

Jervaulx Abbey

The decaying walls of this ancient Cistercian abbey continue to serve as a powerful reminder of Britain's monastic heritage 800 years after it was first conceived.

The once magnificent abbey, in lower Wensleydale, met its end in 1537. Today, all that remains of it is a well-tended collection of romantically picturesque ruins.

In common with other abbeys in the land, Jervaulx was unceremoniously seized and plundered by Henry VIII in 1538 in what became known as the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

Jervaulx suffered more heavily than other Yorkshire abbeys at the dissolution because the last abbot was involved in the Pilgrimage of Grace, a northern rebellion to defend the monasteries. The abbot was among those executed for their part in the rebellion, whose leader Robert Aske was burnt at the stake.

Dating from 1146, the abbey's white-robed French founders christened it Jervaulx, which means Ure Valley as the Ure is the river of Wensleydale.

The monks are credited with creating and perfecting Wensleydale cheese. They already knew how to make Roquefort cheese – the recipe for which they brought with them from France – and they applied their knowledge to create what has become one of Yorkshire's most popular food exports.

The Cistercians themselves were not allowed dairy products as, along with meat, such indulgences were banned from their simple diet.

The very youngest monks and anyone within the abbey who was sick, were allowed a breakfast called 'mixt', which consisted of just one-eighth of a kilo of bread which they could dip into a small amount of wine.

Dinner was called 'prandium', at which everyone ate two vegetarian dishes, usually cooked. Also on the menu were seasonal fruits, a large piece of bread and a jug of wine.

Supper, or 'cena', consisted of green vegetables and more fruit. It was available only in the summer, when the brothers were deemed to need more energy for their outdoor work.

Occasionally, extra dishes, called 'pittances', were served and could include eggs and cheese.

By the time of dissolution, Jervaulx Abbey owned about half of the dale, much of the land left to it in the wills of wealthy benefactors who wanted the monks to pray for their souls.

The abbey's 'lay brothers' – largely uneducated monks from the lower orders of society – worked as builders or in the fields, clearing land, breeding horses, rearing cattle, growing corn and tending the abbey's enormous flocks of sheep that roamed extensive areas called granges.

The 'choir monks' were, or made themselves, too busy with the many daily church services to become very involved in agricultural matters, although they would usually give a hand to bring in the harvest.

Cheese and wool was sold for a good profit at the large markets in nearby towns such as Yarm which, in the Middle Ages, was a thriving port and the lowest bridging point on the River Tees.

The real beauty of the ruins takes the form of a profusion of wild flowers decorating the ancient stones and providing a colourful carpet across the nave. In total, there are believed to be some 200 different species growing among the ruins.

Entrance to Jervaulx is free but there is an honesty box at the entrance gate, the proceeds of which are used for the maintenance of this remarkable memorial.