

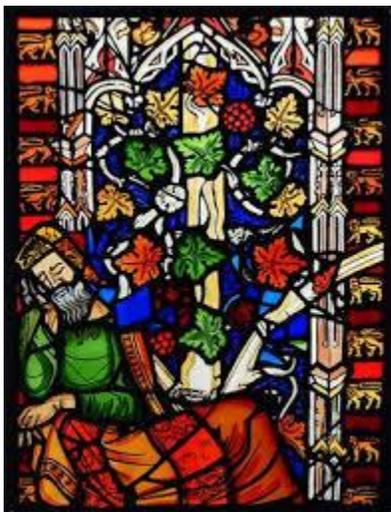
## Medieval Monastic Houses in Somerset

In the mid-tenth century a great change took place which can now be seen as the beginning of medieval monasticism in England which was to last through to the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1530s – the best part of six hundred years. Glastonbury Abbey was refounded by Dunstan in 940; this was followed by Muchelney c 959; Athelney c.960 and Bath c.963. Wells had become the cathedral for the county with a college of canons in 909

In the early medieval period, the principal monastic houses of mid and West Somerset were Glastonbury Abbey, Wells Cathedral and Woodspring Priory. The Priory, although only small, flourished in the fourteenth century when most of the buildings we see today were built. Despite its size, it was a significant presence in the area. Indeed, all three communities were responsible for the draining of the salt flats and marshes of the Somerset Levels.

### Wells Cathedral:

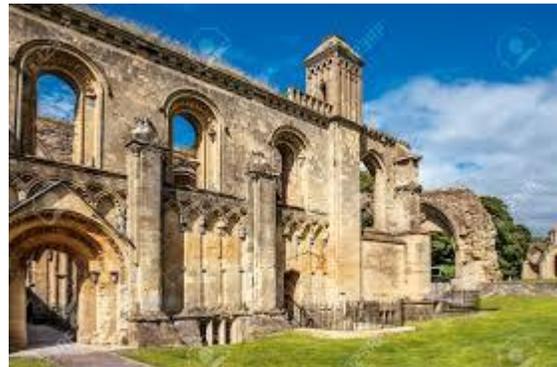
The abbey church was built in 705 by Aldhelm, first Bishop of the newly established Diocese of Sherborne and the font in the cathedral's South Transept is from this church. Replacing the earlier church, the cathedral was built between 1176 and 1490 and is the earliest English cathedral built in the Gothic style. Its iconic West Front and the 'Scissor arches' introduced in 1338 after the weight of a new spire on top of the tower threatened to collapse the whole structure of the tower.



The Cathedral houses one of the largest collections of historic stained glass in the country and experts agree that the 'Jesse Window' is one of the most splendid examples of 14<sup>th</sup> C stained glass in Europe

## Glastonbury Abbey:

The earliest historical evidence of the monastery at Glastonbury comes from charters of the late 7th century which show grants of land made by three Saxon kings, matching the earliest archaeological evidence of a church at Glastonbury. Three distinct phases of Saxon church have been recorded, the last being part of Dunstan's ambitious re-modelling and expansion of the abbey. By the time of the coming of the Normans, the abbey was one of the greatest and wealthiest of the abbeys of the Middle Ages. Founded in the 8th century and enlarged in the 10<sup>th</sup>, it was destroyed by a major fire in 1184, but was subsequently rebuilt and by the 14<sup>th</sup> C was one of the richest and most powerful monasteries in England.



In January 1534, Glastonbury was the only monastery left in Somerset and the passing of the Act of Supremacy made Henry VIII the head of the Church of England and suppression of the monasteries began. Glastonbury held out as long as possible, but eventually Abbot Richard Whiting was arrested on a fabricated charge of treason and executed on Glastonbury Tor on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1539 by being hung, drawn and quartered thus marking the end for the monastery. Abbot Whiting's dismembered body was displayed in Wells, Bath, Ilchester and Bridgewater.

## Woodspring Priory:

The Priory was founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century by William de Courtney and dedicated to Thomas a Becket. William was the grandson of Reginald Fitzurse, one of Becket's assassins. (**Note:** in 1849 a reliquary containing the blood of Archbishop Thomas a Becket was found in St Paul's church, Kewstoke, that was believed to have come originally from the Priory but

removed to St Paul's church for safe keeping at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1534 - 6. It is now in the Museum of Somerset, Norton Fitzwarren, Taunton.)



The Priory was the home of a small community of Victorine Canons (**Note:** the Victorine Order was founded at the Abbey of St Victor, Paris. It also founded St Augustine's Abbey, Bristol, which became Bristol Cathedral.)

Members of the priory were influenced by the [Cistercians](#) who emphasised manual labour and self-sufficiency so that the clerks who had taken holy orders worked on the farm. The priory also provided the clergy for the local parish Church of St Paul's, Kewstoke.

The first buildings were completed in 1242. Several of the original medieval buildings remain largely intact. These include the 14<sup>th</sup>C Great (Tithe) barn and the 15<sup>th</sup>C Infirmary; Some elements of the original 13<sup>th</sup>C church survive together with the gatehouse, gates and the eastern wall of the Cloister and the Chapter house.

