Saint Bernard Abbey primarily seems to sell products made by the monks that live in the Abbey and range from wooden rosaries to the above mentioned beer.⁹ This shows that there has been a decline within the Cistercian order because the Mount Saint Bernard Abbey has had to commercialise and sell the wares made by the brother monks that reside within the Abbey.

Another argument for the decline of the Cistercians is the fact that the Dissolution of the Monasteries can be seen as the final enactment of the 1534 Act of Supremacy that made King Henry VIII the “supreme head on earth of the Church of England”.¹⁰ the actual text of this act is also important to note because it reads as follows:

“Albeit the king's Majesty justly and rightfully is and ought to be the supreme head of the Church of England, and so is recognized by the clergy of this realm in their convocations, yet nevertheless, for corroboration and confirmation thereof, and for increase of virtue in Christ's religion within this realm of England, and to repress and extirpate all errors, heresies, and other enormities and abuses heretofore used in the same, be it enacted, by authority of this present Parliament, that the king, our sovereign lord, his heirs and successors, kings of this realm, shall be taken, accepted, and reputed the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England, called Anglicans Ecclesia; and shall have and enjoy, annexed and united to the imperial crown of this realm, as well the title and style thereof, as all honors, dignities, preeminences, jurisdictions, privileges, authorities, immunities, profits, and commodities to the said dignity of the supreme head of the same Church belonging and appertaining; and that our said sovereign lord, his heirs and successors, kings of this realm, shall have full power and authority from time to time to visit, repress, redress, record, order, correct, restrain, and amend all such errors, heresies, abuses, offenses, contempts and

⁶ Ben Johnson “Dissolution of the Monasteries” <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Dissolution-of-the-Monasteries/> [accessed 24/3/24]

⁷ “Mount Saint Bernard Abbey” <https://www.mountsaintbernard.org/our-history> [accessed 24/3/24]

⁸ “Mount Saint Bernard Abbey” <https://www.mountsaintbernard.org/> [accessed 24/3/23]

⁹ “Mount Saint Bernard Abbey” <https://www.mountsaintbernard.org/gift-shop> [accessed 24/3/24]

¹⁰ Act of Supremacy” <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/religion/collections/common-prayer/act-of-supremacy/#:~:text=In%201534%20Parliament%20passed%20the,severing%20ecclesiastical%20links%20with%20Rome.> [accessed 24/3/24]

enormities, whatsoever they be, which by any manner of spiritual authority or jurisdiction ought or may lawfully be reformed, repressed, ordered, redressed, corrected, restrained, or amended, most to the pleasure of Almighty God, the increase of virtue in Christ's religion, and for the conservation of the peace, unity, and tranquility of this realm; any usage, foreign land, foreign authority, prescription, or any other thing or things to the contrary hereof notwithstanding."¹¹

The text of the Act of Supremacy is important to note because it unequivocally states that king Henry VIII is the head of the Church of England. This is an important factor to the decline of the Cisterciens because it sets the stage for the later dissolution of the monasteries that was truly the final nail in the coffin for the Cistercian Order.

This is a cause of the decline that the Cistercians undertook because the Act of Supremacy meant that the monastic houses, with special note to the cistercians, couldn't really contact their parent houses on the continent without breaking English law. This is key to note when talking about the decline of the Cistercians because the abbots of the Cistercian houses were required to attend the general chapter of the Cistercian order. This general Chapter happened yearly at the abbey of Cîteaux¹². The fact that the Cistercian abbots had to travel to the continent where they were in contact with people who were under the direct influence and control of Rome and the Papal state. Furthermore, the attendance of British Abbots at the Cistercian General Chapter could have been seen as a direct violation of the 1533 Act in Restraint of Appeals which forbade appeals to Rome¹³. The Act in Restraint of Appeals states this clearly in the following section:

*"Where by divers sundry old authentic histories and chronicles it is manifestly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an empire, and so hath been accepted in the world, governed by one supreme head and king having the dignity and royal estate of the imperial crown of the same, unto whom a body politic, compact of all sorts and degrees of people divided in terms and by names of spirituality and temporality, be bounden and owe to bear next to God a natural and humble obedience...For the due administration whereof and to keep them from corruption and sinister affection the King's most noble progenitors, and the antecessors of the nobles of this realm, have sufficiently endowed the said Church both with honour and possession."*¹⁴

Looking

With this in mind it is clear that the forced decline of the Cisterciens that came about with the Dissolution of the Monasteries was impacted by the fact that the Cistercian monasteries were breaking the law by attending the General Chapters following the signing of the Act in Restraint of Appeals.

Another point that one can make about the decline of the Cistercians is the fact that it could be argued that the decline of the cistercians came much earlier than the Dissolution of

¹¹ "Act of Supremacy" <https://www.henryviiihereign.co.uk/1534-act-of-supremacy.html> [accessed 24/3/24]

¹² "Cistercian Administration: The general Chapter" https://www.dhi.ac.uk/cistercians/cistercian_life/organisation/general_chapter/generalchapter.php [accessed 24/3/24]

¹³ "Act in Restraint of Appeals" <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095419633> [accessed 24/3/24]

¹⁴ "Statute in Restraint of Appeals" <https://www.henryviiihereign.co.uk/1532-act-of-appeals-preamble.html#:~:text=Statute%20in%20Restraint%20of%20Appeals&text=For%20the%20due%20a dministration%20whereof,both%20with%20honour%20and%20possession.> [accessed 24/3/24]

the Monasteries and doings of Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell and was in fact caused by the Black Death of 1348-1349.¹⁵ This plague was so influential in the decline of the Cistercians because the widespread death that it caused amongst the population of 14th century Europe caused some of the Cistercian houses to be understaffed and made to be closed. The shrink in population also caused the recruitment numbers of the Cistercian order to fall dramatically.¹⁶ This caused the once powerful and prosperous Cistercian order to make a fall from grace and dramatically lose their prestige. This in turn would set the stage for the Dissolution of the Monasteries that Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell undertook in the middle of the Sixteenth Century. One could argue that without the Black Death of the fourteenth century, and the weakened state that it left the Cistercian order in, then the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539-40 never would have taken place simply because the Cistercian order in England would have been too powerful and influential for even the crown to take on successfully. On top of this weakened state that the Black death left the Cistercian order in, there was also international tensions that further weakened the Cistercians and further influenced the decline that befell the Cistercian order. These international tensions were caused by France and England supporting rival papal candidates with the English faction of Cistercians being ordered by their pope Urban VI to not obey or acknowledge their mother house of Cîteaux, the abbot of which was subsequently declared a schismatic and a pretender.¹⁷ It is clear to see that this sort of thing, a situation in which the head of an organisation is declared a pretender and schismatic by a large faction of the organisation, would have an incredible impact on the decline of said organisation. With this in mind it is no wonder to see that the Cistercian Order that left the fourteenth century was significantly weaker than the one that entered that same century.

In conclusion, it is clear that the Cistercians underwent a massive decline around the middle of the sixteenth century and that the primary cause of this decline was the fact that the King, Henry VIII, needed to replenish his treasury due to his extreme and lavish spending on feasts and wars and such like. His Chief Minister, Thomas Cromwell, organised the dissolution of the monasteries so that the crown could sell off the land owned by the monasteries and keep the money for themselves which shows that the dissolution of the monasteries was undertaken for financial reasons instead of religious or theological reasons. However, it can also be argued that the dissolution of the monasteries was undertaken as the final fulfilment of the 1534 Act of Supremacy which severed England's links to Rome and the Dissolution of the Monasteries helped cement the Church in England due to the fact that the monasteries in England were the final links that the Catholic Church in England had to the Church in Rome. On the other hand it can be argued that the Cistercian order is still alive and active today with the trappists still being widely regarded for the beer that they brew today. This can be seen as evidence against the decline of the Cistercians because it shows that the Cistercians are still alive and have undergone something of a revival. To counter this idea that the Cistercians did not decline and in fact had a revival there is the fact that the Black Death and the international tensions between England and France significantly weakened the Cistercian Order and perfectly set the scene for Henry VIII and Thomas

¹⁵ "Cistercians in a changing World" <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/blogs/cistercians/cistercians-in-a-changing-world/#:~:text=The%20high%20death%20toll%20directly,out%20and%20not%20exploited%20directly>. [24/3/24]

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

Cromwell to enact the Dissolution of the Monasteries due to the weakened state of the Cistercean order. With this in mind it would be entirely possible to say that the Decline of the Cistercian Order happened towards the end of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth century.

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