

**File name: Night Stairs**

**Audio length: 2:29 minutes**

Meg: Here we are, at the bottom of the night stairs. But Sarah, who would be at the top?

Sarah: So at the top are the choir monks, who were the monks in the abbey who were ordained as priests. And they would come down these stairs from their dormitories into church for their first service, which is about 2 o'clock in the morning, and they would get dressed at the bottom.

Meg: Hang on – are they coming down here without clothes on?

Sarah: So they slept fully clothed – their clothes were called habits and they wore them 24 hours a day. But would need to put on their vestments, which is the fancy word for their clothing that they wore for services. They'd do this for the night service, and the robes were kept in the little room under the stairs called the vestry.

Meg: Sara, did they wear pants?

Sarah: No, so we know Cistercian monks, which is the type of monks we had here at Kirkstall, did not wear pants. And we know this through contemporary documentary sources; monks went travelling, they went with other people, one of the monks fell over, his habit blew up, and his companion wrote 'I do feel sorry for the bare bottomed piety of these monks'. And from then on there was a decree saying that if a monk went travelling they were allowed to wear underwear but just for while they were travelling. So we know the normal monks, around Kirkstall, were pant-less.

Meg: Absolutely amazing. In terms of clothing that the monks wore, what kind of clothes did they wear, what they look like?

Sarah: Both type of monks wore a habit; the choir monks was a white habit, and they were sometimes referred to as the white monks, and they had a black hood and scapular down the front, which was just a bit that kept their robes clean. And the lay monks wore an all brown habit and were allowed to grow beards.

Meg: Well let's hope they could grow beards.

Sarah: Indeed.

Meg: What would happen if you couldn't grow a beard? Would they just become a choir monk?

Sarah: No.

[Laughter]

Sarah: On a serious note, if a lay brother wanted to become a choir monk they were punished for the sin of envy. You can't go from one to the other.

Meg: Wow. Is there anything we have in the collection from here, or anything else to point out about the space?

Sarah: So if you turn around, in the chapel closest to the night stairs, you can see the original tiles on the floor: they've been re-laid but they are original and we think they are around 700 years old.