



# Woodspring Priory

Woodspring Priory lies about 5 miles north of Weston-super-Mare. It is tucked in beneath St Thomas's Head near the point where the River Banwell flows out to sea. Woodspring is a remote, peaceful spot and well worth a visit.

A priory is a form of religious house or monastery, whose members follow a life dedicated to the service of God. They pass their days in worship, prayer, spiritual reading and work.



*The murder of Thomas Becket depicted in a stained glass window*

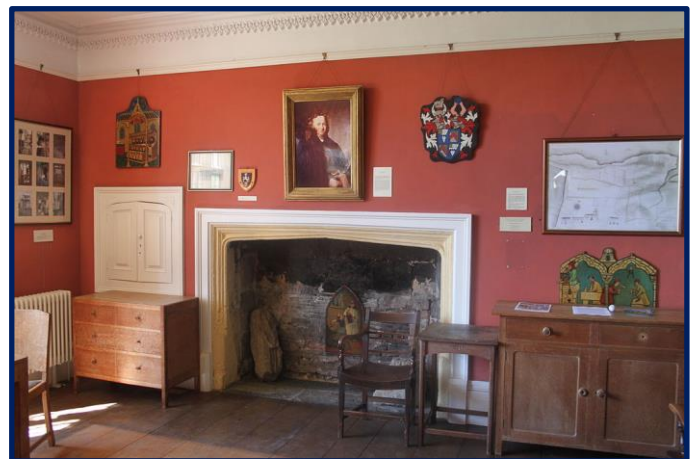
The story of the Priory began early in the 1200s. The local landowner, William de Courtenay, gave his land at Woodspring for its foundation. There was already a chapel there in which William's father was buried and it was dedicated to St Thomas the Martyr.

Thomas Becket was the Archbishop of Canterbury. In 1170 he was murdered by four knights who were believed to have been acting on the orders of King Henry II. The act so shocked people that Thomas was created a saint and Canterbury became a place of pilgrimage. One of these murderous knights was Reginald FitzUrse - an ancestor of William's and former owner of Woodspring.

The chapel was converted into the new Priory and was used to re-house a religious community from temporary accommodation at a place called Doddlynch. (The name Doddlynch appears in documents but nobody knows exactly where it was.)

The new buildings took a while to complete, but for the next three hundred years or so the Priory fulfilled its role as a religious house. Although somewhat remote, its ready access to the sea would have been a distinct advantage.

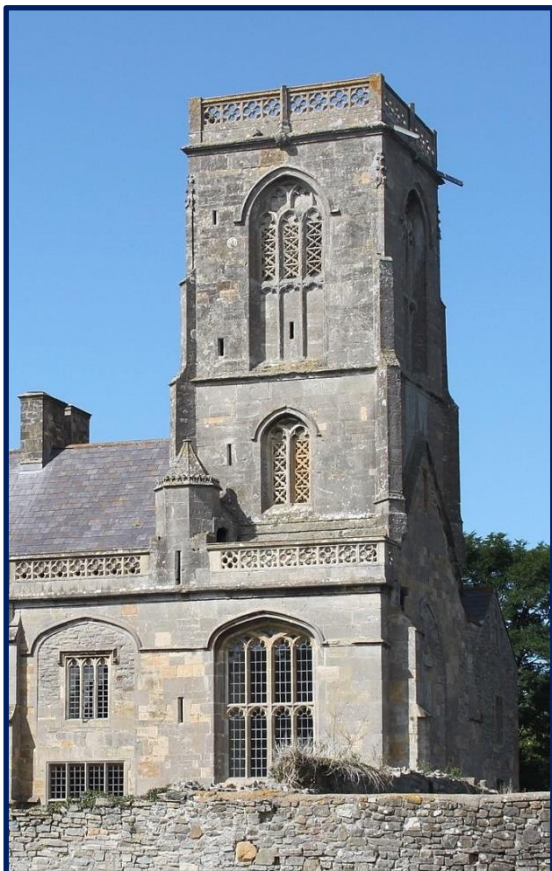
This came to an end in 1536, when it was closed, along with many other religious houses, by King Henry VIII. Henry had finally broken with the Pope and was now head of a Protestant Church of England. The community was dispersed and the land and buildings were sold off, the proceeds going to the King. This period is often referred to as the Dissolution.



*The interior of the priory today © Rodw*

The Priory went through a number of changes in the years that followed, including the destruction of some parts of the original structure. But it never fell into a state of total ruin like so many of the religious houses after the Dissolution.

New buildings were added including a farmhouse, probably built by the Pigott family in the early 1700s. Above all, the original tower still stands and is something of a landmark in this part of North Somerset.



The tower of the old priory © Rodw

In recent times the estate was bought by the National Trust and then passed on to the Landmark Trust, who let historic buildings to holidaymakers. The modern accommodation is centred on the Pigott farmhouse.

In 1849 an exciting discovery was made in the nearby parish church of Kewstoke. Hidden behind a stone wall was a carved stone object which contained the remains of a small wooden cup. These may have been a holy relic of St Thomas, the stone object being a specially designed container (or “reliquary”) and the wooden cup having once held the blood of the saint, rescued after his murder at Canterbury.

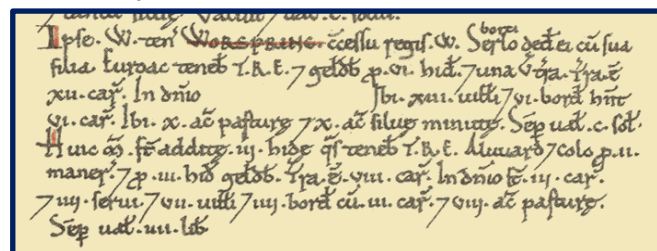
Many holy objects were destroyed or looted at the time of the Dissolution and these may have been hidden in the Church for safekeeping. Replicas of both objects can be seen in the Museum.

There is also a replica of the seal of the Priory, which was used when signing documents. A few drops of molten wax were dropped on the document and while it was still soft the seal was pressed into the wax. This proved that the documents were genuine. If you look carefully you can see the head of St Thomas and a hand holding a sword.



The ‘Worspryng’ seal © Peter Johnson

You can also see the word ‘Worspryng’ on the seal. The name Woodspring came into use in the years following the closure of the Priory. Before that it had been known as Worspring (spelling rules were less strict in the Middle Ages). An earlier village built on the site had the same name. We know this because it was mentioned in the Domesday Book, written in 1086.



‘Worspring’s’ entry in the Domesday Book

The Church at nearby Worle was also connected with Woodspring Priory. Five choir stalls on one side of the church have intricately carved seats. One of them displays the initials P.R.S. in decorated lettering. These are believed to be the initials of Prior Richard Spring who was also Vicar of Worle from 1499 to 1516.

