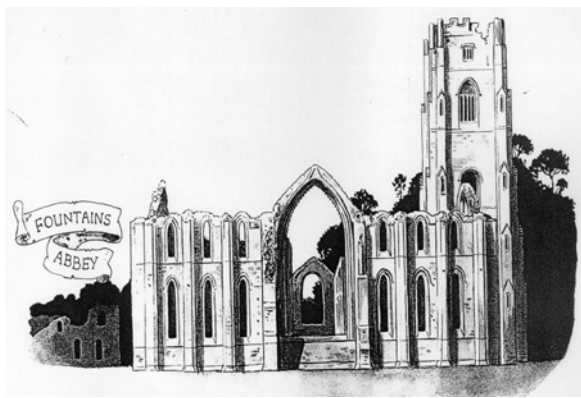


Fountains Abbey

Fountains Abbey was founded in 1132 following a disagreement between the monks of St Mary's Abbey in York. After a riot in October, 13 monks were taken into the protection of Archbishop Thurston of York. He gave them a site in the valley of the River Skell. It was a good site because it was sheltered from the weather, had stone and timber for building and plenty of water from the river and the springs on the steep banks above.

The Abbey's name, St Mary of Fountains, may be due to the springs in the Skell valley, or it may have been named after St Bernard de Fontaines. He was the Abbot of the Cistercians at Clairvaux in France from 1115 to 1153. The monks at Fountains joined the Cistercian Order in 1135, thus receiving much support in the building of the new abbey.

The Cistercian Order had been founded in 1098 in France. Cistercian monks chose to live a hard daily life. They wore a robe or 'habit' of undyed sheep's wool, which meant they were often known as 'White Monks'. This would certainly have been quite uncomfortable and itchy. Underwear was forbidden, though drawers, or underpants, were provided for long journeys. The Cistercians kept silent most of the time, and used sign language to communicate. They had a simple diet consisting mainly of bread and vegetables.



As Fountains Abbey grew, more monks were needed to run the farms, or granges. These monks, who carried out the routine jobs of the Abbey and worked its granges, were known as 'laybrothers'. The 'White Monks' (the choir monks) were then able to dedicate their time to prayer and meditation. The lay brothers generally couldn't read and, although they took monastic vows, they attended fewer church services, had longer hours of sleep and were allowed more food because of their demanding physical work.

Without the lay brothers Fountains could never have become so wealthy. Many served the Abbey as masons, tanners, shoemakers and smiths, but their main job was to look after the Abbey's vast flocks of sheep. These lived on the granges which stretched westwards from Fountains to the Lake District and northwards to Teeside. As well as farming, the Abbey was involved in mining lead and working iron, quarrying stone and horse breeding.

However the monks had extended their lands far beyond what they needed to survive, and more importantly, beyond what they could control. In the 14th century there were bad harvests, Scots raids and the plague (Black Death). So many people died from the plague that there was a demand for people to work in the towns and on farms. Men no longer became lay-brothers and the Abbey had to lease out the monastic granges (farms). The monks then received money and produce as rent. Dairy farming began to take the place of sheep farming in the late 15th century.

Despite its financial problems, Fountains remained of considerable importance in the Cistercian Order. When Marmaduke Huby was Abbot from 1495 to 1526 things had improved and he built the impressive tower. However, the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII closed all monasteries and nunneries. Being one of the biggest and richest abbeys, Fountains was one of the last to close in 1539. The Abbot, Marmaduke Bradley received a pension of £100 a year, his prior £8 and 30 monks each received £5, a handsome amount in those days.