

### **Selby Abbey Visit.**

On 10th July 2019 the Group paid a visit to Selby Abbey, enjoyed a full guided tour and learnt about the Abbey's history including the connection between the Abbey and important historical events.

The following notes hopefully provide a reminder and some brief outline of those major events and are intended as a starting point to find out more!

### **William the Conqueror, the Norman Conquest and the founding of the Abbey.**

There is a close link between the Norman conquest of 1066 and the foundation of Selby Abbey. Although William the Conqueror was victorious at the battle of Hastings and crowned king of England, many nobles in the north of England did not accept him as their king. William had to come north with his army and established his authority with great ruthlessness - the 'Harrowing of the North'. A link was established with Selby because William's wife, Queen Matilda, who had also made the journey north is believed to have given birth to a son in the town. William had already founded Battle Abbey following his victory at Hastings. The creation of an abbey at Selby in thanksgiving for his success in subduing the north and in light of other favourable omens appeared a natural conclusion. King William gave a charter to a monk called Benedict granting him a site on which to build an abbey. He was subsequently ordained by the Archbishop of York as the first Abbot of Selby Abbey. The first Abbey was built in wood and it was Benedict's successor, Abbot Hugh, who was responsible for building the stone Abbey. The building carried out in Abbot Hugh's time was in the Norman style. Continuing work was carried out on the Abbey over lengthy periods and this reflected changing styles. Nevertheless, in parts of the Abbey the Norman style is still clearly visible.

### **Henry VIII's religious reforms and the dissolution of the monasteries.**

When Henry VIII's marriage to his first wife, Catherine, failed to produce a male heir he sought to have the marriage annulled by the Pope. When this was refused the ensuing conflict with Rome escalated and in the 1530's acts were passed by Henry that ended papal authority over the church in England and made the king its head. This was taking place against the background of challenges to the authority of the Pope elsewhere in Europe.

In 1535 Henry turned his attention to the monasteries which had considerable wealth at that time, when Henry himself was in financial difficulties. A

programme of closing the monasteries began. Henry benefitted by appropriating their income and disposing of their assets. As the programme progressed feelings ran high in some areas and in the north of England a movement emerged which became known as the 'Pilgrimage of Grace' aimed at resisting the changes. This won the support of many prominent families and included Lord Darcy, Selby Abbey's High Steward. Representing Henry, the Duke of Norfolk met with the leaders and gave assurances which placated them. Henry later went back on his assurances and many involved were subsequently executed, including Lord Darcy.

In December 1539 a group of Henry's commissioners who were visiting the area confirmed the closure of Selby Abbey. The monastery buildings were extensive. The Abbot's house and many other buildings were pulled down or fell into ruin. However, in keeping with established local tradition, the Abbey church survived as the parish church of Selby. This was unofficial at first but legalised in 1618. This was in contrast to monasteries such as Fountains and Rievaulx where the Abbey churches fell into ruin.

### **The English Civil War.**

A period of political and religious discord in the 1630's which affected Ireland and Scotland as well as England led to direct conflict in 1641 between the king, Charles I, and Parliament. This escalated to the point where civil war broke out in 1642.

Oliver Cromwell was a senior commander in the Parliamentary army ('Roundheads'). In Yorkshire the parliamentary forces were led by Lord Fairfax who was in Selby in December 1642 and he ensured the town's defences were reinforced. The following year there was a confrontation between Parliamentary and Royalist troops ('Cavaliers') in Selby market place and in the winter of 1643-4 the Royalists used Selby Abbey to barrack troops and stable horses. The Abbey Guide mentions vandalism to the Abbey by both sides and the loss of much medieval stained glass.

In 1644 Fairfax defeated the Royalists and drove them out of Selby. In July of the same year the battle of Marston Moor where Cromwell himself took part resulted in an important victory for the Parliamentary forces.

In January 1649 Charles I was put on trial for treason and other crimes and executed at the Banqueting House in London. This was very controversial even among supporters of the Parliamentary cause. Fairfax was not alone in staying away.

## **The 1906 fire**

With regard to the Abbey's later history it is important to mention the fire of 1906 which caused considerable damage. As the Guide points out the easy option would have been to settle for a response to the fire which would only have restored part of the building creating a church on a much smaller scale. Instead a comprehensive programme of rebuilding and restoration was carried out so we can still enjoy the Abbey in all its splendour today.

### **Sources.**

Henry Farrar. 'A Guide to the Abbey Church of Selby which is dedicated to Our Lord Jesus Christ, Saint Mary the Virgin and Saint Germain'. (Selby Abbey 1989.)

Robert Tombs. 'The English and their History'. (Allen Lane 2014.)

Ingrid Barton. 'The Little History of Yorkshire'. (The History Press 2018.)