



Continuity at Westminster Abbey teachers' notes

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Follow-up questions

1. 'For the majority of people living in England, worship in the parish churches remained mostly unchanged despite the religious upheaval of the 16th Century.' Discuss.
2. To what extent did Elizabeth's policy of 'via media' secure a lasting religious stability in England?
3. Despite religious change, pilgrimage remains at the heart of Westminster Abbey. What does this tell us about the impact of the Reformation on everyday faith?

Transcript

In January 1066, King Edward the Confessor lay dying at his palace in Westminster, next to the river Thames. Though childless, he must have taken comfort knowing that his greatest legacy and the work of twenty years, the great Benedictine monastery church of Westminster Abbey, was all but complete. Edward had planned this church to be his final resting place and in fact the church would become the royal mausoleum, housing the tombs of 30 kings and queens. After Edward's canonisation in 1161, the most prestigious place for royal burial was around St Edward's shrine. Many of the most famous medieval kings are buried here; Edward I, Richard II and Henry V to name but a few.

By the late 14th century, there was no more room for royal burials around St Edward. When Henry Tudor became king, he was forced to seek an alternative final resting place. Henry decided to build a new Lady chapel at the east end of Westminster Abbey that would surpass the glories of the 13th century church in terms of beauty and architectural splendour. This would be the final resting place of the new Tudor dynasty.

What do you think? Did Henry achieve his goal? Henry and his wife Elizabeth of York are both buried here. Although Henry VIII chose to be buried elsewhere, the bodies of the other Tudor monarchs; Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I, all lie within this chapel. In a church, the east end is usually considered the most holy. Henry's Lady Chapel lies at the east end of the church and his tomb is situated directly in line with the Shrine of St Edward. This visual line of continuity stretching back from Henry VII to St Edward, was a carefully managed piece of Tudor propaganda. Throughout the Middle Ages it had been important for kings to be seen as having a connection to the saint who was not only the patron saint of England, before St George replaced him in the 14th century, but also the patron saint of the royal family.

Burial at the Abbey is not the only reason for the close connection between the Royal family and this church of course. From 1066, all coronations have been held here too. In 1485, Henry Tudor defeated King Richard III at Bosworth. Despite being crowned at the battle site, it was essential for Henry to have a formal coronation at Westminster Abbey to help legitimise his claim. Henry was careful to ensure that his coronation took place before his marriage to Elizabeth of York to avoid being seen as reliant on his wife for his authority. His son, Henry VIII, was given a full Catholic coronation ceremony in 1509 alongside his new wife, Catherine of Aragon. Despite the religious upheaval of the subsequent years, it is interesting to note that Elizabeth I's coronation in 1559 was the last Catholic coronation ceremony to take place in the Abbey. As a Protestant, Elizabeth had managed to insist that the Gospel readings take place in English as well as in Latin but that was the only nod to her faith permitted during this significant occasion, full of tradition.

During the Reformation, shrines and holy relics across England had been destroyed as part of the new Protestant reaction to Catholic practices. Most famously in 1538, the Shrine of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury was smashed to pieces and his bones supposedly thrown into the river on Henry VIII's orders. The monks of Westminster must have foreseen this turn of events because they hid the bones of St Edward just before the monastery was dissolved under Henry VIII's orders in 1540.

Visiting the Abbey today, you might be surprised to learn that St Edward's shrine is still very much at the heart of this great church. Pilgrims still pray in the niches of the restored shrine. After Henry VIII and Edward VI had all but stripped the country of relics and shrines, Mary I did what she could to reinstate them during her five-year reign. As a Catholic, pilgrimage was a very important part of her worship and so she reopened Westminster Abbey as a Benedictine monastery and restored the Shrine of St Edward. His bones were brought back and reburied inside the Abbey. Elizabeth's policy of finding the 'via media', or middle way, between Protestantism and Catholicism meant that although she was responsible for finally closing the monastery at Westminster, she did permit St Edward's Shrine to remain.

Elizabeth I re-founded Westminster Abbey in 1560 as a church within the reformed Church of England tradition and it has remained so ever since. The Shrine of St Edward is open for private prayer still and pilgrims still visit the site and pray for healing just as they did throughout the Middle Ages. As you sit or kneel inside this sacred space, with the light filtering through stained glass, the royal tombs all around, the feeling of connection to the medieval past is tangible.