

File name: Visitor Centre

Audio length: 2:53 minutes

Meg: Right so we're in the visitor centre now, and we've bumped into our Curator of Archaeology, Kat. Hello Kat.

Kat: Hi Meg!

Meg: So, shall we do a quick-fire history of Kirkstall Abbey?

Kat: Sure, so Kirkstall Abbey was founded in 1152. And it was all because of a man called Henry De Lacy who was Baron of Pontefract. So Henry got very ill and he vowed that he'd establish an abbey if he recovered, and he did survive and he kept his promise.

So, after a failed attempt at Barnoldswick, he secured the land at Kirkstall for a group of Cistercian Monks from Fountains Abbey. And they came here, they built the abbey and they lived here for nearly 400 years until the abbey was shut down.

Meg: You'd be really annoyed if you were Barnoldswick wouldn't you.

[Laughter]

Meg: And why was it shut down?

Kat: It was closed down in 1539 by the order of King Henry VIII. So he created the Church of England and he closed down all of the Catholic monasteries for various political and financial reasons. So after the monastery was shut, Kirkstall Abbey was owned privately until it was bought by a man called Colonel North in 1889, and then he presented it to the city of Leeds.

Meg: Right, before we get fully into it – if you're a monk, and you're living at Kirkstall Abbey, you were either a lay brother, or a choir monk. Is that right?

Kat: Yeah that's right.

Meg: Ok so, how did you know which one you'd be?

Kat: So it would very much depend on your background. So a choir monk would be from a wealthier family and they would know Latin, and they spent their time in prayer and went to church seven times a day. But the lay brothers tended to be men from poorer backgrounds, so they tended not to be able to read or write. They could attend the services in the church but they were often away, on the lands owned by the abbey, and they carried out all the manual work. Particularly farm labour and they looked after the sheep.

Meg: So the space we're in now is the visitor centre, and today is mainly used for buying tickets and magnums. [Laughter]. But in 1152 what was this space for?

Kat: So we are now standing in the lay brothers toilet block, which was called the reredorter. And the toilets were arranged in a line separated by wooden screens and they ran over a drain. And water from a mill pond, which is where the car park is now, next to Abbey House, that flowed down here through the drains. And that's what the wooden flooring is down the middle of the room – that's the actual position of the drain, or where the toilet would flush.

Meg: Trying really hard not to be grossed out right now.

[Laughter]

Meg: Ok so is it all original? Or do we have any objects from that time in our collection?

Kat: The heart of this building as it stands today is original, although it has been extended and there have been lots of excavations over the years. So we have a large archive of objects from the time in the collection. Some are linked to drainage, so we have lots of lead pipes that carried water around the abbey.

Meg: As you leave the visitor centre/lay brothers toilet block, take a left rather than walking straight and over the grass. See you there.