

Obedientiaris: Offices of the Abbey

Obedientiaris, or offices of the abbey, were contemporary to those specified by the Rule of Benedict; however, the loose structure of rotating offices, as prescribed by St Benedict, was not suitable to the structured *ordo* of the Cistercians. Officials of offices (*obedientarii*) were often exempt parts of the daily liturgical observances in order that they could execute their duties.

Abbot (*abbas* or *pater monasterii*)

The abbot was father of the community. He was as Christ within the Abbey and held absolute authority over all its inhabitants and hired labour. He maintained discipline, ensuring those who faulted atoned for their wrong.

He was elected by the whole community under supervision of the father-superior - the abbot of the motherhouse. The abbot-elect made his oath of office to the monastic community in the chapterhouse, and was then invested with the symbols of his office (a crozier and ring worn on the middle finger of the right hand) by the father-superior. He would then receive 'obedience' from his community, and was then consecrated by the diocesan bishop.

An abbot was both the spiritual and material leader of the community, and was to be possessed of moral and practical skills. He would deliver sermons in chapter and on feast days of the liturgical calendar - namely; the first Sunday of Advent, Christmas Eve, Epiphany, Palm Sunday, Easter Ascension and Pentecost, the Birth of St John the Baptist, Solemnity of St Peter and St Paul, Solemnity of St Benedict, All Saints' Day, the four Marian days (Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary - or Candlemas, The Annunciation of the Lord, The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary - or Marymas, and the Birth of the Virgin Mary), and the anniversary of the dedication of the abbey church

The abbot was also involved in worldly matters beyond the precinct in order for the abbey to prosper. He was the public image of both his abbey and of the Order, and was influential in the success (or lack of) in obtaining benefactors and patrons. He would often be absent from the abbey to undertake obligations of the Order (visitations as father-superior, attending General Chapter or as otherwise delegated), or on ecclesiastical or royal business. Some abbots spent more time away from the abbey as mediators or councillors to secular leaders, and travelling on diplomatic missions at royal or ducal courts, than they spent inside. Although frequent and prolonged absences could be damaging, this was greatly compensated for by the many opportunities of additional patronage and endowments accrued from the resultant relationships.

Abbots were often required to host and entertain guests of status. Infirmarys were often used (until bespoke abbatial accommodation was built within the precinct) for which the General Chapter often expressed displeasure.

The abbot was a very demanding role, and it was not uncommon for abbots to retire (or even resign). A retired abbot received a pension for life, a chamber within the monastery with the right to have private servants, and a generous supply of food.

A list of abbots of Sawtry Abbey, and the periods of their respective abbacy, can be found at the end of this article.

Prior (*prior*)

The prior was the 'eye and hand' of the abbot, and as such was second only to the abbot in importance. He gave the signal for labour and chapter, ensured monastic observances, and took the place of the abbot in the routine of the abbey when the abbot was otherwise engaged. He presided in the refectory, when the abbot was with guests to the abbey, signalling when to begin and leave off eating.

In larger abbeys he was assisted by the sub-prior.

Cellarer (*cellerarius*)

The cellarer was one of the principal offices of the abbey with regard to both importance and responsibility, and had all the cooks and lay brothers under his jurisdiction. The Rule of Benedict gave the qualities of a good cellarer as being, 'prudent, of mature character, temperate, not a great eater, not proud, not headstrong, not rough-spoken, not lazy, not wasteful, but a God-fearing man who may be like a father to the whole community'.

The cellarer was responsible for all the victualling of the abbey, which required him to speak to all the lay brothers (however, only two lay brothers were permitted to speak to the cellarer at any one time), to guests and travellers, but not to the monks or novices. He provided all the food and drink to the kitchens, ensuring the proper quantity of food for each monk was properly weighed out, and provisioned the proper quantity of beer, wine or cider. After the meals were concluded, he would send the remains to the abbey gates for relief of the poor. The cellarer also ensured relief for the sick and, with the permission of the prior, relief for all others who were in need, and ensured guests were well looked after.

He led novice lay brothers to the chapterhouse when they asked to be received, and again at the end of their novitiate to make their profession. He also assisted lay brother novices when making their profession.

The cellarer managed the economic affairs of the abbey, the maintenance of buildings and services, supervised the abbey workforce (lay brothers, hired help, paid servants), oversaw all the granges and other properties (including visitations), oversaw land management of all the abbey estates, oversaw payments of money or in kind, planned the planting and harvesting of crops, and the marketing and selling of produce.

In larger abbeys he was assisted in all this by the sub-cellarer.

Sacristan (*vestarius*)

The sacristan was another of the principal offices of the abbey, who was responsible for the general care of the church. His office, the sacristy, was in the north end of the east range and adjoined the south transept of the church. The main duties of the sacristan included opening and closing the doors to the church, preparing the abbot's crozier and stole when needed, assisting the abbot in blessing the monastic crown, making the altar bread, making candles and keeping the holy oils - and ensuring a sufficiency of both, providing ashes and palms when needed, cleaning the chalices weekly and sweeping the church. Whenever a novice made his profession as a monk and ceremoniously received the tonsure, the sacristan burned the hair clippings in a special basin - the *piscina*.

After church services the sacristan rinsed the corporals, veils, towels and altar cloths in separate bowls and then passed the altar cloth to the cellarer to be washed with the rest of the linens. He then washed the others in warm lye-water and dried them; the sacristan then

wore albs and smoothed the corporals with a smoothing stone, folded them in three and carefully put them away until next time.

The sacristan was also the time-keeper for the abbey, and it was his responsibility to set the clock. At the time of rising, he trimmed the church and dormitory lamps and rang the Great Bell to wake the abbey. He also sounded the bell for all the hours, services in the church and for meals.

The sacristan was responsible for the lights in the dormitory and cloister. In smaller abbeys with no librarian the sacristan also looked after the library.

The sacristan was assisted by a deputy, and possibly other helpers, depending on the size of the community.

Porter (*portarius*)

The porter was another office of importance as it was he who, due to his daily interaction with the outside world, presented the image of the abbey to the secular world beyond the precinct. The importance of this office was reflected throughout the Order by the number of monks who held this post being promoted to the abbacy.

The porter manned the abbey gate from Lauds until Compline each day, when he returned to the cloister. He welcomed visitors to the abbey and announced their arrival to the abbot, distributed alms to the poor and needy, and ensured that the community was not disturbed by the comings and goings of outsiders. The porter wore an apron-like work garment known as the scapular while working. As the porter manned the gate all day, he was not able to attend all the services in the church and was excused from attending the daily Offices, but was expected to pull up his hood and stand at the gate in silence when the monks were celebrating an Office in the church.

The porter distributed the remains of the abbey's meals, that were sent by the cellarer, at the abbey gates for relief of the poor.

Guest-Master

The guest-master, or hosteller as he was also known, was the monastic official in charge of the guest complex, and was helped by at least one lay brother; several monks were also appointed on a weekly basis to help him.

After visitors had been formally received by the porter, they were introduced to the guest-master who tended to them until their departure and, if necessary, mediated on their behalf. For instance, if a visitor became ill or was about to die, the guest-master notified the prior or the monastic official responsible. One of the guest-master's duties was to prepare the ceremonial washing of visitors' feet, known as the Maundy of the guests. The guest-master was also involved with the proceedings on Maundy Thursday, when a number of poor folk were led into the cloister for the symbolic washing of their feet, and thereafter refreshed in the hospice. The guest-master was permitted to speak with everyone who ate or slept in the guesthouse, and if he was busy with guests he was excused from claustral activities.

Master of Novices

The master of novices was another principal office in both importance and responsibility, that required a good theological grounding and the ability to demonstrate the virtues of a monk by example. It was he who prepared the next generation of monks.

He taught novices (namely, those men who wished to enter the monastic life but had first to undergo a one-year trial period to test their suitability, and to learn about Cistercian life) the ways of monastic life and observance of the Rule. The master of novices oversaw their studies, provided them with their needs, and offered care and support during difficult emotional periods. He was to talk often with the novices about spiritual matters, enquire regularly of their sincerity for a monastic vocation, and deter them from despondency and melancholy. He corrected the negligence of novices by word or sign and only spoke to them within the novitiate. The master of novices took them to chapter on the feasts of sermons to hear the sermon, and gave them penances when they faulted in public.

He noted their day of entry as a novice and when they would make their petitions, and ensured each read the Rule before making their petition. The master of novices prepared them for the profession one year after their entry, and assisted them during their profession ceremony; especially with donning the habit. He also assisted the newly professed monks with taking their things to the refectory, and showed them their allotted bed in the dormitory. The master of novices retained permission to speak with new monks in the auditorium for two months after the profession ceremony.

Cantor (*precentor*)

The cantor was the chant- and choir-master who, along with the sub-cantor, was responsible for making sure all the monks sang when in the choir; each responsible for one side of the choir. He made solo intonations during mass, helped monks practice their chants, and was responsible for the choir books.

He was the record keeper for the abbey, responsible for the copying of manuscripts and for the schedule of professions.

If the abbey had no office of *armarius*, the cantor acted as the librarian and, as such, was responsible for the armarium, and the common books within, which he provided for reading within the refectory and cloister. He locked the armarium after compline, during work time and mealtimes.

In the absence of the abbot, the cantor anointed the dying and buried the dead.

Infirmarian

The infirmarian was another of the principal offices in both importance and prestige, who was in charge of the monks' infirmary. He was not academically trained in medicine (Cistercian monks were prohibited from studying at university) but had practical knowledge in medicinal care.

The infirmarian was responsible directly to the abbot for the infirmary and the care of the infirm, sick and elderly choir monks of the abbey. He was permitted to speak with his patients to determine their illness and their treatment, but was to do so quietly and in designated areas; this was not to be an excuse for gossip. The infirmarian also oversaw those recuperating after blood-letting; which was periodically undergone by every member of the community to keep him in good health. Elderly monks who were unable to observe the full rigours of the monastic life might also stay in the infirmary and be cared for by the infirmarian.

The infirmarian's duties within the infirmary included making sure that the fire was lit, lighting the candles for Matins, cleaning the bowls that had been used at blood-letting and disposing of the blood. On Saturdays he washed the feet of anyone staying in the infirmary, if they wished, and shook their clothing.

Refectorian

The refectorian was responsible for the choir monks refectory. It was his duty to lay the table for the monks' meals and drinks, and was helped by several monks appointed on a weekly basis. The refectorian, therefore, set out the spoons, napkins, bread and ale, and gathered their napkins and leftovers once they had finished.

Circator

The circator was a deputy of the prior who made rounds of the abbey, reporting to the prior anything that was amiss.

Thurifer

The thurifer carried the thurible, or censer, during church services.

Master of Scriptorium

The master of scriptorium oversaw the copying of books, records and other manuscripts.

Copyist

The copyist(s) worked in the *scriptorium*, copying books, records and manuscripts.

Blood-Letter (*minuator*)

The blood-letter was a competent practitioner for blood-letting.

Master of Lay Brothers (*magister conversorum*)

The master of lay brothers assisted the cellarer in training novice lay brothers and visiting granges.

Lay Brothers' Infirmarian (*magister infirmarius*)

The lay brothers' infirmarian cared for the sick and elderly lay brothers of the abbey. His duties and responsibilities were generally as those of the monks' infirmarian.

Grange Master or Granger (*magister grangiae*)

Each grange master oversaw a particular grange. He was normally a lay brother, but could be a monk in respect of a home grange. Each grange master was answerable to the cellarer.

The grange master assigned lay brothers to their work, oversaw the employment of hired labour, submitted accounts and undertook all necessary purchases and sales.

Librarian (*armarius*)

In those abbeys with extensive book collections, the office of librarian was established with sole responsibility for the care of books in the *armarius*. In such circumstances, the sacristan was dissolved of that responsibility.

Bursar (*bursarius*)

From the fourteenth century onwards, the office of bursar evolved from the cellarer as a separate official who managed all financial matters and supervised the cash incomes (such as rents) of the abbey.

Procurator

The procurator was another office that evolved from the cellarer in the fourteenth century, as a separate official who represented the abbot on all legal and business matters. This office was not established in all abbeys.

Sub-Offices

Sub-offices were established when it was warranted by the size of the community, in order to prevent the official of the prime office from being overwhelmed by the demands of his office.

Sub-prior, helped the prior to maintain discipline and the organization of monastic life; for example, he checked that no monk snoozed in the choir or misbehaved in the cloister. If the prior was sick, busy or, for some reason, unable to fulfil his duties, the sub-prior acted as his deputy.

Sub-cellarer, assisted and deputized for the cellarer in larger abbeys. He undertook these duties when the cellarer was involved in more important matters.

Sub-sacristan, assisted the sacristan in larger abbeys.

Sub-cantor (*succentor*), assisted the cantor in making sure all the monks sang when in the choir; he was responsible for one side of the choir.

Weekly rotations

Cooks and **abbot's cook**, these were weekly rotations of all the brethren. They received a blessing and started their work immediately after the night office. On the occasion when a feast had two masses, one cook heard the first Mass and the other cook the other Mass. When one of the cooks had to sing the gospel or epistle, he attended the Mass appointed for this. The cooks provided hot water for shaving and put warm water in the cloister when the *lavabo* froze. They also cut the wood for the kitchen fire.

Reader, received blessing after the major Mass on Sunday. He sang the reading (as in church) in the refectory during meals once prayers had been said. Readings were homilies or scripture.

Guest-Master's Assistants, several monks were appointed on a weekly basis to help the guest-master.

Refectorian's Assistants, several monks were appointed on a weekly basis to help the refectorian in the refectory.

Abbots of Sawtry Abbey

Hugh	1157 to 1164
Payn	1164 to 1176
Alexander	1195 to c.1228
Ralf	c.1228 to c.1278
Adam	c.1278 to c.1289
William	c.1289 to c.1299
Laurence	c.1299 to c.1303
John	c.1303 to c.1314
John	c.1314 to 1320
Roger of Hertford	1320 to 1338
Ralf Beville	1340 to 1348
William	1351 to c.1391
Thomas de Spalding	c.1391 to 1409
Robert de Spalding	1409 to 1413
John Fulborne	1444 to c.1452
John Alconbury	c.1452 to unknown
Henry	1524 to 1527
Richard	1529 to 1531
Robert	1531 to 1533
William Angell	1534 to unknown (possibly dissolution)

Notes:

abbatial crozier - symbolized a pastoral staff that embodied the leadership and pastoral authority of the abbot and often featured on abbatial tombs.

abbatial ring - signified the spiritual marriage between the abbot, his community and the church.

homily - a commentary that follows a reading of scripture, usually given during Mass at the end of the Liturgy of the Word.

lye-water - used as a laundry 'detergent'; lye was obtained by leaching fire ashes and collecting the resultant concentrated lye, which was then diluted in water as needed.

stole - a liturgical vestment worn in the fashion of a scarf.

tonsure - shaving the crown of the head and leaving a 'crown' of hair.

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