**A near contemporary account of the ‘spoilation of Roche’ Abbey, Yorkshire**

*These notes are background information for the teaching activity ‘What effect did the dissolution of the monasteries have on English society and culture’?*

This account is taken from the Cistercians in Yorkshire website and based on [Michael Sherbrook's account](http://cistercians.shef.ac.uk/roche/history/spoilation/sherbrook.php) of the spoliation of Roche. The original account is in the British Library reference; BL, Add. MS 5813, fo. 5, p. 1. For a transcription, see Tudor Treatises, ed. A. G. Dickens, YAS Rec. Ser. 125 (Wakefield, 1959), pp. 123-126.

**Background**

Michael Sherbrook was rector of Wickersley, some five miles west of Roche, from 1567 - c.1610. He completed his account in the 1590s, but may actually have begun writing around 1567. Sherbrook was himself a child at the time of the Dissolution, but recounts the memories of his father and uncle who witnessed at first hand the spoilation of Roche.

Abbot Henry Cundall of Roche and his seventeen monks gathered in the chapter-house at Roche for the last time on 23 June 1538, and signed the surrender deed, sealing the fate of their abbey. The keys of Roche were then handed over to the commissioners and an exhaustive inventory was taken of all the monks’ possessions and livestock, which were then claimed as Crown property. Each monk was granted a pension, the precise amount depending on his standing within the abbey. Every member of the community also received a ‘reward’. Abbot Henry was given an additional £30, as well as his books, a quarter of the abbey’s plate, cattle, household items, a chalice, vestment and a portion of corn, which was to be taken at his discretion. The other monks each received half a year’s allowance, and every servant of the abbey was given half a year’s wages.

Following the dispersal of the monks, the abbey buildings were destroyed to ensure that the community would not attempt to reconvene.

**Account**

(Roche Abbey) a house of White Monks; a very finely built house of freestone and covered with lead (as the abbeys in England, as well as the churches are). An uncle of mine was present at the breaking up of the abbey, for he was well acquainted with several of the monks there. When the community was evicted from the abbey, one of the monks, his friend, told him that each monk had been given his cell where he slept, wherein there was nothing of value save his bed and apparel, which was simple and of little worth. This monk urged my uncle to buy something from him, but my uncle replied that he could see nothing that would be of any use to him; the monk asked him for two pennies for his cell door, which was worth over five shillings; his uncle refused, as he had no idea what he would do with a door (for he was a young unmarried man, and in need of neither a house nor a door). Others who came along later to buy the monks’ corn or hay found that all the doors were open, and the locks and shackles plucked off, or the door itself removed; they entered and stole what they liked.

Some took the service-books that were in the church and laid them on their Waine Coppes (part of a cart) to repair them; some took windows from the hay barn and hid them in the hay, and did the same with other things: some pulled iron hooks out of the walls – but did not buy them – when the yeomen and gentlemen of the country had bought the timber of the church.

For the church was the first thing that was spoiled; then the abbot’s lodging, the dormitory and refectory, with the cloister and all the buildings around, within the abbey walls. For nothing was spared except the ox-houses and swinecoates and other such houses or offices that stood outside the walls – these had greater favour shown to them than the church itself. This was done on the instruction of Cromwell, as Fox reports in his Book of Acts and Monuments. It would have pitied any heart to see the tearing up of the lead, the plucking up of boards and throwing down of the rafters. And when the lead was torn off and cast down into the church and the tombs in the church were all broken (for in most abbeys various noblemen and women were buried, and in some kings, but their tombs were no more regarded than those of lesser persons, for to what end should they stand when the church over them was not spared for their cause) and all things of value were spoiled, plucked away or utterly defaced, those who cast the lead into fodders plucked up all the seats in the choir where the monks sat when they said service. These seats were like the seats in minsters; they were burned and the lead melted, although there was plenty of wood nearby, for the abbey stood among the woods and the rocks of stone. Pewter vessels were stolen away and hidden in the rocks, and it seemed that every person was intent upon filching and spoiling what he could. Even those who had been content to permit the monks’ worship and do great reverence at their matins, masses and services two days previously were no less happy to pilfer, which is strange, that they could one day think it to be the house of God and the next the house of the Devil – or else they would not have been so ready to have spoiled it.

For the better proof of this, thirty years after the Suppression I asked my father, who had bought part of the timber of the church and all the timber in the steeple with the bell frame, (in the steeple eight or nine bells hung - the last but one could not be bought today for £20 – and I myself saw these bells hanging there over a year after the Suppression) if he thought well of the religious people and of the religion followed at that time? And he told me yes, for he saw no cause to the contrary: well, I said, then how did it come to pass that you were so ready to destroy and spoil the thing that you thought so well of? What should I have done, he asked, might not I as well as the others have had some profit from the spoils of the abbey? For I saw that everything would disappear and therefore I did as the others did.’

Thus you may see that those who thought well of the religious, and those who thought otherwise, agreed enough to spoil them. Such a devil is covetousness and mammon! And such is the providence of God to punish sinners in making themselves instruments to punish themselves and all their posterity from generation to generation! For no doubt there have been millions of millions that have repented since, but all too late. And this is the extent of my knowledge relating to the fall of Roche Abbey.

**How does the account fit in?**

* These events relate to one particular monastery and accounts such as this are not available for all monasteries. However the events follow a general pattern that was repeated in most of the religious houses that were closed during the dissolution.
* The account is of interest for the detail of what happened to the monks and to the buildings and also for the hints that are given as to why monasteries were not just closed but actively destroyed.
* Moreover it gives us a contemporary account which includes not just what happened but also throws light on how the people caught up in it felt about events.
* This evidence can be used when considering the debate about the long and short term effects of the closure of the monasteries; to include local as well as national effects

Roche Abbey is an English Heritage property and students can visit for free as part of a pre-booked group