

What were the nuns like at Shaftesbury Abbey in the Middle Ages?

Why did women become nuns in the Middle Ages? Here are some records about a few of the many hundreds of nuns who lived at Shaftesbury between 888 and 1539. Read them and then fill in the table below. The footnotes tell you where the evidence came from.

Saxon times

1. Aethelgifu, the first abbess of Shaftesbury.

She was only about 16 when her father King Alfred founded the Abbey in 888 A.D. and made her the Abbess. Alfred probably decided that she would be a nun when she was a small child, 'either for political reasons (to prevent her from diluting the royal line by producing sons), or .. because she was of delicate health.'¹

2. Aelfgifu

She was Queen of England, married to Aethelgifu's nephew, King Edmund. She came to the Abbey because she was ill ('Long anguished by the pain of sickness dire'²) and died there in 944 A.D., two years before her husband. Her mother (Wynflaed) and her mother-in-law (Eadgifu) were already living at Shaftesbury Abbey after the death of their husbands, and had promised not to remarry and to pay for their upkeep from income from their private estates.

Middle Ages

3. Nuns in 1120

The monk William of Malmesbury wrote about the nuns of Shaftesbury: 'In all their manners gentle modesty so accords with gracious austerity that no-one can surpass them. It is uncertain, indeed, whether to praise most their diligence in the service of God or their pleasantness in their converse with mankind.'³

4. Men at the Abbey

a. Priests. All monks and nuns were Catholics in the Middle Ages and only male priests were allowed. They had to lead the main services at the Abbey and listen to the nuns' confessions. Some were buried at the Abbey and their

¹ John Chandler, 'A Higher Reality', p.17

² William of Malmesbury, 'Gesta Pontificum', c.1125

³ Quoted in John Chandler, 'A Higher Reality', p.71

epitaphs are in the museum. Click on the picture to see one.

The Bishop also sent priests to Shaftesbury Abbey in 1394 to 'help' the nuns to choose the next Abbess 'since women's ill-advised frailty needed the more informed guidance of men.'⁴

b. Corrodians. They were like rich guests who paid rent and sometimes also did work for the nuns, probably just to give them something to do. Roger de Melbury was living at the Abbey in 1329 and was given a daily supply of food, bread and ale. He was in charge of looking after the metal pots and pans in the kitchen.



5. Abbess Joan Formage

When she became a nun she had made a vow of poverty, so that she gave up all her possessions. However, when she died in 1394 she left a will, which showed she was not a normal nun at all! 'She had three coats lined with fur, two furred in grey, one in white (miniver⁵), and a black cloth hood furred in grey. .. Her five golden goblets were to be sold, along with her other goblets, but a cup with a golden lid (a present from the bishop) was to go to a male relative, Nicholas Thurmond. Her furniture included a red bench embroidered with a design of birds and leaves, and with ten red cushions.'⁶ Immediately after her death the bishop annulled (stopped) her will because she was not supposed to own anything - it all belonged to the Abbey.

6. Naughty nuns

During the time when Joan Formage was Abbess, the Bishop wrote about the behaviour of some of the nuns: 'some influential nuns, very often intent upon bringing men into the infirmary⁷, held feasts and drinking sessions resulting in drunkenness, and otherwise acted there contrary to the Rule⁸. Others had amorous letters which they sent to lovers and suspect persons, sealed with appropriate seals and signets.'⁹

7. Bartholomia Raynold

'Bartholomia Raynold entered the nunnery from her home in Melcome Regis (Weymouth) when she was ten in about 1520. Before she professed her vows at the age of nineteen she visited her parents for their blessing, and confided that she would rather spend £40¹⁰ than go back to the nunnery. But the abbey

⁴ Quoted in John Chandler, 'A Higher Reality', p.70

⁵ Miniver was white fur, from the bellies of squirrels, often used on medieval robes worn by lords and ladies.

⁶ John Chandler, 'A Higher Reality', p.68

⁷ There were infirmaries at most abbeys. They were hospitals, but were separate from the main abbey buildings and some monks and nuns used them more as private houses, where they could eat well and entertain guests.

⁸ The Rule of St. Benedict, which monks and nuns followed.

⁹ John Chandler, 'A Higher Reality', p.70

¹⁰ About £13,000 in today's money – see <http://eh.net/hmit/ppowerbp/>.

servants came to fetch her, and she remained at Shaftesbury as a nun until two years before the dissolution. Unfortunately for her she had gone by the time the pensions wer handed out!¹¹

8. Alice Champnys

Most of the nuns were probably very religious. Alice Champnys wrote this in the front page of a book in the 1530s.

'O swete Jhesu, the sonne of God, the endless swetenesse of hevyn and of erthe and of all the worlde, be in my herte, in my mynde, in my wytt, in my wylle, now and ever more, Amen. Jhesu mercy, Jhesu gramercy¹², Jhesu for thy mercy, Jhesu as I trust to thy mercy, Jhesu as thou art full of mercy, Jhesu have mercy on me and all mankind redemyd with thy precyouse blode.'¹³

¹¹ John Chandler, 'A Higher Reality', p.69

¹² Grand merci – 'great thanks'

¹³ John Chandler, 'A Higher Reality', p.65

Task - What was the Abbey like as a place to live?

Look at these possible descriptions of Shaftesbury Abbey. Which do you think fits the evidence about the nuns listed above in 1 to 8? Be ready to explain why you have chosen the descriptions. You can tick more than one box if you think more than one description applies.

Description	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
A place of prayer and worship								
A place to keep women who might cause trouble								
A place where rich people could retire								
A nursing home where rich people could be cared for								
A royal palace for women								
A place where women men men and got drunk								
A place where men still ruled, even though they did not live there								