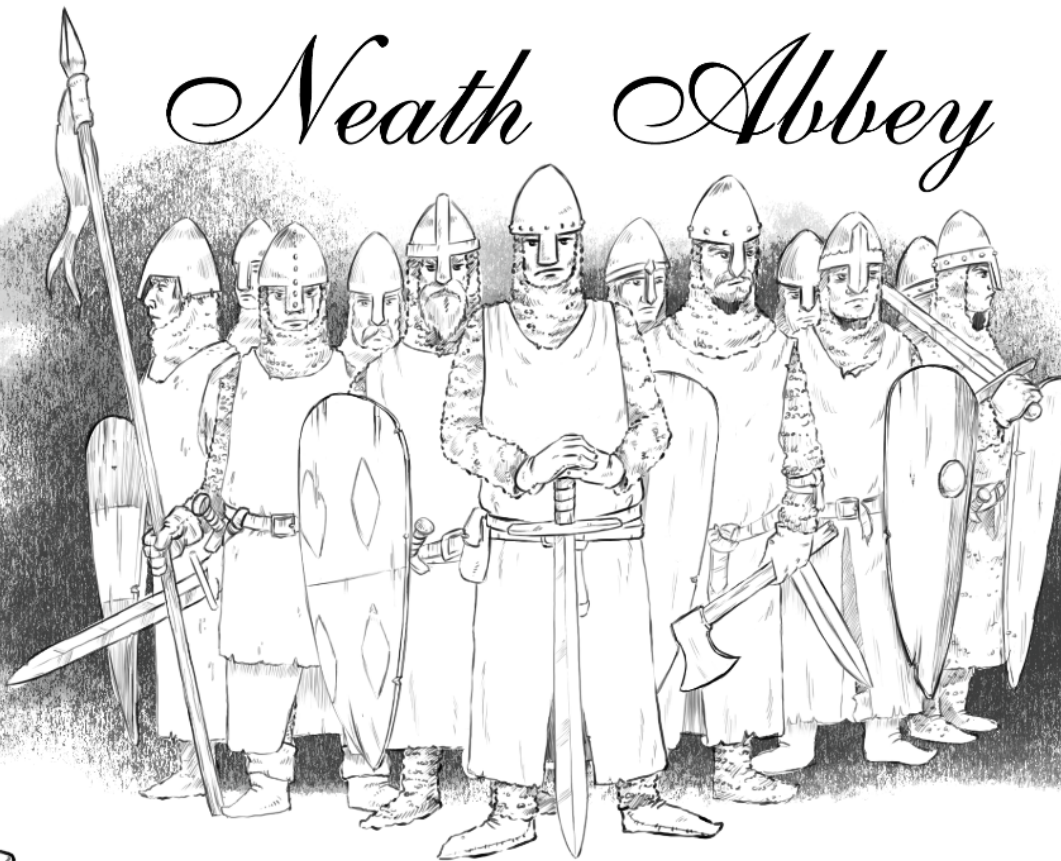


Neath Abbey

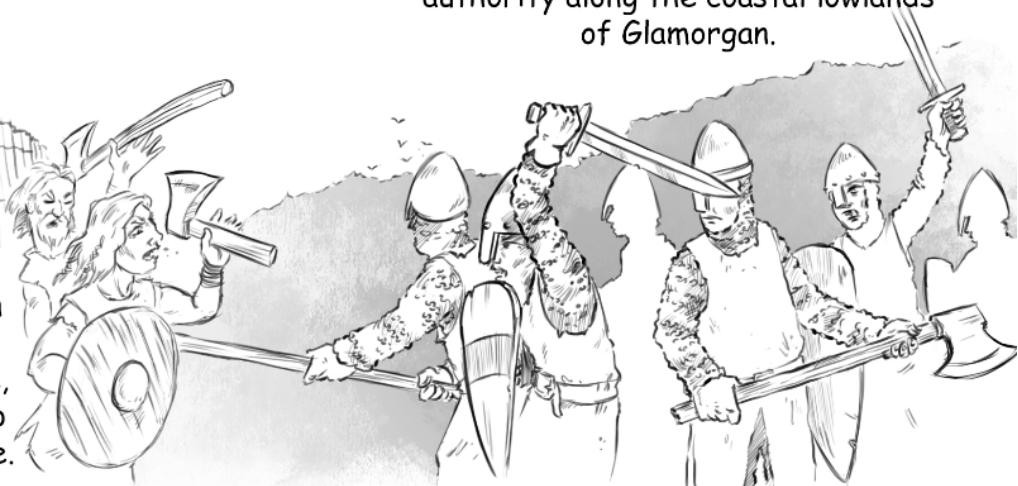


"I Richard de Granville, military commander to the Lord of Glamorgan, Earl Robert of Gloucester. Years later known as one of the Twelve Knights of Glamorgan."



I have played a leading role in the westward advancement of Norman authority along the coastal lowlands of Glamorgan.

And I have built a castle on the west bank of the river near Neath and, from there, I have carved out a lordship stretching to the river Tawe.



Art Director: Nick Price Produced by: Turnip Starfish Limited

By 1129 Richard de Granville had chosen to gift his estates in Wales to the Abbey of Savigny in Normandy, an act of patronage in which he was joined by his wife, Constance. This included extensive lands between the Neath and Tawe rivers, together with meadows, mills and the chapel of his castle.

I will make it clear that this property is intended to endow a new monastery.



The Abbey of Savigny sent a daughter colony across the English Channel. The first foundations for Neath Abbey were being created.



Abbot Richard and his twelve monks arrived at Neath in October 1130. They began more than 400 years of monastic observance at Neath.

We shall plant new life here at Neath.



The Savigniac family of monasteries that had started in Normandy, flourished rapidly and soon comprised more than thirty monasteries with half of those located throughout the British Isles.

I cannot control these monasteries, some want to break free and go their own way.
What am I to do?



The Savigniac fathers had failed to establish any effective structure for the governance of the various Savigniac monasteries.

Abbot Serlo head of the Savigniac community was under increasing pressure for change.

Bonjour, Abbot Serlo!

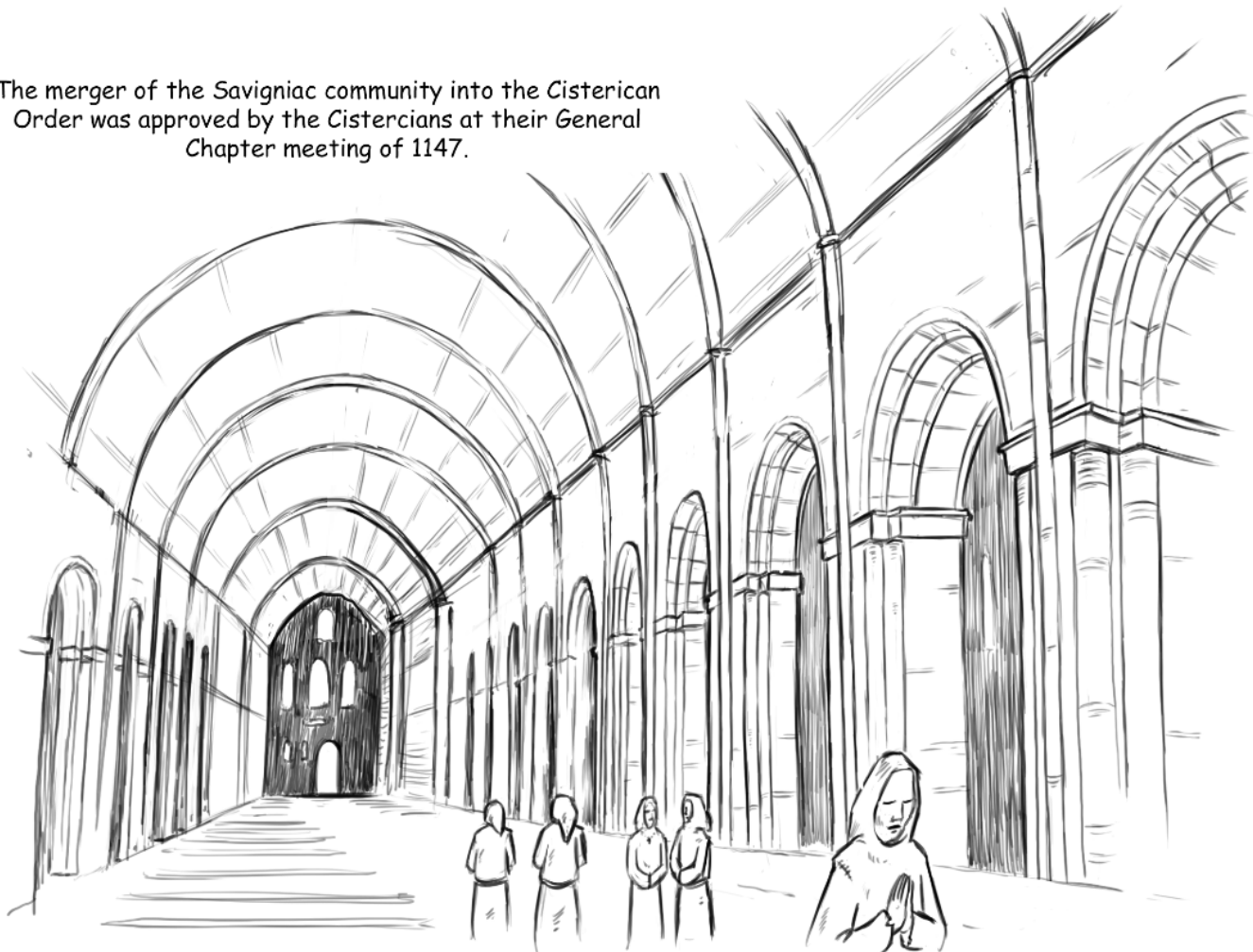
Welcome, welcome to Clairvaux.

You look troubled, how can I help?

Ah! Bonjour, Abbot Bernard! It is good to see you.

Finding the problems too burdensome to contend with alone, Abbot Serlo's admiration for Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercians led him to petition for all of the Savigniac monasteries to be absorbed into the expanding Cistercian Order

The merger of the Savigniac community into the Cisterican Order was approved by the Cistercians at their General Chapter meeting of 1147.



Henceforth, the fledgling community at Neath, along with all the other British and French Savigniac Abbeys were to become part of the most successful and highly regarded religious order in medieval Europe.

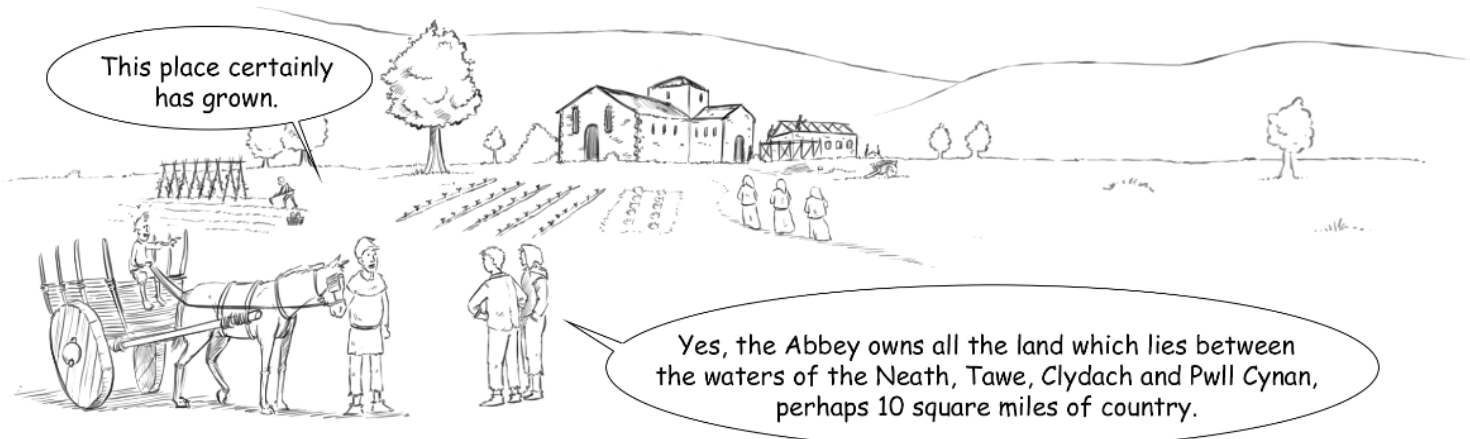
From 1147 the monks at Neath appear to have made the transition to the Cistercian way of life without too much difficulty.





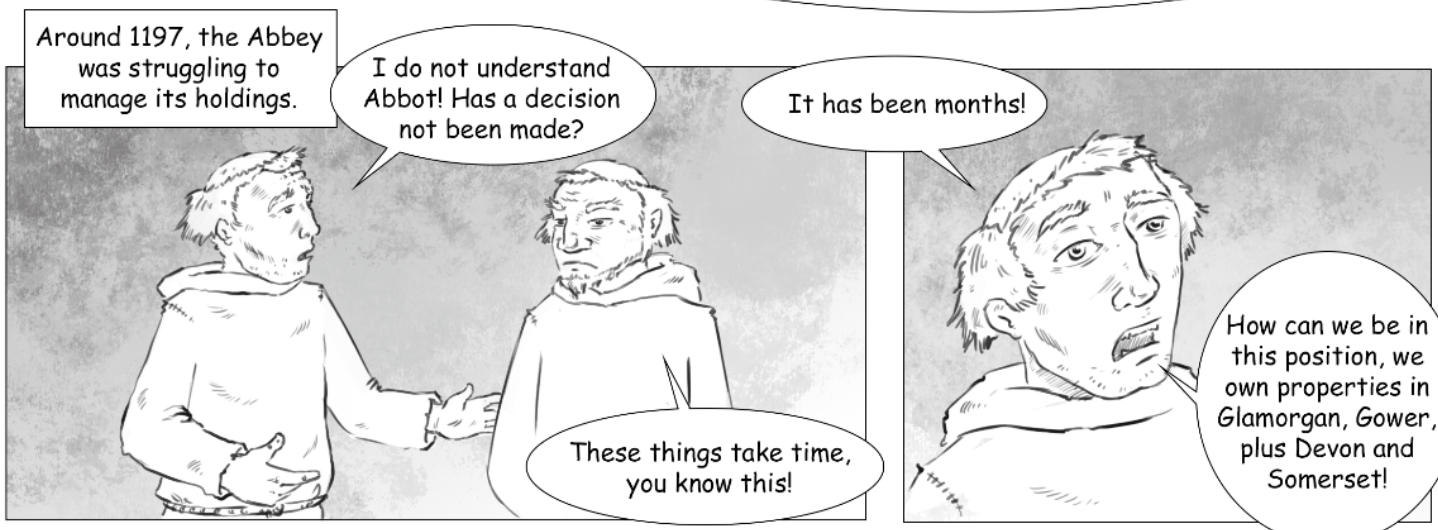
I hear they wear no under garments!

This is also true. They reject fine undershirts and breeches and survive on a meagre vegetarian diet.



This place certainly has grown.

Yes, the Abbey owns all the land which lies between the waters of the Neath, Tawe, Clydach and Pwll Cynan, perhaps 10 square miles of country.



Around 1197, the Abbey was struggling to manage its holdings.

I do not understand Abbot! Has a decision not been made?

It has been months!

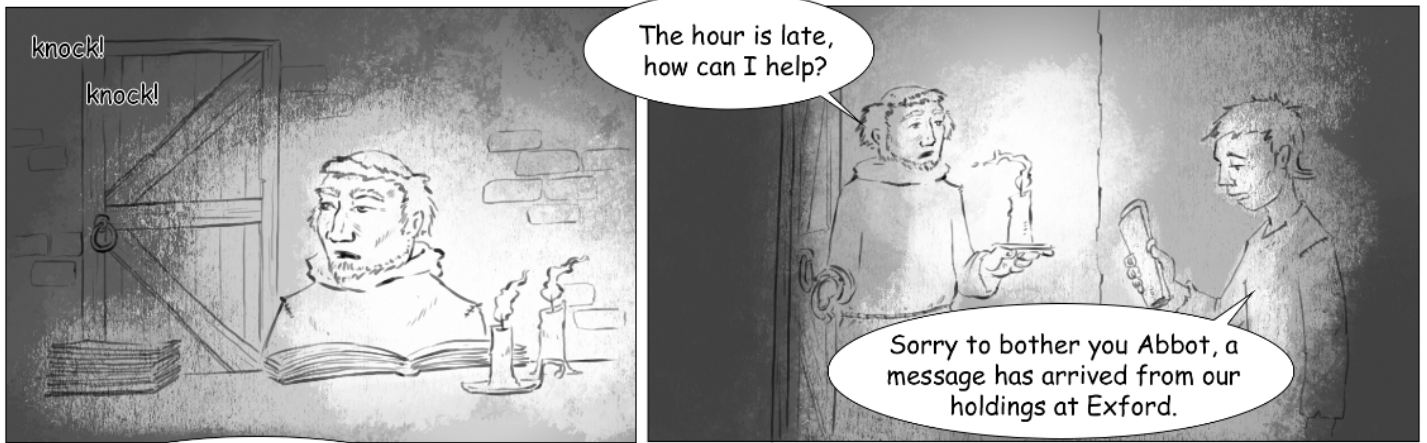
These things take time, you know this!

How can we be in this position, we own properties in Glamorgan, Gower, plus Devon and Somerset!



Our estate is too dispersed to manage efficiently and our neighbours prove increasingly difficult.

Our property at Exford in north-west Somerset would make an excellent new home for the Abbey.



knock!
knock!

The hour is late,
how can I help?

Sorry to bother you Abbot, a
message has arrived from our
holdings at Exford.

Abbot, I heard news had
arrived. Is everything ok?

They are setting up a new Abbey in Cleeve, it is
barely ten miles from our holdings in Exford.

The Abbey in Cleeve
would be too close to
our holdings in Exford
for us to move our
Abbey there.



We have also had news
from our sister Abbey in
Margam.

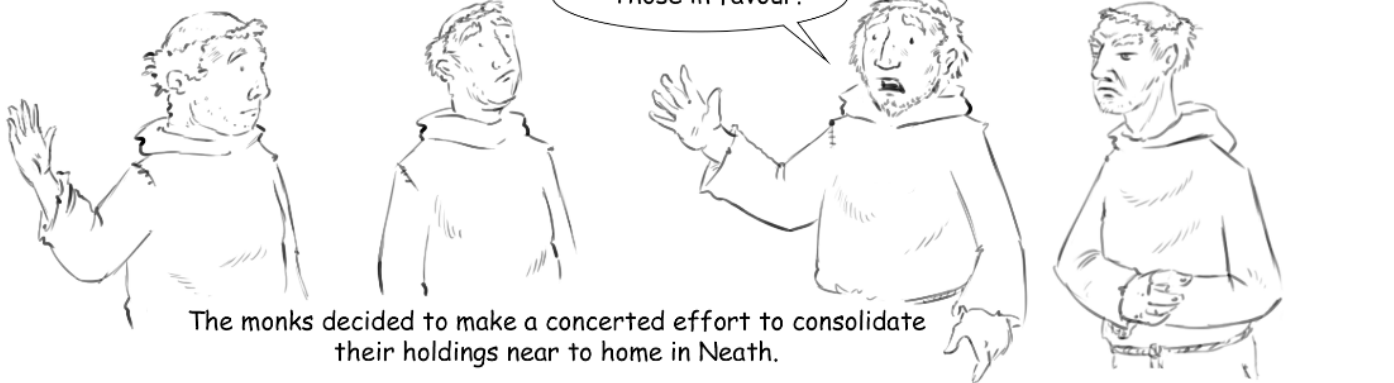
They are disputing lands
we own in their area.



This leaves us
little choice.

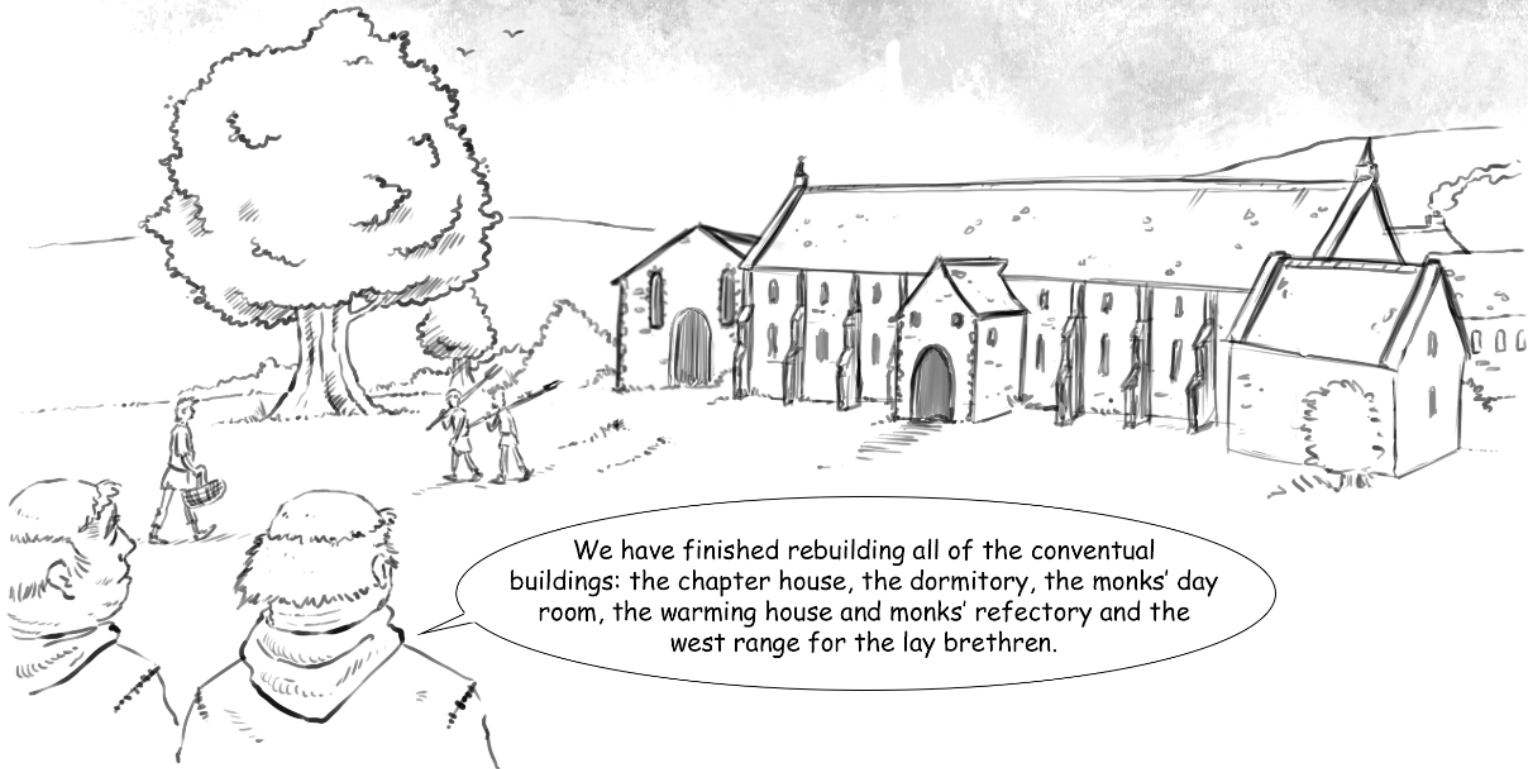
We shall have to make do with
what holdings we have.

Those in favour.



The monks decided to make a concerted effort to consolidate
their holdings near to home in Neath.

During the Abbacy of Adam of Carmarthen, about 1266-89.



We have finished rebuilding all of the conventual buildings: the chapter house, the dormitory, the monks' day room, the warming house and monks' refectory and the west range for the lay brethren.



We have become one of the richest monasteries in Wales, with income only exceeded by Margam.

Our income has exceeded our expectation of around £236 this year.



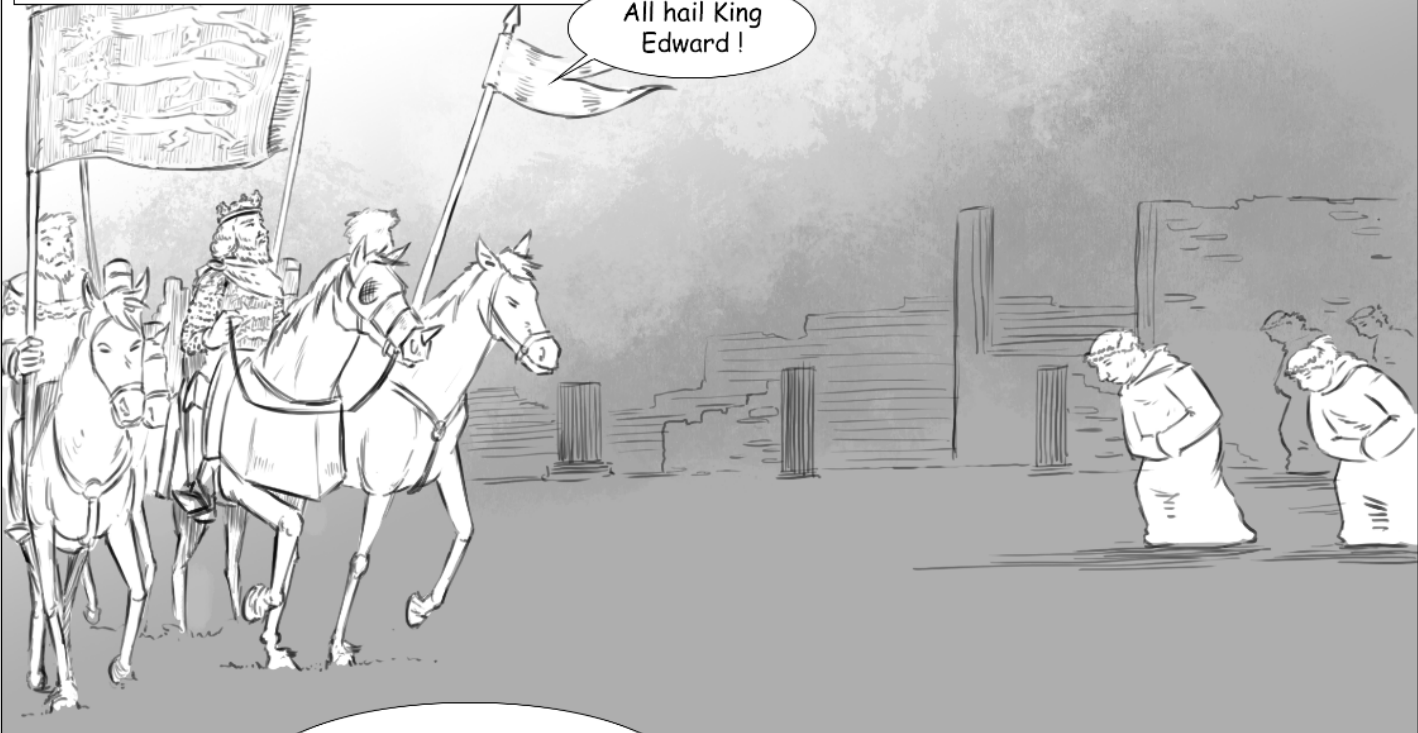
Now the church seems small, dark and old-fashioned.

I think it is time to be bold.

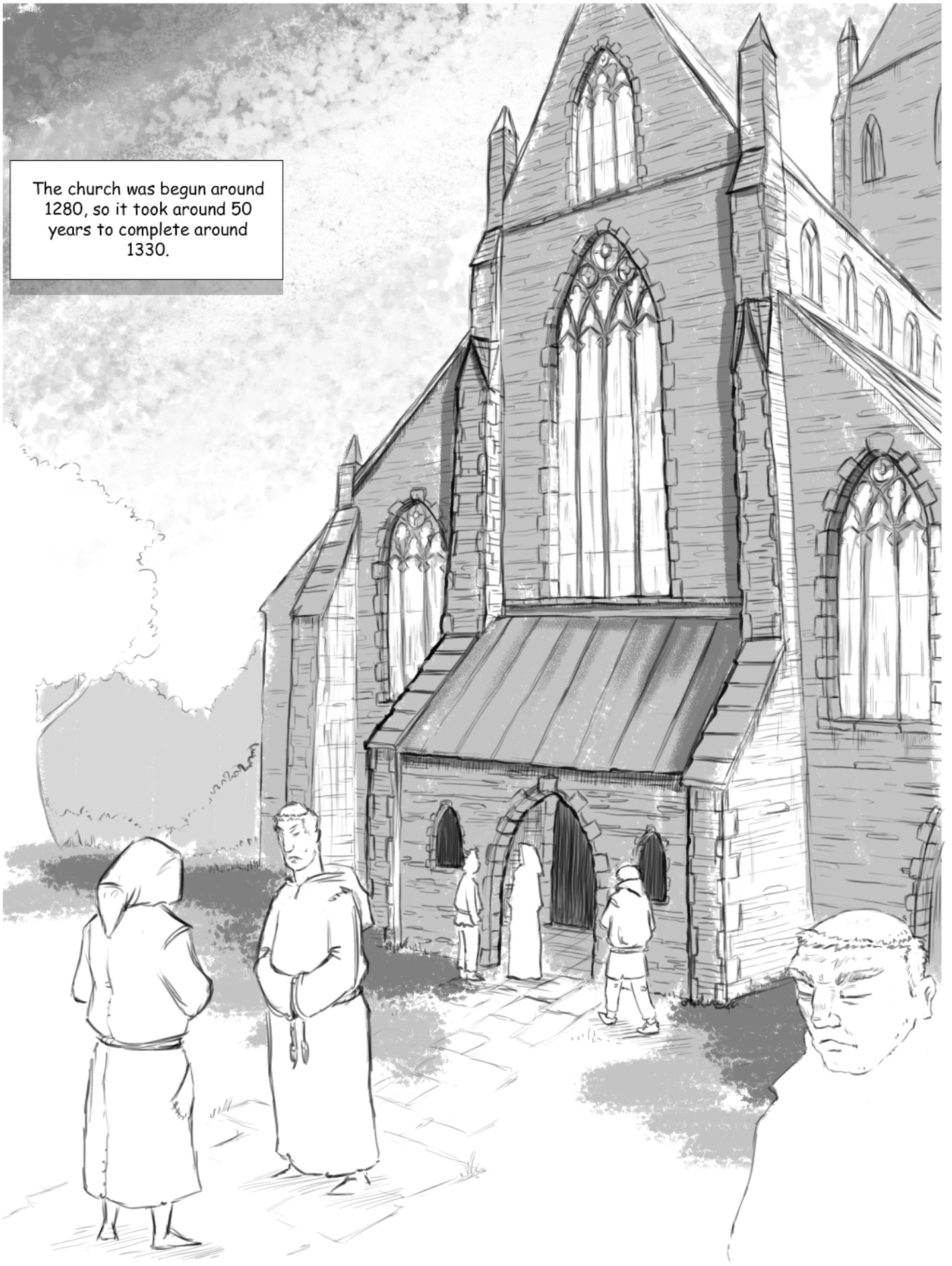
It is time to plan for a new church, in the latest style to provide a fitting setting for our devotions.

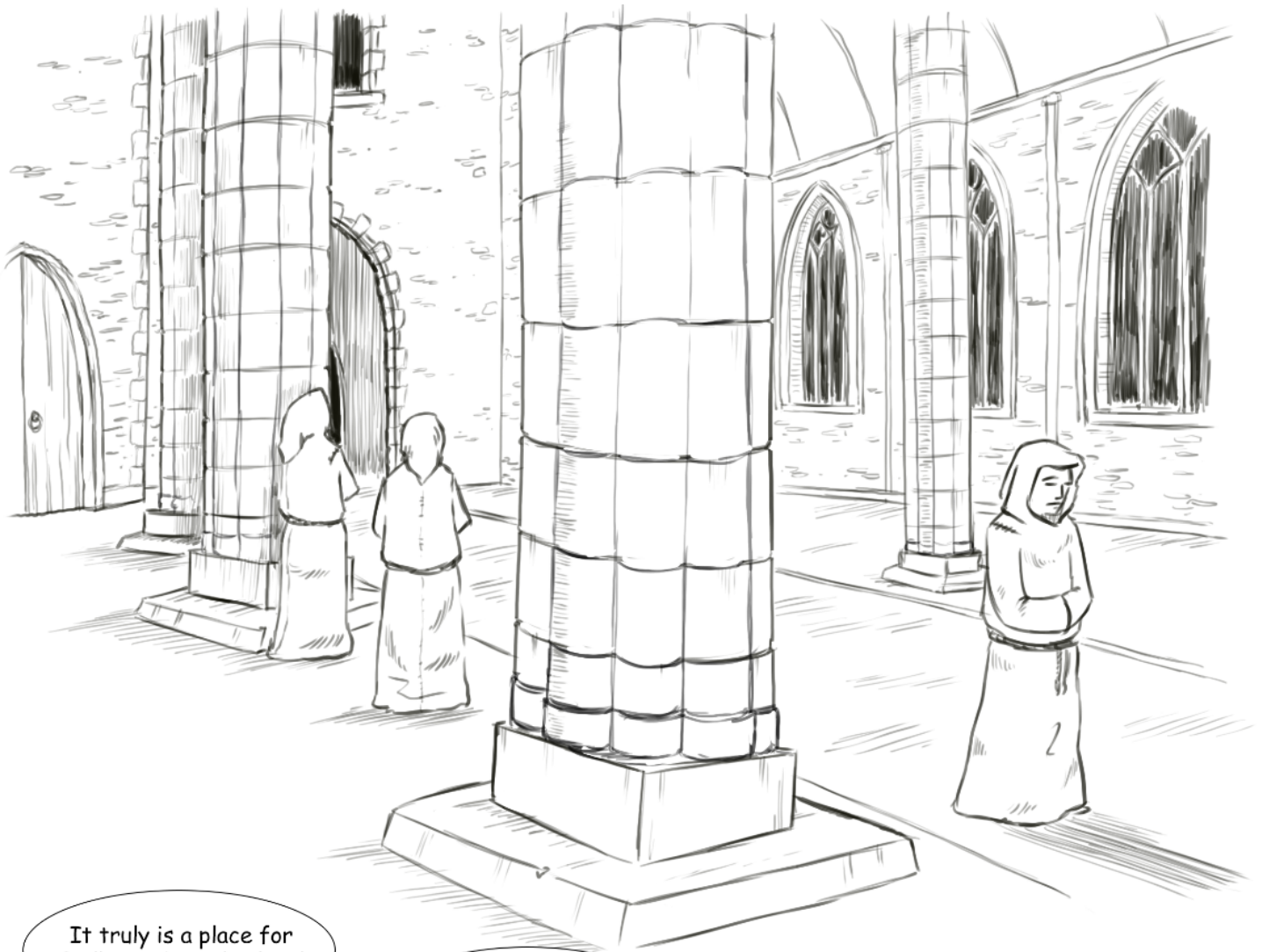


In 1284 during the early stages of the construction, King Edward I visited the site.



The church was begun around 1280, so it took around 50 years to complete around 1330.



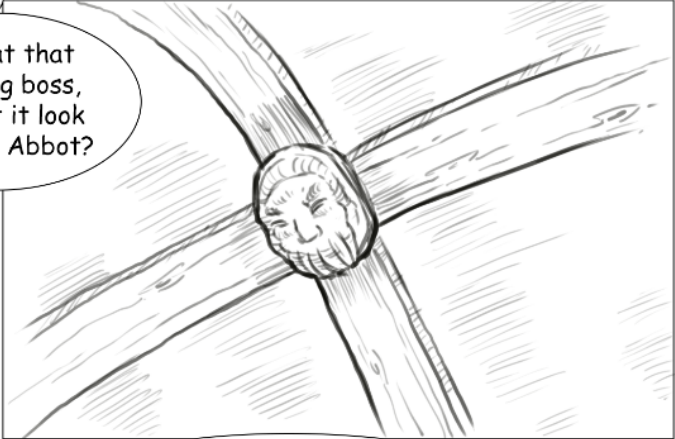


It truly is a place for God! It is breathtaking!

It is impressive!

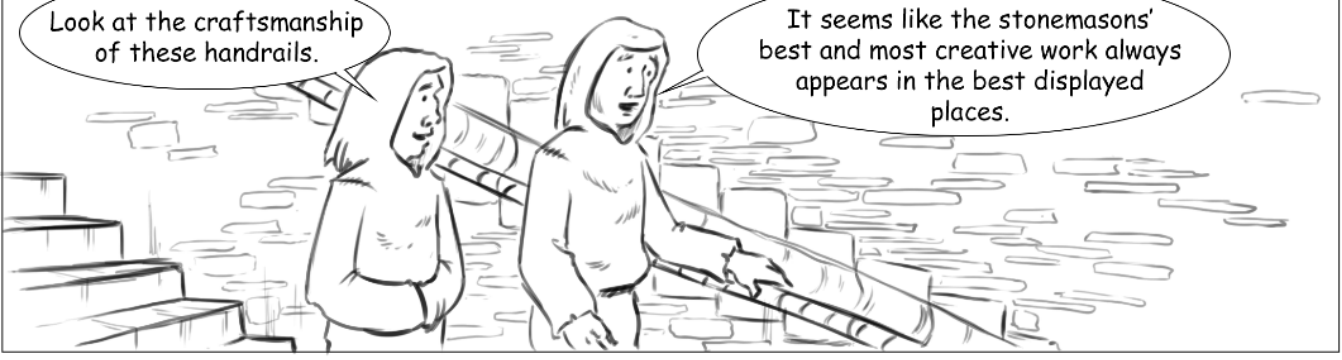


Look at that vaulting boss, doesn't it look like the Abbot?



Look at the craftsmanship of these handrails.

It seems like the stonemasons' best and most creative work always appears in the best displayed places.



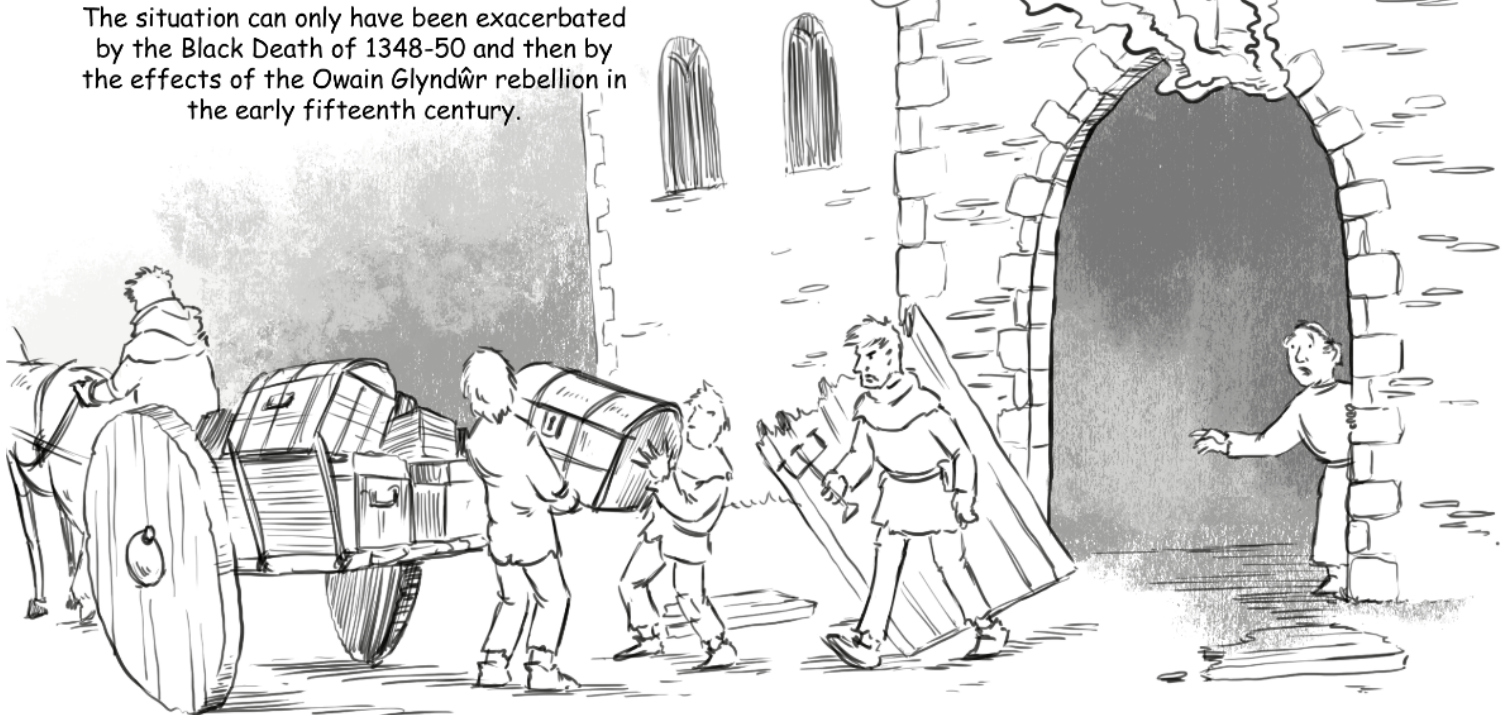
During the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries the Abbey suffered in the turbulent times.



In 1315, for example, the monks complained that they had been 'plundered of their goods [and] their house devastated and ruined' in a Welsh uprising that followed the death of Gilbert de Clare, Lord of Glamorgan at the battle of Bannockburn in 1314.

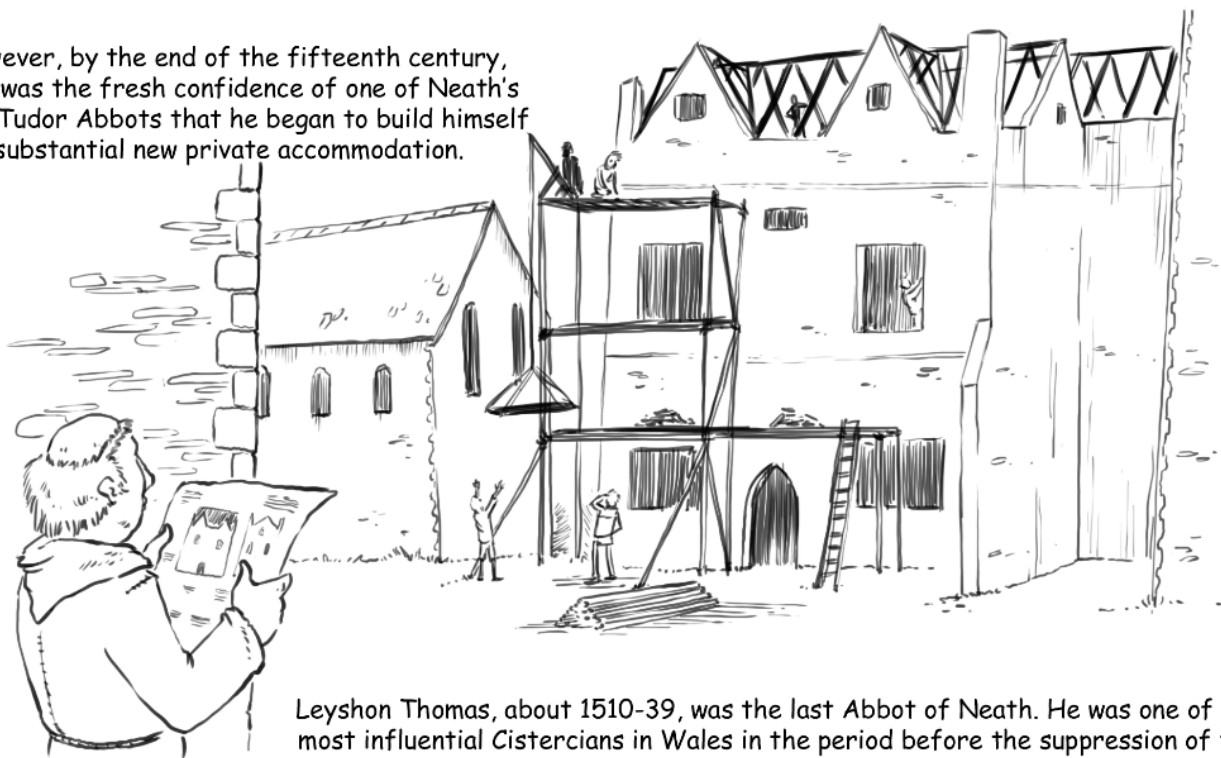


The situation can only have been exacerbated by the Black Death of 1348-50 and then by the effects of the Owain Glyndŵr rebellion in the early fifteenth century.



As late as 1423, Neath was said to be suffering grievously from indiscriminate pillaging.

However, by the end of the fifteenth century, such was the fresh confidence of one of Neath's early Tudor Abbots that he began to build himself substantial new private accommodation.

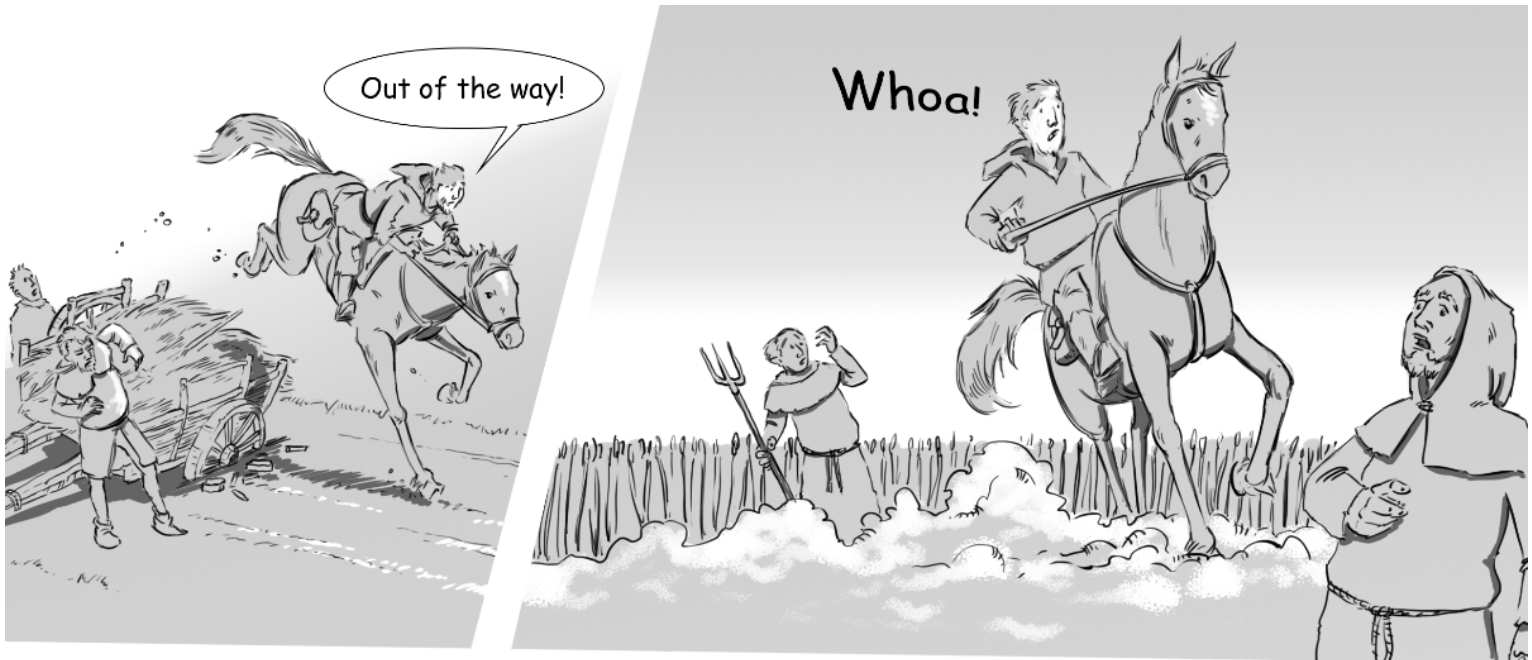


Leyshon Thomas, about 1510-39, was the last Abbot of Neath. He was one of the most influential Cistercians in Wales in the period before the suppression of the monasteries.

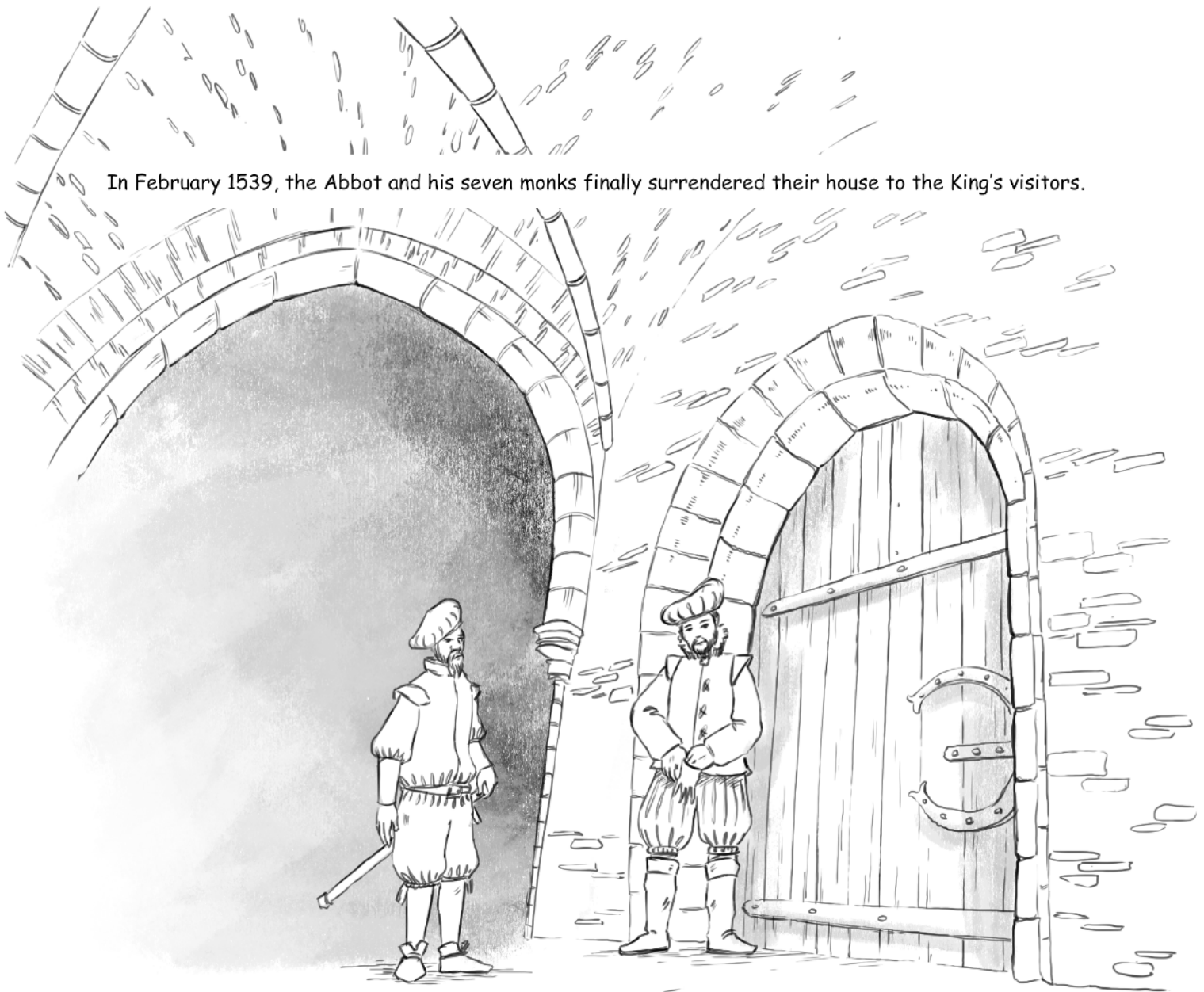


Neath Abbey had an annual income of only £132 in 1536 and therefore should have been amongst the lesser monasteries suppressed by King Henry VIII in 1536. Abbot Leyshon Thomas obtained a stay of this decision in 1537 in exchange for payment of a fine of £150.





In February 1539, the Abbot and his seven monks finally surrendered their house to the King's visitors.



Soon after Neath Abbey's closure, the site and the bulk of its former estates were leased and later bought by Sir Richard Williams alias Cromwell. Interestingly, he was a nephew of Thomas Cromwell, the architect behind the suppression and closure of the monasteries.



The late medieval Abbot's residence was transformed into a splendid Tudor great house from the middle of the sixteenth century.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, industry in the form of copper smelting, began to invade the Abbey site.

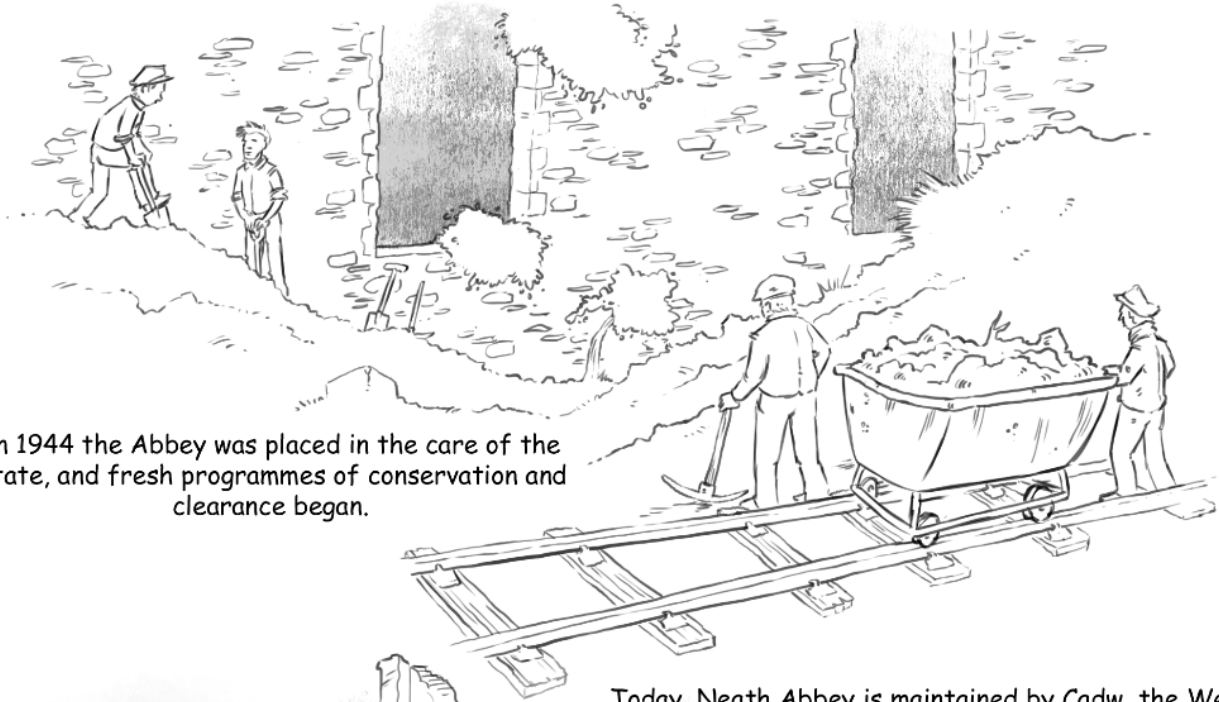


In the early 1740s, the Tudor house remained occupied and complete, its roof intact and chimneys smoking. But, as the century progressed, it was abandoned and allowed to fall into ruin.



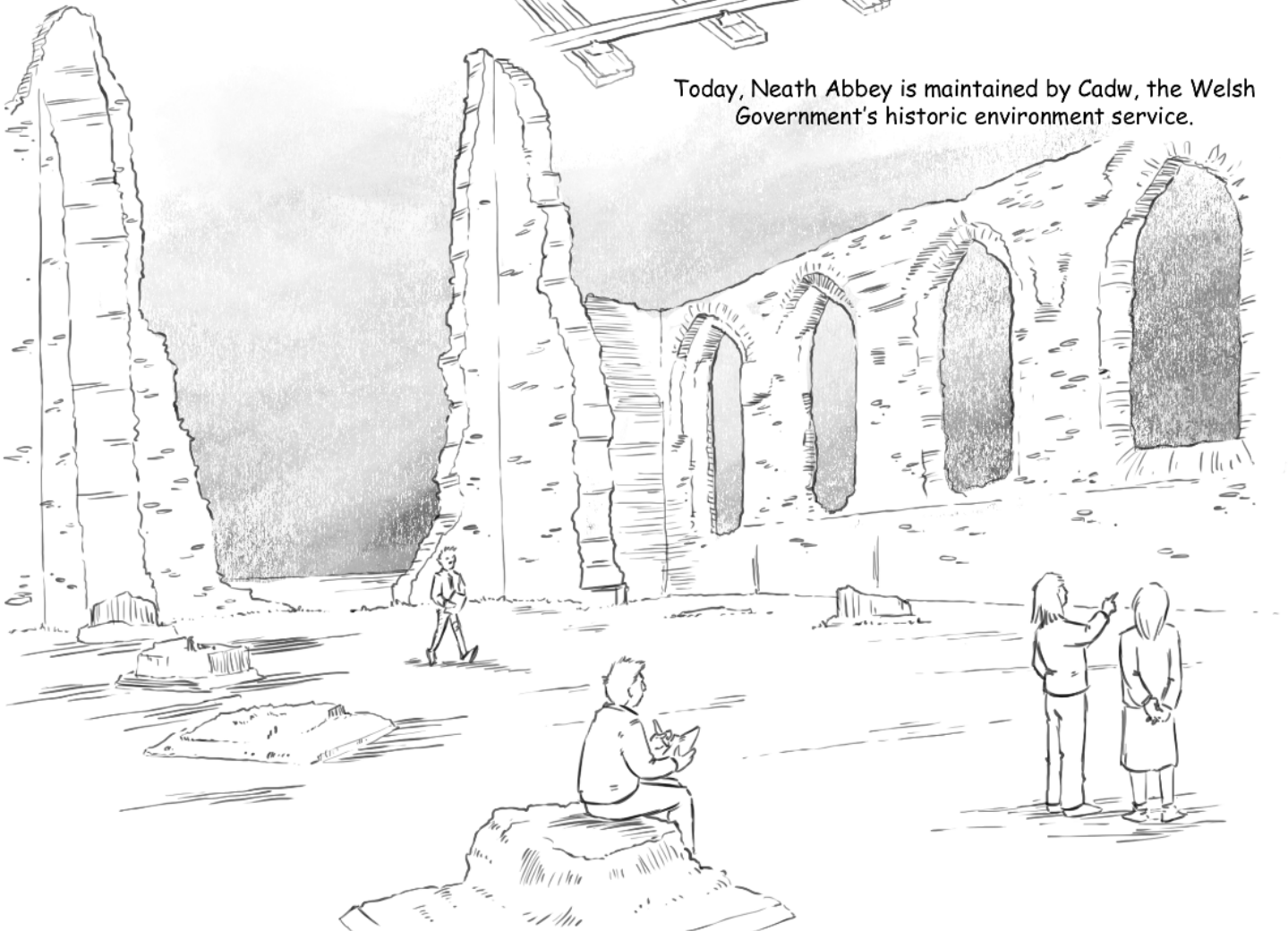
Further industrial works were to engulf the Abbey site, including an iron foundry. By the end of the nineteenth century the whole complex had become a sorry overgrown pile.

After years of neglect, from 1924 a group of local volunteers, led by Mr Glen Taylor, began to clear and partially excavate the site. By the late 1930s up to 4,000 tons of debris had been removed from the church alone.



In 1944 the Abbey was placed in the care of the State, and fresh programmes of conservation and clearance began.

Today, Neath Abbey is maintained by Cadw, the Welsh Government's historic environment service.



In 2023 school children from Dwr y Felin Comprehensive School became the Young Custodians of Neath Abbey. With the community they are helping to forge a new chapter for this historic and important building, for future generations to enjoy.