

Tintern Abbey Ground Plan Commentary

Tintern abbey was a Cistercian abbey founded in 1131 by Walter fitz Richard de Clare, being majorly rebuilt and expanded in the thirteenth century.¹ There were expansions and alterations until the fifteenth century, followed by the abbey being dissolved in 1536.² The abbey was the first of its kind in Wales, later fostering two daughter houses, one in England and the other in Ireland.³ The abbey is in the Wye Valley of Wales, a remote landscape as is typical of Cistercian sites.⁴ This image is an illustrated ground plan of Tintern abbey, each addition being colour coded to the time period in which it was added. These eleven different instances of construction are divided into the three main sections of growth. The first of these is the early period of additions to the original building, over the span of a century, which is then divided into four phases. The next is that of its Gothic architecture, the church style that the abbey is known for. Though this period of building lasted only sixty-one years, it is also divided into four phases. The last of the three spanning two centuries is only divided into three periods between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The first era of construction started in the late twelfth century, functioning as early additions to the initial abbey structure. The majority of the focus of the additions from this time period are those of living quarters, other essentials to life such as kitchens and latrines, as well as a large infirmary hall. The stone cloister and initial church predate these as they were seen to be the most important.⁵ This early period served to fulfil the abbot and monks' specific comforts in permanence now that the essentials for prayer, worship, and those facets of monastic life had been met in its initial construction. There is also a clear expansion of the abbey's outer wall around its eastern side, aiding in the separation between the monks and the outside world.

As stated earlier the abbey was massively rebuilt beginning in 1269, as can be seen in the image's key.⁶ As became common with Cistercian monastic houses, the newly built abbey had features quite modern for its time.⁷ Along with this the Cistercians sold themselves as being a very back to basics style of monastic order, but the highly dramatic style that is gothic architecture contradicted this. One of these gothic features that is very well evidenced in the

¹ J. Burton and K. Stöber, *Abbeys and Priories: Abbeys and Priories of Medieval Wales*, (University of Wales Press, 2015).

² Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Tintern Abbey', in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tintern-Abbey>>; Burton and Stöber, 'Abbeys and Priories', p. 207.; Williams, D.H., 'The Fate of the Religious and Secular Community at Tintern Abbey, Wales, After Its Suppression', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 57 (2022), pp. 181-183.

³ Burton and Stöber, 'Abbeys and Priories', p. 204.

⁴ J. Burton and J. Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages*, (Boydell Press, 2011), pp. 56-81.

⁵ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages*, pp. 64-67.

⁶ Burton and Stöber, 'Abbeys and Priories', p. 208.

⁷ Sternberg, M., 'Cistercian Architecture', in *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, <<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195396584/obo-9780195396584-0257.xml>>

diagram is the Cruciform church in the abbey's southwest. This Latin cross shaped building is highly characteristic of gothic architecture and the churches built in this era.⁸

The portion of the plan dedicated to the 'later middle ages' features primarily repairs or amendments rather than large expansions. Some examples of this, as seen in the plan, are the walls dividing the infirmary hall, a covered passage, and the past abbot's house being divided into apartments. This is possibly due to debts accrued by the abbey around this time which commonly are attributed to being a result of the Glyndwr uprisings.⁹ This could also have been affected by the black death which was estimated to have killed sixty to sixty-five percent of most European populations, and the Cistercian monks were not miraculously exempt from this.¹⁰ Soon after this the abbey dissolved, after which the abbey started to fall into disrepair from its disuse.

In the context of relative modernity, this finalized, albeit later ruinous, result of the abbey went on in later centuries to become an inspiration to authors and artists. The building complex's remains became a common tourist destination beginning in the eighteenth century.¹¹ The building evolved as it did in the image, to become a landmark and, once again, a place of cultural importance. An example for this is a transparency of the abbey being present in Austen's *Mansfield Park*, alongside transparencies of other beautiful things.¹² Tintern also served as inspiration to the venerated poet William Wordsworth, though the abbey is not mentioned in any specifics in the poem.¹³ The poem's descriptions of the landscape however serve to provide a context that the ground plan does not, the setting of the abbey. The way Wordsworth describes the wye valley connects deeply to the ideals of the Cistercians in its seclusion and inspirational nature in thought and prayer.¹⁴

⁸ Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Transept', in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/technology/transept>>.

⁹ Digital Humanities Institute, 'Cistercian Abbeys: TINTERN', <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/cistercians/abbeys/tintern.php>

¹⁰ O.J. Benedictow, *The Complete History of the Black Death*, (Boydell Press, 2021), pp. 869-876.

¹¹ Digital Humanities Institute, 'Cistercian Abbeys: TINTERN'.

¹² J. Austen, *Mansfield Park*, (Spottiswood and Shaw, 1847), p. 135.

¹³ W. Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour', in *Lyrical Ballads*, (David Nutt, 1898), pp. 201-210.

¹⁴ Wordsworth, 'Tintern Abbey', pp. 201-210; Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages*, pp. 56-81.

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