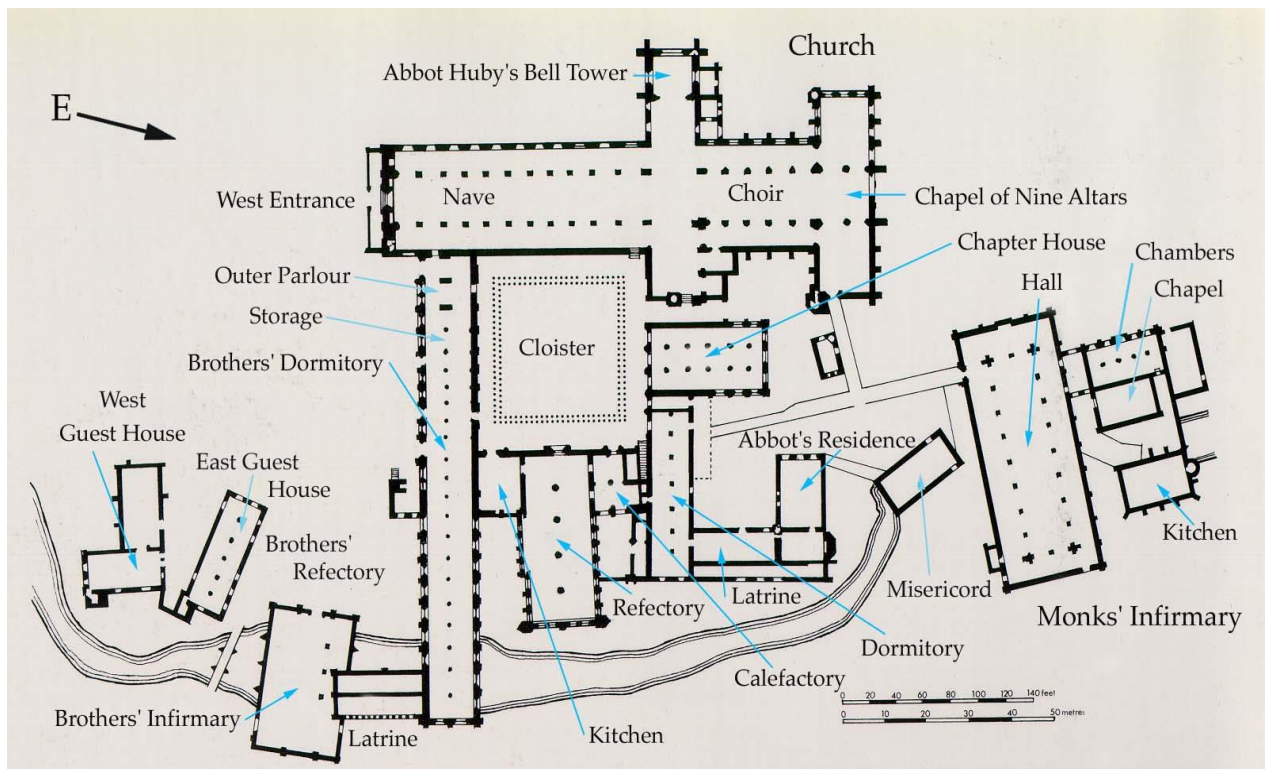




Commentary on a Visual Image: Mature Ground Plan of Fountains Abbey

THE CLOISTER AND THE WORLD, ASSIGNMENT 01

STEPHEN TAYLOR

Commentary on a Visual Image: Mature Ground Plan of Fountains

Abbey¹

Fountains Abbey was the second Cistercian monastery to be built in the North of England, and the third Cistercian monastery to be built in England overall following on from Waverley Abbey (Surrey) and Rievaulx Abbey (North Yorkshire). Founded as a daughter house of Clairvaux in 1132, Fountains Abbey is located close to Ripon, North Yorkshire, and is built along the banks of the River Skell. The site is typical of the “Cistercian plan”, a layout which originated with the layout of Fontenay Abbey and became the standard for most new Cistercian houses.² It consists of a claustral design with rooms of differing functionality on each side: domestic rooms on the southern side, administrative rooms on the eastern side, religious rooms (the church) on the northern side, and labour-related rooms on the western side.

The West

Like many Cistercian sites, the complex at Fountains is designed in part to maintain segregation between the monks and the lay brothers. The size of the lay brethren complex to the west of the cloister is large even by Cistercian standards, indicating that there were likely many more lay brethren than there were cloistered monks at the site. This is also evidenced by comparing the length of the dormitory of the monks with the dormitory of the lay brethren in the image. The lay brethren complex contains a large separate dormitory, refectory, latrine, and infirmary. Although not depicted in this image, the lay brethren at Fountains also

¹ Image originates from <https://medieval.ucdavis.edu/>

² ‘Abbaye de Fontenay - Cistercian Plan’, n.d. <<https://www.abbayedefontenay.com/en/history/cistercian-plan>> [accessed 15 March 2026].

had their own cloister,³ positioned between the west end of the nave and the lay brethren day stairs,⁴ which likely meant they did not have regular interaction with the monks as they did not share a common walkway. This further adds to the sense of separation.

In addition to lay brethren facilities, the western side of the complex also has separate buildings used as guest houses. Two of these buildings were used for guests of note and are depicted in the image. There was also a large guest hall directly to the north of these buildings, more akin to an open-plan dormitory, of which nothing remains today.⁵ This division is probably necessitated by practicality – as visits from important members of the order (for example perhaps the Abbot of Clairvaux visiting his daughter house), visiting patrons who had provided financial support, or potential benefactors would likely expect better standards of accommodation than the guest hall, which would more likely see use by less prestigious visitors such as pilgrims. It could also, in part, be an interpretation of chapter 53 of the Rule of Saint Benedict (“The Reception of Guests”) which states that special attention should be paid to the poor and to pilgrims, but acknowledges that the rich are shown respect “because we are in awe of them”.⁶ The location of the guest accommodation on the edge of western side of the complex ensures that disruption to monastic life is minimal.

The cellarer’s office is also located in the western range. The location of the office presumably allows him to be in close proximity to the cellarium,

³ Rita Wood, ‘Fountains Abbey: 11. Lay Brothers’ Accommodation and Bridge’, CRSBI, n.d. <<https://www.crsbi.ac.uk/view-item?i=2261>> [accessed 8 March 2026].

⁴ The stairs are not labelled in this image but are depicted half-way down the western side of the lay brother dormitory, next to the cellarer’s office, which is also unlabelled.

⁵ Glyn Coppack, ‘Fountains - The Mother House’, in *Fountains Abbey* (Amberley, 2009), p. 72.

⁶ Carolinne White, *The Rule of St Benedict* (Penguin, 2008).

which was also located in the western range (though not depicted).⁷ The outer parlour located at the northern end of the range was likely used for receiving lay visitors and merchants, with whom the cellarer and brethren may need to interact with for purposes of trade or provision.

The presence of all the rooms and facilities in the western range clearly delineate this space as one that is secular (non-monastic), separated from the rest of the complex for the purposes of work and hospitality. It is somewhat self-sustaining, ensuring that the lay brethren have little to no regular need to enter the main cloister.

The North

The church takes up the entire northern end of the complex, consisting of a large cruciform structure with a long nave and a more compact choir area. We can see from the eleven rows depicted that the nave was large presumably to show the status of the abbey but also to accommodate all the lay brethren – who took up at least the first seven rows.⁸ The church was likely separated with a rood screen, allowing the monks to worship in the presbytery on the eastern side of the building, segregated from the lay brethren. This is perhaps a strategic decision, as the eastern wall of the church contained a very large window which would ensure that the monks attending early morning Lauds would have the maximal amount of light available to them. Because the lay brethren slept slightly longer than the monks, prayed many of the daytime offices at their places of

⁷ Julie Kerr and Sarah Foot, 'Lay Brothers' Range – The Cistercians in Yorkshire', *The Cistercians in Yorkshire*, n.d. <<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/blogs/cistercians/fountains-abbey/buildings/lay-brothers-range/>> [accessed 17 March 2026].

⁸ Glyn Coppack, 'Fountains - The Mother House', in *Fountains Abbey* (Amberley, 2009), p. 55.

work, and generally could not read –lower levels of light at their side of the church was likely less of an issue to them.⁹

The church has an entrance off the north side of the cloister leading to the top of the nave, and additionally another entrance adjacent to the chapter house. There is additionally a separate entrance into the church for the lay brethren which leads directly into the lower part of the nave from the lay cloister. The presence of a separate church entrance is both practical for the brethren to enter from the west of the complex, where they spend the majority of their time, and also serves as a physical reminder of the separation between lay brother and monk – that they have separate entrances. A large western entrance at the foot of the nave led to the Galilee porch (a type of narthex) which was perhaps used by lay visitors to allow them to listen to the service without properly entering the building – again defining the western edge of the complex for secular use.

The South

The kitchen on the southern edge of the cloister served food to both the monks and the lay brethren, with serving hatches on both the western and eastern walls providing a direct opening into the monks' refectory and the lay brethren refectory respectively.¹⁰ This further separates the two groups and minimises contact with the kitchen, limiting disruption but providing a single facility to provide for all. The main refectory itself is prominent on the plan, the largest room off the south side of the cloister, on a north-south axis.

⁹ Julie Kerr and Sarah Foot, *Lifestyle – The Cistercians in Yorkshire*, n.d. <<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/blogs/cistercians/cistercian-life/lay-brothers/lifestyle/>> [accessed 15 March 2026].

¹⁰ Megan Cassidy-Welch, 'Status, Space, and Representation', in *Monastic Spaces and Their Meanings*, Medieval Church Studies, 1 (Brepols Publishers, 2001), p. 175.

The abbey complex is strategically placed so that the River Skell, on the southern side of the abbey, flows west to east alongside or underneath the two primary latrines, the kitchens, and both infirmaries – ensuring that waste is taken away from the site. Water for drinking, cooking, and washing was presumably extracted upstream at the western side of the complex.

The East

The only room leading directly off the cloister at the eastern edge is the chapter house.¹¹ Its prominence in the cloister denotes its importance as the administrative and corporate heart of the monastery, likely second in importance only to the church itself.

Although in the early days of the order the abbot slept alongside the monks in the dormitory, it quickly became the norm for the abbot to have private accommodation. The abbot's house at Fountains is located south-east of the chapter house, immediately west of the infirmary, and additionally linked via a walkway from the eastern end of the church (where the abbot is likely to have stood during services). The location of the house, away from the cloister but by no means near the edge of the site, ensures that important rooms were nearby to the abbot's dwelling and that his presence could still be felt by the monks on site, whilst still offering a sense of privacy and separation. In addition, there is a direct passageway from the abbot's house to the misericord (a smaller refectory where meat was served). Although the consumption of meat was prohibited for everyone except the sick and infirm (as per chapter thirty-nine of The Rule of St Benedict), and perhaps explaining why the misericord is directly adjacent to the infirmary, this rule was relaxed in

¹¹ I am defining the dormitory as a southern room due to its north-south axis.

the fifteenth-century to allow the monks to eat meat a few times during the week except during periods of religious fasting. The passageway from the abbot's house to the misericord therefore denotes his importance and status – likely designed entirely for his and his guests' own use.

The infirmary is set to the east of the cloister complex and is largely self-sustaining, with its own chapel, kitchen, and presumably latrine block. Although not depicted in the image, the infirmary is partially built over the top of the River Skell, with a large arched tunnel system underneath allowing the river to flow underneath the southern edge of the building.¹² The infirmary is placed away from the main complex presumably for reasons of hygiene; it ensured the flowing water took waste away from the site without tainting the water downstream. It was also in a quieter area away from the main complex to ensure the sick and infirm could rest, whilst also keeping the potentially unpleasant noises of the sick away from the monks in the cloister.

Conclusion

The plan of Fountains Abbey is intentionally designed to encourage several different types of separation: primarily to separate the lay brothers from the monks, but also to separate visitors from the monks, to separate the abbot from the rest of the monks at specific times of the day, and to separate the sick from the healthy. The clever combination of geographical placement and architecture ensures that the monastery maintains both a clean water supply and waste disposal, whilst the claustral design of the abbey separates the space into different functional zones and encourages segregation.

¹² Sarah Foot Julie Kerr, 'The Infirmary', Cistercians in Yorkshire, n.d.
<<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/cistercians/fountains/buildings/infirmary/>> [accessed 16 March 2026].

Bibliography

- ‘Abbaye de Fontenay - Cistercian Plan’, n.d.
<<https://www.abbayedefontenay.com/en/history/cistercian-plan>>
[accessed 15 March 2026]
- Cassidy-Welch, Megan, ‘Status, Space, and Representation’, in
Monastic Spaces and Their Meanings, Medieval Church Studies, 1
(Brepols Publishers, 2001), p. 175
- Coppack, Glyn, ‘Fountains - The Mother House’, in *Fountains Abbey*
(Amberley, 2009), p. 72
- , ‘Fountains - The Mother House’, in *Fountains Abbey* (Amberley,
2009), p. 55
- Julie Kerr, Sarah Foot, ‘The Infirmary’, Cistercians in Yorkshire, n.d.
<<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/cistercians/fountains/buildings/infirmary/>>
[accessed 16 March 2026]
- Kerr, Julie, and Sarah Foot, ‘Lay Brothers’ Range – The Cistercians in
Yorkshire’, *The Cistercians in Yorkshire*, n.d.
<<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/blogs/cistercians/fountains-abbey/buildings/lay-brothers-range/>> [accessed 17 March 2026]
- , and Sarah Foot, *Lifestyle – The Cistercians in Yorkshire*, n.d.
<<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/blogs/cistercians/cistercian-life/lay-brothers/lifestyle/>> [accessed 15 March 2026]
- White, Carolinne, *The Rule of St Benedict* (Penguin, 2008)
- Wood, Rita, ‘Fountains Abbey: 11. Lay Brothers’ Accommodation and
Bridge’, CRSBI, n.d. <<https://www.crsbi.ac.uk/view-item?i=2261>>
[accessed 8 March 2026]

