

What is a monastery?

Monasteries are places where monks live. Most of them are also connected with a place of worship called an abbey. The word abbey means father. This is because abbeys were important buildings where abbots were in charge of monks. The abbot is the 'father' to the monks.

In Britain, many abbeys date back to the time when the first monks were sent by the Pope in Rome to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. They first began doing this in the 7th century. The abbeys that we see today, however, mostly date from the time when the Normans conquered England at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. This is because William the Conqueror, who was a Duke of Normandy (now part of France), needed to get the church on his side before he could begin the conquest of England. And the church had its price for giving their blessing: they wanted lots and lots of land. So this is what he gave them – and much of it ended up in the hands of monks.

When groups of people wanted to become monks, so some kind of organised way of doing things developed. New communities were set up, each headed by a father – an abbot (and later, nuns were headed by an abbess). Monks were often showered with gifts in the hope that it would bring blessings on the giver, and so the monks were rich targets for thieves. As a result they started to live in buildings surrounded by high walls. This is how the village of monks' huts changed to a monastery.

The monastery became a community so the monastery also had storehouses, kitchens and places for the monks to sleep (dormitories). There was also a large hall for eating in (called a refectory) and small places for praying (similar to chapels). Cloisters were open courtyards inside the monastery. Then, in the middle of all these buildings was a large church where all gathered together. In some monasteries, this large church later became a cathedral.

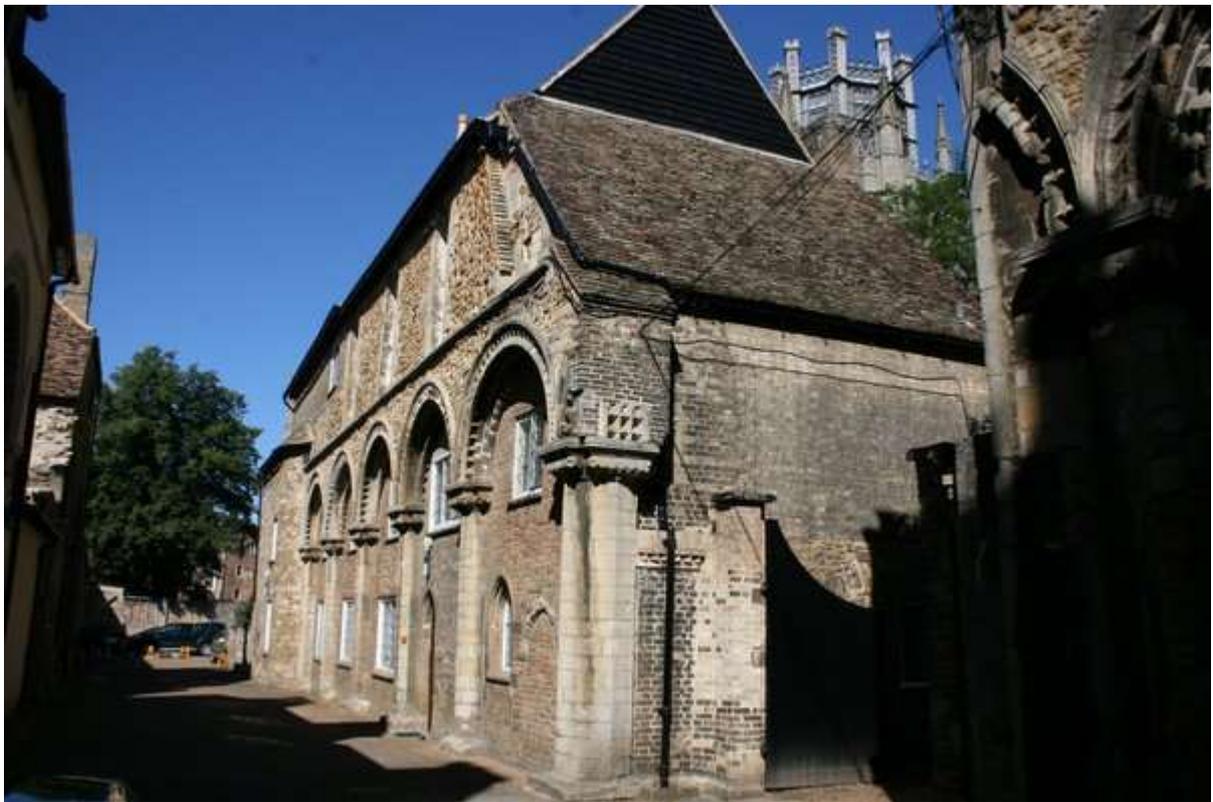
During the Middle Ages in Britain, several orders of monks were founded on the principle that they owned nothing, and everything they had was the result of charity. They included Franciscans (the Grey Friars) Carmelites (the White Friars), Dominicans (the Black Friars) and Augustinians (the Austin Friars). These groups worked among people, rather than closing themselves off in monasteries. That is the difference between friars and monks. However, other orders based on Benedictine ideas remained enclosed. The most important group were the Cistercians, who founded many monasteries in northern England, including Fountains Abbey, one of the largest and now most famous ruined monasteries in Britain.

Many monasteries became very wealthy and owned large areas of land and wealth. The abbot became very powerful and the monastery and church had influence over the local towns and villages.

When Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries – had them closed down - their land, power and wealth was given to the king instead.



The Black Hostelry Ely



Powcher's Hall, part of the old monastic buildings of Ely