

Fountains Abbey and Rievaulx Abbey

Inspired by the BBC's programmes about the Normans, and Dan Snow's Norman Walks, my wife and I took a short break in North Yorkshire to visit two of the most impressive testaments to the Normans' religious fervour and passion for abbey building in the years after the Conquest.



Fountains Abbey

Our first visit was to Fountains Abbey, on the doorstep of the Yorkshire Dales, near Ripon. A dispute and riot at St Mary's Abbey in York led to the founding the abbey in 1132. After pleading unsuccessfully to return to the early 6th century Rule of St Benedict, 13 monks were exiled and taken into the protection of Thurstan, Archbishop of York. He provided them with a site in the valley of the little River Skell in which they could found a new, more devout monastery. Although described as a place "more fit for wild beasts than men to inhabit" it had all the essential materials for the creation of a monastery: shelter from the weather, stone and timber for building, and plenty of water.

The ruins are indeed a most impressive site. An excellent centre displaying the life of monks in the Middle Ages and a scale model of how the abbey looked at its zenith provided just the right context for our visit. The sheer scale of the architecture and height of the stonework and windows takes your breath away.

Now managed by the National Trust, the visitor experience is enhanced by the inclusion of Studley Royal, a very extensive **Georgian water garden** adjacent to the abbey ruins, the bottom lake of which is currently being drained and restored to its former splendour. A stroll in the sun around both sites on a late summer's day, in such a serene, peaceful location made a wonderful start to our trip.



Rievaulx Abbey

After staying overnight further north in Skeeby, we made our way southwards to Rievaulx, an English Heritage site which is near Helmsley on the edge of the North York Moors National Park. It's approached by a very steep escarpment, which once scaled, provides astounding views over the surrounding countryside. The abbey was founded by St Bernard of Clairvaux, as part of the missionary effort to reform Christianity in western Europe.

Twelve Clairvaux monks came to Rievaulx in 1132. From these modest beginnings grew one of the wealthiest monasteries of medieval England and the first northern Cistercian monastery. Rievaulx enjoyed the protection of Walter Espec, keeper of the royal forest, of nearby Helmsley Castle, who provided much of the abbey's land.

Rievaulx boasted a 'celebrity' abbot, Aelred, who was their 3rd incumbent and who led it for 20 years. He immortalised Rievaulx in his famous words "Everywhere peace, everywhere serenity, and a marvellous freedom from the tumult of the world", which still holds true. The back-to-basic, environmentally-friendly principles he extolled strike a familiar 'green' chord today. The inhabitants at Rievaulx, who included the lower classes as labourers and lay people, lived an austere, self-sufficient life, eating only one vegetarian meal a day in winter and observing silence.

If you have time, also visit the National Trust-run Rievaulx Terrace built by [Thomas Duncombe III](#) in 1758 that overlooks the abbey ruins and which is adorned at both ends by Tuscan and Ionic temple follies.

It's quite a long drive to this part of England (nearly 3 hours, 158 miles), but worth it to see such impressive examples of the Normans' devotion to God.

Martin Jones

LAUREL POWELL'S PHOTOS OF FOUNTAINS ABBEY ON BOXING DAY 2011!







Laurel writes: "Fountains Abbey is the surviving section of a Cistercian monastery. Each year on Boxing Day the congregation of Ripon Cathedral walk on a pilgrimage to the Abbey for a candlelit carol service in the Cellarium which is the only part of the abbey with any ceiling remaining."

Thanks very much for the photos Laurel - Ed