

Christianity through the Ages

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Hello, today we are going to look at the history Christianity in the east midlands.

Christianity has been a part of British society since Roman times. A great deal has changed since the Roman period, society has evolved and our language is very different from it was all that time ago. Not surprisingly there have also been changes in the way the church has been organised and how it relates to British society.

The development of the Christian church during the Anglo-Saxon period was driven by the demands of the church itself, forming alliances with Saxon and Viking Kings to strengthen its position, but working alongside them rather than through or for them.

That relationship changed with the Norman invasion. The Norman and Plantagenet kings that followed saw the Church as part of the feudal system that controlled and maintained society.

Under the feudal system the king was at the top of a pyramid power structure. Below the king were the lords and bishops, who exercise authority on the kings behalf and provided military, financial, and spiritual support to the king.

The lords were supported by the knights, who held land and provided military service. The bishops were supported by senior clergy such as abbots, priors, and priests. They also held considerable land and although they could not bear arms themselves, they certainly raised funds for the war chest and encouraged others to take up arms.

Below the knights and clergy came the commoners and laity. These were the ordinary people who were required to be loyal to both the church and the king, paying taxes and providing service to both.

So we can see that the church was a significant part of the state, but it was also a significant part of everyday life. It's hard for people in country like today's Britain to imagine, but for the people of medieval England prayer would come as naturally as breathing. This was probably helped by a very down to earth approach to understanding the bible, which we know about from surviving religious art and carols. For the medieval man or woman the simple proofs of god's work were all around them, and simple religious observances such as prayers upon waking or eating were constant reminder of this.

The buildings that were built for the church reflected the status of the clergy who presided. For the Bishops, there were cathedrals and palaces such as the Cathedral at Nottingham. Towns with cathedrals were called cities and often had special privileges. They would often have a castle as well so that both the king's military and spiritual authority was represented.

Cathedrals were large impressive buildings and would be decorated with stained glass, statues and colourful paintings.

Market towns and villages had a parish church. Much smaller than a cathedral, they would be no less lavishly decorated. Some important market towns like Worksop would attract monastic orders who would set up an enclosed religious community. These were known by different names according to the particular religious community that lived there. Worksop, for example had a Priory of Augustinian Friars.

For some, however, the religious calling overtook all other aspects of life and they turned their back on other people and spent their lives in solitude and poverty to devote themselves to prayer and meditation. These people were called Hermits and were held in high regard during the medieval period. Some had no dwelling and lived only on the gifts of food they were given by pilgrims. Many became saints after their deaths, more than the wealthy bishops and priests.

In the fourteenth century plague and famine created deep wounds in the fabric of society, in the century that followed England and other countries experienced civil wars, rebellions and the relationship between church and state became strained.

In the 16th century a political crisis about the inheritance of the English throne caused Henry VIII to break England away from the religious authority of Rome and make the church subject to the monarch. The wealth that the church had enjoyed for hundreds of years was confiscated in what became known as the dissolution of the monasteries. Buildings were demolished and lands sold to new landlords. The priory at Worksop was closed at this time and many of the buildings were demolished. But a small part of the church was left to serve the parish and the gatehouse was also kept, but in private ownership.

For ordinary people the authority of the church was lessened, and the rule of the king's law came before the laws of the church. In time some would question the need for a state church at all. This led to divisions within the church and sometimes violent confrontations.

In the centuries that followed the church and the state would become more separated to the point where we today have a society that includes many religions and beliefs, but the laws and policies of the government are determined by non-religious needs and ideas.

Religion is still an important part of life, but it is no longer decided for you how you approach it.