

MEDIEVAL MAYHEM

Taleblazers Trips at Torre Abbey



Subject: History/English

Topic: Defending Torre Abbey in the Middle Ages

Setting: The Learning Lab, Undercrofts and Gardens.

Based on events that took place at Torre Abbey in 1351, students will be introduced to the early history of Torre Abbey, how and why it was founded and its rise to high status. We will learn what life as a White Canon was like and how that life differed greatly to the lives of the common folk of Torbay.

Organisation of the session

The session will start with a performance of an original ballad of The Siege of Torre Abbey followed by a workshop where we focus on key elements from the story – structure, setting and character. Finally, we guide the students to weave their own narrative around the bones of the tale from the opposing perspectives of the Canons and the raiders. To close the session there will be an opportunity to share the day's work with each other as poems or short scripted plays.

There will also be an opportunity for students to split into groups to explore the Abbey and complete the Torre Abbey in Medieval Times worksheets or the Taleblazers' Riddle Trail.

Learning objectives

- To understand the importance of Torre Abbey in the locality and as an important source of historical information.
- To begin to understand the role of monasteries in the Middle Ages and how Torre Abbey was defended during this time period.
- To use writing or performance to support understanding and consolidating what they have heard or read.

Before you join us at Torre Abbey

Before undertaking this activity, pupils might like to:

- Find out about monasteries in the Middle Ages and why they needed to be defended.
- Be familiar with terms such as abbey, canon, abbot, undercroft, gatehouse, gun loop etc.
- Looked at other sources about Torre Abbey e.g. illustrations, internet images, old postcards etc.

Curriculum Links

“Know and understand the history of these islands as a coherent, chronological narrative... how people's lives have shaped this nation and about historical events, people and places in their own locality.”

“Improvising, rehearsing and watching spoken word in order to generate language and discuss language use and meaning, to add impact.”



Taleblazers are a CIC that celebrate the heritage, folklore and natural history of Devon. They bring together art, storytelling and history in a way that really gets children excited about heritage! These workshops will enthuse your students about local history and develop their creative writing and performance skills.



Taleblazers

CHANGE THE STORY. CHANGE THE WORLD.

FOUNDING TORRE ABBEY

Torre Abbey was founded in 1196 when Abbot Adam and six canons of the Premonstratensian order arrived at Torre, a hamlet on an isolated stretch of coast. William Brewer, lord of the Manor, had given them land to build a monastery here.

The Premonstratensians were 'canons regular' who followed the rule of St Norbert. This meant that they lived in a monastery like monks, but could choose to serve in Torre churches as parish priests. They wore long white cloaks over white habits and were known as the White Canons or Norbertines.



William Brewer

William Brewer was friend and confidant to four kings – Henry II, Richard the Lionheart, John and Henry III. When Richard was imprisoned on the way back from the Third Crusade (1189–1192), his captors demanded an enormous ransom. The king was freed – but only in return for 60 hostages to ensure all the ransom was paid. One of the hostages may have been William's young son, also called William. (The wives and sons of noble families were often used as hostages in the Middle Ages.) It's possible that William Brewer gave the land and money to found Torre Abbey as an offering of thanks for the safe return of the hostages.

Defending Torre Abbey

Monasteries were easy targets for attackers. They had valuable possessions and were poorly defended. Barns storing crops were also targets.

The Hundred Years War (1337–1453), when England was at war with France, saw an increased risk of attack. The canons are known either to have been armed or to have employed men-at-arms. In 1348, Edward III gave permission for the abbey to strengthen its defences and waived a tax on the abbey to allow for the cost of adding defensive crenellations.

To give warning of attack, the abbey probably had lookouts and beacons on local high points.

Providing for the abbey

The abbey was built on land that sloped down towards the sea and provided good grazing. Water supplies were essential so William Brewer gave permission for water to be piped to the abbey and allowed them to divert water from local springs. He also gave land, grazing and fishing rights, quarries, watermills, farms – and even rights to cut turf and rushes. This provided a good income for the abbey.



The alarm bell installed in Tudor times was rung in times of danger

Torre Abbey prospers

In the mid 1300s, at the height of its power, Torre Abbey housed an abbot and 25 canons. Between 1348–1350, outbreaks of the Black Death killed a third of the population in England. For many monasteries this spelt the end of an era, but despite losing over half its canons (25 in 1348 and 11 in 1377) the abbot embarked on a major building programme.

Torre Abbey closes

In 1534, Henry VIII cut all ties with the Pope in Rome and declared himself Head of the his newly created Church of England.

Then he set about closing all the monasteries. Torre Abbey was closed in 1539. (See also Torre Abbey in Tudor times.)

THE GATEHOUSE

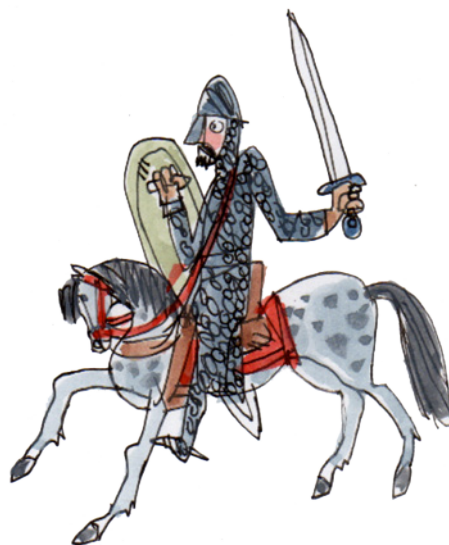
In 1348 Edward III gave the abbey permission to strengthen its fortifications. The gatehouse was an important part of those defences.

Outside you may like to talk about:

- The **battlements** on the roof line.
- **Gun loops** for early handguns, first introduced around 1360.
- Four **octagonal corner towers**. The south west turret has a central chute that was used to hoist shot and powder up to the battlements.
- The **arms of the local Mohun family**, on the ceiling of the larger arch. They may have given money to rebuild the gatehouse.
- The doorway to the **porter's lodge**. The porter, who monitored everyone coming and going, lived here.
- The **'squint'** (small opening) in the wall of the smaller arch so the porter could keep an eye on who and what was coming and going.
- The **large arch** used for horse-drawn vehicles and the **smaller arch** used by foot passengers.
- The cobbled surfaces under the arches.



The gatehouse, originally one of three, was the innermost gatehouse. It may have been intended as a bolthole in times of danger



THE SPANISH BARN*

The Spanish Barn was built in the early 13th century to store crops and produce.

In winter, grain was separated from the stalk (threshing) on the threshing floor between the two opposing doors. Then, grain was separated from the chaff (winnowing) by throwing it up in a winnowing basket. The chaff was blown away by the draft created when both the large doors were open.



You may like to talk about:

- Thick **stone walls** supported by **buttresses** for greater strength.
- High, narrow **slit windows** to prevent theft.
- Two **big doors** large enough to allow loaded wagons to be drawn inside, unloaded and then exit via the opposite door without the need to turn round.
- **Smaller doors** for the **laybrothers** who did all the manual work for the canons.

* *The Spanish Barn is sometimes closed for events. Please check availability before your visit.*

THE UNDERCROFTS

The Cellarer's Undercroft (on the left of the entrance passage) was used to store food and wine.

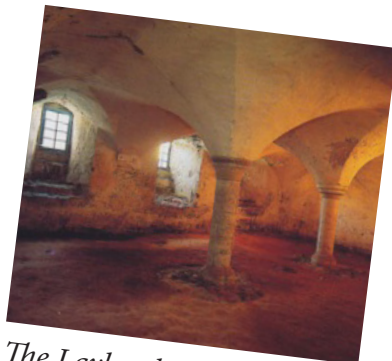
The Laybrothers' Undercroft (on the right of the passage) was where the laybrothers dined (the Refectory). Both are virtually unaltered since the abbey was first built more than 800 years ago.

In the Cellarer's Undercroft you may like to talk about:

- Huge **pillars** which support the vaulted ceiling.
- The **grave slab of the sacristan**, the canon in charge of the abbey valuables.



The Cellarer's Undercroft



The Laybrothers' Refectory

In the Laybrothers' Undercroft:

- **Thick walls.**
- The **blocked arch** with a hidden stairwell leading up to the grand dining rooms of the abbot and his guests.
- The small arched doorway leading to a **servicing hatch** (now blocked up) where food was served from the kitchens.
- **The Abbey Imp**, the bottom half of a gargoyle which once sat atop the Spanish Barn gable to frighten away thieves and evil spirits.



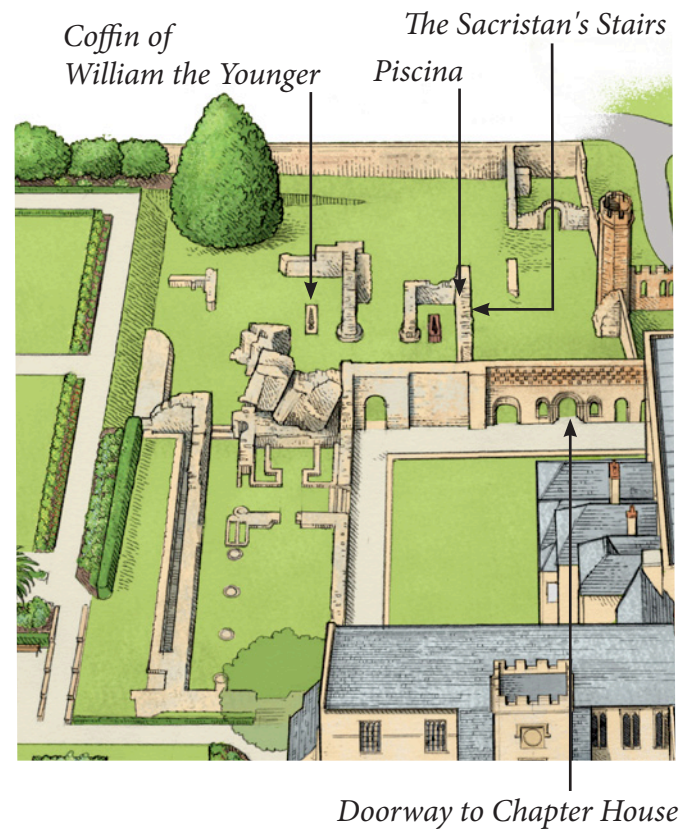
The abbey imp may have looked like this

THE ABBEY RUINS

When Torre Abbey was dissolved in 1539, the abbey church was smashed so that it couldn't be used again and valuable materials such as lead were stripped and melted down. Some buildings fell into decay and others were reused for other purposes when the abbey became first a cider farm and then a grand country house.

You may like to talk about:

- The remains of the **abbey church** aligned east to west like all Christian churches.
- The **piscina** where the canons washed the items used in Mass. The consecrated water drained away so that it couldn't be used for other purposes.
- The doorway to the **Chapter House** where the canons met each morning to discuss abbey business, pray and mete out punishment for breaking the rules.
- The **stairs** that led to the sacristan's room. Other canons were not allowed to use these stairs.
- The **stone coffin of William the Younger**, the son of the founder, in front of the high altar. This was the most prestigious place to be buried in the abbey. The 'plug hole' allowed fluids to drain away from the body.
- **Markers in the cloister pathway** to show where canons were buried.



The abbey ruins



The Sacristan's Stairs

800 YEARS EXHIBITION

On the Top Floor is the 800 Years Exhibition, the first part of which chronicles the abbey from its foundation in 1196 to its closure in 1539.

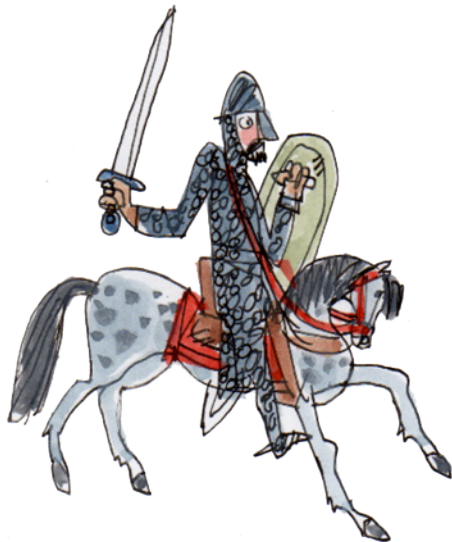
You may like to talk about:

- The **interactive** showing a day in the life of a canon.
- The **robes and hat** of a Premonstratensian canon.
- **Seals** used by abbots on official documents.
- A **calculating board**.
- Illustrations to show the **hierarchy within the abbey**.

Post visit

Post visit work could include:

- Finding out more about weapons and warfare in the Middle Ages
- Researching more about life in a monastery in the Middle Ages.
- Using the story of William Brewer and the hostages in roleplay, or to write an article in the style of a tabloid newspaper e.g 'LOCAL LORD IN HOSTAGE DRAMA!'
- Write a letter from William the Younger to his father complaining about being a hostage.



Ideas for next steps back at school in KS1

- Use the lives of the Canons of Torre Abbey as a comparison piece to create timetables of their day versus ours.
- Use the abbey as an introduction to developing historical skills such as: 'How do we know it is old?'
- Use abbey features e.g. doors and door furniture, windows, surfaces, roofs, etc. and compare with the same features in your school building.
- Ask children to bring in something they think is 'old' and produce a time frame/chart/line to develop chronological understanding.

Ideas for next steps back at school in KS2 & KS3

- Use maps to investigate the legacy of Torre Abbey in the Middle Ages by researching street and parish names and properties such as churches.
- Find out what might have been on the menu for the medieval Canon or Lay brother in the 11th Century, compare to our food today and design a modern menu for a monk.
- Hundreds of ghost stories survive from the Middle Ages, investigate some of the ones associated with Torre Abbey and then write your own using suspense language.

PRICES & PACKAGES



Teachers can choose to book a general free-flow visit with worksheets provided, a private guided tour of the Abbey or a hands-on Taleblazer's workshop.

If you would prefer to explore Torre Abbey independently, then an Educational Group Membership will allow any group from your school to visit for free for a year.*

With a host of group benefits, extras and packages to enjoy, a visit to Torre Abbey is the perfect day out for an informative educational experience outside the classroom.

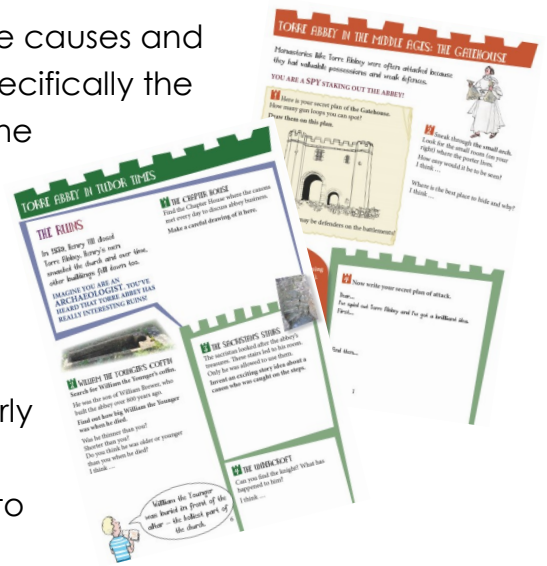
Contact

grace.melsher@torbay.gov.uk for further information and to book your trip.

Taleblazers Trips at Torre Abbey

The Spanish Armada comes to Torbay: With a focus on the causes and consequences of the 16th Century war with Spain and specifically the Armada of 1588, we follow the first skirmishes of the war, the taking of the Nuestra Senora del Rosario and the subsequent imprisonment of almost 400 Spanish sailors in the barn at Torre Abbey.

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Package	Self-Guided with worksheets (Minimum of 10)	Torre Abbey Private Guided Tour	The Spanish Armada Comes to Torbay Workshop	Medieval Mayhem Workshop	Full day hire of Learning Lab for self led workshop
Child (5-15)	£2 per child plus £25 Annual Educational Group Membership	£3.75 per child plus £25 Annual Educational Group Membership	£10 per child (Minimum of 30)	£10 per child (Minimum of 30)	£115
Student (16-19)	Coming Soon	£3.75 per student plus £25 Annual Educational Group Membership	N/A	N/A	£115

*Educational Group membership for schools costs just £25 per year