

Rievaulx
Abbey
M D C C C X L V I

BRIEF
HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE
ACCOUNT OF
RIEVAULX ABBEY

IN THE NORTH RIDING
OF THE
COUNTY OF YORK

BY LT
WITH LITHOGRAPHIC VIEWS
AND GROUND PLAN OF THE ABBEY
BY W MONKHOUSE

*'Alas ! The lone deserted wall,
A mournful ruin now appears ;
Yet still; majestic in its fall,
Tho' mouldered by consuming years'*

YORK

1846

Rievaulx Abbey

*'Still in this glen deep-channelled in the wolds,
Untrod by pilgrim now, fair Rievaulx stands,
Though bruised and broken by Time's serpent folds,
Thy glorious fabric once of pious hands —
In spendid ruin ! what a thrilling scene
Of solitude, of grandeur, of decay —
With stream and woodland graced and meadows green,
Where peace unchallenged holds perennial sway.'*

ATKINSON

THE disposition of early ages to build and endow religious houses, has been attributed to various motives; to an opinion of the prevalence of intercessory prayers of saints — a belief in the doctrines of purgatory — to the holy wars, so called — and to the natural love of the Normans towards building churches and monasteries. To none of these, however, is attributed the foundation of the once magnificent, but now mouldering ruin of Rievaulx Abbey. Historians of monachism are agreed that it had its origin in domestic grief.

Sir Walter l'Espece, a Norman baron, who distinguished himself at the battle of the Standard, was rewarded by King Henry the I with extensive grants of land in this neighbourhood. This nobleman had a son, bearing his father's Christian name, who was killed by a fall from his horse. The afflicted parent, it is said, resolved to make 'Christ heir of part of his land' and he accordingly built three monasteries, *viz* Rievaulx and Kirkham in Yorkshire and Warden in Bedfordshire. Rievaulx Abbey was commenced in AD 1131, under the superintendence of William the first abbot who, with a party of monks of the Cistercian order had been sent over to England by Bernard, abbot of Clairvaulx in Burgundy. It was dedicated, as

Before quitting this subject it may not be uninteresting to some to be furnished with a description of the men who for four centuries tenanted this monastery. The habit of the order was formerly of a dark colour but they pretended that the Virgin Mary miraculously changed it to white at Citeaux. With this white robe was worn a black scapular and hood and their garment was girt with a black girdle of wool. In the choir they wore a white cowl and over that a hood with a rochet hanging down before round to the waist and in a point behind to the calf of the leg. On going abroad they wore a cowl and a large hood, both black.

That the abbey of Rievaulx sustained a dignified rank among monasteries in general will be apparent from the fact that in the year 1409 its abbot sent procurators to the council of Pisa, held for the extinction of the schism between the rival popes Gregory XII and Benedict XIII and from the further fact that at the sumptuous and memorable feast given by Nevill, Archbishop of York on his installation in AD 1464 its abbot ranked fourth in the order of precedence at the table :

*'Who that had seen the abbot in his power,
Lord of a palace and a rich domain;
Had thought that time would bring a blighting hour,
And prove that all his honours bloomed in vain'.*

In less than a century from this time however, that storm, which from the long contentions between the sovereigns of England and the pontiffs of Rome had been gathering thickly around, burst upon the monastic houses. The celebrated quarrel between Henry VIII and pope Clement afforded to that imperious monarch a favourable opportunity of throwing off his allegiance to Rome, which he had no sooner done, than with the consent of parliament all the religious houses of England which had a less clear annual income than £200 were dissolved by the act passed in AD 1535

The suppression of these houses was speedily followed by the



all other of the same order, to the Virgin Mary. Sir Walter gave the manor of Helmsley, with lands in Bilsdale, Griff and other places, to its endowment and many private individuals also devoted large tracts of land for the same purpose. Kings Henry I and II exempted its lands from tithe and invested its possessors with extensive immunities and privileges, all of which were confirmed to them by pope Alexander III by his bull dated AD 1160 in which he enjoined that the Cistercian order should continue there *for ever*. Sir Walter l'Espec survived the founding of the abbey for about thirty years and spent the last two years of his life within its walls as a monk.

The number of abbots from the foundation to the surrender of the abbey was thirty-one; their names and the period of their office as given by Burton will be found on the last page. Of their mental or moral character but little is recorded. Aelredus or Ealred the third abbot appears to have been distinguished for his piety and learning: it is said of him that 'he so much addicted himself to divine contemplation that he shined among his companions like a moon among the stars'. He was the familiar friend and biographer of David King of Scots. The successors of Ealred do not appear to have imbibed his love of literature; at all events no traces of their literary labours are now extant.

Among the monks of this abbey who attained distinction may be mentioned Walter Daniel, a disciple of Ealred who trod close upon the heels of his master, both as to virtue and literature: all his works are said to have been carefully preserved in the library attached to the abbey. Maurice, another monk of this house in 1147 was appointed abbot of Fountain's near Ripon, but preferring study to an active life he resigned his office in three months and returned to Rievaulx. He was succeeded by Thorald who was also a monk of this abbey but in consequence of some disagreement with his metropolitan Thorald likewise resigned his office and returned to his former associates at Rievaulx.

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materials in great part converted into straggling cottages which compose the village. Some fine specimens of corbels probably from the nave, may be seen ornamenting the village mill. Measures were taken by the late noble proprietor and have been still more efficiently carried out by its present owner, for preserving the abbey from further spoilation and decay.

The church exhibits one of the earliest specimens of the transition from the massive Norman to the light and elegant style of early pointed architecture introduced during the twelfth century and the windows, which are principally of the narrow lancet form with hatched ornaments, have a pleasing effect, though

*'Shorn of their glass of thousand colouring,
Through which the deepened glories once would enter,
Streaming from off the sun-like seraph's wings'.*

The choir, which is 144 feet in length and 63 feet in width is still in excellent preservation and viewed from the altar towards the nave, has a most imposing appearance. While gazing in mute astonishment on this scene the contemplative mind will frequently revert to the period when, on festive occasions the mitred abbot followed by a long train of white robed monks, entered the choir in solemn procession and the vaulted roof reverberated with notes of praise. How changed the scene now, gliding through the desolate windows at eventide

.....*'Oft sings
The owl his anthem, where the silenced quire
Lie with hallelujahs quench'd like fire'.*

On the eastern side of the choir are two flying buttresses; these are rarely met in contemporary monastic buildings. The late Lord Feversham had the bases of the pillars in the choir laid open in 1819 which has greatly improved their appearance. In the course of these excavations a stone coffin was



floor of this building has been on a level with the base of the arched doorway; the lower part from its rough appearance would lead to the conclusion that it had been used for cellarage. The windows of the refectory are all of the long lancet order and the corbels are ingeniously varied. On the west side the remains of a music gallery or scriptorium are seen, the access to which has been by an exterior staircase.

On the east side of the refectory are the supposed remains of the kitchens, parallel with which stand what has generally been considered the remains of the dormitory extending in a direct line from the south transept of the church. Such a connection appears to have been necessary when at the midnight hour the matin bell

'Warn'd the grey Fathers from their humble beds'

Their rules requiring them to sleep in their habits; and after matins not to return to their beds.

On the south side of the dormitory is an open court on one side of which, between a circular archway and the window the curious may observe two mutilated figures, by some supposed to represent the *fall* but by others *the annunciation*. Adjoining are the remains of the chapter house, the abbot's lodge etc, but these are in total ruin and the walls overspread with ivy. Close by is a farmhouse, part of the floor of which consists of tessellated pavement. At some distance from the abbey near the entrance to the village from the north may be seen the remains of the eleemosynary.

A glance at the plan of this abbey and a careful inspection of the ground where foundations of other appendages to the building may be traced (but which are not indicated on the plan as being too much involved in obscurity) will at once prove it to have been an extensive and magnificent fabric. Between the west corner of the refectory and the village may

The transepts are evidently of an earlier date than the choir; the lower part of the exterior walls next to the nave presenting quite a contrast to the upper part as well in the appearance of the stone itself as in the architecture. The north-west front has two tier of semi-circular headed windows with those of the narrow lancet form above; while the north-eastern front has only the lower windows semi-circular headed, the middle narrow lancet and the upper ones of the pointed trefoil character, highly ornamented.

In the interior of the transept as well as the upper part of the choir, between the spandrels of the arches, the quatrefoil ornament is found, corresponding with that ornament at York Minster. The tooth moulding is also prominently introduced, especially in the upper parts of the transepts, giving to the whole a light and elegant finish. The length of the two transepts is 118 feet and the breadth 47 feet.

The nave of the church is supposed to have been of a date antecedent to the choir but its foundations are so buried in rubbish that until the bases of the pillars are laid open the date must in some degree rest upon conjecture. The fragment of the exterior wall which remains strongly indicate it to have been of Norman architecture. The length of the nave is 166 feet making the entire length of the church internally 343 feet.

Quitting the transept by the circular headed doorway at the north-west corner the visitor finds himself in the quadrangular grass plot on the south and west sides of which the cloisters formerly ranged, connecting the church to the refectory, a spacious building 125 feet in length and 37 feet 6 inches in breadth. The entrance to the refectory from the quadrangle is by a handsome receding arched doorway, the mouldings of which are in good preservation. Within the inner part of the arch may be seen a specimen of the plaster of the walls and of the paint or colouring with which it was ornamented. The

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be seen a mound of slag in which are frequently found pieces of cast metal, which would indicate that ironworks have formerly been carried out there and the fact that the monks had granted to them certain ironworks in Rumblesmoor seems to strengthen the possibility. Below the village in line with the picturesque bridge which crosses the Rye is a place called the 'forge' where a quantity of charcoal and pieces of metal are still to be met with.

Having scanned the internal beauties of the abbey the visitor still has a rich treat before him. Quitting the village at the north end a winding footpath leads up to the brow of a steep hill covered with wood, on reaching the summit of which *The Terrace* which has justly been described as one of the finest in England opens out before him. It was formed by Thomas Duncombe Esquire in about 1758 and is half a mile in length and of ample breadth, having a plantation at the back and gently sloping in front to the wood. At the north end is an elegant temple with an Ionic portico and here the eye which has been feasting on the gaities of nature may be gratified with the beauties of art.

The ceiling of the temple is adorned with subjects from heathen mythology in fresco from the pencil of Burnici who was brought over from Italy expressly to execute them. In the centre of the ceiling is seen *Aurora, Apollo and The Muses*. In the cove of the ceiling in oblong compartments are *Andromeda* chained to a rock, *Diana and Endymion, Vulcan and Venus, Hercules and Omphale*; and in circular compartments, *Ariadne and Theseus, Hero and Leander, Pan fighting with Cupid and Jupiter and Europa*. The cornice and frieze with the beautiful white marble chimney piece will also not escape observation. Proceeding from the temple along the winding lawn to a point opposite the principal entrance gate and approaching the verge of the slope, the grey tinted abbey is seen reposing in the vale beneath surrounded by picturesque thatched cottages with the river Rye peeping from beneath overhanging

woods and refreshing the scene. Here, tracing the windings of the vale in a north-westerly direction,

'Distance lends enchantment to the view'

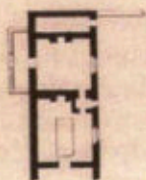
The pendant woods adorn the diversified hills on either hand and the valley enriched with trees of varied foliage winds along until lost in the projecting woods; whilst the bold azure-tinted hills of Hawnbury and Easterside skirt in the distance, the horizon, imparting additional grandeur to the scene. Nor is the eye alone gratified, for while gazing on this fairy spot the ear is often regaled by the wild music of the woods :

*'Here the gay tenants of the tuneful grove,
Harmonious breathe the raptures of their love;
Each warbler sweet that hails the genial spring,
Tunes the glad song, and plies the expanded wing;
The love-suggested notes, in varied strains,
Fly round the vocal hills and listening plains;
In varied strains, the love-suggested song'*

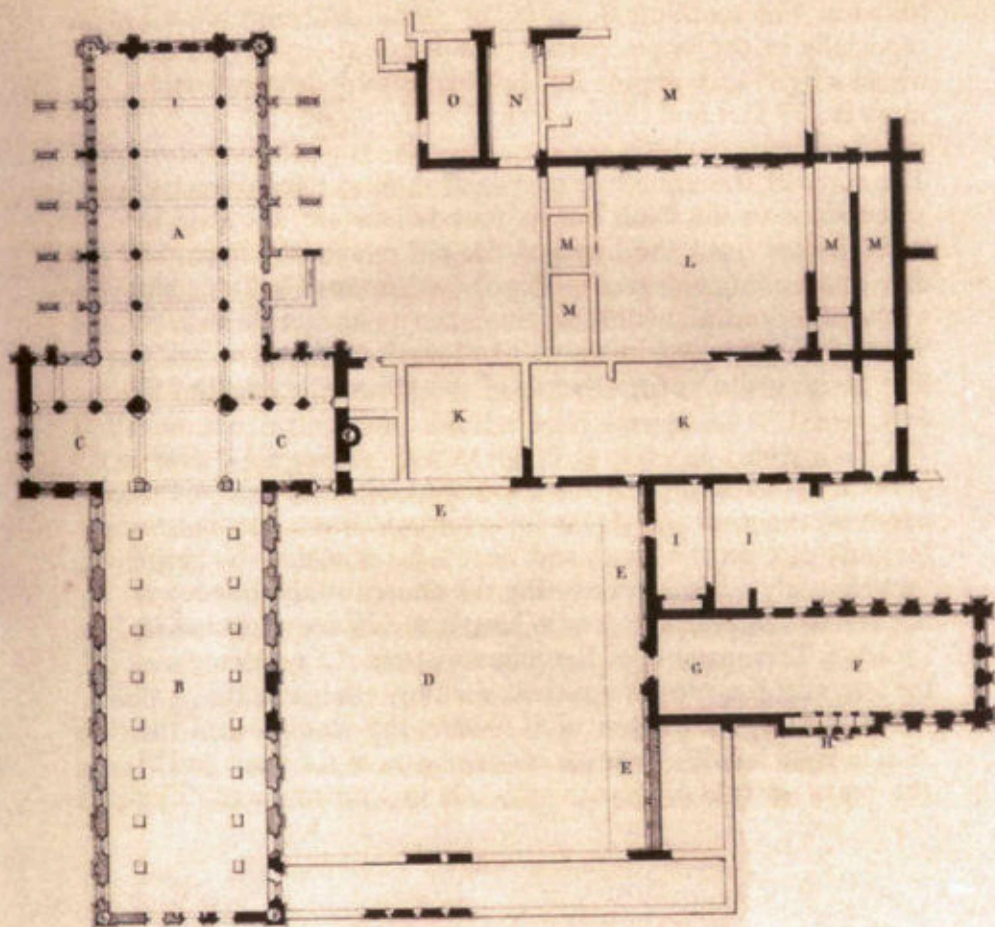
At the south end of the terrace is a circular temple, the floor of which is formed of the tessellated pavement removed from the abbey. The prospect from hence is rich in all those varied objects which give charm to the landscape. Perhaps however the most picturesque view of the abbey is obtained at the southern extremity of the vale on the side of 'Briary Hill'. Another very pleasing view is afforded from the brow of a hill west of the abbey leading to the village of Old Byland. In short from whatever point the ruins are viewed they furnish an admirable subject for the painter and the poet. And now,

*'Adieu ye towers ! By many an age array'd
In many a tint ; though crumbling and decay'd.
Still may your aisles in hoary pomp sublime,
To new-born eras, mark the lapse of time'*

Plan of Rievaulx Abbey



- A Choir of the Church
- B Site of the Nave
- C Transepts
- D Quadrangle
- E Site of the Cloisters
- F The Refectory
- G Ante-room in Refectory
- H Music Gallery
- I Site of Kitchens
- K Site of Dormitory
- L Open Court
- M Site of Abbot's House
- N Part of large arched entrance
- O Lodge



List of Abbots

Time of occurring	No	Names of abbots	How vacated
AD 1131	1	William, obit 1146	Died
	2	Maurice	
1160	3	Aelredus	
1175	4	Roger	
1180	5	Barnard	
1189	6	Sylvan, obit 1189	Died
	7	Godfrey	
1199	8	D Ernaldus	Resigned
1203	9	William Punchard, obit 1203	Died
	10	Guranius, obit 1211	Died
	11	Helyas	Resigned
	12	Henry, abbot of Warden obit 1216	
	13	William, abbot of Melrose obit 1223	Died
1224	14	Roger, abbot of Warden	Resigned
1238	15	Leonias de Dundraynon monk of Melrose, obit 1240	Died
	16	Adam de Telletia	
August 1275	17	William	
	18	Thomas	
	19	Robert	
Feb 1307	20	Peter	
June 1318	21	William	
Nov 1349	22	Richard	
	23	William	
Oct 1419	24	William Bromley (or Bymley)	Resigned
	25	John	
Nov 1423	26	Henry Burton, monk of Salley	
	27	William Spencer	
April 1449	28	John Inkeley (or Ingelay)	
Jan 1489	29	John Burton	
Nov 1513	30	William Helmesley	
	31	Richard (or Rowland de) Blyton	

In Dugdale's *Monasticon Anglicanum*, 1825, volume V page 277, four abbots are named who are not included in the above list. From this work and from Burton's *Monasticon* the historical facts before given have been chiefly selected.