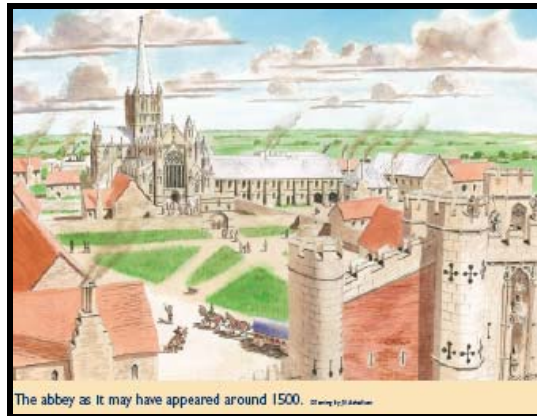




## INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

### Thornton Abbey and Gatehouse



Thornton Abbey was founded in 1139 by William Le Gros, Earl of Yorkshire, for a community of 12 Augustinian Monks from Kirkham Priory. The great size of the abbey and its ornate decoration (which includes one of the finest gatehouses in England) provide an indication of monastic wealth and importance in the Middle Ages. The site offers good links to History and opportunities for cross-curricular projects at all key stages.

#### Historical Background

On Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> January 1140, William Le Gros, Earl of Aumale and York, invited twelve men from the community of Kirkham Priory to populate a monastery on the banks of the Humber Estuary at Thornton, one year, to the day, after he had founded it.

The new community were Augustinian Canons and they followed a monastic rule widely attributed to the saint, scholar and bishop Augustine of Hippo. They lived communally and ate, slept and prayed together;

partaking in a simple life of prayer, study, education and charity. Unlike other monastic orders Augustinian Canons would go into the local community to preach, teach, provide for the poor and perform the duties of the local priests.

During the 1100s the Humber Estuary was a busy trade route and it is likely that this influenced William Le Gros' decision to build within close proximity to it. It is recorded that the stone and wood used in the abbey's construction arrived by boat and the canons used the river as a means of bringing goods and food to the monastery.

In 1148 Prior Richard became Thornton's first abbot when the monastery was raised to the status of abbey because of its wealth and influence.

Thornton Abbey grew into one of the richest Augustinian monasteries in England with most of the income coming from the wool trade, the principle source of prosperity for the

region. In 1313 wool sales yielded more than £800 profit for the abbey a huge sum of money in the Middle Ages.

On 12 December 1539, the prior and 27 canons surrendered the abbey to Henry VIII. However two years later the King and Queen Katherine Howard visited Thornton. He decided to re-establish it as a religious college. Very few abbeys were refounded in this way and it suggests that the King was impressed by Thornton. The college only existed for 7 years and was closed by Henry's son Edward VI in 1547.

In the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century Vincent Skinner, a member of parliament, bought the former monastic precinct in 1610 and began work on converting the site and buildings into a country home. Historical sources suggest that shortly after the house was completed it collapsed, complete with furniture inside it. The remains can still be seen as earthworks in the north west of the abbey precinct.

Between 1866 and 1870 the abbey precinct was used each summer as the encampment for the Lincolnshire Rifle Volunteers. It also became a popular resort easily visible and accessible from the main railway on its way to the Humber ferry. In 1938 the abbey was placed in the guardianship of the state and is now maintained by English Heritage.

### Exploring the abbey

Building remains of the abbey are still clearly evident within the huge monastic precinct, including the church, chapter house, south range with parlour and warming house, cloister and west range.

The abbey church at Thornton was a magnificent building, laid out in cruciform plan. It took 150 years to complete. The interior of the church was the largest and most richly detailed building of the monastery. Stone work was intricately carved. In 1315 hundreds of leaves of beaten gold and silver were purchased, with red and white lead to decorate the high vault of the church.

Two complete sides of the octagonal Chapter House, completed in 1308, indicate the scale and grandeur of the abbey buildings. It was an enclosed space of regular form and brilliantly lit with great windows. The interior was a perfect architectural creation, its proportions and form rich with symbolism.

### The Gatehouse



Built between 1379 and 1389 the gatehouse at Thornton Abbey is one of the best examples of medieval building in Britain and still survives to its full height. Constructed predominantly of bricks it is one of the earliest large scale works of brick architecture in Britain. It was the main entrance to the abbey precinct and is the entrance visitor's use today. The passage is still hung with its original 14<sup>th</sup> century doors.

The gatehouse stands a symbol of the abbey's power, strength and dominance and was built at a time of unrest and violence in the surrounding countryside. From the outside it has a fortified appearance with battlements, arrow loops, and a slot for a portcullis. The inside is laced with narrow passages containing latrines and fireplaces. The absence of a kitchen suggests that the gate house was never designed for residential purposes. Although it is possible that it was used for the abbey's administration and court room the original purpose of the building is uncertain.

Numerous carvings of figures, animals and foliage decorate the gatehouse and reflect the variety of imagery used by the medieval sculptures. These were not only symbolic but also a demonstration of wealth.

### **The Exhibition**

In July 2007 a new exhibition was opened in the gatehouse showing examples of carved stone and tiles discovered during site clearance excavations between 1949 and 1953. The displays inform what the abbey buildings would have looked like and relate the history of the site. Interactive resources include replica costume and mason's mark rubbings.

### **Education Approaches**

There are a number of approaches that can help pupils gain the most from a visit. The suggestions included here focus on observational and thinking activities that can be undertaken during a visit. follow-up activities drawing upon these suggestions can be completed in

school. These activities are adaptable across year groups.

### **Key Words**

Estuary, Monastery, Black Canons, Augustinian, Gatehouse, Cloister, Abbot, Exchequer, Chapter House, Church.

### **Key Questions**

Pupils can develop knowledge and understanding by focussing on key questions.

- What was life like for a monk at Thornton Abbey?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of building an abbey on this site?
- How has the site changed over time?
- What evidence can you find of how the site has changed over time?

### **Curriculum Links**

#### **KS 1 and 2**

#### History

Programme of study (PoS)

- Knowledge, skills and understanding
- Chronological understanding, knowledge and understanding of events, people and changes in the past
- Historical interpretation, historical enquiry
- Organisation and communication.

Unit 18 – What was it like to live here in the past?

#### Geography

Unit 6 – Investigating our local area

## Art

Unit 2C – Can buildings speak?

Unit 5A – Objects and meanings

Unit 6C – A sense of place

Unit 9gen – Visit a museum, gallery or site.

## Science

Unit 1A – Ourselves

Unit 2A – Health and Growth

Unit 4B – Habitats

## **KS 3**

### History

PoS as KS1/2

Unit 4 – How did the medieval church affect people's lives

### Geography

Unit 1 – Making connections

Unit 19 – Tourism – good or bad?

## Art

Unit 7B – What's in a building?

Unit 10gen – Visit a museum, gallery or site.

## **KS 4 and above**

- Archaeology
- Art
- History
- Geography
- Travel and Tourism

### Activities on Site

As you explore the abbey try to encourage pupils to imagine how it would have looked.

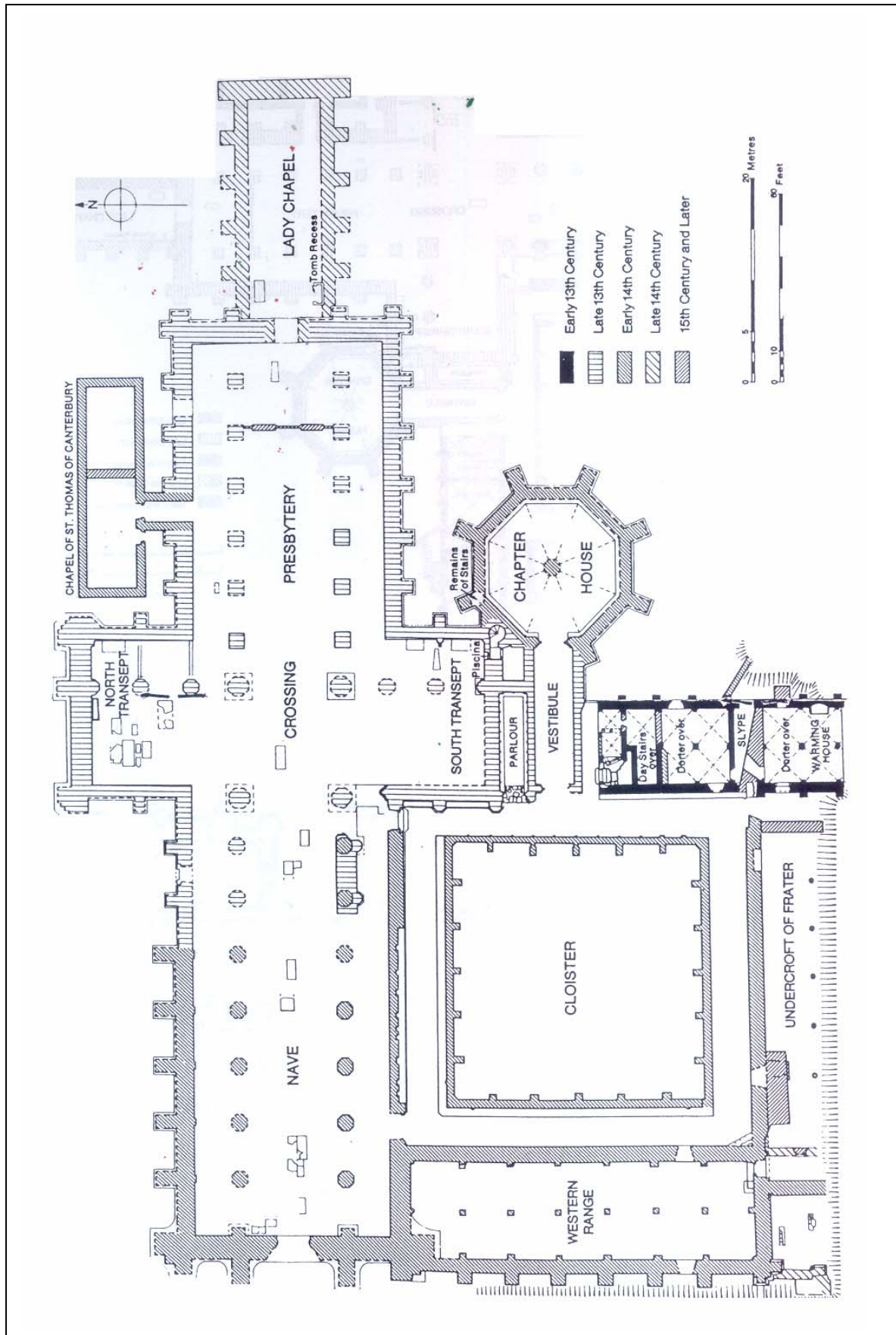
- Identify each location and record it on a map
- Ask pupils to close their eyes and imagine the sights, smells and noises. These can be written down and form the basis for a story

- Ask pupils to find and draw examples of shape to be used in pattern making exercises back in school
- Take digital images around the site for use in creating a virtual tour, PowerPoint presentation or information leaflet
- Look for and record evidence to show how the abbey changed over time
- Choose five words to describe mood, expressions or personality. Ask pupils to go around the site deciding which carved head best fits each word. Ask pupils to imagine that these heads have feelings and to suggest what they might feel about the present use of the site, influx of tourists rather than pilgrims and worshippers. These responses can be used to stimulate language work back at school such as poetry, storytelling and drama
- Look for different examples of how stone has been used.

### Activities in School

- Have a go at developing and writing a site leaflet for a specialist audience e.g child's activity sheet, French or German visitor
- Create a virtual tour of the site using photographs, sketches, movies, sound clips etc. present using suitable ICT e.g. web page or PowerPoint presentation
- Design a recruitment poster showing the advantages of becoming a monk
- Write a monk's diary describing life at Thornton Abbey or ask pupils to imagine that the abbot has granted them an interview with one of the Black Canons.

# Site Plan



## Making a Visit

English Heritage welcomes educational groups free of charge to over 400 of the country's most significant historical properties. Visits to Thornton Abbey must be booked in advance; bookings should be made at least 14 days before you wish to visit.

You can book online at [www.english-heritage.org.uk/onlinebooking](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/onlinebooking) or through the contact address below:

The Education Team  
English Heritage  
37 Tanner Row  
York  
YO1 6WP  
Tel: 01904 601917  
[Educ.york@english-heritage.org.uk](mailto:Educ.york@english-heritage.org.uk)