

Article #10 - Female Houses (Nunneries)

The origins of Cistercian female houses lay with the wives and female relatives of those who entered Citeaux Abbey (France) with Bernard in 1113. This first Cistercian female community was originally settled in Molesme (France) but in the same year relocated to Jully in Langres (France) where they established a Priory. Although a foundation of the Cluniac monastery of Molesme, the nuns adhered strictly to the Cistercian *ordo*. A second Cistercian female community was founded in Tart, near Genlis in Burgundy (France) in 1125. Although a daughter-house of Jully Priory, it is considered as the first true Cistercian nunnery; Tart Abbey itself was to found eight daughter-houses.

In the early thirteenth century Cistercian nunneries were filiated to either Citeaux Abbey or Clairvaux Abbey (France). In 1213, the General Chapter regularised the rules pertaining to Cistercian nunneries. Nunneries incorporated into the Order were to be fully enclosed, and no new nunneries were to be founded without the consent of the General Chapter. Although the abbess of a nunnery held the same position of authority over their house as an abbot, they were not equal in status nor in the decision making process of the Order; as exemplified by abbesses being barred from attending General Chapter. Nunneries were to be under the care and supervision of an abbot who carried out the annual visitations of a Father Immediate and provided for the nuns' spiritual needs, celebration of Mass and confession; abbesses were not to be present during the filial visitation of an abbot. Mother Abbesses who made their own visitations to daughter-nunneries were not to change anything ordained by an abbot. In 1218, the General Chapter decreed that nunneries should be located no closer than five miles to a male abbey, in order to prevent economic competition between the two. During the period 1220 to 1241, the General Chapter issued numerous statutes prohibiting the incorporation of newly founded nunneries into the Cistercian order. Despite these statutes, however, the founding and incorporation of nunneries into the Order flourished in the first half of the thirteenth century; culminating in a peak between 1235 and 1245, with few nunneries being founded after 1250. In Germany, for instance, approximately 235 Cistercian nunneries were founded between 1200 and 1250 with a further fifty by 1300. In 1251, Pope Innocent IV issued a Papal bull allowing the General Chapter to refuse any more nunneries into the Order, however, the fervour had already passed and the marked reduction in new nunneries was a natural decline rather than a result of the Papal bull.

In England and Wales only two nunneries were recognized by General Chapter as having been incorporated into the Cistercian Order; Tarent Abbey (Dorset) and Marham Abbey (Norfolk). However, a nunnery that had chosen to follow the Cistercian *ordo* could be formally considered as 'being Cistercian' by a Cistercian abbot or a senior clergy (archbishop or bishop), and would receive the same privileges and freedoms as male Cistercian houses; as many as thirty-three nunneries were so identified, of which thirteen are confirmed as such in the *Monasticon Anglicanum*.

In the main, nunneries were similar to their male counterparts. All nunneries were subordinated to an abbey, the abbot of which was the Father Immediate who conducted visitations as he would on any of his subordinate abbeys; in the case of Marham Abbey, Sawtry Abbey (Huntingdonshire) and Sibton Abbey (Suffolk) were the closest male Cistercian abbeys, so it is quite possible the abbots of Sawtry Abbey became the Fathers Immediate and had filial responsibility as such. Some abbots with filial responsibility of a nunnery complained of the burden this placed on their abbeys; financially - as nunneries were less self-sufficient due to smaller endowments and donations than their male counterparts, and spiritually - as ordained monks were sent as chaplains to the nunneries. Female communities comprised of choir nuns, novices and lay-sisters (who worked within the inner court) and lay-brothers (who remained in the outer court, worked the granges and managed other properties), an ordained monk who was the resident chaplain who celebrated mass, preached and heard confession (who also lived in the outer court) - in

larger communities there would be more than one chaplain. Choir nuns followed the *opus dei* in the same manner as monks and knew all 155 psalms. Nunneries were led by an abbess (or prioress, in smaller communities) whose symbol of office was as that of an abbot, the crozier, and whose responsibilities for the daily routine, economy, liturgical observances and reception of guests were no different to those of an abbot. The economy of a nunnery was more dependent on rents, control of parish church and tithes, and the right to appoint priests, rather than income from granges. Unlike monks, nuns ran schools for girls where they taught both the basic *trivium* (grammar, logic and rhetoric) and the advanced *quadrivium* (arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy). They also cared for the sick and poor, performed penitentiary services (rites of reconciliation), and intercessory prayers for benefactors and patrons. Female houses were commonly involved in caring for lepers and many Cistercian nunneries served as a mausoleum for wealthy families; in 1202, the nunnery of Trzebnica (Poland) was founded by Duke Henry the Bearded of Silesia and his wife Hedwig with the specific purpose of being the place their burials and for perpetual liturgical commemoration, it also served as the place where Hedwig would retire to following the death of Duke Henry.

List of Cistercian Female Houses in England

Dorset

- Tarent Abbey

Lincolnshire

- Greenfield Priory
- Legbourne Priory

Norfolk

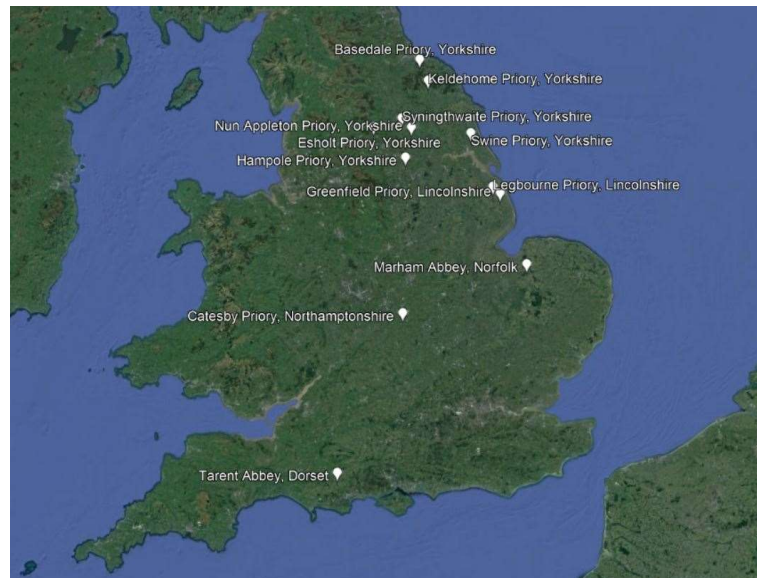
- Marham Abbey

Northamptonshire

- Catesby Priory

Yorkshire

- Basedale Priory
- Hampole Priory
- Hoton Priory*
- Keldholm Priory
- Nun Appleton Priory
- Codenham Priory* (of Nun Appleton)
- Syningthwaite Priory
- Esholt Priory (of Syningthwaite)
- Swine Priory
- Wickham Priory*



English Nunneries (*locations unknown and not shown on image)

Referenced Documents

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Article #11 - Novitiate

Unlike other monastic orders, the Cistercian order did not accept oblates (children under the age of fifteen). Postulants (those wishing to be accepted into the Order) were to be aged fifteen years or older; this was later raised to the age of eighteen years by a statute of the General Chapter in 1175 - an abbot was to send away any postulant who looked younger in stature, face and demeanour. They were to be literate (able to read Latin) in order that they could begin theological and spiritual training from the start (they were to know the psalms by heart by the end of their *novitiate*), whilst other studies focused on the Rule of Benedict. In 1349, in an attempt to counter the rapidly declining numbers of choir monks, the General Chapter reduced the requirement for postulants to be of 14 years of age - in order that they would be fifteen years of age when making their profession. Postulants must not be married, convicted or suspected of heresy, and were to detach themselves from their families. A postulant or novice who was found to be married, convicted or a heretic was to be sent away immediately or locked-up. They must also not already have been accepted into another monastic order.

Postulants were first admitted to the gatehouse where they remained for at least four days, after which they were brought to the chapterhouse where they prostrated themselves before the abbot. The abbot then asked *quid petis* (what do you ask for?), to which postulants would reply *misericordiam Dei et vestram* (the mercy of God and to be received). Postulants then stood and were told by the abbot of the difficulties of monastic life and asked if they were willing to embrace it. If they were willing to do so the postulants replied 'yes' and returned to the gatehouse for three more days. On the third day postulants became novices and were taken to the *cella novitorium* (novices dayroom and dormitory) to start their year-long *novitiate*.

The twelve months *novitiate* was a period of assimilation into monastic life, its routines and rituals under the guidance and supervision of the monastic official known as the novice-master; preparatory to the solemn ceremony of profession, when the novice was permanently admitted into the community. During their *novitiate*, novices followed the same daily routine and received the same diet as the choir monks, but were not yet considered full members of the community. They worked, rested, read and slept at the same times as the monks, and ate the same food at the same time as the monks. Novices did not, however, go to daily chapter. Novices wore monastic habits without the cowl, were not tonsured, ate and slept separately (in the *cella novitorium*) from the choir monks, and always walked behind the monks in procession. If a novice died he received the same privileges as a monk. At the end of their *novitiate* the cellarer again led the novices to the chapterhouse where they made their profession to the abbot and received the tonsure, whereby the crown of the head was shaved. The ceremony of profession then continued in the church where Mass was celebrated, and the new monks took vows of obedience, stability and chastity. They were then officially welcomed as full members of the monastic community and took their place with the rest of the monks in the church, refectory and dormitory.

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