

File name: Chapter House

Audio length: 1:44 minutes

Meg: So now we're in the second most important part of the abbey. Kat – we're in the Chapter House, right?

Kat: That's right, we're standing, right now, in the outer chapter house. So it's split into two parts; this bit dates from the late 1100s and is designed in a Norman style, and the room to the back was rebuilt in the 1200s and is Gothic. If you look up you'll see the difference in the style of the two vaulted ceilings.

Meg: Ok so what did the monks do here?

Kat: So the monks would gather here every day for about an hour to attend the chapter meeting led by the abbot, who was the head of the abbey. The monks would sit on benches and listen to a chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict, which set out the rules for how the Cistercians should live. Important decisions were also made here, like the election of an Abbot. Sins were confessed here, and punishments given out. And this is also where the monks officially surrendered Kirkstall Abbey to Henry VIII in 1539.

Meg: Ok so, Kat, those things over there look suspiciously like coffins. Who was in them?

Kat: So these coffins possibly contained the remains of the early abbots of Kirkstall Abbey. The timing of the rebuilding of the inner chapter house and the number of abbots, up until that point, all kind of fits with this theory. It's not clear why the coffins were enclosed within the walls, but it's unique to Kirkstall Abbey - it's really unusual! According to local tradition, the coffins might have been damaged by people looking for treasure.

Meg: And did they find any? Is there any treasure from here in our collection?

Kat: No, no treasure's been found to our knowledge, although there is a record of boys in the chapter house finding bones and part of a human skull in the opening in the wall back in 1827.