

The Life of a Monk

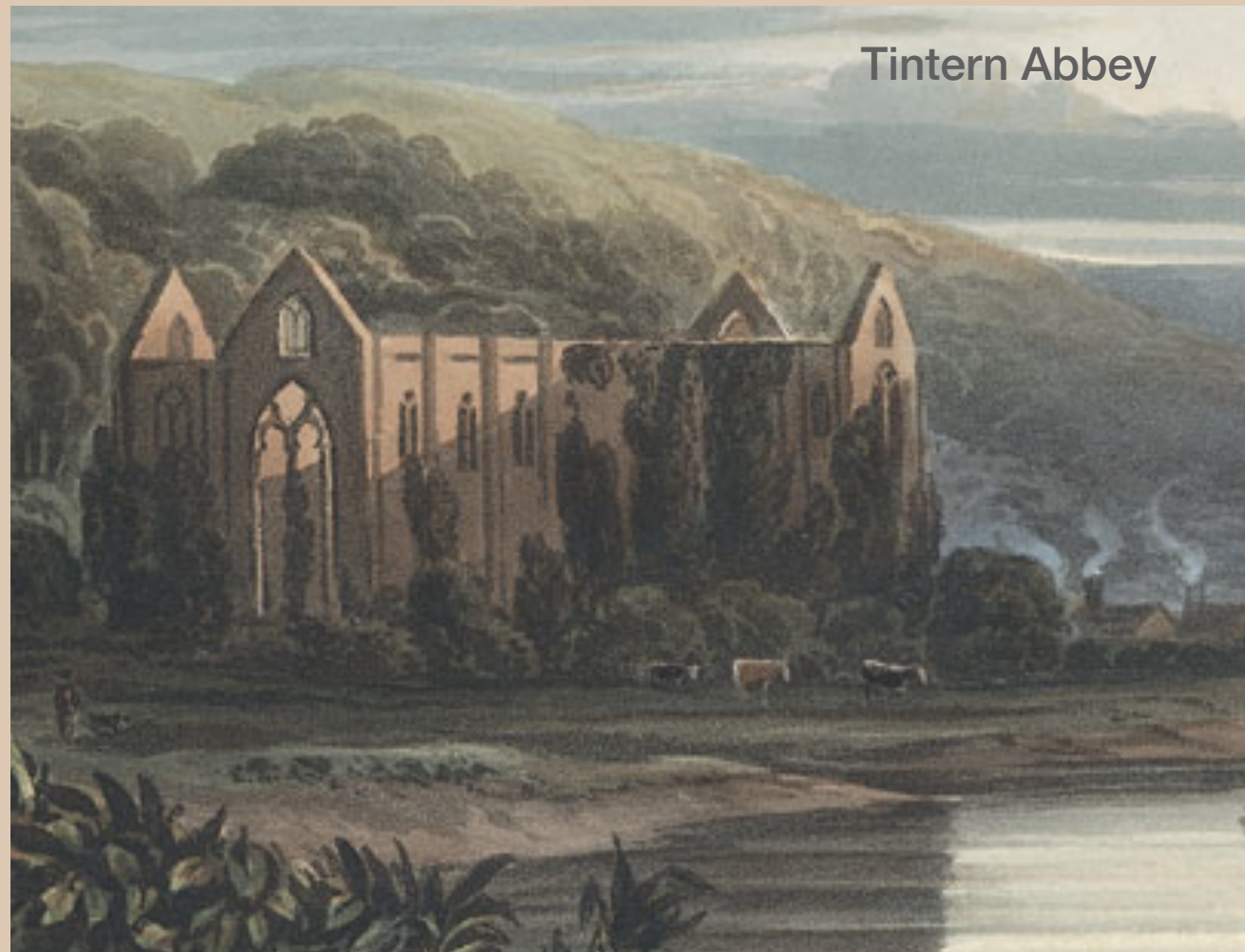
The ruins of monasteries can be seen around Wales. Here is a photograph of Strata Florida Abbey in west Wales. What was the purpose of monasteries? Who lived in monasteries? Why were they so important?



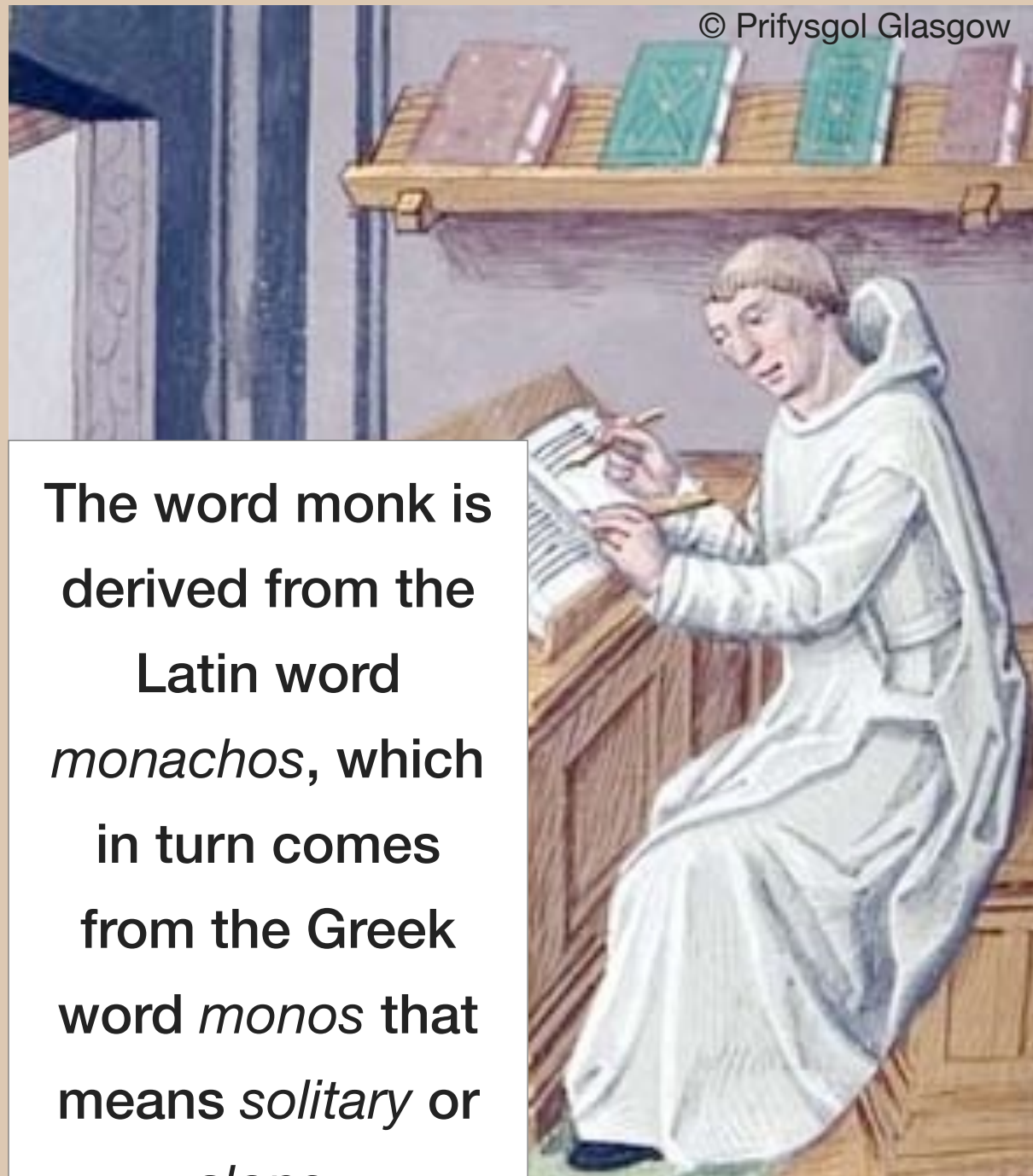
What is a monastery?

A monastery is a sacred building and a home to men called monks. Monks spend their time and their lives worshipping God. There are monks still living in monasteries across the world today. During the Middle Ages there were monasteries throughout the land.

Monasteries are different to churches and chapels because the monks lived in the monastery. Monks were given a bed, clothes and food by the monastery. They were usually located in isolated, rural places because they wanted to separate themselves from the rest of the world, and ensure they could pray in peace and quiet.



Who lived there?



The word monk is derived from the Latin word *monachos*, which in turn comes from the Greek word *monos* that means *solitary* or *alone*.

Monks lived in the monasteries. They were very religious, lived simple lives and followed certain rules to discipline themselves. The monks didn't have any possessions, they didn't even own their own clothes and they wore a simple garment known as a habit. Monks chose to live in the monastery as they wanted to help others and worship God. Many monks could read and write, something that was uncommon in the Middle Ages. The Monks concentrated on *Ora et labora*, which is working and praying.

Becoming a Monk

Any man was allowed to become a monk, rich or poor, nobleman or peasant. A vow of obedience had to be taken by every candidate. There were three important steps to becoming a monk.

Postulancy

The postulancy started after their vow of obedience. It was a month of watching and learning the ways of the monastery.

Novitiate

The novitiate was a period of training that took a year to complete. At the end of the year they would have to take a simple vow.

Solemn

The solemn vow took place 4 years later. After the solemn vow they were monks for the rest of their lives. They could not write letters home, have any outside contact and could not leave the monastery without consent. They had to live their lives by the *Rule of Benedictus*.

Hierarchy

The monastery had a strict order where everyone knew his place.

Abbot



Prior



Monk

The abbot was the head of the monastery, and was therefore a powerful man. He was also responsible for the financial aspects of the monastery.

The prior was the abbot's deputy and was responsible for the running of the monastery when the abbot was away.

The next level below the prior were the monks. Priests had a higher status than ordinary monks.

Rules of the monastery

To become a monk the men had to follow certain rules. The monks followed the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, which is similar to a handbook of how to live and act as a monk. There are 73 chapters full of advice on how monks should think and behave. Here are some of the rules the monks had to follow.

Rule of Saint Benedict

- The monks should live and work in silence.
- The monks should be obedient
- It explained how much food and drink the monks should have.
- It explained the work monks should do.
- Information on how to discipline children.
- The monks should welcome guests into the monastery.
- The monks should study in their cells.
- The monks should care for the sick.
- And much more...

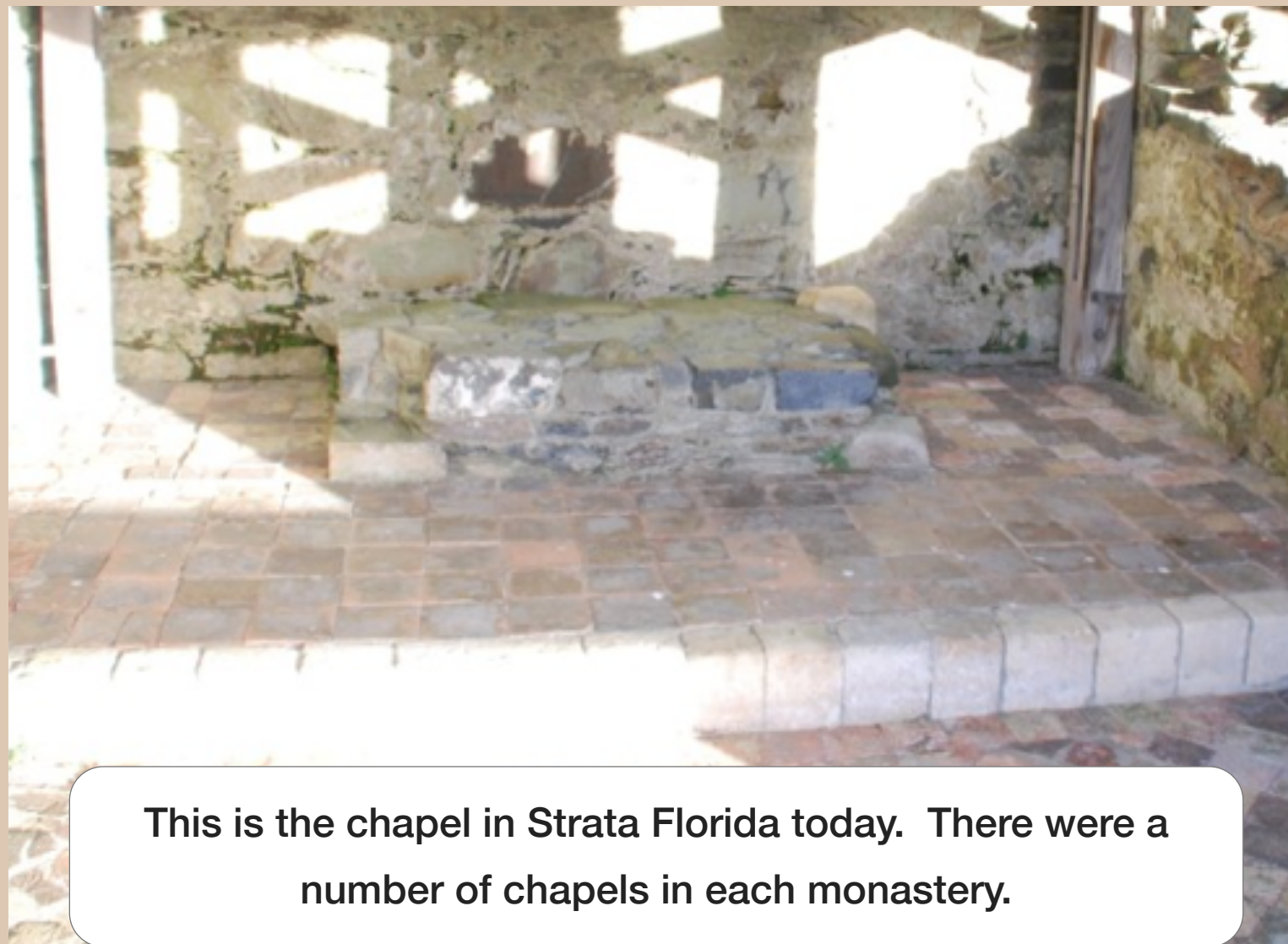
Silence

The monks worked in silence. If they did speak they had to make sure they were only talking about either work or life, anything else was considered worthless. There was no talking during meal times, and a prayer was read while they ate. The silence helped the monks concentrate. This is also why the monasteries were located in the countryside, away from all distractions. There was short space of about twenty minutes a day after supper where there was an opportunity for the monks to talk about whatever they wished.



Praying

The monks went to the monastery's chapel specifically to pray. The monks used to sing and pray at specific times of the day. There were many different prayers during the day, and they used to pray for other people as well.



This is the chapel in Strata Florida today. There were a number of chapels in each monastery.

Wealthy people paid the monasteries to pray for their families, especially for the men who had killed others in battle. The wealthy lords and princes thought that asking the monks to pray for them would guarantee they went to heaven.

Working monks

The monks did more than just pray. Here are some of the things they used to do.

Writing

The monks are famous for writing some of the earliest Welsh manuscripts that are still around today. The ability to write was uncommon in the Middle Ages, and therefore a treasured skill.

Grow food

The monks used to grow their own food to make bread, mead, honey and ale.

Farming

Farming was important to feed the monks and also for extra income.

Healing

Monks cared for people who were ill o'r suffered from diseases.

Teaching

They offered an education for children.

A perfect location

The monasteries often owned much of the land around the monastery as well. The photograph shows how the monasteries took advantage of the surrounding area.



Farm land - Good farm land was important to grow and farm crops and produce meat and wool.

Villages - This is where the common folk lived, their lives revolved around the monastery.

Rivers - The water from the river was crucial to irrigate the land and could be used for fishing. Most monasteries were located close to a river.

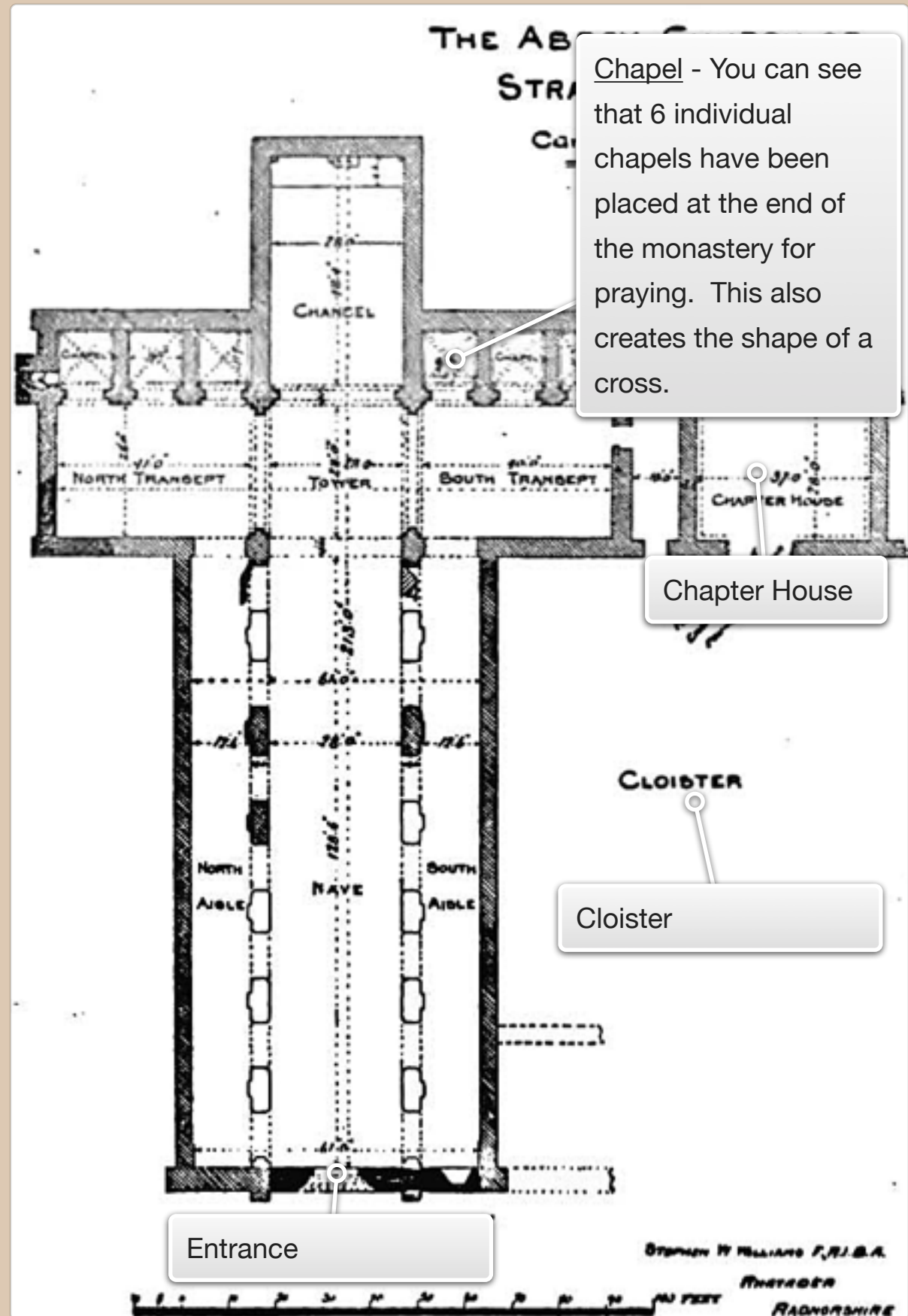
Strata Florida Abbey

Wood - The monastery owned these lands. If the common folk wanted to collect firewood and use the wood from the forest as building material they had to pay a fee to the monastery.

Shape of the monasteries

Look at the map of the monastery, which shape can you see?

This is the entrance to Strata Florida today.



Agriculture

The monasteries owned a large amount of land in Britain. The monks weren't the only ones to farm the land, the local people did so as well. The monasteries used to lease their land out to the common folk. The common folk used to farm the land and then sell the produce to the monastery.

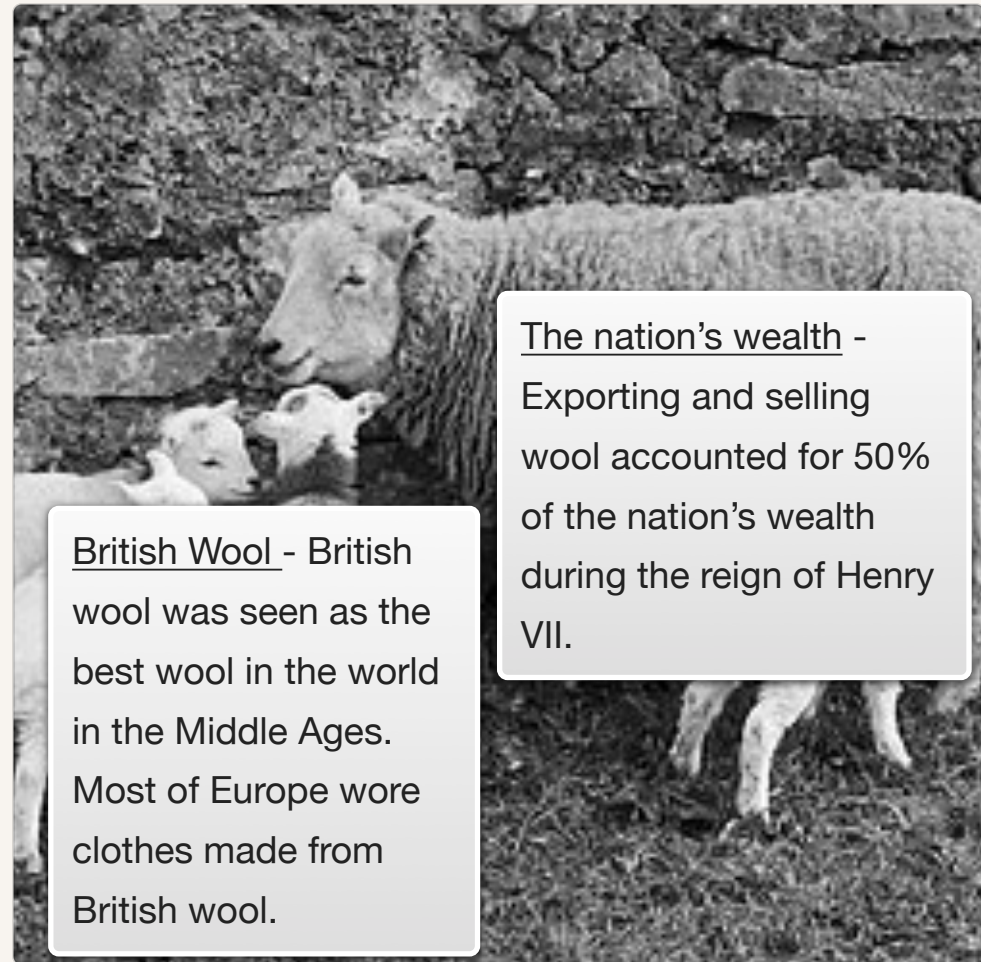
For successful cultivation they needed to water the land to allow the crops to grow and the animals to graze.

They managed to move the river's flow, by forming canals to divert the river to make farming much easier.

Why was farming important?

The common folk had to farm and grow their own food to eat or sell, or they would starve.

The importance of wool!



British Wool - British wool was seen as the best wool in the world in the Middle Ages. Most of Europe wore clothes made from British wool.

The nation's wealth - Exporting and selling wool accounted for 50% of the nation's wealth during the reign of Henry VII.

A day in the life of a monk

These were the different prayers and chants they had to perform each day.

They went to bed at 8.15 p.m. and woke up at 1.30 a.m.

9 a.m. Terce Sext 12 noon

6 a.m. Prime None 3 p.m.

3.30 a.m. Matins Vespers 6 p.m.

2 a.m. Nocturns Compline 8 p.m.

Rise 1.30 a.m. 8.15 p.m. Bedtime

