

What did Shaftesbury Abbey look like in the Middle Ages?

Once Shaftesbury Abbey was the most important nunnery in the country. If you visit today all you see are ruins. How can we find out what it looked like? This activity looks at some of the evidence. Like a jigsaw, each piece of evidence adds another piece to the puzzle. Sometimes the evidence is not accurate, or even fake - so beware!

Larger images can be found on the website - [The Saxon the Medieval Abbey](#)

Maps and photos

Maps show what the area looked like at different dates. Look at them and work out what things changed. Also look at the image Sketch 1548 on the website to see what was left of the Abbey just 9 years after Henry VIII closed it down and the nuns moved out.

1. A map made in 1615 by William Willis. This is the oldest map of Shaftesbury.

- ◆ What things are still there today?
- ◆ Why do you think some of the houses were drawn as pictures and some as plans?



Map 1650

2. A map made in 1799 by William Upjohn for the Earl of Shaftesbury.

- ◆ What things had changed since 1615?
- ◆ What things are still there today?



Map 1799

3. A plan of the foundations of the abbey discovered by archaeologists from 1817 to today.

- ◆ What things does this plan tell us about the abbey and the nuns who lived there?
- ◆ What kind of information about the abbey can this plan **not** tell us?



Excavations
plan 2002

4. Aerial photo of Shaftesbury taken in about 1999.

- ◆ What things have not changed much since 1799?



Getmapping
Aerial Photo

Objects

The Abbey Museum and the Shaftesbury Town Museum have many objects dug up at the Abbey. The Abbey was closed in 1539, so most things have either rotted or been taken away since then. The objects that have lasted best are the ones made from stone, metal or pottery. Think of all the other evidence that there would be if nothing had rotted or been taken away!

5. Floor tiles.

Thousands of floor tiles have been found at the Abbey - enough to cover the whole floor of the church. Here is one of them, showing a dog and a tree, and a group of them laid out in a pattern.



Tile with dog
design

- ◆ Does the design give you any information about life in the Middle Ages?
- ◆ Describe how the church would have looked, with tiles like these all over the floor.



Tile pattern

More activities are available on the 'Floor tiles at Shaftesbury Abbey' sheet.

6. Looking at stone carvings like these carved columns can help us to work out what the Abbey looked like.

- ◆ Describe the design on the top of the column.
- ◆ What evidence is there that these columns were up against the wall rather than in the centre of the floor?



Carved stone
columns

7. This is what the columns might have looked like in the church.

- ◆ Why do you think the row of columns was put in the church - for decoration, to hold the building up or because they had a particular use for the nuns?



Columns

8. This is part of a statue from the Abbey Church. It was once brightly painted. It was probably smashed up when the Abbey was closed in 1539. It was found hidden behind a wall in St. Peter's Church in Shaftesbury.



- ◆ Who do you think is shown in the statue (e.g. priest, nun, saint, lord, lady)?
- ◆ Do you think the figure would have been standing up (perhaps behind an altar) or lying down (perhaps on a tomb)?
- ◆ Describe how the Abbey Church might have looked if there were lots of painted statues like this around it.

Painted statue

Pictures

No pictures have survived from when the Abbey was in use by the nuns, but there are two pieces of evidence which give us some idea what it looked like at that time and soon after it was closed.

9. The Abbey's seal. This was a metal design which was pressed into wax. The wax was used to seal up a rolled up document and the seal was pressed into it to show that the document came from the Abbey. This one has a picture of a church and it is very likely to be the Abbey as it looked in the Middle Ages.



Abbey Medieval seal

- ◆ Can we be certain that the Abbey looked like the church on the seal?
- ◆ Describe the church on the seal.
- ◆ Who might be the person standing in the doorway (e.g. the Abbess, Jesus, St. Edward, King Alfred)?

10. This sketch was made in 1548, only nine years after the Abbey was closed down.



Sketch of the Abbey - 1548

- ◆ Compare the sketch with the maps and photo. Which parts of the Abbey does it show?
- ◆ Without anyone living in it, do you think the Abbey would have become a ruin after only nine years? What might have happened to make it a ruin so quickly?

Looking at other abbeys

One way we can work out what the Shaftesbury Abbey looked like is by comparing it to other abbeys and churches built at the same time.

11. Romsey Abbey. This was built at about the same time as Shaftesbury and is quite close by - it's in Hampshire.

- ◆ How does Romsey Abbey help us to understand what Shaftesbury Abbey may have looked like?
- ◆ How much are we guessing, by looking at Romsey Abbey?



Romsey Abbey exterior



Romsey Abbey interior

What other people think

Other people have spent a lot of time thinking about what Shaftesbury Abbey looked like in the Middle Ages. We can look at their ideas. However, remember that they may not have had all the evidence, or they may have wanted the evidence to fit in with their ideas, rather than the other way round. They are making **interpretations** of the evidence.

12. The historian Frank Hopton studied Shaftesbury Abbey. He described what the Abbey might have looked like: 'There were large wall spaces, .. painted in bright colours with scenes from Bible stories.'

13. Frank Hopton also drew a plan of the Abbey in the Middle Ages, by comparing the 1615 and 1799 maps with buildings still standing today.



Hopton Plan 1993

- ◆ What kind of buildings were there at Shaftesbury as well as the main Abbey Church?
- ◆ Who might have lived at the Abbey, as well as nuns, and what kind of jobs did they have?

14. The artist, Frank Garbutt, drew some pictures of life in the Abbey. This picture shows the nuns being evicted from the Abbey when it was closed down in 1539.

- ◆ How did the artist want you to feel about the nuns?
- ◆ How did he want you to feel about the two men?
- ◆ Do you think the real events happened exactly as the artist has shown them in the picture?



Nuns being evicted from the Abbey

15. Architects have studied the Abbey and made these computer graphics.

- ◆ Are they exactly like the medieval church?
- ◆ What would make the views even more accurate?



Nave



Abbey buildings

Task

Now put together all your evidence. What do you think the Abbey looked like? Either write a description or make a drawing. Add labels or notes to say what evidence you used. If you prefer, you could write a story based at the abbey, using evidence to make it more accurate.