

# Fountains Abbey

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## Studley Royal Park including the Ruins of Fountains Abbey\*

UNESCO World Heritage Site

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View of Fountains Abbey looking from east to south.

**Fountains Abbey** in North Yorkshire, England, is a ruined Cistercian monastery, founded in 1132. Fountains Abbey is one of the largest and best preserved Cistercian houses in England. It is a Grade I listed building and owned by the National Trust. Along with the adjacent Studley Royal Water Garden, it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

## History

Fountains Abbey was founded in 1132 following a dispute and riot at St. Mary's Abbey in York. Following the riot, thirteen monks were exiled and after unsuccessfully attempting to return to the early 6th century Rule of St Benedict, were taken into the protection of Thurstan, Archbishop of York. He provided them with a site in the valley of the River Skell. The enclosed valley had all the required materials for the creation of a monastery, providing shelter from the weather, stone and timber for building, and a running supply of water.<sup>[1]</sup> The monks applied to join the Cistercian order in AD1132.

The abbey operated until 1539, when Henry VIII ordered the Dissolution of the Monasteries. The Abbey buildings and over 500 acres (2 km<sup>2</sup>) of land were then sold

by the Crown, on October 1, 1540 [1], to Sir Richard Gresham, the London merchant, father of the founder of the Royal Exchange, Sir Thomas Gresham.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Architecture



Interior looking down the Nave

Construction of the Abbey began in 1132, with rock quarried locally, although the original monastery buildings received considerable additions and alterations in the later period of the order, causing deviations from the strict Cistercian type. The church stands a short distance to the north of the River Skell, the buildings of the abbey stretching down to and across the stream. The cloister is to the south, with the three-aisled chapter-house and calefactory opening from its eastern walk, and the refectory, with the kitchen and buttery attached, at right angles to its southern walk.

Parallel with the western walk is an immense vaulted substructure, incorrectly styled the cloisters, serving as cellars and store-rooms, and supporting the dormitory of the *conversi* (lay brothers) above. This building extended across the river. At its southwest corner were the necessaries, also built, as usual, above the swiftly flowing stream. The monks' dormitory was in its usual position above the chapter-house, to the south of the transept.

Peculiarities of arrangement include the position of the kitchen, between the refectory and calefactory, and of the infirmary (unless there is some error in its designation) above the river to the west, adjoining the guest-houses. In addition, there is a greatly lengthened choir, commenced by Abbot John of York, 1203–1211, and carried on by his successor, terminating, like Durham Cathedral, in an eastern transept, the work of Abbot John of Kent, 1220–1247, and to the tower, added not long before the dissolution by Abbot Huby, 1494–1526, in a very unusual position at the northern end of the north transept.

Among other apartments, for the designation of which see the ground-plan, was a domestic oratory or chapel, 46½ ft by 23 ft, and a kitchen, 50 ft by 38 ft. The whole arrangements and character of the building bespeak a rich and powerful feudal lord, not the humble father of a body of hard-working brethren, bound by vows to a life of poverty and self-denying toil. In the words of Dean Milman, "the superior, once a man bowed to the earth with humility, care-worn, pale, emaciated, with a coarse habit bound with a cord, with naked feet, had become an abbot on his curvetting palfrey, in rich attire, with his silver cross before him, travelling to take his place amid the lordliest of the realm." — (Lat. Christ. vol. iii. p. 330.) However, worldly as some

abbots and monks had become, the many visitors and tenants of the English monasteries would soon come to regret their loss, and the forced implementation of a dramatically more worldly regime.<sup>[3]</sup>

St Mary's Church (built c. 1873), designed by William Burges is also nearby.

## **National Trust Property**

Fountains Abbey is maintained by English Heritage, and owned by the National Trust. It is immediately adjacent to another National Trust property, Studley Royal Water Garden, with which it is jointly marketed. The Trust also owns Fountains Hall, to which there is partial public access.