

The Architectural Splendor of the Southwest Side of Fountains Abbey



The Fountains Abbey complex, nestled amidst the tranquil landscapes of North Yorkshire, England, stands as a testament to the enduring allure of architectural grandeur and historical legacy. Within this expansive site, the Southwest side of Fountains Abbey shines as a living proof of the greatness, and vastness, of the archaeological prowess of the Middle Ages. Albeit the entirety of the southwest side is not visible in the photo located above, which this commentary mainly focuses on, due to sporadically placed trees in the middle of the Abbey's grounds, the architecture itself is a sight that irrevocably affects expectations of the splendour of gothic architecture.

The architecture of the Southwest side, and the Abbey complex itself, can be considered an artful representation of the grandiose plans of the Cistercian Order itself, yet directly contradicts the essential teachings included in the Rule of St Benedict's,¹ which would suggest, and in turn, is supported by the history of the Abbey itself, that it was built past the decision to halt the expansion taken in 1152 by the Cistercian General Chapter, as the records show, The original Abbey, made of wood and consisting of 2 levels, was burned down during the attack in 1146, barely six years before the halt of the expansion. Later on, the Abbey was rebuilt and expanded upon, as well as changed multiple times over the course of the following centuries, with the final structure, the Huby's tower, one directly opposing the rule of not building tall towers, being built in 1526.

The photo presented above once again leaves much of the extraordinary architecture hidden, including the underground levels as well as the inside of the cloister and cellarium, not to mention the chapel itself, each one of these showcasing the achievement of the building technology available to people in that period of time, showing not only how the idea can be turned into a physical manifestation, but can also include ideologies and beliefs.

¹ Saint Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Translated by Leonard J. Doyle, (Liturgical Press, 2001).

What it shows, is the outer courtyard, a vast space far removed from where the monks were focused on their contemplations. According to the plan², which corresponds with the photo that this commentary focuses on, it predominantly shows the cellarium, as well as the Hubby's tower, the last part of the architecture to be built before the downfall of the Order in England. The photo itself was taken from a more western than southern side, focusing the view on the more elaborate side of the monastic structure, showcasing the progress from monastic asceticism to secular patronage, with the Hube's Tower being a sign the Abbey was taking that direction even before the Dissolution of Monasteries. What is further hidden in the photo, by a tree nonetheless, is the entrance to the nave of the chapel, the very front of it, one that most likely included stained glass, the empty space left after which is hidden by one of these trees. The grand design of the architectural splendour, as mentioned before, served a very specific purpose, to connect the beauty, ideology and belief, one that was commonly shared during that era - it was to showcase the might of the Lord whom the architecture represented, in this case - God. For this purpose, the gothic style which was utilised here was used - the pointed arches, as well as the tendency to build higher, was in contrast to the Romanesque style low-level builds, it was meant to represent closeness to God and desire to reach heaven, as well as to scare the invaders, common folk and evil, by convincing them of the greatness and the might of God.

On the right-hand side of the photo, we can see the remains of a building, most likely located there due to the direct access to the body of water located behind it. This could have been done for various reasons, with the dominant one being a necessity to take care of sanitary needs.

The architecture itself shows multiple examples of the Gothic style of building, with its pointed arch specifically. It is, as mentioned before, a far-removed concept from the minimalist approach that the Cistercian Reformation was meant to build, and the Cenobites that lived there were more akin to the noble monks than this secluded Cistercian community. What initially started as a wooden structure turned into a Romanesque-style building, in the end, stands as an example of Gothic architecture (at least from the side visible in this picture). The wealth of the site showcases the wealth of the community, with their trade and ability to utilise the terrain, as well as their donations, slowly but surely, the Cistercians living in the Fountains Abbey were able to afford such luxury, furthering their inevitable separation from their roots.

The fact that the ruins of this Abbey stand in such a relatively well-conserved way until this day may also be due to the fact that after the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the Abbey complex was taken over for secular use, a trend that can be seen nowadays with the religious organisations, such as Church of England offering their building for sale, often times for personal use such as homes, as was the case with the Fountain Abbey. Acquisition by a private person, not connected with any religious organisation, meant that not only the utility of the Abbey would change but also the way funds were utilised. Regardless of the wealth

² The Gresham Publishing Company, 'A Plan Of Fountains Abbey', *The New Gresham Encyclopedia*, [photograph], 1922, <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34073/34073-h/34073-h.htm>> [accessed 16 August 2023].

the Cistercians had, they were still a monastic order, with their distribution of funds being scrutinised and sometimes limited, having to rely not only on donations but also on their sales and production, with a lot of funds being directed to the build of the Abbey complex, even if over time, it brings a question whether in the long run, they would be able to uphold the site and provide necessary maintenance, something that would come much easier to a private Landowner. This might have also been a reason why shortly before the Monasteries were dissolved, the last Abbot, Marmaduke Bradley proceeded to lease out parts of the estate.³

In conclusion, the southwest side of Fountains Abbey, presented in this photo, stands as a testament to the dynamic interplay of architecture, history, and societal evolution. Its departure from conventional Cistercian architectural principles mirrors the evolving architectural tastes of its era, as well as the progressive downfall of the Cistercian ideology, that even though it was meant to bring an upheaval, and majority joined the Order for the very reason of avoiding the earthly splendour, resulted in a monastic building that sometimes could rival noble estates. Its historical trajectory, from Cistercian sanctuary to secular dwelling, mirrors broader historical currents, leaving an indelible impact on the surrounding landscape, not only because it currently serves as a historical site with an abundance of rich history but also through the impact the residents of the Abbey had on their surroundings, specifically their ability to utilise even a barren land into one that would be a source of livelihood.

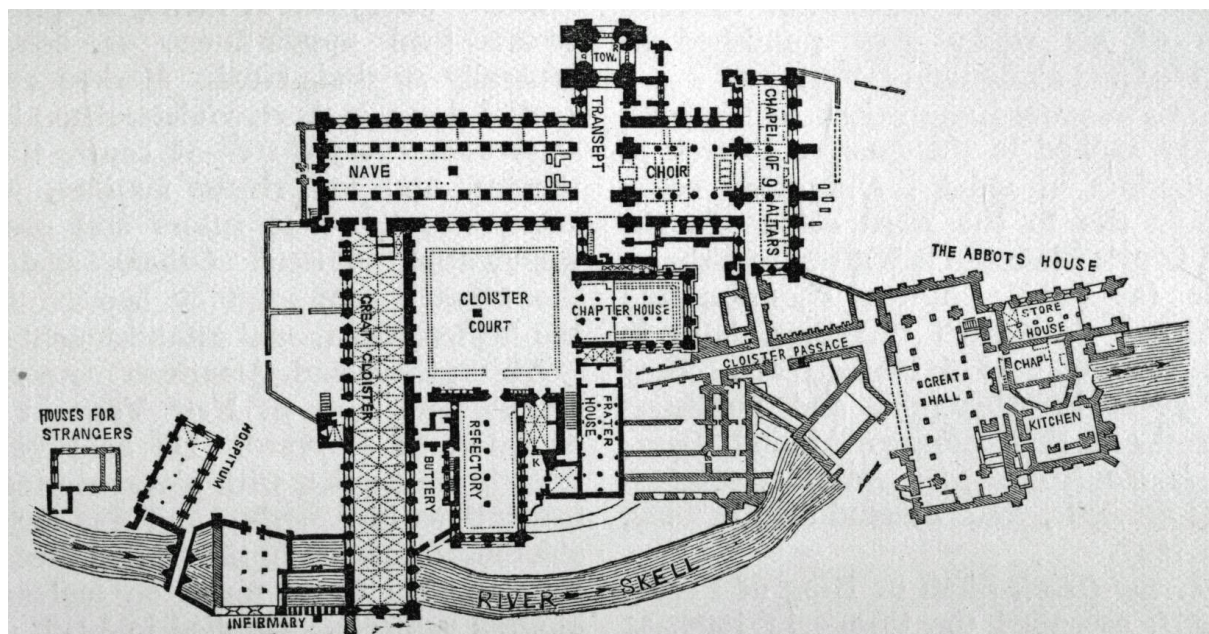


Fig.1 A Plan of Fountains Abbey.⁴

³ The Cistercians In Yorkshire Project, *Fountains Abbey: Buildings*, N.A., <<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/cistercians/fountains/buildings/>> [accessed 16 August 2023].

⁴ The Gresham Publishing Company, 'A Plan Of Fountains Abbey'.

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