

# *Shaftesbury Abbey Education Days*

History fires children's curiosity about the past and a visit to an historical site can be invaluable, leading to a deeper engagement with historical events and giving an opportunity to develop a fuller appreciation for those who lived before us.

During the Middle Ages many people chose to live a religious life as a monk or as a nun. These were self-contained worlds, mainly separated from the rest of society. Each was ruled by an abbot or abbess overseeing the life of its inhabitants who followed special rules.

Shaftesbury is extremely fortunate in that, through its Abbey, it has a tangible connection to life in medieval times. As an extremely wealthy and prominent abbey, Shaftesbury became a centre of pilgrimage and great importance until its dissolution in 1539 by the orders of Henry VIII.

Shaftesbury Abbey was the first major religious community established exclusively for nuns. It served the local area in helping the sick and poor, and offering hospitality and education. Because it was founded by Alfred the Great, and its first Abbess was King Alfred's daughter, Aethelgifu, it was also one of the richest and most important nunneries in England until its closure in 1539.

Archaeological excavations in the past, and in more recent times with the **SAVED** project, are still revealing evidence of life in a religious order.

## **Educational Opportunities for Schools**

Shaftesbury Abbey offers two different areas for children to learn about the Abbey. You can choose from the full list for your visit.

The options are:

### **1. Life at the Abbey.**

Activities that would have taken place within the abbey grounds, either by the nuns themselves or carried out by the crafts people living just outside the religious precinct.

## 2. Archaeology in Action

Activities that show how archaeologists excavate a site through use of an excavation box, explore and study artefacts that have been found within the abbey grounds and reveal items from an indoor dig to demonstrate how the past is underneath our feet.

These activity days will include national curriculum content for local history, Anglo-Saxon settlements, art and culture and use of artefacts as a source to learn about the past.

A full or half day is available, each beginning with a guided tour of the Abbey grounds and a brief introduction to the history of the Abbey. There is also a chance to experience how the nun's day was punctuated by services and devotions. Each child will have the opportunity to dress in a tunic representing different people in the Abbey, nuns, priest, workers etc.

The children will be divided into 4 groups - preferably with no more than 8 per group. For a half-day visit, you can choose 2 activities from the list which 2 groups will work on simultaneously in the smaller groups. For the full day, the children will rotate between 4 activities of your choice. Each activity will last approx. 40 mins.

### **Suggested outline for a day visit:**

9.30-9.45	Arrival at the Abbey
09.45/10.00	Brief introduction and tour of the Abbey led by Abbey volunteer/staff (whole class)
10.20	Short break. Get into groups. Dress in tunics
10.40	Activity 1
11.25	Activity 2
12.10	Lunch (30 mins)
12.45	Activity 3
13.40	Activity 4
14.20	Plenary
14.30	Return to school

## **Brief Synopsis of Activities for Life at the Abbey**

(more information is available on the Background Information files)

### **Choose from the following activities:**

#### **1. Clay tiles**

Many floor tiles have been excavated from the Abbey grounds. The children will be able to handle and investigate these tiles and design their own clay tiles in the medieval style using simple tools. (Teachers' notes available)

#### **2. Illuminated letters and Calligraphy**

Many books were written devoted to God. The decorative, illuminated letters were to glorify the written word. Using reed pens, the children will practise calligraphy writing and design an illuminated letter, decorated with gold and colours appropriate to the times. (Teachers' notes available)

#### **3. Herb Bags and Soap**

Cleanliness and medicine were an important part of a nun's daily life and herbs were grown and used for this purpose. The children will learn about the specific properties of different herbs and select ones to make a herb bag of their own as well as a simple scented soap, for medicinal as well as cleansing purposes. (Teachers' notes available)

#### **4. Textile making**

Part of the nun's daily life involved spinning and weaving their own clothes and belts. The children will weave and make their own plaited braid in the style of the nun's belts. (Teachers' notes pdf file)

#### **5. Gargoyles and Grotesques**

Grotesques were carvings that adorned religious buildings. They were to scare away evilness but were also often comic. Gargoyles were situated just under the roof and their spouts (often an open mouth) helped drain water away from the stone walls. Some have been excavated at the Abbey grounds and are on display for the children to see. The children will learn about

gargoyles and grotesques and carve their own gargoyle face using clay.  
(Teachers' notes available)

### **Archaeology in Action options (led by a member of the Education Team)**

#### 6. Mapping the remains

Using a map, children will work out the layout of the Abbey church. They can colour in the parts which can still be seen on their map.

#### 7. Full scale indoor dig

With a simulated full-size indoor 'dig', children will 'excavate' a portion of the Abbey church, removing layers, identifying objects and features as they uncover them. Expect a few surprises! (Whole class activity)

#### 8. Artefact hands-on session

Children will be able to handle, discuss and record actual artefacts from the Abbey, and take their recording sheets home. (group activity)

#### 9. Box dig using excavation tools

Excavating an abbey floor 'box dig' outside with real medieval tiles, children will observe, measure and draw what is found to create an 'archaeological site report'. (group activity)

If you are interested in booking an activity day at Shaftesbury Abbey, please email [office@shaftesburyabbey.org.uk](mailto:office@shaftesburyabbey.org.uk) or ring 01747 852910 for further details and to discuss arranging a visit.