

File name: Church

Audio length: 3:49 minutes

Meg: So the church. As churches go: lovely. And everyone's in here, right? So, all mixed up, having a party?

Kat: The whole community would be here but they'd all be divided up. So the lay brothers would be at the back, and then the choir monks would also have been split into sections. So there was a middle section for monks from the infirmary, who would also have had to have tried their best to come to church still. And this section has bigger windows to let more light and air in.

Meg: So the choir monks get that beaut view of the altar and the window?

Kat: Yes the choir monks who were well definitely got the best view, although the stalls faced inwards. But the monks would never have had the beautiful long view of the nave that we see. A screen would have divided the lay brothers from the choir monks, and another screen divided the sick monks from those who were well. A high altar would have been at the front underneath the big window. Apparently the high altar was destroyed by three men from Bramley, apparently, in the early 1700s. So the church would have just looked very different to what we see today. The relic of St Bernard may have also been in the church.

Meg: Sorry Kat, what's a relic?

Kat: So a relic, in this context, is the remains of a deceased holy person so that would be used in prayer.

Meg: And surely we've got literally so much stuff from here?

Kat: Yeah we've got the stonework from the windows. So the beautiful Gothic window you see in the East wall wasn't the original window. The first window was a rose window and we have some of the original stone tracery. And we also have lots of decorative floor tiles from the church. And we have other interesting objects; like a lead tray was discovered in the 1890s, in the church, and they probably lined a wooden box but we have no idea what was in it.

Meg: Kat, with the tiles that've been found on the floor...

Kat: Yep

Meg: Because they've been found in other areas of the abbey right?

Kat: Yep

Meg: Are they all the same across the whole of the abbey or is it different for different rooms?

Kat: They're all the same but the problem is... they, so they started to be removed from like the early 1700s by antiquarians. So a lot of them were re-laid in different places so we don't know if they are in the original positions, apart from the refectory because you know that was excavated in the [19]50s and [19]60s so that's completely in situ. But all the rest of the tiles, it's really difficult to say which room they're from originally in the first place because they were just such collectables and people went in and rearranged them. So we think that the church was tiled, but we're not sure how the tiles were arranged, which is sad!

Meg: And what about burial?

Kat: So you can see an old doorway in the North transept, and this was the funeral gate and would open out towards the monks' cemetery. So

there are people buried across the abbey who weren't monks as well but we have no record of exactly who and where. Being buried within the abbey was seen as a great privilege and it was a way to achieve salvation in the next life, especially being buried in the church. But we do have records of some charters which record people donating their bodies for burial, along with gifts to the abbey. For example, Nigel of Horsforth gave his body and lands in Horsforth to Kirkstall Abbey.

Meg: Nigel.

Kat: Nigel, yeah! And we also have fragments of tombstones and coffins that have been found in different parts of the abbey as well.

Meg: And is there anything else we should know about the space?

Kat: I mean there's lots to say about the church but one of the most interesting things is that after the abbey closed and up until the early 1800s, a road ran straight through the nave of the church towards Leeds. And when Henry VIII removed the lead roof to sell, this put a strain on the structure, and might have contributed to the tower collapsing during a storm in 1779. So Cistercians were supposed to be really humble, so the church tower was meant to be low, but for some reason the second to last Abbot decided he didn't want a low tower, so he raised it to its current height.