



Press Information

A Brief History of Fountains Abbey

The dramatic abbey ruins at Fountains are the largest monastic ruins in the country. Set in the naturally beautiful Skell valley, flanked by two vast expanses of lawned grass with awe inspiring cliff faces to either side and the river Skell running through the valley and under the abbey - which in itself is a masterpiece of 12th century building ingenuity - this truly is a beautiful place to visit.

Soak up the spiritual atmosphere, lose yourself in the passages, staircases and towers or marvel at this unique relic of ancient architectural craftsmanship.

The abbey was founded in 1132 by Benedictine monks seeking to live a devout and simple lifestyle. Within three years, the little settlement at Fountains had been admitted to the austere Cistercian Order and with that came a most important development; the introduction of the Cistercian system of lay brothers.

The lay brothers relieved the monks from routine jobs, giving them more opportunity to dedicate their time to God. It was due to the lay brothers that Fountains attained its great wealth and economic importance, via wool production, lead mining, cattle rearing, horse breeding, stone quarrying and other industrial and agricultural concerns. By the mid 13th century Fountains had become one of the wealthiest religious houses in England.

In the 14th century economic collapse followed bad harvests and Scots raids, and the Black Death exacerbated the effects of financial mismanagement. The community of lay brothers reduced in size and in the late 15th century dairy farming replaced sheep farming.

Despite its financial problems and its deviation from the original idealism of the founding monks, Fountains Abbey remained of considerable importance in the Cistercian Order and the abbacy of Marmaduke Huby (1495-1526) marked a period of revival. Fountains once again flourished, and the great perpendicular tower built by Huby symbolises his hope for the Abbey's future, and his initials boldly carved out on the tower, as elsewhere, spell out his personal ambition.

However this revival was brought to an abrupt end in 1539 by Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries.