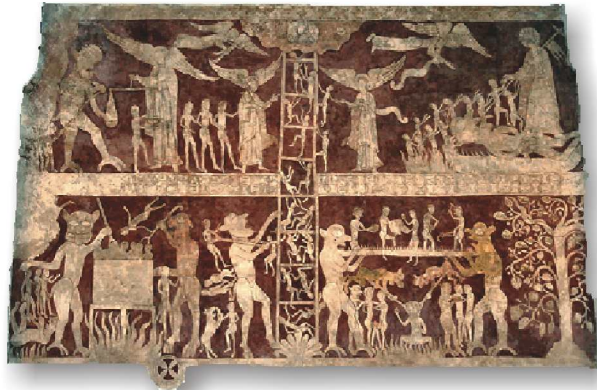


**How important was religion to medieval people? Why did the monasteries exist?
What was life like for the canons at Topholme?**

It is very difficult for us to appreciate the importance of religion in medieval life. At that time everyone believed that God and the saints controlled what happened to them, and that when they died they would be judged by how good they had been during their lives. Being good meant leading a Christian life. The good people went to Heaven and the bad ones were sent to Hell.

At this time people in Britain were Roman Catholics and their churches were under the rule of the Pope in Rome. Church services were read in Latin which meant that most ordinary people could not understand the words that were being spoken, but the inside walls of churches were decorated with paintings to illustrate what was being said. Many of these showed what would happen to those who did not live good lives. The 'Ladder of Salvation' wall painting at Chaldon Church in Surrey is a good example.



The 'ladder of Salvation'

But it was very difficult to live a life that was completely free of sin, and it was believed that before you could go to Heaven you had to be truly sorry for the bad things you had done, and spend some time in purgatory being cleansed of your sins. People showed how sorry they were by going on pilgrimages and everyone went to church every Sunday to attend Mass, and to confess their sins to the priest so that they could be forgiven. They were afraid of dying without having been to confession because their sins would count against them. They also believed that they would go to Heaven more quickly if people who were still alive said prayers for their souls. They paid for these prayers by giving money to churches, monasteries and nunneries during their lifetimes, and leaving money to them in their wills when they died.

The monasteries and nunneries existed to provide a constant offering of prayers. The monks and nuns devoted their whole lives to God and praying was their main work. They also provided help and care for the poor and they gave shelter to travellers.

Although there were monasteries before the medieval period, many more were built between 1066 and 1500, particularly in the 12th century. By the 14th century there were more than 80 monasteries in Lincolnshire alone.

What was life at Topholme Abbey like?

Compared to modern lifestyles, life at Topholme was hard. The **Premonstratensians** followed a strict version of the rule of St Augustine. They devoted their lives to God and every day was organised around a routine of regular prayers, which started at 2.00am with Vigils and ended at 7.30pm with Compline. They were not allowed to get married or to have any possessions of their own, and they only ate very simple food. Lessons were read to them while they ate their meals together in the refectory. They were closely related to the Cistercians in their lifestyle and their choice of isolated sites for their monasteries. Unlike some other orders of monks, they did not stay within the confines of the monastery, but went out into the community to be village priests and missionaries. Hardly any evidence remains of the things the canons used in their daily lives, but the British Museum has a wax impression of the Topholme Abbey seal that was used to seal documents. It shows Mary with Jesus on her lap and has 'the seal of the Abbot and community of St. Mary of Topholme' written in Latin around its edge.



Harlech45A14 drawn by K. Holland

'Topholme Abbey Seal'

Like other monasteries, Topholme Abbey was inspected regularly by the Bishop. Records of these visits suggest that some of the canons found the rules too strict. In 1482 they had obviously been behaving badly because they were forbidden to leave the precincts of the abbey without permission or to sit up drinking after their last prayers. In 1497 Thomas Pynderwelle was sent away to another Premonstratensian abbey at Croxton in Leicestershire for becoming involved with a local woman and having a child with her.

As well as the Abbot and the canons, there were probably servants who helped with the work of running the monastery and with growing crops, looking after the sheep and tending the lands. A large part of the canons' income came from agriculture, especially wool production. Over the years they were given more land, but in comparison with some other monasteries Topholme never became very wealthy. The number of canons living here changed a little over the years. It fell to only 5 in 1381 after the Black Death, but stood at 16 a hundred years later. When the abbey closed in 1536 the Abbot received £18 and each of 8 canons was given £1.

