Q: What light does an examination of Rievaulx Abbey throw upon the history of its medieval inhabitants?

**Rievaulx Abbey and the History of its Inhabitants**

Who were the medieval inhabitants to reside in such grandiose, historical and exceptionally intriguing buildings known as monasteries, and how can we learn about them?

The study of monastic life from the twelfth century to the sixteenth century may be best understood through the visual landmarks left at the sites of its most notable monasteries. We will aim to drill down our focus to Rievaulx abbey, challenged only by Fountains abbey in most popularity contests among north England monasteries, and pick apart its visible features to fulfill this ideal. We will dissect Rievaulx abbey categorically, breaking apart different segments of its life cycle, and piece it all back together to review what knowledge the monastery offers us. The segments following will include historical references, the Cistercian order, the location, the lands, and the buildings that make up Rievaulx abbey.

In 1132, St. Bernard of Clairvaux sent 12 monks, led by their Abbot, William, from Clairvaux to found the Abbey of Rievaulx on a small property “in a place of horror and dreary solitude”. A look at Image 1 and Figure 1 below shows the wide open range surrounding the abbey, with no company besides the trees and land. From 1135 to 1145, the first church on the site was built and most likely modeled after the mother house at Clairvaux, which “reflected the functional austerity of the time.” We see this demonstrated in the abbey from the nave (Image 2), west range (Image 3), and Galilee porch (Image 4), all of which has preserved original 1100s architecture. It is all very plain, regular stone, with no detail found. William would hold the role as first Abbot from 1132 to 1145, ending in the same year as the completion of the church. Along the western wall of the chapter-house his shrine stands remodeled as of 1250, seen in Image 5, to honor his role within the abbey. This shows a clear change in Cistercian life, as they did not believe or have shrines originally. By 1143, three hundred monks had entered Rievaulx,
showing great expansion since its foundation 11 years prior. The community thrived and received grants of land totaling 6000 acres, as well as having established daughter houses in England and Scotland, Rievaulx’s primary mission.

In 1147, Aelred was elected as the third Abbot of Rievaulx, after the second Abbot, Maurice, stepped down to become Abbot of Fountains abbey, and was said to have “doubled everything: monks, conversi, laymen, farms, lands and equipment.” He would lead as the third Abbot until his death in 1167. The prestige of Aelred attracted many monks, as he was regarded as a wise and saintly man. He would later go on to immortalize Rievaulx in his famous words, “Everywhere peace, everywhere serenity, and a marvelous freedom from the tumult of the world.” Statistics, from our documents, for 1160 state that he left behind him 140 monks, 500 lay-brothers, and zero servants. From these modest beginnings grew one of the wealthiest monasteries of medieval England. In the 1220s, the monks rebuilt the east part of the abbey church in large part to create a more splendid area to house Aelred’s tomb. Called the presbytery, Image 6 shows the immaculate size which reflects the prosperity of the abbey financially and in residency.

Toward the end of the 1200s, the abbey was in debt due to its building projects and the loss of revenue caused by an epidemic of sheep-scab which affected production of wool. Eventually, Rievaulx’s fortunes suffered further during Scottish raids in the early 1300s. To deepen problems, the Black Death from 1348 to 1350 made it difficult to recruit lay brothers for the manual labor required. This led to the abbey leasing much of its lands to provide revenue. By 1381, based on our documents, there were 14 choir monks, three lay-brothers, and zero servants. Due to the diminished population within the abbey, some buildings were reduced in size. One of the notable buildings to have been reduced is the chapter house, which houses the monks when they have large meetings. Image 7 shows us a small sized chapter house that would not have held the original 140 monks during Aelred’s reign. A look at Image 8 shows the
small sized chapels, a sign of private worship and prayer. During the 1400s or early 1500s, part of the dorter and warming house were taken down because they were too big for requirements. A look at Image 9 shows us the size of the fireplace in the warming house, which must have been enough to heat the monks in the later years.

In 1536, the general dissolution of monasteries began with the Act of 1536. When the dissolution of Rievaulx abbey came to fruition by King Henry VIII in 1538, our documents show that there were 21 monks, no lay-brothers, and 102 servants to occupy 72 buildings with an income of £351 a year. Once a monastery had surrendered, it was ransacked and largely reduced to ruins by the royal agents. There was a clear purpose to ensure that no monastery should be reoccupied by monks bent on reviving its religious life. The royal decision to destroy all the buildings was implicit in the stripping of lead from the roofs of monasteries. Image 10 shows us the eastern side of the abbey, completely decimated from the destruction of the dissolution. Image 11 shows the kitchen in ruins, Image 12 show what’s left of the cloister surroundings, and reflecting back on Image 1, Image 2, and Image 3 show the bare portions of what used to be full-scaled buildings.

Identifying some of the historical layout surrounding Rievaulx abbey leads us into a closer look of the monks who lived there. These monks believed in work, love, prayer and self-denial. Much of this self-denial was seen in their negative world view, causing them to seek an escape. This desire for quiet and peaceful areas led them to the countryside, as seen in Rievaulx abbey’s location. A look back at Image 1 reminds us of the lands that surrounded the abbey, with no civilization nearby. Figure 1 shows a clear picture of the surrounding area. The Cistercians, as mentioned in our documents, “count riches and honor as worthless and spurn fleshly desires and vainglorious food.” This lack of need or desire is shown among much of the simple architecture. Image 1, Image 2, and Image 3 are the examples of simple architecture used throughout the monasteries early years. The reason they worshipped to begin with was
the idea that Jesus died on their behalf, and monasteries were the vessel to thank God. Proof of this resides in the cross-shaped architecture of the church. The nave, north transept, south transept, and presbytery are the foundational pieces of the cross, if you look from above. Figure 2 shows us a sense of this depiction.

The monks, all of whom resided within Rievaulx during their stay, owned no personal property and did not even talk together. Image 13 shows the treasury, which is accurately small since there were not many items that needed to be stored. Much of their belief revolved around the idea that worship takes place internally. Their religion was in spirit, they were introverted. Take a look at Image 14, which shows us the refectory, and Image 15, which shows us the cloister. These congregational areas show much room for community and acquaintance. The prosperity of the abbey may have transformed the monks from singular, secular people to community-based spirits. Originally, during the winter, the monks observed silence and only ate one vegetarian meal a day. Another look at Image 11, although in ruins, shows a rather small area for a kitchen, indicating that small preparation space was adequate.

To fully realize their beliefs, and their way of life, as described, the monks placed great value in the location of their monasteries. Situated in a valley surrounded by high tree-clothed hills, Rievaulx abbey was able to maintain privacy and provide the Cistercians who lived there with a second Paradise of wooded delight. The Garden of Eden held the title of their first Paradise. By seeing the inhabited area, it’s easy to accept Cistercians as surviving by themselves, for themselves. The location supports their desire to follow a strict life of prayer and self-sufficiency with little contact with the outside world. The lands emphasis on manual labor and self-sufficiency would have been fulfilled through activities such as agriculture and brewing ales. Again, reflecting on Image 1 and Figure 1 gives us the ability to imagine such a scene. Rievaulx was also adequate in being close enough to town, specifically Helmsley, for access, but far enough away to signal independence. Since the land was donated by Lord of Helmsley,
and the mission was to expand the north, it starts to become clear why Rievaulx abbey is situated where it is.

Further, the location had an important visibility factor and enough environmental resources to keep the monks self-sustaining, such as water supplies, a powerful stream, wood, berries for food, flat space for building, and a nearby stone quarry to mine and build with. “Built predominately from local sandstone, there is evidence that much of the stone came from Wethercote, a quarry some six miles north of Rievaulx.” The stream that rests upon the location of Rievaulx, the Rye, would have powered the abbey’s mill. A look at Image 16 shows us the old location of the river Rye, which was moved to accommodate the monks. The stream would be moved three times in total. Some of the water seepage can be seen in Image 17 and Image 18. Conclusively, the monks would have mined lead and iron, reared sheep and sold wool to grow their wealth to support their building projects. Image 1 is a great example of land which to have reared the sheep.

Cistercian architecture is considered one of the most beautiful styles of medieval architecture. Most foundations were primarily constructed in Romanesque and Gothic architecture, made of smooth, pale stone. Reflect back onto Image 1, Image 2, and Image 3. Columns, pillars, and windows fell at the same base level of architecture, but would be updated during remodeling. Image 19 shows great detail in the north transept, Image 20 shows detailed columns in the infirmary cloister, and Image 21 shows a contrast from pre-1150 rounded windows and post-1150 pointed windows. A general view of the abbey speaks volumes about the defensive needs of the monks. Built almost like a castle, the abbey would have been useful from invading attacks or unwanted visitors. This shines light on the apparent fact that the northern and western borders of Scotland and Wales were unclear during this time, and may have led to controversial fights for land. Further, this proves the desire for the monks to keep
visitors from entering, as they would have had to approach the western wall and entered accordingly. The towering size and stone architecture prevents entrance otherwise.

Unfortunately, much of the damaged ruins don’t show us the types of art and relics that were hung. Our documents establish a beautifully written piece about early Cistercian practice:

“Monasteries have absolutely no place for the sculpture and painting found elsewhere – for the man who has found Jesus’ company in his own soul, what use are the external pomps and shows that others love? He shuns anywhere too large or extravagantly vaulted – a wicked waste of space and materials! He is happy to say his prayers in a little chapel of rough, unpolished stone, where there is nothing carved or painted to distract the eye [Image 8]: no fine hangings, no marble pavements; no murals depicting ancient history, or even scenes from holy scripture; no blaze of candles, no glittering of golden vessels.”

Focusing on the nave, we meet a representation of Noah’s ark, which can be imagined with its long length and symmetrical layout. A look at Image 2 confirms this layout. A close look at a chancel positions us in front of the altar, which was a very religious symbol of the monks and was used to pray and worship in front of. Today, the altar stands smashed, which can be seen in Image 8, displaying a visibly chipped corner. During the fall of the monasteries, altars would be seen as tainted, as it was the most prized symbol. An inspection of the altar reveals five different crosses, which signify the five wings of Christ. One of these crosses is seen in Image 23. A closer examination shows a place for a relic below the altar, seen in Image 24. This sheds more light on the religion surrounding the altar. Another appearance of significance takes place with the scratched out face of a main statue still standing in the abbey. This is an example of the belief that you should only read about holy people, and not try to portray them in any materialistic way. Much of the change in chapels would have occurred in the 14th and 15th
century, with the downsizing of the abbey’s population. Image 8 shows the size of a chapel, fit for a single person. While examining the chapels, there is a small portion of the ground that displays decorative floor tiles. The tiles must have been laid from the 13th century onward, where further expansions and grandeur were applied within the prospering Rievaulx abbey. A look at these tiles is seen in Image 25. This contrasts highly with the simple and plain building of the original abbey. Among our journey of the nave, toward the presbytery, we continue on to see the priscina, a drain of holy water for monks to dip their hands in so they were pure during mass. This can be seen in Image 26, which must have been put in during later years due to the detailed architecture.

While the original building was modeled on the French style such as that used at Clairvaux, when the presbytery was remodeled and extended during the 12th century, the new additions were much richer in detail and splendor. Image 22 shows the comparison between old and new. Taking a look at the presbytery, one starts to notice the windows. This starts to become visible in Image 21, where the bottom two sets of windows are rounded and the top set has the pointed architecture found after 1150. This is also seen in Image 27, in the south transept. A further look at updated architecture can be seen in the windows of Image 28 and the reinforcement used in Image 29 to hold up the presbytery. Within the presbytery, the elevated platform within the church signifies a place from which to preach or read, showing that attention put upon such an event. What’s left of the altar is seen in Image 30.

A quick look at some of the other notable features will finish off our discussion of the Cistercian inhabitants. First is the library, which demonstrates a lack of books within the monastery. A look at Image 31 exemplifies the room size. Standing small, the library could not have held a large collection of books, which is surprising with the monks’ lifestyle of confinement. The assumption would be that lay brothers did not use the library, and only the important people of the abbey, such as the Abbots, would donate books to the library. The
books for worship would have been left within the chapels, where the monks prayed. Second is the parlour, a small area where clergy could converse without intruding on their peers. Image 32 gives us a sense of the privacy found here, and is another example of life without much, if any, speech. Third is the infirmary hall, partially seen in Image 33, which would later become the abbot’s residence. Located in the south east of the abbey, the abbot was far away from the lay brothers, the entrance, and much of the other monks living quarters. Fourth, the novice room, seen in Image 34, was secluded away from the rest of the abbey and lower to the ground. It is assumed that access to the novice room was from the south east, near where the abbot stayed. Since they were monks in training, it is plausible to see them being secluded like this. A very plain room, it signifies the original beliefs of simple life with internal prayer. Lastly, we have the tanning vats, a notoriously smelly process, seen in Image 35, which clarifies the lack of population within the monastery during the end of its years. With only a few vats, there was no need for more.

To conclude, Rievaulx abbey shines light on the medieval inhabitants by the large contrasts in 1100s architecture with later remodeling throughout the presbytery and south end of the abbey. Starting small, simple life and internal prayer were the main concerns, which would later expand into grandeur displays of size, architectural detail, and subtle features such as floor tiling. The prosperity of the abbey must have been overwhelming and brought great boosts to the morale of Cistercian life and belief. The location solidifies the seclusion the monks desired and the access of land to fulfill their building projects. Honor of the Abbots, seen in the shrines of the presbytery and western wall of the chapter house, signify the respect the monks had for their superiors. Further, the cross-shaped view from above reminds us all that what came first to these inhabitants was their belief and faith in God. It is a magnificent display to see a culture grow out of such a singular belief and way of life.
Bibliography


Images

**Image 1**: A display of the land and trees surrounding Rievaulx abbey, away from the town

![Image 1](image1.jpg)

**Image 2**: A look down the preserved area of the nave, holding original architecture from 1100s

![Image 2](image2.jpg)
**Image 3:** West range – where the lay brothers would stay - original 1100s architecture

**Image 4:** Galilee porch – where visitors entered, with the lay brothers staying on floors above
Image 5: The shrine of William, the first Abbot of Rievaulx, as remodeled in 1250

Image 6: The Presbytery standing large with pointed windows - 1200s Gothic rebuilding
Image 7: The chapter house, which saw a size reduction due to a diminished monk population

Image 8: One of eighteen chapels in the nave where monks could pray and worship
Image 9: The 20-foot fireplace used in the warming house – emitting all the heat for the monks

Image 10: East side of monastery with demonstrations of ruined stone from late development
Image 11: Kitchen used to prepare food – completely ruined today

Image 12: A display of what used to surround the entire cloister
**Image 13:** Treasury – the size showing the lack of material possessions and valuables

**Image 14:** Refectory – the area where all the monks would eat - a sense of community here
Image 15: Cloister – large, flat, and used for congregating without speaking

Image 16: The old path of the river, before the location was moved to fulfill needs
Image 17: Where water drains through

Image 18: Path where the water ran in the south end of the monastery
**Image 19:** A display of increased architectural detail in the north transept

**Image 20:** The infirmary cloister – well decorated, and smaller, than the main cloister
**Image 21:** South transept - contrasts rounded (first two sets) & pointed (third set) windows

**Image 22:** A contrast between the west end of the church (nave) and the east end (presbytery)
**Image 23:** A picture of one of the 5 wings of Christ on the altar within a chapel

**Image 24:** Below the altar of a chapel, a sealed up area where a relic may have been placed
Image 25: A view of some of the preserved tiles used on the floor

Image 26: Carved into the wall, the priscina would be used to rinse hands with holy water
Image 27: The south transept, with 1200s Gothic architecture up top and original 1100s below

Image 28: North transept standing with 1200s Gothic-styled arched windows
Image 29: Showing reinforcement to hold up the East end of the Church

Image 30: What's left of where the altar was in the main presbytery
**Image 31:** The library & vestry – the small size showing the lack of material books stored away

**Image 32:** Parlour, where clergy could converse, unlike the cloister, without disturbing fellows
Image 33: Infirmary hall – later the abbot’s house – located on the right

Image 34: Novices room – where the new monks would start and congregate
Image 35: Tanning vats toward the south end of the monastery