



HISTORIC SCOTLAND
ALBA AOSMHOR

MELROSE ABBEY

LARGE PRINT AUDIO GUIDE SCRIPT



99. Introduction

SFX: Harsh wind. A wolf howls.

Wolves still roamed Scotland when a small band of monks arrived here in eleven thirty six. And when they stood where you're standing now they looked out at – nothing. Not a town, not a village, not a house. It was cold. It was miles from anywhere. For the Cistercians – it was perfect. The Cistercians not only sought out inhospitable and lonely places – they revelled in them.

Hello and welcome to the magnificent Melrose Abbey.

Looking at the abbey ruins now it looks peaceful and dignified, but Melrose has had an extraordinarily eventful existence. This abbey has been endlessly attacked and repaired, even destroyed and rebuilt. At one time it was one of the richest and most powerful abbeys in Scotland, not to mention one of the biggest sheep farms in Europe, but later it was abandoned, unfinished and left to ruin.

Its story begins nearly nine hundred years ago and it's quite a story. And it might not be what you imagine. When you think of abbeys you might think of this...

MUSIC: Monks singing.

...but our story includes some of this...

SFX: A mason chipping at stone.

...a bit of this...

SFX: Sheep noises

... a little of this...

SFX: The gurgling sound of beer brewing.

...and of course a large helping of this...

SFX: The clatter of battle.

Of course the sound the monks were after was this...

(PAUSE)

That's right. Silence. For Cistercians were a silent order, directing their thoughts to internal contemplation and the

word of god. We're going to find out about the lives of these monks and the abbey they built.

But first let me give you some brief instructions about how to use this audio guide.

At the end of every commentary just follow the instructions so that we can give you the best route around the grounds. You can pause this commentary at any time by pressing the red button and get me talking again by pressing the green one. You can adjust the volume with the yellow speaker buttons. Remember our stewards are here to help you if you have any questions.

So let's make our way to the site of the nave – that's the green grassy area in front of the church building. Take the cobbled stone pathway to get there. Press the green button when you're ready to hear more.

On your way you might want to hear more about the extraordinary founders of this abbey – the Cistercian Monks. If you do, enter 1.

1. The Cistercian Order

At the beginning of the eleventh century most monastic communities had adopted a rule for communal life devised in Italy by St Benedict in the early years of the sixth century. This rule provided a simple but consistent framework across cultures and national boundaries.

St Benedict required his monks to divide their lives into three parts: the saying of offices: spiritual reading and meditation; and manual labour. But by the end of the eleventh century, so much time was taken up by the church offices that manual labour had been abandoned and the monks had little opportunity to read and meditate. And some felt that the grandness and richness of the monasteries distracted rather than concentrated the mind on Christ.

So in 1098, a group of monks founded a community in unforgiving French marshland that would return to the true roots of St Benedict's rule. They cut down the amount of religious ceremony, but intensified it. They worked. They designed a life that was completely immersed in contemplating their god. It became the most spectacular and successful reform movement of the Middle Ages. The

Cistercians. Within fifty-five years they had founded three hundred and thirty-nine monasteries across Europe.

They became known as the White Monks because of their undyed woollen robes. They insisted on an uncompromising life of poverty and simplicity. So they wouldn't be disturbed, new monasteries were to be placed in far away spots – such as Melrose. They even created their own special workforce – the lay-brothers – so that almost everyone they came into contact with was compatible with their fundamentalist lifestyle.

So the monks who lived in this abbey lived life for one purpose – to dedicate their lives to god. One novice monk wrote:

M

Our food is scanty, our garments rough; our drink is from the stream and our sleep upon our book. Under our tired limbs there is a hard mat; when sleep is sweetest we must rise at a bell's bidding ... self-will has no scope; there is no moment for idleness or dissipation ...

Which sounds like a hard life. But the young monk ends his words saying something that might ring true as you experience Melrose:

M

"... Everywhere peace, everywhere serenity, and a marvellous freedom from the tumult of the world."

You should now be standing in the nave, the green grassy area in front of the church building. When you're ready to continue, press the green button.

100. The Nave/The Lay Brothers' Choir

In front of you is the grand abbey church and to your right are aisle chapels. These were all built in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

But you're standing in what was part of the original twelfth century church. Take a quick peek behind you. The small wall that you walked through earlier is all that remains of the twelfth century building. It's the outer wall and the space you walked through was the door.

The twelfth century church was split into two parts. It was as if there were two churches in the same building. The first church was for the monks. The second church was for the workers, called lay-brothers. And you're standing in the lay-brothers section.

The lay-brothers were the workforce of the Cistercians. Not just anyone could become a monk – so if you were lower born and still wanted to serve god you could become a lay-brother. Your life was similar to that of a monk - all prayer and work. Just a little less prayer and harder, more physical work.

To us it seems a very hard life indeed, but his situation could be seen to be far superior to that of many Scottish peasants. A lay-brother had two meals a day, a roof over his head, a dry, if uncomfortable bed and a job for life.

The lay-brothers played a fundamental part in creating the kind of wealth that financed the building of magnificent abbeys like Melrose. If you want to know more about the Cistercian economy and the role of lay-brothers enter 2.

If you'd prefer to continue with the tour, our next stop is the big stone screen ahead of you. It's got a doorway in the middle. Just before you get to it, stop and press the green button.

2. The Cistercian Economy / Creation of the Lay-brothers

SFX: Sheep

The Cistercians were phenomenally successful sheep farmers. They were as single-minded in developing their estates as they were in the strict devotion of their lives.

They took land that hadn't been cultivated since before the Romans arrived and made it profitable. They bred new hardier types of sheep. They cultivated royal influence and developed international trade routes into Flanders and Italy. By the end of the thirteenth century Melrose exported two thousand fleeces and three thousand sacks of wool to Bruges. The quality of the wool was so good that the Bruges traders knew to look out for it. With their profits the Cistercians bought more land and had whole villages moved if they got in the way of their farming plans. They frequently went to the law to get what they wanted and weren't above deception or coercion.

But it wasn't just sheep. They led the world in metallurgy. They were the first to develop greenhouses. They were

innovators in crop development and much more. All these skills were utilised for profit.

The reason the Cistercians developed such a variety of expertise was that they followed the Benedictine ideal of self-sufficiency to the letter. The idea was that if they did everything for themselves they never need come into contact with the outside world and their minds could focus fully on the Lord. But this created a problem.

One of the things that separated the Cistercians from other orders was their insistence on work. But their harsh physical regime and intense ceremonial programme meant that they couldn't cope with the demands of a multinational agricultural empire on their own. But if they couldn't be in contact with the outside world, they couldn't hire labourers.

Their ingenious answer was the lay-brothers. They educated the workers they needed in the ways of the Cistercians and made them a part of their self-contained community. So the uneducated had a religious life and the Cistercians had a labour force. They could go to the inhospitable landscapes they loved and colonise them with workers that were an extension of their own ideals.

This glorious church is evidence of the huge wealth that the monks and lay-brothers created. Yet despite the prosperity of the order, the inhabitants of the abbey lived a frugal and abstinent life.

Before we go into the monks' half of the church, let's take a closer look at the big stone screen ahead of you. It's got a doorway in the middle. Just before you get to it, stop and press the green button.

101. The Pulpitum/Screen.

This stone wall is called a Pulpitum. It's the wall that divided the monks' part of the church from the lay-brothers' part of the church.

Let's see if we can imagine what the lay-brothers might have seen of their part of the church.

Well, to be honest if they were here for one of the major religious services they wouldn't have seen very much. The lay-brothers probably outnumbered the monks by three to one. So for events that required all the lay brothers to be here it must have been pretty crowded. But, even if they strained their necks, all they could have seen of the Monks' side was the vaulted roof.

The lay-brothers had their own altar of course; the niche in the wall to the right of the door was possibly a wall cupboard to store all the equipment for it.

The lay-brothers had something to look at on the top of the Pulpitum. This is because there were statues on it. These statues probably looked quite different than you'd imagine. They were painted and if they were wooden, they might

even be dressed. There's a spiral staircase within the walls so men could get up there to decorate them.

Unlike the lay-brothers – we can go through the door into the monks' side of the church. As you're going through the door look up and see the head of Christ carved above you. Once you're on the other side just press the green button.

102. The Monks' Choir.

This area is what's known as the monks' choir.

It's actually quite tricky to work out what the abbey church looked like when the Cistercians worshipped here. In the seventeenth century, after the demise of the monastery, the locals moved in and made some heavy-handed alterations so they could use Melrose as their parish church. You have to ignore those massive stone pillars and remember they put in that plain stone ceiling.

But imagine it's nine hundred years ago...

MUSIC: Cistercians singing

There's hardly anything left of the original twelfth century church. But the windows would have been much smaller. The architecture much simpler. For the twelfth century was the time when the Cistercians were at the height of their commitment to simplicity. The Cistercians reacted against the ostentatious decoration of other churches which they thought distracted a monk's mind from god. Their bare walls were painted white. The glass in their windows was plain rather than stained glass. There were no statues and

even the chalices and crucifixes were made of wood or iron rather than gold.

But within a hundred years the simplicity of the Cistercians had begun to be diluted. Red lines may have been painted on walls to look like stonework and patterns added to the columns and arches.

The abbey church you're standing in now was mostly built in the fifteenth century. Architecturally this was the most up-to-date style and they used the finest stonemasons in its construction. Within it there'd be statues of saints, elaborate ornaments and all manner of finery glittering with silver and gold.

Why the change to the purity of the order? Well the Cistercians became so successful and rich in their businesses and so influential in powerful political circles it was almost inevitable that, as the centuries went by, the purity of the order would be sullied.

An example of how their deeply held ideals collided with the needs of powerful outsiders are the aisle chapels.

There are three aisle chapels in this part of the church. They are on the right if you stand with your back to the pulpitum. We're going to look at the chapel furthest from the pulpitum, so the third on the right. When you get there, press the green button to continue.

103. An Aisle Chapel

Cistercian abbeys have been called “factories of prayer”. And chapels like this were the Monks’ workplace.

To get into here you’d have walked in through a wooden screen. On your left was the altar. All altars faced east, towards the rising Sun, often thought of as a symbol of the Resurrection. Above the altar there’d be a statue or painting of the chapel’s patron saint.

The reason there are so many chapels is that these little rooms were central to the life of every monk. Each ordained monk had to say mass every day. And as there were many monks, they needed lots of altars.

The reason Cistercians had such an intense austere life was so they could become closer to God. To the medieval mind the more austere and pious you were, the more powerful was your prayer. So the power of the Cistercians’ prayers was unsurpassed.

Given the deeply-held religious beliefs of people at all levels of society – there was an inevitable logic that the elite of society would utilise the Cistercians’ power of

prayer. For example a nobleman who had been in the wars might be a little concerned about the “thou shalt not kill” rule. So he’d get a Cistercian abbey to say mass for him in perpetuity. In this way he could shorten his time in purgatory and improve his chances of getting to heaven.

Cistercians could hardly refuse a powerful nobleman and so they prayed. But in return they might be given farm land, gifts or even good old fashioned cash. And it wasn't just riches. The Cistercians had influential friends in high places because the Cistercians had influence with the man in the highest place of all, God.

This seems like a paradox. Their piety meant that they were in demand by the rich, but the more in demand they were – the richer they became themselves and the further away from their roots they grew. This was why when the reformation came and a new wave of religious fervour swept the land the Cistercians had become the type of acquisitive order they themselves would have scorned four hundred years previously.

But perhaps the monks would see it differently. They simply lived a hard life in order to become closer to God, then they came to these chapels and prayed with all their heart.

Let's move on to the North Transept. Turn right out of this aisle chapel and make your way to the end of the abbey church. When you have open sky above you again, press the green button to continue.

104. The North Transept.

Like many churches this building is designed in the shape of a cross. We're now standing in the arms of the cross. We're going to take a closer look at the arm on the left, the North Transept.

[Pause of 2-3 sec]

In this North Transept, you can see some more aisle chapels on the right wall. [Pause] Standing with your back to the aisle chapels, look up at the opposite wall. [Pause] High up between the window recesses, you can see two statues. [Pause] The statue nearest the end wall is easiest to make out. We can tell this one is St. Peter, the man you meet at the gates of heaven, because he's standing there with the keys to the door and he's holding the book – the book that you hope your name is in.

The other statue is St. Paul. However, the stone it's carved from has eroded more over time, making it difficult to see his trademark sword. St. Peter and St. Paul look down on the two chapels dedicated to them, behind you.

If you look to the end wall, which is on your left if you're standing facing the aisle chapels, there's a small wooden door. [Pause] This is the door to the sacristy. This is where the priests put on their vestments and prepared for religious ceremonies. You might want to take a peek inside later on.

But before you do, notice what looks like a window on the same wall. It's above the door and to the left. In actual fact this isn't a window – it's another door. This door opened directly onto the monk's sleeping quarters that were on the first floor of the cloisters. On the west wall, the wall opposite the aisle chapels, you can see the outline of steps. These steps led down from the doorway and were called the night stair. So called because the monks woke up in the middle of the night and immediately came down these steps to get to their prayers. At the bottom of the steps you can see a small basin where they ceremonially washed their hands before entering the choir.

This night time worship was the result of Psalm 119: chapter 162, "At midnight I rose to give thanks to thee." It's not the only example of the Cistercians' commitment to religious ceremony. Their life was an exceptionally intense life of devotion. If you'd like to find out what a normal Cistercian monk's day was like, enter 3.

Otherwise, make your way to the Presbytery – the far end of the church, with its majestic window. It's directly opposite the monks' choir. Press the green button when you're there.

3. Cistercians – A Day In The Life

SFX: Alarm clock rings.

I don't know if you ever grumble about getting up in the morning. But let's see how you'd get on with a normal day at the office for a Cistercian monk. Lets go back to a summer's day in eleven hundred and seventy two.

SFX: A simple bell rings.

Wakey wakey. It's two in the morning. And you're up for the first religious ceremony of the day – Nocturns.

MUSIC: Cistercian monks singing.

You've slept in your clothes so you can rise, silently of course, and immediately process your way down the night stair to the abbey church. All orders perform nocturns, but the Cistercians are unusual in that you don't get to go back to bed after the ceremony – you stay awake reading or privately contemplating god. You're also unusual because you pray standing up – otherwise you might fall back asleep.

The next ceremony is “Matins” which celebrates the break of day – at around, say, four in the morning. Then, as the sun rises, you have the ceremony of “Prime”, followed by morning mass with all the monks. And you’re likely to be punished if you’re not singing devoutly enough.

SFX: THWACK! MUSIC ENDS

Then you’re off to the daily meeting at the chapter house where you’d be assigned your daily tasks. At seven in the morning you start work.

SFX: Hoeing .

Until eight when you have “Terce”, then mass, then the next religious ceremony, “sext”.

SFX: A hand bell.

Then a quick – and very frugal – lunch. Then, wait for it, – a siesta – the word siesta comes from sext. But don’t get too comfy, you’re soon up for “None” at two and working again until vespers at 6.

MUSIC: Cistercians singing.

As it's summer you might get a second meal – no such luxury in winter. Then there's "collation" where you sit round the cloister to hear a reading, then compline at around half past seven.

Finally, at around eight it's back to bed.

MUSIC ENDS

I say bed – it's just a meagre mattress on the floor. You lie on your back in the correct position – with your hands folded above your single blanket. And remember you don't undress – you sleep in your clothes – so that when you wake up the next day at two in the morning you're ready to do it all again.

We're going to make our way to the Presbytery now. It's at the far end of the church, directly opposite the monks' choir. Press the green button when you're there.

105. The Presbytery.

This end part of the church is called the presbytery. And in it is the spiritual heart of the abbey. The high altar.

Notice all the big windows around it. The church itself might have been a little dark and dingy – but here it is illuminated from all sides...

Music: *angelic chorus.*

... everyone could see where their attention should be focussed.

The most impressive of the windows that illuminated the altar is the big window in front of you. It was probably built by English stonemasons. See how thin the struts are that support the window. They're plain – but incredibly delicate. The iron supports were only put in around a hundred years ago. That delicate stonework survived for five hundred years without them, through violent trauma and Scottish weather. It's a testament to the skill of the stonemasons that this window survives at all.

But the window isn't the only evidence that this is the most important end of the church. Above you have a look at the ceiling. Carved into the bosses are the holy trinity and saints looking down. Ahead the two holes in the wall are cupboards for all the incense, candlesticks, books and religious vessels used during mass.

Now have a look at the wall to the right. As in the aisle chapels, the presbytery has a piscina – a basin. But as befitting the status of this altar this is a more elaborate double version. If you look on either side of the presbytery there are arched recesses. These were for tombs and originally held stone effigies of the deceased.

Originally Cistercians didn't allow people to be buried within the church. But as the order became more relaxed, the elite of society got buried here. And naturally the more elite you were – the nearer to the altar you were buried. If you were buried around the altar itself – you must have been virtually royalty.

This magnificent part of the church was built with the financial help of King Richard II of England. It was needed because the abbey was burned down by – King Richard II.

If you want to find out more about Richard and why he destroyed and helped rebuild the abbey press 4. Or to continue your tour, press the green button.

106. Directions to South Transept

Our next stop is the South Transept. If you stand with your back to the Presbytery, it's the arm of the church to the left. Press the green button when you're ready to hear more.

4. Richard II and the destruction of the abbey.

MUSIC: Cistercians singing

For an abbey built by monks dedicated to peace and solitude, Melrose has seen more than its fair share of troubles.

It was King David the first of Scotland who was instrumental in establishing Melrose. He was keen to have Cistercian Abbeys in Scotland because Cistercians didn't just look after the welfare of souls – they provided order and created wealth. And a magnificent abbey on the border with England sent a message showing the wealth and power of the Scottish king.

Unfortunately if the English wanted to send a message back, abbeys such as Melrose were one of the first in the firing line.

SFX: Sounds of battle.

Melrose suffered many attacks. But in thirteen eighty-five the abbey suffered its most calamitous hammering. In

revenge for a Scottish raid on the English, Richard II sent a force into Scotland which, in the words of the time:

M

“saved nothing and burnt down with fiery flames God’s temples and holy places – to wit the monastries (sic) of Melrose, Dryburgh and Newbattle”

The abbey was ransacked. Monks were killed and Melrose was burned to the ground.

SFX: Battle fades.

The Cistercians looked at the smoky ruin. But they dusted themselves down and immediately set about building a new abbey. And they were helped by none other than Richard II – the man who’d burned it down in the first place.

One reason Richard did this is that in helping rebuild, he was aiding his soul’s salvation. When you’re standing at the pearly gates, the burning down of churches doesn’t go down too well.

But also you have to remember that at this time the border between England and Scotland was fluid. Rebuilding

Melrose was an act of a Christian – but it was also like a claim on the land. Richard wanted to associate himself with the Cistercian Order, their wealth and their power.

It wasn't the first attack on Melrose and it wouldn't be the last. But over the next one hundred years or so a new Melrose grew out of the ashes of the old. And it survived to become one of the marvels of medieval architecture.

[Automatic link to 106 – directions to South Transept]

107. Interior of the South Transept.

Ahead of you, above the door that leads outside, is a beautiful window. If you look to your right you can see a plaque dedicated to the man who designed it. He was a French master mason called John Morow and he is the man responsible for much of the exceptional work on this side of the church.

Essentially this plaque is his CV. It sings his praises. Not surprising as he probably designed his panel, composed the text and carved the stone. But then he's got plenty to crow about. He was a master mason, which is the closest thing in the medieval world to an architect. Master masons were among the great technological and scientific innovators of their day. Yet it's worth remembering that the tools used to design this wonderful church were a ruler, a set square and a set of compasses.

These implements were held in almost mystical reverence. The inscription above the door to the right of the plaque reads:

M

“As the compass goes evenly about, so truth and loyalty shall do without doubt. Look to the end quoth John Morrow”

In other words:

M

“Truth and loyalty are as reliable as a compass. Prepare for your end says John Morrow”

Beneath this inscription is a doorway that leads to a narrow spiral staircase. If you want to, you can climb these stairs and get to see the view from the top of the building.

Our tour continues outside. When you're ready go through the doorway beneath the window and press the green button to continue.

108. Exterior of the South Transept.

This side of Melrose is a particularly wonderful illustration of the skills and artistry of medieval craftsmen. It's much more intricate than the interior of the presbytery. Just compare the windows. Instead of the minimalist stonework of the English masons you have a much more flamboyant style. This work is more in keeping with French stonework – more evidence that it's designed by John Morow.

You might want to spend some time here investigating all the artistry and invention that's on display, but there's one statue that you should pay special attention to. Walk along to the left, but stop when you can clearly see where the roof of the church ends. When you're ready, press the green button to hear more.

109. Statue of Virgin Mary

You should now be standing so you can clearly see where the church roof ends. If you look to the last pillar to the left, you can see the Virgin Mary. She's missing her face, as is the baby Jesus that she's holding. But even with the damage and at this distance she still has majesty. It's one of the finest examples of medieval sculpture in Scotland.

It's placed in a particularly significant spot. It marks the boundary between the monks' area and the lay-brothers area.

It's no coincidence that a most magnificent statue in a most important setting is of the Virgin Mary for she was central to Cistercian worship. Cistercian monasteries were dedicated to Mary, every monastery seal featured Mary and she was ever present in their sculptures, paintings and stained glass. In fact for many years Mary was the only image allowed other than Christ himself.

And at the end of the day, the last of the many religious Ceremonies Cistercians performed was Compline – and the final act of Compline was to sing *Salve Regina*. A song dedicated to the Virgin.

You might have noticed that, like Mary, many of the statues have lost their heads, been defaced or are missing altogether. Attacked and abandoned Melrose was in poor shape. But one of Scotland's most famous sons came to the rescue – Sir Walter Scott. If you want to find out about his relationship to Melrose, press 5. Alternatively you might want to find out where you can spot one of Scotland's most famous Gargoyles. If you do, press 6. Or to continue the tour, press the green button.

6. Bagpipe Playing Pig

The more you look at this side of the Abbey, the more dragons, skulls and weird looking characters you see. But let me give you directions to find one of the most renowned gargoyles in Scotland. Look to the right of the statue of Mary – past the next pillar – and up behind on the wall, just below the roof line. You should find a pig – but this is no ordinary pig – it's playing bagpipes.

Once you've found our bagpipe playing pig you can return to the tour by pressing the green button, or if you like you can find out more about Melrose's famous fan, Walter Scott, by pressing 5.

5. Walter Scott

MUSIC: BAGPIPES

Sir Walter Scott was one of the most popular writers of the nineteenth century.

He was from an old Borders family and spent part of his childhood not far from here at Smailholm. Much of his life was spent exploring the land, its stories and its history and many of his novels and histories were located around here.

Through his work he became the world spokesman for Scotland. It was he that fanned the flames of passion for the kilt and the bagpipes, creating the image of the Highlander as a noble warrior.

Even now his characters conjure up images of a Scottish History overflowing with romance, action and adventure.

Walter Scott also loved Melrose Abbey. There's even an engraving by Turner of Melrose – and in the foreground is Walter Scott. But his involvement with Melrose went beyond just liking the place. He held the position of Sheriff Depute of Roxburghshire and in eighteen twenty-two Scott

personally supervised the extensive repair work that was to preserve this abbey for future generations.

To get to the next stop, press the green button for directions. But if you haven't yet looked for one of Scotland's most famous Gargoyles press 6.

110. Directions

To get to our next stop, we need to go back inside the church. Use the same door we exited by. Once inside, make your way to the Presbytery with its large windows and press the green button for more directions when you're there.

111. Directions ctd

Stand with your back to the Presbytery, so you are facing the Monk's Choir. If you look very carefully you will see a doorway on the right hand side, concealed behind the pillars. Make your way towards it, and when you get there, go through the opening and out into the open. When you're standing in the green grassy area outside, press the green button to continue.

112. The Cloister.

The church is where the monks worshipped, but this area is where they lived and worked. The twelfth and thirteenth century foundations you see before you are the most extensive of any monastic site in Scotland of this period. It gives us a remarkable window into the lives of the monks and lay-brothers who lived here.

Let's start with the cloister itself.

This central grassy space has always been open but it would have been surrounded by four covered alleys. If you look back to the doorway we just came through, you can see the surviving walls of the cloister to either side. In the wall above the benches you can see holes – these are the sockets that supported the timber roofs that covered the walkway around the cloister.

Monks reserved this area as one of private and quiet contemplation. It was set as far away from the clatter of the kitchen, the noise of the mills and hustle and bustle of the lay-brothers area as it could be.

In the summer, at around seven in the evening, this would be the place for a meditative reading called “Collation”. The Cistercians gathered in the cloister walk against the church. The Abbot would sit in the middle and opposite him, on the other side of the cloister was a collation lectern where a monk delivered the reading to end the day.

We’re going to walk anti-clockwise around the cloister to look at some of the buildings that made up the monks’ living quarters. Look back to the doorway through which we entered the cloister. This is our starting point. Looking anti-clockwise, past the cloister wall, you’ll see a small wooden ramp leading down. [Pause] Press the green button when you get to this first wooden ramp.

113. The Chapter House.

This is the Chapter House. If the altar is the abbey's spiritual heart, then here is the abbey's head. The Chapter House was the administrative centre where monks met every morning. It was called the Chapter House because meetings always began with a reading of a chapter from the rule of St. Benedict – the founding father of many monastic orders and whose writing the Cistercians took as law.

But there was much more than just the reading of chapters. You had the inauguration of new monks and the naming of old monks to new posts. You had to discuss business affairs. And you had some of this.

SFX: Thwack of a birch rod.

It was the room where sins were punished. But this was done in a particularly Cistercian way. Every morning each monk was invited to confess his sins. He asked pardon and awaited judgement. But those who could not think of any sins they'd committed were accused of sins by their fellow monks. This wasn't vindictive – they were trying to help. For it meant that the accused could also be judged and

corrected and so progress with them on their road to salvation.

Some sins might be familiar to us, everything from lateness to murder. But they were much more likely to be sins such as having unworthy thoughts.

The Chapter House was also a place of burial. It was a particularly favoured place for Abbots to be laid to rest.

And there's someone else famous said to be buried here – King Robert the Bruce. Or at least part of Robert the Bruce. If you want to hear more about the unusual story of the burial of one of Scotland's great heroes, press 7.

Or, to move on to the parlour, make your way to the next set of stone steps leading down. Press the green button when you're ready to hear more.

7. Robert the Bruce's heart

King Robert the Bruce is one of the most famous figures of Scottish history. He died in thirteen twenty-nine – but his story didn't end there.

Back in the fourteenth century it was relatively common for different body parts to be buried in different places. If you wanted to be buried next to your wife *and* in the place you were born then dividing yourself up was just common sense.

What Robert the Bruce wanted in death was to fight in the Crusades – something he was unable to do in his life. So his body was buried in Dunfermline Abbey, but his heart was taken away to join the crusades in Jerusalem.

Unfortunately it only got as far as Spain where the carrier of the heart - Good Sir James of Douglas – died in battle. It's said that his last act was to hurl the heart at the enemy. Fortunately it was retrieved and brought back to be laid to rest at one of Robert the Bruce's favourite places – Melrose.

Then, in nineteen ninety-six, Historic Scotland undertook archaeological excavations of the chapter house floor. The team investigated a casket. In laboratory conditions a small hole was drilled into it and its interior was probed by a fibre optic cable. The casket was carefully opened to reveal – another casket. Smaller and made of lead. It was accompanied by an engraved copper plaque:

M

“This enclosed leaden casket containing a heart was found beneath the chapter house floor, March 1921 by his Majesty’s office of works.”

As there’s no DNA of King Robert the Bruce to test against and so prove definitively that this was his heart, there was no point in opening the casket up. So in a ceremony in 1998 this casket was replaced, undisturbed and there’s a plinth in the chapter house to commemorate Robert the Bruce.

So is it his heart? It would be more likely that a man of Robert the Bruce’s status wouldn’t be buried in the chapter house but right by the altar. However, it is quite possible that the casket was moved during the rebuilding in the 15th Century.

Our next stop is the parlour, the area by the next set of stone steps leading down. Press the green button when you’re there.

114. Parlour

Welcome to the Parlour. The word Parlour comes from the French word parler – to talk. This is the room where the silent Cistercians were allowed to converse.

Cistercians frowned on any activity that distracted them from God. And talking was very distracting indeed. As one Monk wrote:

M

“From the permission to chatter arises the wherewithal for brawling. From the brawl come threats and acrimony”

So this room wasn't here just for an idle natter. It was unheated and had cold stone benches on either side. It was used for essential conversation such as novice monks speaking to their master in the early days of their probationary period.

We're going to move on to the last room in this stretch. Press the green button when you're ready to hear more.

115. Novices' Day Room.

This is the Novices' Day Room where new recruits received instruction. If you wanted to become a monk you had a one year testing period known as the novitiate. During this time a monk called a Novice-Master had the job of making potential monks “worthy vessels of God and acceptable to the Order.”

We don't know exactly how they did that, but education was vital in more ways than one. Academic prowess was a powerful feature of the White Monk's influence – remember many nobles were illiterate and monks from orders such as the Cistercians became influential advisors and negotiators.

However, the majority of those who joined the Cistercian order spent virtually all of their lives within the abbey precinct. The successful novices in this room wouldn't have left Melrose and their education must have focussed on their spiritual life here. They'd have learnt the customs and traditions of the Cistercian order and the writings of the great theologians. They'd also have instruction in spiritual exercises. Cistercian writing of the time is full of advice on the nature of prayer and they developed sophisticated meditative techniques.

Here's some advice to a novice from a monk:

M

Focus your eyes on one place in front of you to the best of your ability and as your human frailty allows. Wandering eyes are most harmful to the mind's stability. To elicit humility, therefore, form a mental picture of the Lord as if he were lying in the manger in front of you. To feel compunction visualise him suspended on the Cross. Grieve and be thankful because of the nails, the thorns, the spittle and the gaping wound at his side.

Despite the frugal life of a monk there was no problem in getting new recruits. By eleven fifty two there were three hundred and twenty eight Cistercian abbeys in Europe. And this room was packed with aspiring monks.

Behind the Novices' Day Room you can see what looks like a ditch. This is the Great Drain and it's our next stop, Press the green button when you're there.

116. The Great Drain

SFX: Running water.

In nearly every other Cistercian monastery in the world the monks' cloister is on the other side of the church – the south side. But at Melrose they sacrificed their sense of order and uniformity so that they could utilise the River Tweed.

As I mentioned before, the Cistercians chose remote places for their monasteries. But their order also demanded self-sufficiency. And they were canny farmers. Melrose had excellent land for sheep and running water to power a fully-fledged agricultural industry. So successful were they that at one point Melrose was the biggest sheep farm in Europe.

And the Cistercians were sophisticated engineers. They had complex water pipe systems complete with inspection hatches and taps that turned on and off. Remember taps that turned on and off weren't in most British homes until the nineteen twenties.

The part of the water system here is called "The Great Drain". The Cistercians diverted water from the River

Tweed to the abbey. The water that arrived here had already powered a mill and been used by their tanners.

But when it got to this point – it was used again, but for a different purpose. Above all the buildings we've seen, the Chapter House, the Parlour and the Novices' Day Room, on the upper floor, was the monks' dormitory.

But at this end of their dormitory, cut away at a right angle to the main room was a room with a line of benches with holes in. These holes were directly over this part of the great drain and were the monks' lavatories. This is a highly sophisticated – and sanitary – system for the Middle Ages.

If you go to the museum in the Commendator's House over the road you can find some interesting pottery objects that were found in this drain. They're urinals. They were dropped in by accident.

Let's make our way to the Warming Room now. It's the first room on the right after the Novices' Day Room.

117. The Warming Room.

This is the warming room. It's the only place in the monk's range, apart from the kitchen, that had a fire. The Cistercians didn't have any winter clothes. The reason was that the man who set the rules for the Cistercians' was, once again, St. Benedict. Here's what he said about clothes.

MUSIC: something angelic

M

It is sufficient if a monk has two tunics and two cowls to allow for night wear and for the washing of these garments; more than that is superfluity and should be taken away.

Of course Saint Benedict lived in Italy, a somewhat different climate from Scotland where it can get rather cold. But what St. Benedict decreed is what the Cistercians did, so come rain, shine or snow the Cistercians wore nothing but a loose woollen robe and a tunic.

In the mid twelfth century the order started to get softer – so on cold days it was allowed that monks could wear all their clothes at once.

But even so, on frosty Scottish winter days, this was the only room where they could find some warmth.

Our next stop is the next room along to the left. Press the green button when you're ready to hear more.

118. Refectory

This is the refectory, the monks' dining room. The walls of the refectory extend beyond the wall and across the road ahead of you. When the Cistercians were at their peak they had to enlarge the rooms to make space for all the extra monks.

The rules for eating and drinking were again laid down by Saint Benedict and he instructed them to have bread and some fruit and vegetables – so that was what they had. Other orders were also based on the rules of Saint Benedict – but the Cistercians took his writings to literal extremes. And what the monks ate and how they ate it was, like everything else, designed to enhance their ability to concentrate on God.

So they were strict vegetarians. Eating meat led to sinful thoughts. Only the old or the ill were allowed meat – for they were too weak to have carnal thoughts and were thus already out of Satan's grasp.

In winter there was only one meal and the whole thing was finished within half an hour. There'd be no heating and of

course, the meal was eaten in complete and utter silence. The only sound was a monk reading from a holy book.

Although the monks couldn't speak, they did have sign language. So before you leave this room let me just teach you something that might come in handy if you ever find yourself in a Cistercian monastery at meal-time.

Put your hand palm up. Now curl your index finger tip under your thumb and flick it forwards. You've just asked someone to pass the salt. Today Cistercians still ask for the salt like this. Just as they did nine hundred years ago in this very room.

It's time to move on to the next stop. Press the green button when you get to the last room in this stretch.

119. The Kitchen

This is the kitchen. The food for both the monks and the lay-brothers was cooked here. Here they cooked huge vats of vegetarian stew. The hole in the wall to your left that looks like a window is actually a hatch to the lay-brothers' section of the range.

Part of the doctrine of the Cistercians was to be completely self sufficient so that no-one disturbed them and interrupted their devotion to god. So not only did they grow all their own food; they made their own plates, made their own clothes, made their own shoes and they made their own beer. Yes, you heard right, the serious and sober Cistercians drank beer.

SFX: Beer brewing gurglingly.

Below the hatch and a little to the right you can see what is probably the base of a boiler – the ruts in the ground were for drainage. This part of the kitchen is the brewery. You'll have gathered by now that, being Cistercians, they didn't brew beer so they could have a good knees up. The beer was made, as it was everywhere in those days, to purify the water. Everyone drank it, adults and children alike. The

beer wasn't very strong. But nevertheless, the amount the monks could drink was restricted.

And on that note, let's move on to our next stop, marked by the low stone walls that run at a right angle to the rooms we've just been looking at. When you're ready to hear more, press the green button to continue.

120. The Lay Brothers Range

This is the lay-brothers' range and it's huge. It's not just what you see about you now – it carries on over the road. The buildings here were two storeys high with the lay-brothers' dormitories on the upper floors. At its peak Melrose sustained around fifty monks but three times as many lay-brothers. And if the presbytery was the Abbey's heart and the Chapter House its head, then this area was its muscle.

Remember Melrose Abbey was both a self-sufficient religious community and a hugely successful and efficient agricultural industry.

The place thrummed to the sound of masons...

SFX: Chippity chip

...carpenters

SFX: Add saws and hammers

...blacksmiths

SFX: Add hammering anvils

...as well as bakers, weavers, cobblers, skimmers, tanners and sheep.

SFX: A fair old racket

And the lay-brothers had to grow, store and prepare food, make clothing, cutlery and tools, erect buildings and fences – even prepare parchment for manuscripts. In fact anything that needed to be done, was done here.

But once again there was a spiritual side to the Abbey's productiveness. For example the central tenet of their order, charity.

SFX: Fade racket.

The farm was so successful that the main use of the ground floors was for storage. But it wasn't just used for business reasons. In fact there was so much storage it's recorded that in a twelfth century famine, this monastery was able to feed four thousand starving people for three months.

As time went on, the business of the Abbey continued, but the numbers of the lay-brothers dwindled.

One reason for the change was “the foul wind from the south”. This time it wasn’t an English army. It was The Black Death. Because a huge percentage of the workforce died, the bargaining power of the survivors rose. The lifestyle of the average peasant improved and the austere existence of the lay-brothers’ life seemed less attractive.

And a combination of the gradual laxity in Cistercian dogma and simple economic necessity meant that the White Monks had to change their attitude to their labour-force too. Whereas before they only had contact with workers schooled in Cistercian philosophy now they hired people from outside the abbey walls. By the fourteenth century ordinary employees were used to do the work of the lay-brothers.

But throughout Europe pockets of lay-brothers remained. They were finally officially disbanded in nineteen sixty-seven.

To hear the tour conclusion, just press the green button.

121. Conclusion

Jo Watson died in fifteen ninety. He was the last monk at Melrose. But the truth was that the Community was doomed long before. The authority and riches of the Cistercians, that had made them so preeminent in previous years, meant that they were seen as a vulnerable political target when times changed. In the end, the Reformation put the final nail into the Cistercian order in Scotland. The farm lands of the once powerful abbey were gradually divided up. The cloister was allowed to fall into ruin.

But this magnificent building survives. A tribute both to the workers who built it and the monks and lay-brothers who lived in it.

This is where the audio guide ends. But there's plenty more to see. Across the road is the Abbot's Hall and you can also visit the museum that's inside the Commendator's House. Designed in the early nineteen forties, this charmingly old-fashioned museum houses the largest display of medieval objects anywhere in Scotland – almost all of which have been found within the Abbey grounds, many ending up by accident in the Great Drain. So you can see those urinals first hand.

And if you've got the bug for monks and abbeys you might want to visit the Augustinian Abbey of Jedburgh, find out about the Premonstratensians at Dryburgh or discover the Tironensians at Kelso.

The stewards in our Visitor Centre, where you return your audio guide, will be happy to give you directions.

We hope you've enjoyed your visit to one of the most beautiful and historic monuments in Scotland. The much loved, much battered Melrose Abbey.