

Forum Report. Historic Environment Group. August 2025.

For our third Summer outing we chose Marrick Priory, near Reeth. Currently serving as an outdoor centre established in 1970, the Priory retains enough original features to justify a visit; it has also gained a good reputation for supplying afternoon tea which our group took full advantage of.

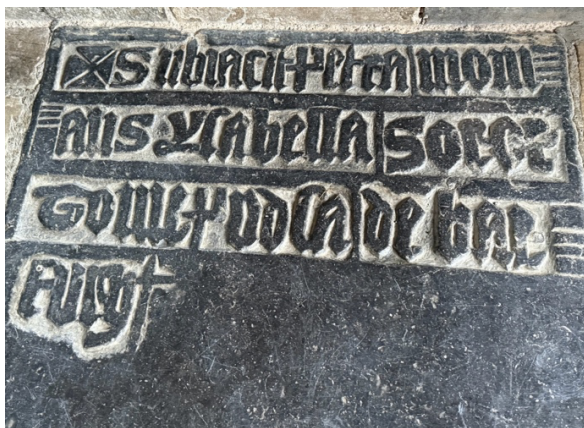
The Benedictine nunnery here was established in about 1140 by Roger De Aske, early in the reign of Henry II. For 400 years or so the nuns lived in peace and tranquillity well off the beaten track but supported by an associated lead mining industry until Henry VIII had them evicted as part of his dissolution of the monasteries. The Prioress, Christabel Cowper, and her 16 nuns mostly returned to their families while Sir John Woodall, once secretary to Anne Boleyn, purchased the building (for £364 and sixpence) before passing it on to Sir Timothy Hutton of Marske in 1592. The artist Turner visited the area in 1816, producing a well-known watercolour of the Priory. From 1592 until the 19th century the building changed hands many times, depending on the state of the local lead mining industry, until the final decline of mining locally saw the 'priory' (latterly a parish church) abandoned at about the end of WW2. After sympathetic restoration it reopened 20 or so years later as a residential centre for outdoor pursuits, with its brewery and other associated outbuildings becoming a separate farm.



The Earliest Priory Remains. (Photo by Ian Royston)

We started our tour outside in the ruined remains of the early Priory (probably 13th century) which adjoined a later building famed as 'The Coffin House'; this was found to contain a hearse dating from 1828 which is now restored and on display at Beamish. The historical highlight of the visit however was the restored (in about 1811) priory church, dedicated to St Andrew and filled with intriguing inscriptions which give rise to more questions than answers. In the nave, near the modern entrance, is a black marble

gravestone with a Latin inscription reading '*Here lies Isabella de Sorez, Countess of Richmond, who has departed*' (thanks to Ian Reid for locating this translation). The only other information I could find was that Isabella was one of the nuns of the priory, and sister of Thomas de Pudsay, of Barforth; elsewhere I have found recorded one 'Thomas of Pudsay' who was apparently alive in the mid 1300s. Equally intriguing is a carving, now on the floor by the altar, of the arms and sword of the founder, Sir Roger de Aske. It is believed that this carving once stood upright elsewhere in the building. Moving to more recent times, high on the wall is a tablet to the memory of "Mr. Thomas Fawcett, of Oxque, in this parish, who died in 1783, a celebrated cultivator of bees, for which he received many testimonies from the Society in London for the encouragement of Arts and Sciences."



The Isabella Inscription. (Photo by Tim Meacham)

We dined where the nuns dined, next door to the Prioress's house. The 1970 restoration here has retained some important features of the early buildings and as a bonus the afternoon tea was absolutely delicious – and there was lots of it! We finished our visit by climbing the first section of the 'Nuns' Steps', a paved way by which the sisters reached the village of Marrick on the hill above the Priory. This was a very different visit to any we have done before, but a most memorable one thanks mainly to the current staff who went out of their way to make us welcome.



The Nuns' Steps. (Photo by Tim Meacham)



The Priory from The Nuns' Steps. (Photo by Tim Meacham)

Tim Meacham. 26/8/25