

Chronicles of Dissolution

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Introduction

2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. In 1517, Martin Luther famously nailed his 95 Theses to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany. This act of defiance can be seen to herald the process of change in religious practice across Europe.

Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries took place as part of the Reformation in England. It resulted in the plunder of church wealth and the destruction of monasteries and their communities.

'Chronicles of the Dissolution – Piety, Plunder and Protest' is a graphic arts project illustrated by eight students who spent a week at The National Archives in Kew illustrating their interpretations of Early Modern records from the State Papers of Henry VIII. The tales are told through the eyes of individual characters, from the lowliest carpenter to the ruthless commissioner.

Together they give us a unique insight into the consequences which followed dissolution as a result of Henry VIII's determination to reform the English Church.

Ela Kaczmarek – Education Officer, The National Archives

The Minstrel's Tale

Summertime. Mid-late 1530s, in an average town in England.

A troupe of MINSTRELS on a stage in a village square, holding a number of instruments: a lute, a fiddle, a trumpet, and a bagpipe. At the other side of the square, stands a PREACHER, on a box. A crowd has gathered. Half face the PREACHER, half the MINSTRELS.

PREACHER:

No more taxes! Get rid of the sponging, thieving monks! Evil sorcerer scum! Posing as holy men with their sick superstitions, superfluous ceremonies, slanderous jugglings and counterfeit miracles! Fleecing you, the people, for a glimpse of an old cow bone!

(He holds up the items as he speaks)

Telling you it's St Mary's Girdle, or St Bridget's elbow! The coals that St Lawrence was toasted with! The parings of St Edmund's nails! St Thomas of Canterbury's penknife! A bell to wear upon the head to dispel a headache!

PREACHER'S CROWD:

Liars! Hypocrites!

PREACHER:

Truth to tell, the nuns are all sultry sex slaves, salivating lasciviously –

The MINSTREL, strums a chord:

– Ah, the truth, the truth! Tell us, troll, what's Cromwell paying you and all your mates to lurk in every village square?

The MINSTREL'S CROWD whistles and cheers. The PREACHER'S CROWD boos.

PREACHER:

I am the agent of the Vicar General! I speak the truth –

The MINSTREL'S CROWD whoops. A chant rises:

Song! Song! Song! Song! Song!

The MINSTREL holds up a hand:

It's great to be back here in –

BACKING MINSTREL, whispers:

Nottingham

MINSTREL:

– Nottingham!! So vibey! So what'll it be today, Nottingham? A couple of our good King's tunes?

(He strikes a chord and nods to the band, and sings)

Pastime with good company
I love and shall until I die

The MINSTREL'S CROWD groans. The PREACHER'S CROWD applauds.

MINSTREL:

No? A spot of Green Groweth the Holly? ... It Is to Me a Right Gret Joy? ... O My Hart?

CROWD:

Nooooooooo!

MINSTREL:

You're right, those tunes of Henry's are, what – at least ten years out of date. But wait! I have the very thing – (to fellow musicians) – on three. One, and a-two –

All musicians start playing. MINSTREL sings

Crim, Cram, and Rich!
With the three L's and their like

CROWD:

Layton! Legh! London! The priest, the lawyer, and the don!

MINSTREL:

Catchy chorus! We'll come back to that!

As some men teach
God them amend
And that Aske may
Without a delay
Here make a stay
And well to end

(He points to CROWD, who are waving banners with 'Resist' and other slogans)

MINSTREL'S CROWD chants:

Layton, Legh, London!

PREACHER, enraged, pointing. Suddenly, the PREACHER'S CROWD parts to show

SOLDIERS:

Traitors! There! Seize them! Slandering the names of the commissioners!
Praising the rebel Robert Aske!

MINSTREL:

But wait, wait! I have it now – the last few lines of that smash hit by our very own King Henry:

(He sings, as he is dragged away by soldiers)

Company with honesty
Is virtue, vice to flee.
Company is good and ill,
But every man has his free will –

(A soldier knocks him unconscious.)

The Maid's Tale

December 1532, Windsor Palace. Elizabeth BARTON (aka 'The Maid of Kent') – a young woman who is famous for her religious visions – is with her mentor Dr BOCKING. They are outside Henry VIII's bedchamber.

A split scene, showing Henry's bedchamber. HENRY (aged 42) is sitting on the edge of his bed, in his nightclothes. CROMWELL (aged about 47) stands nearby, with papers to sign, and on the other side of the door, Dr BOCKING (aged about 52) and Elizabeth BARTON (aged about 26). BOCKING is dressed as a monk, and BARTON as a nun. They whisper.

BOCKING:

Go in, go in, the door's ajar!

BARTON:

But –

BOCKING, shoving her:

You must! I am your father in God, and I know best.

(Inside the bedchamber.)

HENRY

You bore me, Cromwell, with your ifs and buts. I must marry Anne or –

(The door opens, and in runs ELIZABETH BARTON, her hair and clothes in disarray.)

BARTON:

My King! My King! I am compelled! The heavenly voices speak in me!

HENRY:

Well, well, if it isn't the Maid of Kent! St Sepulchre's nun! Let her be, Cromwell. I saw her twice before. Let's hear what she has to say.

BARTON Seizes his arm, looks him straight in the face:
Heaven's door lies open, Prince, its windows all ablaze

(CROMWELL moves, but Henry shoos him back.)

BARTON

but you – you crawl in darkness, tormented by your lust.
Passion drives you onwards, but all too soon to dust
your body falls.

(HENRY laughs. BARTON pulls Henry's head down to her stomach. CROMWELL goes to strike her. HENRY stops him.)

BARTON:

Listen hard, poor Prince. Your ears will hear the call,
the cries of Virgin Mary, mother of us all.

HENRY:

How is it possible, Cromwell, that her voice seems to come from her stomach so?
Look, her lips are barely moving.

BARTON, in a terrible voice, eyes rolling, mouth frothing:

Your sight is short, your senses dim.
You throw away your soul upon a whim.
Marry Boleyn, and in but half a year
You'll be six feet down, with all of hell to fear.

HENRY, angrily:
Enough! Get rid of this versifying witch!

(January 1534. St Paul's Cross, London.)

BARTON and her followers, including Dr BOCKING, and many abbots and nuns kneel at St Paul's Cross. Richard LAYTON (aged about 32) and other of CROMWELL's men stand in front of them. It is snowing. BOCKING and Barton hold hands.

LAYTON, to BARTON:
Most lying and false nun! Confess!

BARTON:
I confess that when I said the devil did spit in my face, and it was black as soot
and stinking as carrion, it was a fabrication!

(The CROWD shrieks, gasps)

LAYTON, turning to BOCKING:
Confess, devil's bastard!

BOCKING, head bowed:
I confess that I did encourage the Maid of Kent to say such things! It was not her
doing.

BARTON looks at BOCKING:

No, no – it is I who am the cause of all this mischief. I fooled Wolsey then, and
now Thomas More.

LAYTON, to the monks and nuns assembled:
And you, treacherous doublehoods? Did you not follow the Maid and her ghostly
father you see here?

MONKS AND NUNS, looking worried, shaking heads:
If any of us heard or believed the said false revelations, we be right pensive and inwardly sorry.

CROWD:
String 'em up! Put their heads on a spike!

(London Bridge, 13 April 1534. Thomas More is going to Parliament.)

Thomas MORE (aged about 54) is being driven by in a carriage. With him is his cat. He is
anguished, distracted.

MORE, stroking his cat:
So, puss, off to Parliament today, to swear allegiance to The Act of Succession!
All for his new Queen, more like. Queen Anne – hah!

The cat stares back at him. MORE looks out of the window.

Suddenly, he raps on the carriage to stop, pulls back curtain, looks out of the window. There, framed by the Houses of Parliament, is Elizabeth BARTON's head on a spike. Next to hers is that of BOCKING. MORE stares.

MORE:

The Maid of Kent... I saw her with my own eyes when she was just a serving girl. She was right, so many times. I wasn't the only one who believed her, you know. Warham, Fisher of Rochester, the brothers of Syon, Wolsey, and even Henry himself!

(He pauses.)

When she spoke her visions, her voice was so unlike hers. Like a puppet, you know.

(To BARTON:)

No heavenly voice will ventriloquize you today, dear lady. Oh, Maid! So silent, now when we need you most? Tell me, what will become of me? But wait! Of course! You have a message for me still. Qui tacet consentire videtur! (He laughs) You speak true, as ever, my dear!

(He raps on the carriage to move on.)

I shall not say a word! They cannot know my mind if I do not speak it – and silence means consent, in law!

—

On 1 July 1535 Thomas More was charged with high treason for refusing to acknowledge the Act of Supremacy. His defence was to remain silent. He was executed five days later.

The Nun's Tale

London, The Rolls (The office of Thomas Cromwell).

Margaret VERNON (a middle-aged woman), Prioress of Little Marlow Abbey, and a young NUN (aged 25) stand in a busy street outside the Rolls – a grand court building in central London. Nearby is a pawn shop with an ornate iron sign hanging above it. In the sign is a diamond, with the words 'Bestyan – Jeweller'.

VERNON is standing before two soldiers, who look past her. There is a queue of other people, including several MONKS. The NUN is standing to one side, looking at the shop window.

VERNON:

But I must see him, I tell you! He knows me!

MAN:

Oy, there's a queue here you know!

WOMAN:

Cheeky, innit.

MONKS:

Sister, we too need to see Master Cromwell. So many of us have been turfed out, left with nothing!

VERNON:

Well, I hear that many of my brothers get pensions, or openings as chaplains, or clerks. And at the very least, four shillings and a priest's robe!

MONK:

These rags? And not every man–

VERNON:

Ah, but the women? Have you considered that nuns get nothing at all? Tell me, brother, why should that be?

MONK:

The Lord moves in mysterious ways.

(As they argue, the NUN slips away inside the pawn shop. VERNON does not notice.)

VERNON, facing back to the soldiers:

Tell Master Cromwell Margot Vernon is here. I am Prioress of Little Marlow nunnery, and was the teacher of his son!

SOLDIER, snickers:

Yes, and I'm the Maid of Kent!

Inside the shop of Bestyan the Jeweller.

The shop is dark, dingy, full of objects pawned by desperate people. From the back of the shop a small middle-aged man appears. He is the jeweller, BESTYAN (aged about 50). He looks suspiciously at the nun.

NUN, looking around anxiously:

I hear, sir, that you do accept ... certain goods. They say that you're the best.

BESTYAN:

Well, you're better off with me than the goldsmith, that's for sure. Last week he pulled the wool over the eyes of the Abbot of Fountains alright. The goldsmith told him his rubies were garnets. A very fool and miserable idiot! But I see you are different, more intelligent, as well as beautiful.

NUN, hastily:

I have no time, sir – just look.

(She reaches into a bag and pulls out a gold plate with emeralds, and a textile belt.)

BESTYAN:

I'm always happy to take a look for a sister in God.

(He screws an eyeglass into his eye and examines both carefully.)

Hmm. And where did you come by this, you say?

NUN:

Oh, I... found it. Near Little Marlow. Just lying in the road.

BESTYAN:

Sadly, sister, these are just zircons, not emeralds. Practically worthless! And as for this old belt-

NUN:

A holy relic – St Mary's girdle!

BESTYAN:

I've seen ten of these this week.

NUN:

But –

BESTYAN:

But don't despair, sister – I'm sure we can come to a deal.

NUN:

Thanks be to God!

Little Marlow Abbey. The Cell of MARGARET VERNON, Prioress.

Margaret VERNON in her cell in the convent, writing a letter. Other than the desk and chair there is a small chest in the corner. VERNON is irritated, distracted. With her stands the young nun.

NUN, curiously:

Are you writing to Master Cromwell, mother?

A pause. VERNON, continues writing:

I would be, foolish girl, if only you didn't keep interrupting!

NUN, starts to cry:

It's not my fault I'm here! It's so unfair. Just because I turned 25 last month I can't leave with all the others! They can do what they like! They can get married –

VERNON:

They cannot! The vow of chastity is broken only on the King's death! And don't think that the others aren't struggling.

NUN:

And that Commissioner was so horrible, mother! What malice and grudge he bore against us, calling us spoilers and wasters! And what a lech! He was, like, totally obsessed! He kept asking me how many monks I'd – you know – done it with. None, I said, and then –

VERNON:

Layton and the others are gone, now. Try not to dwell.

(A pause.)

I'm sure Master Cromwell will see us right. I am putting in a word for you now. I gave him my word that I would embezzle nothing, but leave the house as wealthy as I could, and so I will! After all, we have the Emerald plate and the Girdle of St Mary.

In fact, I shall check on them now –

NUN, splutters:

No! – no need, mother. I dusted and polished them only yesterday.

VERNON:

Leave me in peace now, child.

The young NUN leaves. VERNON pauses, puts down pen, and goes to a small chest in the corner. She opens it. It is empty. She stares at it.

The Rolls, London.

CROMWELL with clerks. They are presenting petitions to him.

CLERK 1:

So the Abbot of Fountains gets one hundred pounds a year. Dartford Prioress – Joan Vane, 100 marks. Re: Sion – the Abbess Agnes Jordan is to get 200 pounds. Oh, and I have a letter here from one Margaret Vernon, my lord, Prioress of Little Marlow nunnery.

CROMWELL:

Vernon, you say?

CLERK:

I have tried to see you, but am kept back by your men, she says. She seeks your help to some respectable living for herself. Could she be transferred to Malling in Kent, she says.

CROMWELL:

Vernon! Of course! My boy Gregory's teacher! Yes, yes, transfer her somewhere else! Is it just for herself she asks?

CLERK, leafing through papers:

She refers to a 'poor maiden' who is with her, but makes no case for her.

CROMWELL:

Give Vernon Mallings Abbey, and a pension of £40 a year.

Nuns under the age of 24 were permitted to abandon religious life. For those older than 24, however, there were few opportunities to earn a living, and they were unable to marry since their vow of celibacy was still in force. While monks may have had opportunities to work as private tutors, chaplains, clerks, and the like, little is known of what became of nuns that were released, although some records of pensions for both monks and nuns do exist. It is estimated that a minimum of 1,800 clergy were left with no visible means of support after the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

The Monk's Tale

28 September 1536. Hexham Abbey, Northumberland.

We are inside the Abbey, near the altar. A group of monks huddle around MONK 1, who is hidden from view.

MONK 1:

I can't! I am a man of faith, not –

MONK 2:

Think of the many who resist! All men of peace.
The Swalesford nuns, the Aylesford Friars! so meek,
yet they defend our Queen against the King,
– a herd of wild beasts, the King's men say.

MONK 1:

The King's men –

MONK 2, angrily, gesturing to MONK 3:

– sent out to spy, repress, redress,
reform, extirp, correct, restrain, amend!
as Layton says – that pestilential pug –
it's all for increased virtue in the church!

MONK 3:

We've heard the tales – what Layton and his friends
do write in that compendium of theirs,
that book so full of spite, and sin, and hate –
where all monks are per volunt. poll. sodomites –

MONK 1:

You what?

MONK 4

– a load of rubbish, mate, to you and me –

MONK 3:

– we sleep with anything that moves, you know –
the nuns as well, all peperit ex solute –

MONK 4:

– that's ridiculous –

MONK 3:

Like rabbits breeding every chance we get
– and all is true, 'cos Layton says it's so.
And now he's taken it to parliament.
Our shame so public, so clear for all to see –

(Bells ring; the monks look startled.)

MONK 1:

The bells! They're here! Make haste, make haste!

MONK 2:

Keep still, and let me do you up like so –
– and there, we're done! You stand in harness, brother.

(Stands back to reveal MONK 1, in full armour. Behind him, the altar cross.)

MONK 1:

I never thought this day would come to pass.

On the tower of Hexham Abbey. Clouds gather. The MONKS stand in a row, in armour. The ABBOT of Hexham, Augustine WEBSTER (aged about 50), stands in front of them. Below them, a crowd, heavily armed, with halberds, bows, arrows, pikes and other weapons surround two men on horseback, who are carrying the King's standard. They are Richard LAYTON (aged about 36) and Thomas LEGH (aged about 38), the King's Commissioners.

LEGH:

You've heard the talk: while many houses fall
yet some lie low. In Louth the vicar there holds out.

LAYTON:

I know. While Aske, the lawyer, stirs it up.
But look, this crowd does not seem pleased at all –

LEGH:

It's like a town at war.

(The bells of the town and the monastery ring out. A voice from above.)

LEGH:

You shall not have this house of God!

LAYTON:

Yield! You must do so.

WEBSTER holds up a hand. The monks in armour flank him. The crowd falls silent.

WEBSTER:

The King says not.

LAYTON (confused):

What? How? That cannot be.

The King decrees –

WEBSTER, unfolds a scroll in his hands:

Here is the confirmation of our house

With the royal Seal –

LAYTON:

– King Henry's seal?

WEBSTER:

The same.

He gave it but a year ago. The house is ours, he said.

And now he contradicts his own decree.

(A murmur from the crowds. They gather more tightly around the men.)

WEBSTER:

We shall all die before you take our lands,
our goods, or house.

LEGH:

Is this how you respond?

WEBSTER:

It is, in full. And now we march, for God.

(He gives a signal, and the gates of the monastery swing open, revealing a group of monks, all armed. They march forward, pushing the men back. The last we see of them is the monks standing on the village green in a row, waiting until LAYTON and LEGH are out of sight.)

A month later. Somewhere in the woods of Northumberland.

The MONKS of Hexham are in hiding. They are injured, cold, desperate.

MONK 1:

My cousin has come from Tyburn Tree today.
Weber, she says, was brave.
Reynolds of Syon Abbey too, and Lawrence of Bevall.
Cromwell asked them one more time –
are you content, says he, to take the King
as Supreme Head on Earth of the Church of England?

(A pause.)

MONK 1:

They all said no.

(The monks weep.)

MONK 1:

The King's men choked them half the way to death,
and then relieved them from the noose, let fall
their kicking, anguished flesh to God's sweet ground,
attached their limbs to ropes, and then, the ropes
to horses, one of whom faced North, the others –
South, and East, and West.

Their body parts
now hang around the city.

—

The Hexham uprising was quickly put down, and the monks all executed. Days later, on 1 or 2 October 1536, an uprising at Louth in Lincolnshire began. It gained the support of at least 20,000 people (some reports say double this number). The Louth Rebellion lasted for around a fortnight. It was followed weeks later by another, even larger uprising in Yorkshire known as The Pilgrimage of Grace.

The Rebel's Tale

October 1536, Hampton Court Palace.

Indoors. HENRY (aged 45) stands impatiently while HOLBEIN the Younger (aged 39) paints him. Jane SEYMOUR (aged 28), his new wife, is sitting near him, embroidering. She is nervous.

HENRY:

I can't stand this any longer! Haven't you heard there's another uprising in the North? 40,000 men have gathered. Just days after all that trouble in Louth!

JANE:

40,000?

HENRY:

At least, blast it!

JANE:

But, your majesty, your brave men dealt with Louth; surely they will do the same here.

HENRY:

This is different! This one's not some peasant rabble led by a vicar and a shoemaker, Captain Cobbler! This time it's the lords and nobles – all sworn to me, the traitors – and at their head a lawyer, one Robert Aske, Esquire. But I've sent Norfolk to deal with it – he'll not spare them.

JANE:

Aske? Robert Aske? The lawyer? But –

HENRY:

Speak up, sweet! But, what?

JANE:

He is my cousin. An honourable man, and honest –

HENRY, looking sideways at her, dangerously:

Your cousin, you say?

JANE, gathering her courage. She throws aside her embroidery and falls to her knees:

Yes, and on my bended knee, I plead, my Lord. Robert is a good, good man. Could these rebellions not be God's punishment, my Lord, for overstepping the mark? If Robert leads them, it is a true cause!

HENRY:

A true cause? Silence! Think on what happened to your predecessor, wife! Never mention his name again!

(He brushes her aside, walks round to looks at painting.)

Holbein! Are my eyes really that close together... and what do you think you're doing, painting me so... fat?

HOLBEIN:

You see far, my lord. You are grand. Mighty.

Doncaster, 6 December 1536. The Duke of Norfolk and Richard Layton are meeting with the leader of the rebellion, Robert Aske.

A royal tent. Inside it, hangings, rugs, a table in the middle. Soldiers. The Duke of NORFOLK (aged 63) sits on one side, and on the other, Robert ASKE (aged 36). In the corner, Richard LAYTON.

NORFOLK:

The King has asked me here to treat with you, Mister Aske. This uprising must stop.

ASKE:

We wish no bloodshed, merely to present our Articles.

NORFOLK:

Your... articles?

ASKE, counting off on his fingers:

One, the suppressions must cease. Two, Cromwell must be expelled. Three, the monasteries must be re-established. Four, the King must yield to the Pope's authority.

NORFOLK:

The King is Supreme Head of the Church of England, you whelp. You dare –

ASKE:

We have 40,000 men – more than your soldiers combined. We've taken York, Hull, Pontefract and Doncaster.

NORFOLK:

You insolent –

LAYTON, stepping forward:

Of course, of course. By the way, the King's new wife, the Queen Consort – your cousin, I believe? – asks after you.

ASKE, surprised:

Jane? I have not seen her for so long – is she well?

LAYTON:

Come to London, my friend, and see her yourself.

ASKE, looking from one to the other. Both LAYTON and NORFOLK are smiling.

LAYTON spreads his hands, palms up, in a conciliatory gesture:

The King offers all concerned an unconditional pardon.

ASKE, hesitates, then speaks:

I will come.

—

Aske met with Henry in London and negotiated a deal. However, fighting then broke out again in Yorkshire, and Aske was arrested and charged with high treason. Aske was hung in chains from the battlements of York Castle. The ringleaders of the Pilgrimage of Grace were arrested and executed.

After this, in the spring of 1537, the great monasteries surrendered one by one, starting with Furness.

The Scaffolder's Tale

Lewes Abbey, 1538.

We are at the top of the abbey's spire, looking down. There are gargoyles on the spire. Seagulls circle. A SCAFFOLDER is up there, hammering boards together, securing poles and timber with rope and nails. Far, far below, we see two figures emerge. One is Richard LAYTON (aged about 38), and the other, PORTINARI (aged about 50), the Italian engineer hired to oversee the deconstruction of the great abbey.

SCAFFOLDER, to himself:

Can't believe they're taking this old beauty down. It's stood here five hundred years – what a waste. All that Quarr limestone. Those tiles! Such craftsmanship, such artistry! But once Furness Abbey caved last year it's just been a matter of time.

(He pats a gargoyle, who is pulling a face.)

Mmm, I know how you feel, mate.

(Down below)

PORTINARI to LAYTON, both looking up at the spire:

It's no easy job. The church is larger than we thought – look.

(He shows LAYTON a blueprint / diagram of the church, with specifications. The specifications read:

Front wall: 10 feet thick

Height of steeple in front: 90 feet

Height of platform with the five bells: 105 feet

Circumference inside: 155,812 feet

Circumference outside: 151,200 feet

Length 420 feet width 692 feet

Height: 63 feet

Steeple: 10 feet 32 pillars

8 very large

Each pillar: 14 feet thick

45 foot round

Large pillars: 42 feet high

Height of platform of the great altar: 93 feet)

LAYTON, looking displeased:

It's beyond you, then? And yet you have brought down so many houses already –

PORTINARI, offended:

I never said I couldn't do it. You see, the scaffolds are in place already. But I will need more men, and the means to pay them –

LAYTON:

There is no shortage of men, nor means.

PORTINARI:

And not locals – I need practiced hands! Experts. Men from London. Seventeen at least. Two more carpenters, two smiths, two plumbers, one furnace-man to melt

the lead, and nine labourers. And we'll need straw – lots of it – to cushion the stones when they're thrown to the ground. Horses and carts to take the stone away.

LAYTON, making a note;

It shall be so. And quickly – we cannot have this constant looting. There is stealing nightly. Comers and goers daily –

PORTINARI:

I heard they stole glass out of the windows last night.

LAYTON:

Next they will bear away doors, and pluck down ceilings!

PORTINARI:

Very well, we start on Friday. We shall cut the wall behind the high altar, and then the foundations of these four great pillars. We shall put in props and then we will bring the whole thing down by burning the props with fire or powder.

SCAFFOLDER, up high, tying a rope:

But it's well paid, there's no denying that. And those monks are all corrupt, aren't they. Who appointed them to lord it over us?

(Close up of his foot kicking a hammer. The hammer flies off the scaffold, and falls...)

– oops!

PORTINARI:

– Watch out!

(He shoves Layton to one side. LAYTON, sprawls. The hammer lands where he was standing.)

LAYTON:

– What? I –

(He laughs.)

An omen from above, master engineer!

Morning. RICHARD LAYTON's lodgings in LEWES.

Richard LAYTON stands in front of a mirror, his arms outstretched. He is wearing his nightshift. His servant BARTELOT (aged about 35) dresses him throughout the following, which is directed to a clerk sitting at a desk nearby.

LAYTON:

Dictation: We have visited Battle, Bath and Lewes. At Battle the abbot is the arrantest churl that ever I see – a beetle and buzzard – a black sort of monk, past amendment, I am sorry to say.

(He lifts his arms over head)

At Bath we found the monks more corrupt than any others in vices –

(His nightshirt is pulled off him. He is bare-chested. BARTELOT glances at him, catches his eye)

– with both sexes.

(He raises his arms again to receive a shirt)

The place is a very stews, and unnatural crimes are present both there and at Lewes –

(BARTELOT stands very close to him to lace up shirt)

– where I found corruption of both kinds – and what is worse, treason. The subprior confessed treason to me. I made him put his name to it, and confess that the prior knew of it too! That done, I then accused him of the further crime of concealing treason. I called him heinous traitor in all the worst names I could devise –

(looks down at BARTELOT, who is now kneeling to tie his britches)

– he all the time kneeling and begging me not to tell you of this. But I regarded his words –

(BARTELOT now holds up a hand mirror. LAYTON preens.)

– but smally.

London. The office of Thomas CROMWELL. CROMWELL (aged about 53), at his desk, listening, a stack of letters before him, and a large box, and behind them, three hawks on a stand. A clerk is reading a letter.

CLERK:

‘...but smally. Lewes Abbey is now being brought down. Portinari the engineer is overseeing. I send you the goods I have taken from there. Enclosed – vincula S. Petri, which women put about them at the time of their delivery.

(CROMWELL opens the box. Picks out several long pieces of mummified tendon, holds them with distaste.)

CLERK:

I send you also a great comb called Mary Magdalene’s comb –

(CROMWELL Lifts out a comb, looks at it in bewilderment.)

CLERK:

The prior of Bath sends you these Irish hawks. No hardier hawks can be.’

CROMWELL turns and looks at the hawks. They look back at him.

Lewes Abbey. A group of workman stand around outside the Abbey. PORTINARI is there, and the SCAFFOLDER, as well as the ABBOT (aged about 55) and monks.

PORTINARI:

Get down and cover your ears!

They all crouch, apart from the ABBOT, who stands defiant. There is an explosion inside the abbey (or series). Lewes Abbey collapses before their eyes.

SCAFFOLDER, leads the ABBOT away:

Come on, Father. Let's get you home. I'll take you on my cart.

The ABBOT's home. The ABBOT stares at a carriage drawn up before his house.

ABBOT:
Who's that?

SCAFFOLDER:
No idea – hang on.

He approaches the house. The door opens, revealing a young man and woman. It is GREGORY CROMWELL (aged about 18), and his new wife, ELIZABETH SEYMOUR (aged about 20), sister of JANE SEYMOUR.

ELIZABETH:
Your father was so generous in agreeing to divide Sussex between himself and the Duke of Norfolk and in giving us this wonderful house! Oh, Greg, I love it here!

GREGORY:
I know – and everyone's moving in! The Dacres, Gage, Gainsforth, Shelley, and Bellingham – all our friends –

ELIZABETH:
So much merrymaking to be had!

GREGORY, catching sight of the SCAFFOLDER and the ABBOT:
Can I help you, my good man?

SCAFFOLDER:
I – no. We're just passing through.

—

Two months later GREGORY CROMWELL and ELIZABETH SEYMOUR fled Lewes after an outbreak of plague nearby. They moved to a former convent called the Motte, four miles out of Lewes. In 1551 GREGORY died of what was known as the 'sweating sickness'.

The Carpenter's Tale

Boxley Abbey, 7 February 1538.

Inside the monastery of Boxley. The interior has been attacked by the Commissioner's men, with shattered bits of wood, chiselled off images all around. There are, however, flowers everywhere, more than would usually be the case. The monks and abbot stand near the Roode of Grace, which is a large wooden image of Christ on the Cross. It is attached to a pillar– or was, as it is now semi-attached, hanging precariously, bits of wire protruding from its back. The monks' heads are bowed, apart from one old man at the front – the ABBOT – who is looking up at RICHARD LAYTON (aged 38). Layton is standing on the altar.

LAYTON:

What do you mean, old fool, that you know nothing of these engines and old wire at the back here? These old, rotten sticks?

ABBOT:

The Roode has not been moved for many years. Not since it was delivered to us, a miracle, on the back of a horse –

LAYTON, turned away, pulling at wires:

– a whore, you say?

ABBOT:

A horse, my lord, a riderless horse, that ran up to the door and thence to this pillar – A miracle, I tell you! The divine hand working! The King himself came here some thirty years ago, when he was but a youth, and gave us six shillings to see it! And you dare lay hands on it –

LAYTON, grunts, tugging at the wires and pulleys behind:

- and yet I am not the first, buzzard. Some cunning carpenter has been here before me!

(He opens compartment at back, wriggles his way into it. His head is no longer visible, but we hear his voice, suddenly, as Christ's mouth moves up and down.)

LAYTON (as Christ):

'Ooo, bishop, I am sore thirsty! Get me a gottle o' gear, gah'on!'

(Christ's eyes roll, and his head rolls from side to side. His eyebrows jiggle up and down.)

ABBOT and MONKS, shocked:

Blasphemer! Such impiety!

LAYTON, appearing from behind the Roode, enraged:

No! It is you who blaspheme! Peddling this false, crafty and subtle handling, to the dishonour of God, and illusion of the people!

(He accidentally knocks over giant vase of gillyflowers and roses.)

And why these blasted flowers everywhere?!

ABBOTT:

Here at Boxley the people pay their rent in flowers.

24 February, 1538. St Paul's Cross, London.

The CARPENTER, an old man, is in a crowd of people at St Paul's Cross, gathered to watch the destruction of the Roode of Grace. On a platform, LAYTON, and others are with the Roode of Grace. There is a SOLDIER on stage with a bucket of water and a bar of soap.

CARPENTER, leaning on stick, to his granddaughter, who is agog:
You know, I made the Roode of Grace! Oh yes, back in the day. The French took me as a Prisoner-of-War, back in the day of the King's father – rest his soul! I was crammed in with thirty others into a stinking hole. The guards laughed at us, and said, pay us a ransom and you're free!

GIRL:
What did you do?

CARPENTER:
Well, I said I'll make you something the like of which you've never seen before,
A living, breathing, thing, an automaton to match the finest in Europe –

GIRL:
A what?

CARPENTER:
Like a big puppet. With wires and wood and all. So they let me out, and gave me wood, and I whittled and fettled away. And when they saw it, they were so amazed they let me go, with it –

So I tied it to the back of a cart and off we go. I got to somewhere near Rochester when I was all of a sudden terrible thirsty. The horse was plodding along on its own in the right direction, so I thought, I'll just pop in here to grab a quick half –

MAN in crowd, disbelieving:
A likely story!

CARPENTER
– and when I came out, blow me down if the horse hadn't disappeared, with the Roode and all!

GIRL:
Quiet! Look! They're speaking!

LAYTON:
People of London, behold this abomination, the Roode of Grace! We bring it here so that you may be disabused of idolatry, and to show you how the monks of Boxley of many years time out of mind did get great riches! How the monks did fatten their purses and lighten yours!

Signals to a soldier, who inserts himself inside the Roode. The crowd falls silent, apart from

GIRL, in a piercing voice:
But do its eyes roll, granddad?

CARPENTER:
Hush –

LAYTON, waves hand:
Observe the artifice!

(Christ lifts his head. The crowd gasps.)

The great blasphemy in the name of God!

(Christ's eyes move left. The crowd titters. Christ shakes his head from side to side.
LAYTON, signals angrily to the OFFICER in the Roode.)

Behold the foaming pestilence that comes from the false idol!

(Soap suds appear in Christ's mouth, and trickle downwards, while Christ's eyes roll and his jaws clack. The crowd laughs. CROMWELL, infuriated, gives a signal to the soldiers on stage. They raise hammers and chisels and attack the Roode.)

Let it be known that he who made this false idol was a great sinner!

GIRL, pointing at her grandfather:
My granddad's not a sinner! He's a carpenter!

CARPENTER:
No! Be quiet –

LAYTON nods to the soldiers. The crowd closes in. A small girl screams.

The Abbot's Tale

29 June, 1539. Calais. The castle of Lord Lisle, Arthur Plantagenet, and Henry VIII's uncle.

Arthur Plantagenet, LORD LISLE (aged 47) is reading a letter to his wife, Honor Glanville, LADY LISLE (aged 46). It is morning, in their bedroom. Lisle is in bed, looking tired. She looks bright and sits at her dressing table. She is already dressed.

LORD LISLE:

Look, dear, Reginald says here that the Abbot of Glastonbury has not been spreading rumours about the King after all.

LADY LISLE, sarcastically, brushing her hair:

Now, would that be the same Reginald Pole, son of the Countess of Salisbury, my dear? The one who took himself off to France, unable to support the King's divorce? Your second cousin once removed – if we overlook your unfortunate illegitimacy?

LORD LISLE, crossly:

The King himself overlooks it, and calls me uncle.

LADY LISLE, in mirror, to herself:

As if we're ever allowed to forget it! Lord, the tangled webs of these Plantagenets! So confusing!

LORD LISLE:

But listen! Reggie says 'I have examined him to the utterest, and can find no fault in him at all'. After all, he's just an old man, dear, and not in the best of health –

LADY LISLE:

Reggie says! Reggie – Cardinal Reginald Pole no less – is not to be trusted! He assisted the Pilgrimage of Grace, for goodness' sake! This will not do. The abbot is a slanderous old goat. He says you are untrue to Henry – you cannot let this stand.

LORD LISLE, unhappily:

I shall speak to Henry, dear.

GLASTONBURY, 19 September 1539. The House of the Abbot of Glastonbury, Richard Whiting.

Night. We see a house in Glastonbury, and in the distance, the Tor. One window is lit up. It is the Abbot's study. The Abbot, RICHARD WHITING (aged 78) kneels – a small, very frail old man – while soldiers and LAYTON (aged 39) ransack the shelves around him.

LAYTON:

Well, old man, we've been surveying your estate today. Truly it is the godliest house in all the land. Four parks! Four manor houses! A great lake filled with great pike, bream, and perch. And now we come to taste your hospitality. Hmm, what have we here? Books? What sort of books can they be, old man?

WHITING, on his knees, head bowed:

Not your kind of books.

LAYTON:

Let's see! Aha! Some pardons, and some papal bulls!

(He throws them down.)

WHITING:

They are holy books. Not your new fangylles!

LAYTON:

What filth is this – a treatise against the King's Divorce from Queen Katharine!

(He slams a book down in front of WHITING)

The counterfeit life of Thomas Beckett!

WHITING, raising his head

How full you are of envy, malice and strife, Priest Layton.

16 November, 1539. Glastonbury.

A crowd standing in a semi-circle. The point of view is looking down on them. The people speak in turn.

WOMAN ONE:

So I heard all about it from my cousin. The Crafty Cardinal – Glastonbury himself – plotted with the Abbot of Reading– and was it the Prior of Colchester? – with John Onyon, Bachelor Gyles, the Blynde Harper of Grey Friars, that Savoy priest Master Manchester, Dr Holyman, Roger London, John Rugg –

MAN ONE:

– truly, what a ragman's roll of old rotten monks, rusty friars, and pockeyed priests!

WOMAN ONE:

Anyway it was all a huge conspiracy! Glastonbury gave pestilent and cankered counsel to overthrow the prince –

MAN ONE:

– a prince most puissant!

WOMAN FOUR:

They say they found gold and plate the old Abbot had hid in the walls, vaults, and other secret places. Every day they found more until they tore the Abbey down.

WOMAN THREE:

What a beggarly, monkish merchant Whiting was! Even though the King had given him 7,000 marks a year!

(We see the Abbey Gate with pools of blood leading in and beyond.)

LAYTON:

We drew him through the town upon a hurdle and executed him on the Tor Hill. He took his death patiently, asking pardon of God and the King for his offenses. What they were, he did not say. And now his body is divided. One quarter stands at Wells, another at Bath, at Ilchester and Bridgewater the rest – and here's his head upon the Abbey gate.

—

Lord Lisle was arrested on charges of conspiracy in 1540, as part of charges laid against a number of Plantagenets in France, who were accused of plotting Henry's downfall. Lisle was kept in the Tower of London for two years and then released. He died on his journey home.

In 1534 Glastonbury Abbey signed the Act of Supremacy, and the Abbot was told that the Abbey was safe from dissolution. But by 1539 it was a notable exception. Glastonbury Abbey was dissolved as part of the 1539 Act for the Dissolution of the Greater Monasteries.

The Commissioner's Tale

An image of Henry VIII, silhouetted against stained glass and a portrait of his fourth wife, Catherine Howard.

LAYTON:

I know I should be there, Bartelot, at the King's marriage to Catherine Howard. But I told him I was ill.

28 July 1540. Rectory of Harrow-on-the-Hill. LAYTON (aged 40) is standing on top of a hill, with a hooded goshawk on his arm. Behind him, an orchard. Behind him, his servant, BARTELOT (aged 37).

BARTELOT:

Are you ill, my lord?

LAYTON:

I have a heavy heart today.

(A pause.)

We had some good times, though, didn't we?

(Another pause.)

Remember that time we went to Langdon? When I bashed down the abbot's door in the middle of the night with a pole-axe?

BARTELOT:

Very clearly, my lord.

LAYTON:

Hah! I dashed it to pieces! And that little dog of his, that would not stop barking. So in I go, Bartelot, pole-axe raised, for I know the abbot is a desperate knave, and it is the middle of the night, you see – when all of a sudden out rushes his whore, alias his gentlewoman, and the tender damsel rushes straight into your arms out the back!

LAYTON:

Eight days for her in a cage in Dover, if I recall right. Happy days, Bartelot.

BARTELOT:

Happy days, my lord.

LAYTON:

Oh, and the worst of them! Those canons at Newark –

BARTELOT:

I don't recall, sir, what they did –

LAYTON:

Well, truth be told, nothing much – so I accused them of sodomy and adultery, and from then went on to smaller things to see what I could find. They were the most obstinate canons that ever I knew!

LAYTON:

But some of them really were up to no good! Remember Syon? The Bishop fixing up his cell for his wenches to pass to and fro at night! I remember the locksmith as he confessed to making keys –

BARTELOT:

Taking out bars in the window –

LAYTON:

Oh yes! Those letters from a nun to him – he told her that if she submitted her body to him during confession it would not count.

(Layton laughs. The hawk pecks at his hand.)

LAYTON:

What untruth and dissimulation we found! What falsehood, what bribery, spoil and ravine with crafty colours of bargains! And do you recall that time in '35 at Canterbury – when I almost burnt to death in my bed?

BARTELOT:

Oh yes, sir, like it was yesterday.

LAYTON:

Some fool servant must have placed a candle too near the rushes. Whoosh! That was nearly the end of me. Imagine!

BARTELOT:

Imagine that, my lord.

LAYTON:

Brrr! I feel someone stepping on my grave. So much death.

LAYTON, strokes bird's head:

I feel Cromwell's spirit here. He loves – loved – hawks so. I always made sure to make him feel at home. You shall have twenty beds in the town, I would write, and a dozen more besides in the parsonage. I sent him partridges, freshly killed. Simon the Apostle himself was never so glad to see Christ his master, as I was to see my master Cromwell in my house.

I was always his most assured poor priest–

(He unhoods the bird)

Cromwell's alter ego I.

BARTELOT, holding the bird's chain:

Now, my lord?

LAYTON:

Now.

And now Cromwell himself is in the Tower. Mercy, mercy, mercy! He cries.

(The bird is unchained. It flies off, high in the sky, until it is a just a speck.)

—

Thomas Cromwell was executed at the Tower of London on 28 July 1540, the day of Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine Howard.

Richard Layton continued to have a successful career in Henry's administration. In 1543 he was appointed as ambassador to Paris. In June of 1544 he died of unknown causes in Brussels.

Notes

Timeline:

| | |
|--|---------------|
| Death of Cardinal Wolsey | November 1530 |
| Thomas Cranmer consecrated as Archbishop of Canterbury | March 1533 |
| Henry marries Anne Boleyn | January 1533 |
| Act of Succession | April 1534 |
| Act of Supremacy | November 1534 |
| Treason Act | November 1534 |
| Cromwell appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer | April 1533 |
| Thomas More is executed | July 1535 |
| Cromwell is appointed as the king's vicegerent | July 1535 |
| Valour Ecclesiasticus and start of the visitation of the monasteries | 1535 |
| Act for the Dissolution of the lesser monasteries | February 1536 |
| Louth Rebellion and Pilgrimage of Grace | October 1536 |
| Execution of Anne Boleyn | 19 May 1536 |
| Henry marries Jane Seymour | 30 May 1536 |
| Act for the Dissolution of the greater monasteries | 1539 |
| Execution of Thomas Cromwell | July 1540 |

All of the stories within this book were inspired by documents held by The National Archives. The documents are open to the public and can be found through The National Archives' catalogue using the following document references:

SP 1/22
SP 1/31
SP 1/55
SP 1/80
SP 1/82
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SP 1/241
SP 3/13
SP 5/4
KB 27/997
KB 27/963
C 65/143
E 344/22

E322/12
E164/25
MP CC1/7

Key:

SP = State Paper
KB = King's Bench
C = Chancery
E = Exchequer
MP = Maps and Plans

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Back Cover

In the summer of 2017, eight students arrived at the National Archives to embark upon a project which would become this book. Each a talented artist, aged between 17 and 20, they were given stories of the Dissolution of the Monasteries to illustrate, based on historical records held within the archives.

Written by Carol Adlam, each story tells the tale of a real event from the Dissolution, through the experiences of the people who would have been there. From the lowliest builder to the Abbot of Lewes Abbey, the tales show the wide ranging effects of Henry VIII's determination to dismantle the existing Catholic church in the formation of the Church of England.

Each student could illustrate their tale in their own style, using any medium they desired. These tales are now presented in this graphic novel to bring you the story of The Chronicles of the Dissolution.

