

## TEACHER'S KIT

## RIEVAULX ABBEY

HISTORY  
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TO DOWNLOADHISTORY  
INFORMATION  
ACTIVITIES

## TEACHERS' INFORMATION

Rievaulx Abbey was founded in 1132; the first of the Cistercian order to be established in the north of England. It quickly became one of the wealthiest and spiritually renowned monasteries in medieval England. Under King Henry VIII, its monastic life ended and the buildings fell into ruins, only for the site to later flourish as a destination for artists and writers, inspired by the remains.

## Who were the Cistercians?

The Cistercian Order was founded at Cîteaux in Burgundy, eastern France in 1098. One of many new religious orders born at this time, their intention was to adhere more closely to the Rule of St. Benedict – the blueprint for monastic life, written in the 540s.

In 1119 Pope Calixtus II formally recognised the Cistercian order and their 10 monasteries. From then their growth continued unparalleled. By 1150 more than 330 Cistercian abbeys had been founded throughout Europe; by 1200 the number had reached 525 and by the end of the Middle Ages there were over 700 Cistercian abbeys in Europe. These communities for men were mirrored by those for women.

The Cistercians were successful for a number of reasons. One reason is that they radically simplified monastic practice, returning to the basic principles of a disciplined communal life focused on prayer, reading and work. Another reason is that they were willing to open monastic life to wider social groups. Like monks in other orders, all Cistercian monks were Latin literate and most came from well-to-do families. The Cistercians called themselves 'the new soldiers of Christ', and this appealed to the chivalric ideals of the knightly families who were supporters of Cistercian monasticism. The Cistercians also expanded the idea

of opening religious life to the labouring and uneducated classes by introducing a new category known as lay brothers. Even some knights and nobles joined Cistercian abbeys as lay brothers.

Lay brothers could be distinguished from the monks by their clothes; the Cistercian monks wore undyed or white habits, whereas lay brothers wore brown habits and were also allowed beards. The monks spent much of their day in church singing the eight daily services or reading in the cloister, alongside some manual labour. Lay brothers undertook most of the agricultural labour on the granges (monastic farms), returning to the abbey on Sundays and feast days. Lay brothers did take some monastic vows but these were less detailed than those of the monks.

The monks and lay brothers would have lived quite a tough, strictly disciplined life; working hard and eating a simple vegetarian diet. However in an age that was often rough and unstable, this proved attractive to many people.

## The foundation of Rievaulx

Cistercians first appeared in England in 1128 and Rievaulx was their first community in the north of England; part of a deliberate plan to expand the Order. Land for the abbey was given by Walter Espec, Lord of Helmsley; a wealthy landowner who was vassal to both Henry I of England and King David of Scotland, and an active supporter of ecclesiastical reform. The isolated nature of the land was useful to help enforce the monks' seclusion. The remote valley had a river running down the centre and many natural resources. The monks became skilled at farming, rearing sheep on the scrubland, and mining lead and iron.

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## The building of Rievaulx

Construction at Rievaulx was directed by Geoffroi d'Ainai, a monk from Clairvaux, the founding Abbey of the Cistercian order. The first buildings were made from timber; these provided accommodation whilst permanent structures were built. The stone abbey was mainly built from local sandstone, sourced from within a radius of 10 miles, although some stone was imported for ornamental purposes. The 12th century abbey was a mix of simplicity and grandeur. The scale was impressive, although plain materials were used. Walls were plastered inside and out, providing a striking image of white against the green background of the valley. [For further information on the construction of Rievaulx, see p. 35 of the guidebook, available at a discounted rate for education bookings]

## The Abbots of Rievaulx

The first leader of the settlement was Abbot William, a native Yorkshire man who had spent 15 years as secretary to Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux. Within a decade of becoming Abbot in 1132, William had expanded the community from around 30 to over 300 men. As well as being a great spiritual leader, he demonstrated tremendous business and managerial skills. He was responsible for the first stone buildings at Rievaulx and under him, five daughter houses were established at Warden and Melrose (1136), Dundrennan (1142), Revesby (1143) and Rufford (1147). On his death in 1145, he was buried in the Chapter House, where later, a shire was constructed to him.

William's successor was a man called Maurice. A scholar more than an administrator, he resigned from office after 18 months but not before he had secured the whole of the valley for the Rievaulx monks. Maurice successfully acquired possession of the land on the

opposite side of the hill from the rival Savigniac order who had building s about a mile upstream. The Savigniac's agreement to move to a new site in 1147 gave the Cistercians at Rievaulx about 30 per cent more land.

Maurice's resignation gave way to the election of a man who was to become Rievaulx's most famous abbot, Aelred. Born in Hexham in 1110, but raised in the court of King David, Aelred visited Rievaulx Abbey in 1134, returning from a mission to York. During his stay a fire broke out in the guest house and his quick action in dousing it was seen as divine intervention. Aelred was immediately admitted as a novice, and by 1142 had progressed to novice master. He travelled to Rome, before founding Revesby Abbey in Lincolnshire, a daughter house of Rievaulx, in 1143.

During his abbacy, the community at Rievaulx doubled in size, with numbers peaking in the early 1160s at about 640 men (140 monks, 500 lay brothers and servants). To accommodate this increase Aelred embarked upon a number of extensive building projects. He built a monumental church in the 1140s, as well as a unique new Chapter House. The east range of the Cloister was rebuilt with three storeys at the southern end. The architecture displays many qualities associated with the Cistercians but also reveals Aelred's own tastes, informed by his extensive travel while fulfilling his role as a preacher and diplomat. When he died in 1167, Aelred was buried next to Abbot William and, like him, soon came to be regarded as a saint (1191). His books continue to be widely studied as exemplars for communal living. Aelred was succeeded by Abbot Silvanus.

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### Rievaulx in the Later Middle Ages

Little is known about the history of Rievaulx after the death of Aelred as no chronicle or diocesan records survive. The rise of town-based monastic movements, such as the Franciscan and Dominican friars, meant the Cistercians would have had to compete for patronage and new recruits in a world struggling with the best way to follow a religious vocation.

The Cistercian order at Rievaulx also had a number of other problems which saw the abbey's fortunes falter in the 13th and 14th centuries:

- The division between monk and lay brother became more pronounced, with the lay brothers believing they should share in decisions and in the election of abbots. This culminated in the exclusion of lay brothers from the cloister and ultimately to their numbers declining over time. (This decline was also the result of other factors such as an overall improvement in living standards and security, problems with discipline and a general cooling of the Cistercians to the idea of the lay brotherhood).
- Economic problems came when an epidemic of scab decimated the abbey's sheep. The problems reached such an extent that in 1279 the king, Edward I, had to install a financial administrator.
- In 1322, while Edward II was staying at the abbey, his army was attacked by Scots. Edward retreated to York but Rievaulx was plundered, causing untold damage.
- In the 1340s the Black Death swept through the north and by the 1370s only 15 monks and 3 lay brothers remained.

To survive these challenges, the monks broke up the abbey's granges and rented out their lands. A partial

recovery followed and just before the Suppression, Rievaulx is shown to have housed 23 monks and 102 'servants and attendants'. Life in the abbey changed over the 400 years of its existence, reflecting those in wider society. By the 14th century, the monks were allowed to eat meat twice a week and the standard of their accommodation improved, giving more comfort and privacy.

### Rievaulx and the Suppression

On 3 December 1538, six years after Henry VIII declared himself head of the Church of England, the Abbot Blyton and his brethren, surrendered Rievaulx to the Crown. The abbey was sold to Thomas Manners, Earl of Rutland. The buildings were dismantled, and roof leads and bells were reserved for the king. However, Rutland continued to manage the abbey's ironworks throughout the 16th century. Furthermore, a blast furnace and new forge were built and the business prospered. Yet by 1640, local supplies of timber for charcoal were almost exhausted and the ironworks closed.

### Monastery to Monument

In 1695, the valley and many of the estates belonging to the former abbey were sold to Charles Duncombe, a City of London goldsmith and banker. In the 1750s, Thomas Duncombe built a terrace, framed by classical temples above the abbey to carefully manage the views and inspire people to use the ruins to get a vision of the past. Rievaulx Abbey then became a destination for travellers and poets, who were drawn to see the awe-inspiring ruins. Artists such as J. M. W. Turner and Thomas Girtin made Rievaulx the subject of their work. The abbey continued to fall into ruin until the Office of Works took Rievaulx Abbey into guardianship in July 1917. Fallen debris was removed and the site was preserved.

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SITE TIMELINE

12 <sup>TH</sup> century	1132	Rievaulx Abbey founded and is the first Cistercian monastery in northern England. The first buildings are constructed from timber
	1135-45	Abbot William leads the new community. He oversees the construction of the stone buildings Daughter houses founded at Warden, Melrose, Dundreman and Revesby
	1145	Abbot Maurice succeeds Abbot William. A deal with Byland Abbey is negotiated, increasing the abbey's land by 30 per cent. A further daughter house is established at Rufford
	1147	Maurice resigns and Aelred is selected as the next abbot
	1140s	Aelred begins a series of large building projects, including a monumental new church and a new chapter house
	1167	Aelred dies and is succeeded by Abbot Silvanus
	1170s	Silvanus rebuilds the south range of the cloister and completes the main cloister's arcades
13 <sup>TH</sup> century	c. 1220	Rievaulx in financial difficulties
	1279	Continuing economic problems result in Edward I's instalment of a financial administrator
14 <sup>TH</sup> century	1322	Edward II is staying at Rievaulx when his army is attacked by raiding Scots. Edward retreats to York but the abbey is plundered
	1340s	The Black Death sweeps through the north of England
	1370s	Only 15 monks and 3 lay brothers remain at Rievaulx

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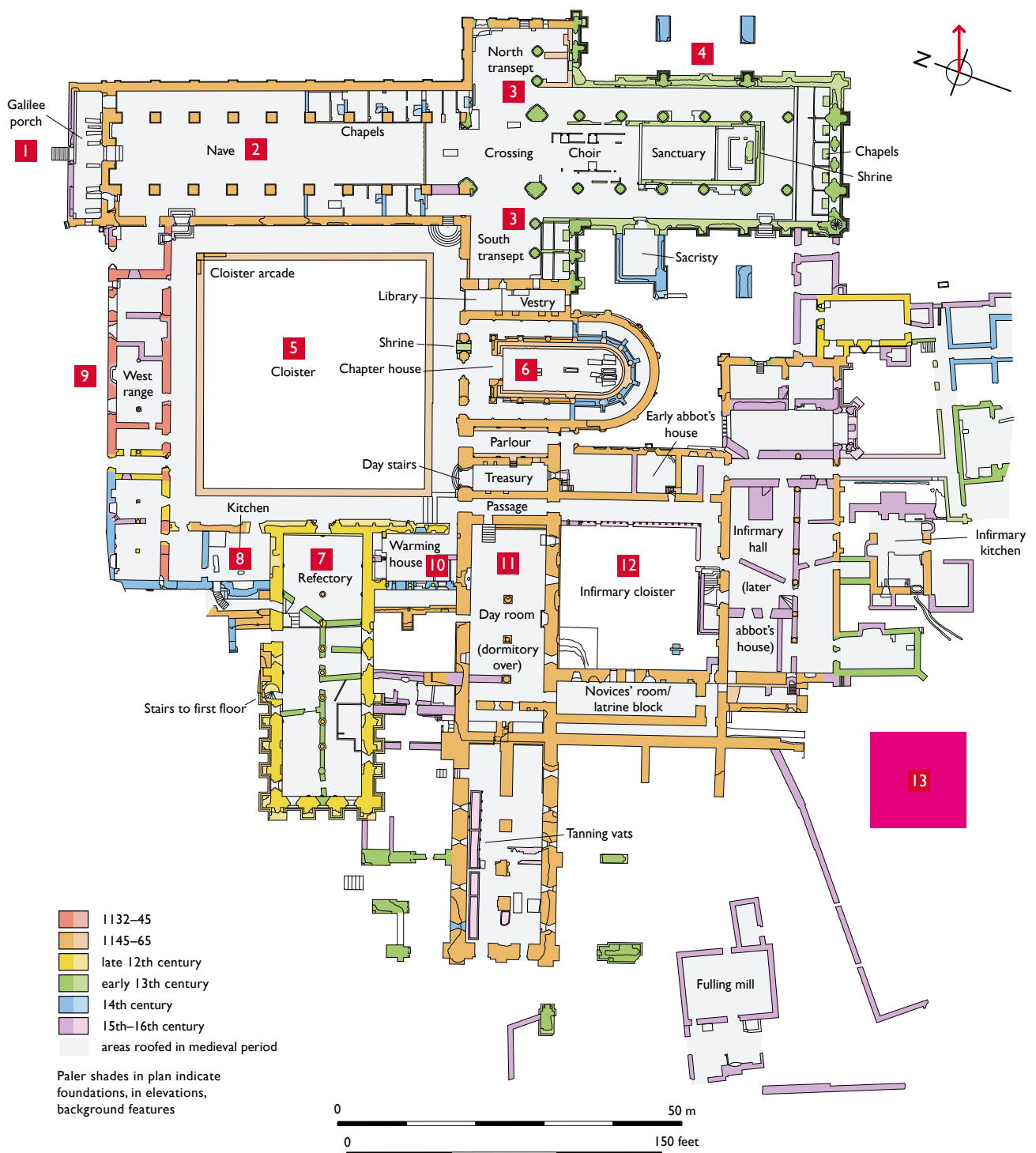
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RIEVAULX ABBEY

SITE TIMELINE

16 <sup>TH</sup> century	1500s	Numbers have increased to 23 monks and 102 lay servants. Rules are relaxed in favour of a more comfortable lifestyle
	1538	Rievaulx surrenders during the Suppression. The abbey is sold to Thomas Manners, Earl of Rutland. Rutland oversees the dismantling of the abbey and continues to manage the ironworks
17 <sup>th</sup> century	1600s	The ironworks prosper. A new blast furnace and forge are built
	1640	Local supplies of timber are almost exhausted and the ironworks closes
	1687	Rievaulx Abbey and Helmsley Castle sold to Charles Duncombe
18 <sup>th</sup> century	1750s	Terrace built above the abbey. Rievaulx Abbey becomes a popular destination for visitors
19 <sup>th</sup> century	1880/90s	The ruins begin to attract scholarly interest. The Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Association visit the site with guides in 1881 and 1893
20 <sup>th</sup> century	1917	The site is taken over by the Office of Works. Immediate preservation and repairs take place. Excavation of the site involves removing fallen debris to expose the buildings hidden beneath

## SITE PLAN



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## SITE TOUR

## 1. Galilee Porch

This is the church entrance, and it is characteristic of Cistercian churches. It was a popular burial place for lay patrons and traces of eight graves remain.

## 2. Nave

The nave, along with the transepts and presbytery, forms a church that is cruciform in shape. It was built in the 1150s and architectural decoration was restricted to simple mouldings. The nave was divided into nine bays and the first six of these were for the lay brothers. At the level of the sixth bay was a screen with an image of Christ on the cross, dividing the lay brothers from the monks. Beside the doorway to the cloister is a basin for holy water. From the 13th century the church floor was paved with glazed tiles, and in the early 14th century the windows in the nave were updated. Private chapels were inserted where monks could say private masses. This marked a break from earlier Cistercian values.

## 3. North and South Transepts

The transepts were rebuilt to the same height as the presbytery. A dramatic alteration in the colour of the stone marks the difference between the old and new work, this can be clearly seen on page 8. A door in the south transept allowed monks to enter the church directly from the dormitory. A door in the north transept led to the cemetery.

## 4. Presbytery

This part of the church was for the choir monks alone, and they spent five hours a day here. The presbytery was rebuilt in the 1220s in a more English style than

the nave. It is more richly detailed than the older church and the increased height allows for three tiers of arches. The high standard of stone cutting and the intricate architectural detail suggest a very costly construction process. The style represents a relaxation of the Cistercian philosophy of simplicity. At the east end stands the high altar on a raised platform. Behind the altar is a shrine to St Aelred. There are five chapels at the back for private masses.

## 5. Cloister (the entrance is located down the stairway by the water basin)

This was an open square surrounded by a roofed arcade. It was the main thoroughfare of the abbey, giving access to the living and working quarters. The central area was a garden. At 42m square, it is one of the largest Cistercian cloisters in Britain. The north alley was used for reading and study. To the south is the entrance to the library and beyond this is a rectangular wall recess, where the roster for weekly duties was kept.

## 6. Chapter House

This was the most important building in the abbey after the church. Daily meetings were held to hear a reading of a chapter from the Rule of Benedict. The monks also discussed business here and confessed their faults. The design of the chapter house is unusual because it has a rounded east end, something not repeated anywhere else in the Cistercian world. Tiered stone benching and additional seating in the aisles meant this building could accommodate the whole community when the abbot gave sermons. The three doorways at the entrance represent the Trinity. The north arch has been filled with the shrine of Abbot William, Rievaulx's founder.



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## 7. Refectory

This was the dining room for the monks. Fixed tables were arranged around the side walls and meals were eaten in silence, while listening to a reading. At the end, a dais formed a high table for more important monks. The youngest monks sat nearest the door. The refectory was richly decorated and traces of paint show the room was pale pink with a fine false masonry pattern.

## 8. Kitchen

The kitchen served both the monks and lay brothers. The main hearth would have been in the centre and there was a food hatch through to the refectory. Meals were eaten twice a day in summer and once in winter.

## 9. West Range

The west range housed the lay brothers which held their refectory and dormitory. There were also cellars and parlours. This part of the abbey is all that survives from the time of Abbot William. It is the earliest surviving Cistercian building in Europe.

## 10. Warming House

A fire was lit in this room on All Saint's Day (1st November) and kept burning until Good Friday so the monks could warm themselves. It was remodelled several times. In the late 12th century it was a single storey building. A room was later added above it, possibly to store valuable charters and documents.

## 11. Day Room and Dormitory

This was a workroom for the monks in winter. Their tasks included reading, copying manuscripts and light crafts such as sewing and mending clothes.

The doorway at the south end leads to the latrines, which consisted of a row of wooden seats over a stone channel. The dormitory where the monks slept on straw mattresses was originally 73 metres long. In the 1160s, around 140 monks would have slept here. In the 14th century, declining numbers led to a reduction in size. The room was divided with wooden partitions, showing the rising standard of comfort.

## 12. Infirmary

Rievaulx was a source of medical help for the community and the infirmary is where the sick were treated. The size of this building emphasises its importance. The sick slept in beds separated by wooden screens and were allowed heating. The infirmary had its own kitchen, where meat was permitted. It also had its own latrine, bath-house and cloister. At the end of the 15th century, the infirmary was converted into the largest abbot's house in England. An extra floor was added and windows were remodelled in the fashionable Tudor style. The cloister became the abbot's private garden where medicinal plants would have been grown. The new house marked the abbot and the abbey's social status.

## 13. Other buildings

Access to the abbey was controlled via a gatehouse that was situated at the far west end of the nave. This was the original entrance to the medieval abbey. Outside the gatehouse was the inner court. Various domestic buildings would have been here, including a brew house, bake house and a stable. Beyond these was the outer court. The buildings here were mainly agricultural and industrial, such as granges, mills and the tannery. At the time of the Suppression there were 72 buildings inside a walled precinct of 92 acres. The present site is only 14 acres.





## USING RIEVAULX ABBEY ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Rievaulx Abbey lends itself to supporting study across the curriculum at all Key Stages. The site provides great stimulus for a range of activities that encourage questioning; the collection and use of source material; deepen chronological understanding and awareness of historical interpretation, in addition to a variety of creative outcomes. We have selected a few of our favourites here.

### LIFE AS A MONK

**Curriculum links:** History, English, RE, Citizenship, Music, Design and Technology

**Key skills:** developing knowledge and understanding, asking and debating challenging questions, expressing ideas creatively

#### Suggested Activities:

**What is a monk?:** consideration of this question can lead students to discuss why people devote their life to God. Students can think about other people who devote their life to God both in Christianity and in other faiths. (KS1-4)

**A monk's life:** students could be provided with a timetable of a Cistercian monks day and asked to compare it with their own, followed by discussion. (KS1-4) [A timetable of a monks life can be found on p.8 of the Rievaulx Abbey Red Guide]

**A monk's diet:** the monks followed a strict vegetarian diet, where bread, beans and ale were the staples. Students can identify the different foods eaten by the monks, splitting them into food groups and considering

where they came from, before reaching a conclusion about whether the monks' diet would have been nutritious. Comparisons can be made with the diets of the group and what substitutes a healthy diet today. (KS1-3)

**Tableaux:** students can create still scenes around the abbey to represent what different rooms were used for. Thus, in the refectory the tableau could represent the monks eating their meal. (KS1-3)

**Christian beliefs:** students can investigate the physical manifestation of the Cistercian monks' beliefs. The nave, transepts and presbytery form the shape of the cross; the three doorways at the entrance to the chapter house represent the Trinity. (KS2-3)

**Different beliefs:** the Suppression demonstrates the differences that exist within a religion, as well as between different religions. Students can discuss why people have different beliefs and how differences can be resolved. (KS3-4)

**Writing activities:** the dramatic setting of the abbey can be used as inspiration for creative writing around the theme of life as a monk. (KS1-4)

**Chants:** the class can work in groups to create their own chants about something that is important to them. Students could listen to existing examples to assist with style and tone. Groups can re-enact their chants in the choir section of the presbytery. (KS1-3)

**Making music:** the abbey can act as inspiration for the composition of music, drawing on emotions created by the ruins, such as eeriness, sadness, or a sense of grandeur. (KS1-4)

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## FIELDWORK STUDY

**Curriculum links:** Geography, History, English, Science, Art

**Key skills:** observation, collecting and analysing data, interpreting sources (including maps) and drawing conclusions, communicating information with confidence in a variety of ways.

## Suggested Activities:

**Environmental Study:** as a class, identify the features of the landscape. Ask students to think about why the monks chose this site for the abbey. Possible suggestions include the isolated nature of the site and the natural resources of the valley. (KS1-4)

**Using a compass:** ask your students to find their way around the site/to specific rooms, using the site plan and a compass. They can record the directions they take. (KS2-3)

**Exploring materials:** ask students to identify the different materials they can see at the abbey. This can lead to discussion of the different properties of materials, as well as thinking about how materials are changed through human influence (carved and shaped) and environmental factors (age and weathering). (KS2-3)

**Investigating rivers:** studying the features of the river can fit into a wider topic of water and its effects on the landscape. The monks altered the course of the river three times at Rievaulx to create more room for building. This can lead to discussion of the human impact on the environment. (KS3)

**Map of trade links:** although the monks lived in isolation, they also had links all over the world. Most stone was quarried locally but some, such as Purbeck

marble, came from further away. The abbey had daughter houses elsewhere in England, and connections to the network of Cistercian abbeys and the Vatican in Europe. The monks traded with wool merchants all over Europe, including in the Low Countries and Italy. On a map, lines can be drawn linking the abbey to these places. (KS2-4)

**Advertising:** a visit to the abbey can be used as a research trip. Students can take photos or videos that can be used at school to create a promotional leaflet or film, designed to attract visitors to the abbey. Examples of existing leaflets can be seen in the English Heritage visitor centre. Consideration should be given to the importance of sustainable heritage and tourism. (KS2-4)

## LOCAL HISTORY STUDY

**Curriculum links:** History, English, Design and Technology

**Key skills:** using a range of source material, asking questions, weighing evidence, making judgements, speaking, reading and writing fluently, communicating ideas

## Suggested Activities:

**Historical Timeline:** Using the site plan, historical information, museum artefacts, reconstruction images and photographs students can create a timeline showing the development of the abbey at Rievaulx over time. (KS1-3)

**Comparing daily life:** using objects in the site museum, students could compare objects that were used by the monks to ones with a similar purpose today. For example, different sized cups were used to weigh things by the monks. What is used today? Show students the

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picture of the chess pieces found on site. How do they compare to chessmen today? (KS2-3)

**TV report:** students can work in groups to imagine they are reporting live from the abbey at a time of significance in the abbey's history. For example, the time of the Suppression; they could conduct an interview the Abbot or Henry VIII. What key questions do they need to ask and what key facts do they need to communicate to their audience? What language do they need to use? Students can create a script, then record their report using Smartphones or iPads. (KS3)

## SITE STUDY

**Curriculum links:** Art, Design and Technology, Maths

**Key skills:** develop creative, technical and practical expertise, critique, evaluate and test ideas, experiment, invent and create, reason, identify relationships

## Suggested Activities:

**Forming shadows:** The ruins of the abbey create dramatic shadows. Students can draw the shadows, or identify the light source in order to create their own shadows. (KS1-3)

**Investigating pattern:** the abbey is full of patterns and shapes. Students can look for examples of symmetry and repetition, as well as identifying different shapes, including the variety of arch types in the abbey. Shape can also be explored through silhouette. (KS2-3)

**The abbey then and now:** the artist's impressions on site and in the Teachers' Kit can be used to gain an impression of what the abbey was like over time. Ask students what they would have seen at different points in the abbey's history. What do they see now? Students can also identify different building styles, showing the

different stages the abbey was built in. They could take photographs to create an interactive timeline. (KS2-3)

**Artist Studies:** compare the work of artists who have painted the abbey, such as J.M.W. Turner, Thomas Girtin and John Sell Cotman. How have they represented the ruins? (KS3-4)

**Creating a sketchbook:** multiple drawings can be made on site that can then be made into an individual or class sketchbook. A viewfinder can be used to help students focus on different parts of the abbey. These drawings can then inspire further work. They can be developed into a class display or a more detailed piece of individual art. (KS2-4)

**Name panels:** show the students the image from the Teachers' Kit of Abbot John Burton's rebus panel. The carved pictures represent his name. Students can draw inspiration from this concept to create their own panels. This can also involve discussion of identity and how it can be represented. (KS2-4)

**Design Tasks:** set the students a brief to create a product, such as floor tiles, for the abbey. They can research existing examples, create initial sketches, then develop a final design. (KS2-3)

**Medieval vs. modern:** compare the construction methods used then and now. For example, look for different types of window construction around the abbey. Students can make sketches or write descriptions and then compare this to a modern window. (KS2-3)

**Models:** use the visit to the abbey as a research trip to then allow students to create their own models. Photographs and sketches can be made on site. Back in the classroom these can be used as inspiration for drawing an abbey plan or making a 3D model. (KS3-4)





Monks in the Infirmary garden.



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Rievaulx in the 12th century.



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Rievaulx in the 13th century.



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Rievaulx in the 16th century.



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Early morning sun on the arcade.



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Early morning sun on the arcade.



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Looking through the presbytery from the nave.



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Detail of carved stone window.





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Early morning sun on the presbytery, looking from the south transept.



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Reconstruction drawing of the south transept in the 15th century, Peter Dunn.





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Reconstruction drawing of the day room in the mid-13th century, Peter Dunn.



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Reconstruction drawing of the refectory kitchen in the 14th century, Peter Dunn.





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Aerial view looking along the nave.



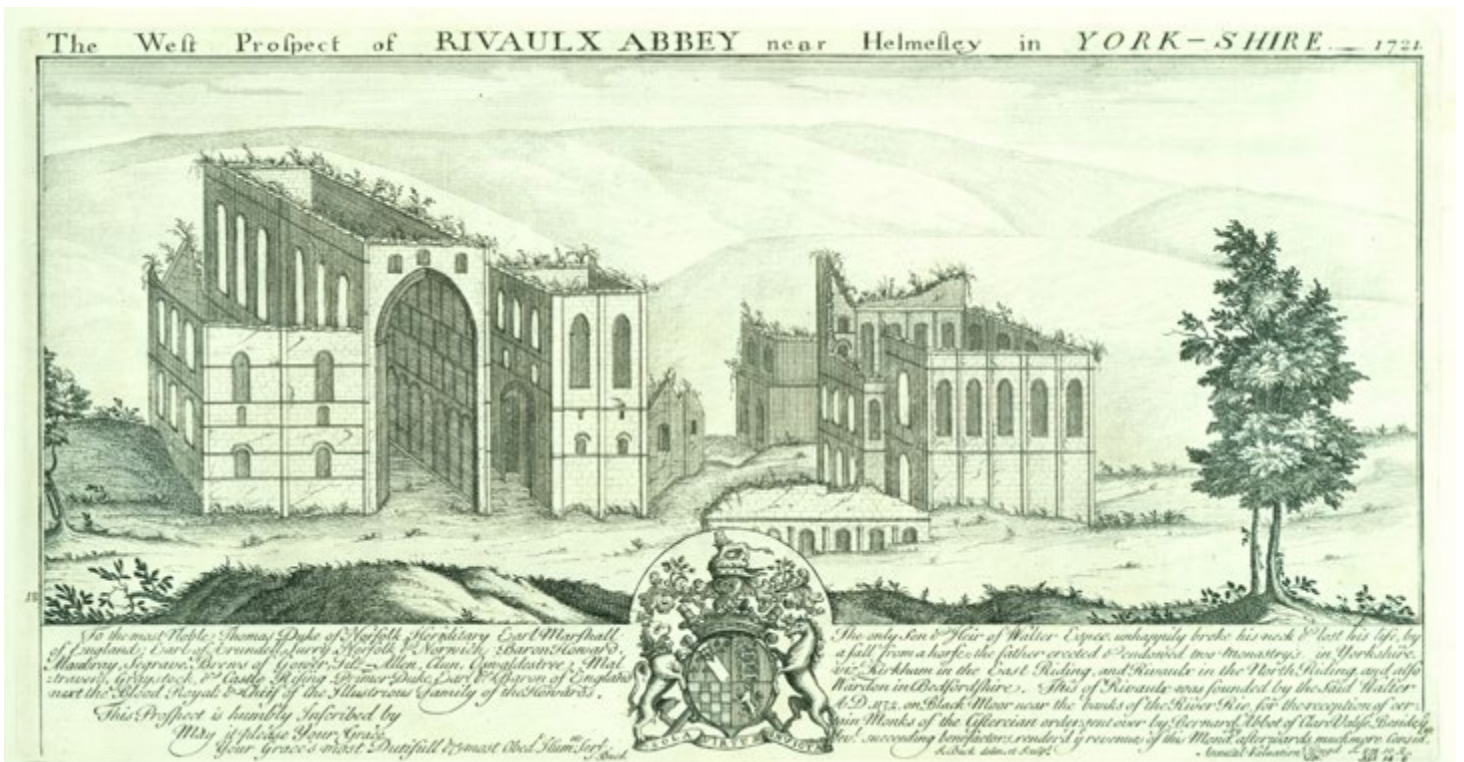
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RIEVAULX ABBEY

West Prospect of Rievaulx Abbey near Helmsley in Yorkshire, Samuel & Nathaniel Buck.



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Carved head from abbey.





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Rebus panel of Abbot John Burton.



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Chess pieces from the abbey.

