



Fountains Abbey was a Cistercian Monastery founded in 1132 by thirteen Benedictine monks. These monks were exiled from St. Mary's abbey in York and had found a place in the valley of the River Skell which "a most inhospitable place; more proper as a retreat for wild beasts than a suitable abode for mankind,"¹ which is a statement that has been used by other founders of Cistercian monasteries like the monastery of Cîteaux. The idea behind choosing areas like these come from the desire to be in isolation from society and to choose places like the desert, where the hermits go to resist temptations. They also decided to appoint Richard who was the ex-prior of St. Mary's of York to be their first abbot and be able to lead the monks through these hard times while attempting to set up their new monastery. Though they did not begin as a Cistercian monastery, within three years they were admitted into the order.

Fountains abbey rose to be the largest and richest abbey in Cistercian history, though their beginning was filled with many hardships and challenges. They were forced to deal with the harsh weather of the winter all without any money, food, or basic necessities. According to the accounts from Saint Robert of Newminster "there was... no sound of a murmur to disturb the peace and tranquillity that filled the breasts of these solitaires. No sadness could reach them, whose joy did not consist in the abundance of possessions,"² since they were supposed to accept that God always has a plan for them, even if many of them were suffering. This may have been Robert's way of trying to prove that the monks were very dedicated to their life of poverty and hardships, even if many of them had complained and sadness within the group considering they had come from an already established monastery.

¹ Henry Collins, *The Spirit and Mission of the Cistercian Order*, (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co, 1866), 50.

² Collins, *The Spirit and Mission of the Cistercian Order*, 54.

Fountains Abbey remains one of England's most important monastic ruins. With much archaeological research it will become "one of the most clearly understood and well documented medieval abbeys,"³ meaning it can give a lot of insight into the architectural aspect of the Cistercians. With the geographical placement of the abbey being near a river, they were able to construct a water mill which is still standing among the ruins and is the oldest surviving Cistercian water mill. This shows the Cistercians ability to find the most advantageous areas to set up their monasteries, even though they claim to set up in places "inhabited only by wild beasts... at that time unusual for men to enter,"⁴ which is again repeated in a separate Cistercian document. Though not everything that was once standing in Fountains is still up, it is still clear that they took great care into the construction of their monastery.

This monastery was very rich and prosperous, thanks to their many methods of production. The monastery was very prosperous from exporting wool since the monks were able to raise sheep at the monastery. Since they had a lot of stock they would put the wool in the 'wool house' which was situated beside the malt-house and the brewhouse.⁵ The malt-house and brewhouse being more contributing factors to their economic growth, where they would be able to brew their own beers and ales. The monks were very intelligent economically since none of them were able to be individually rich they would produce materials for the monastery to become richer. They would also accept donations from benefactors in order to keep up to the growth of the monastery and the production of their exports.

While they were prosperous for centuries, in 1535 an investigation done in the monastery revealed many instances of affairs and breaking of the rules. This caused some turbulences for the monasteries and in 1539 Abbot Marmaduke Bradley and the other 31 members of the monastery had given up the titles and rights to the royal commissioner. There was hope when King Henry VIII wanted to form a bishopric, this unfortunately didn't work out and "with no reason to spare Fountains any longer,"⁶ it was eventually demolished. The buildings were demolished in a way to make them uninhabitable which is why in the modern age it's a sight of ruins. Though Sir. Richard Gresham decided not to "cause a scene of devastation,"⁷ Fountains suffered less destruction and that is the reason for it being one of the most preserved monastic houses.

³ The Cistercians in Yorkshire Project, *Fountains Abbey: Introduction*, The Digital Humanities Institute, <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/cistercians/fountains/history/>

⁴ *Exordium Parvum*, 12th Century, 2.

⁵ The Cistercians in Yorkshire Project, *Fountains Abbey: The Wool-House*, The Digital Humanities Institute, https://www.dhi.ac.uk/cistercians/fountains/buildings/outer_court/woolhouse.php

⁶ The Cistercians in Yorkshire Project, *Fountains Abbey: The End of Monastic Life: The Dissolution of Fountains*, The Digital Humanities Institute, https://www.dhi.ac.uk/cistercians/fountains/history/end_of_monastic_life/end5.php

⁷ The Cistercians in Yorkshire Project, *Fountains Abbey: The End of Monastic Life: The Dissolution of Fountains*, https://www.dhi.ac.uk/cistercians/fountains/history/end_of_monastic_life/end5.php

Fountains is a place of great historical significance and allows visitors to be able to step foot into the lives of medieval monks and see the architecture of their times. It has allowed for plenty of historical finds and insight into the layouts of monastic houses. Though Fountains was known for being very rich and successful, it came with many hardships and difficulties. Along with creating a very large monastery, the monks of Fountains were able to be very successful in their economic growth.

Bibliography

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