

Founding a New Abbey

When an abbey had grown in such size (approximately 60 choir monks) that it would not suffer the loss of a founding colony it was expected to colonize a new daughter-house as a filial *de novo* foundation. There was no prescribed location for a Cistercian abbey, although valleys were dominant in chosen locations, and the '...setting up their monasteries in deserted places far away from human habitation...' (Jamroziak, 2013) was more myth than fact; indeed, the only statute regarding the location of a new abbey was that, 'no abbey was to be founded in cities, towns or villages'. In reality, the location for a new abbey was governed by the wishes of the founding benefactor, availability of land, local conditions and ready access to a source of fresh water, and nearby settlements. Choir monks were to get their living from manual labour, farming and stock-raising, but were not to live away from the monastery. Abbeys were to have granges as necessary that were manned by lay-brethren, and it was forbidden for choir monks to live in the granges.

The process by which a new abbey was established took several years and is summarized by the following:

The prospective founding benefactor would apply to the General Chapter for permission to found a new abbey. The General Chapter was held each September so, depending on when the application was made, it could be upwards of a year before the matter was addressed.

The next General Chapter following submission of the application would consider the matter and appoint a commission, that included two or three abbots familiar with the prospective locality. The commission would visit the intended site for the new abbey and assess the suitability of the initial grant of land, its legal status and the distance between the proposed site and neighbouring abbeys of the Order; no Cistercian abbeys were to be closer than 10 Burgundian Leagues (40km or 25miles).

The report from the commission was discussed at the next General Chapter and, if the findings were positive, foundation of the new abbey was initiated. Before a new foundation could proceed, and as provided by the *Carta Caritatis*, the Bishop in whose diocese the foundation would be established was to agree, 'to avoid every conflict between Bishop and monk.' The provision in the *Carta Caritatis* removed all Cistercian abbeys from episcopal control and jurisdiction.

Lay brothers, with resources provided by the benefactor, would construct the first essential buildings; an oratory - where the monks could pray, a dormitory and refectory - for the monk's living accommodation, a guest house - so that visitors would not intrude on the claustral life of the abbey, and a gate house to control access to the monastic precinct. These first buildings were 'primitive' in nature until more substantial structures of stone could be constructed, and would likely have been built from readily obtainable materials such as wood, wattle and mud, and thatch. At the same time, the precinct boundary would be marked out and, in the first instance, ditched, whilst a fresh water supply would be channelled from the source provisioned for in the foundation endowment.

Only then would the founding colony arrive at their new abbey. The founding colony consisted of twelve choir monks (representing the twelve Apostles of Christ) and a new abbot (as their Superior, as Christ was to the Apostles), who was appointed by the abbot of the mother-house. The colony was to be in possession of the prescribed books - a missal, the gospels, a gradual, an antiphony, a hymnal, a psalterium, a copy of the rule and a religious calendar, that would enable the same interpretation of the Rule and the same observance of customs as all other abbeys of the Order. This

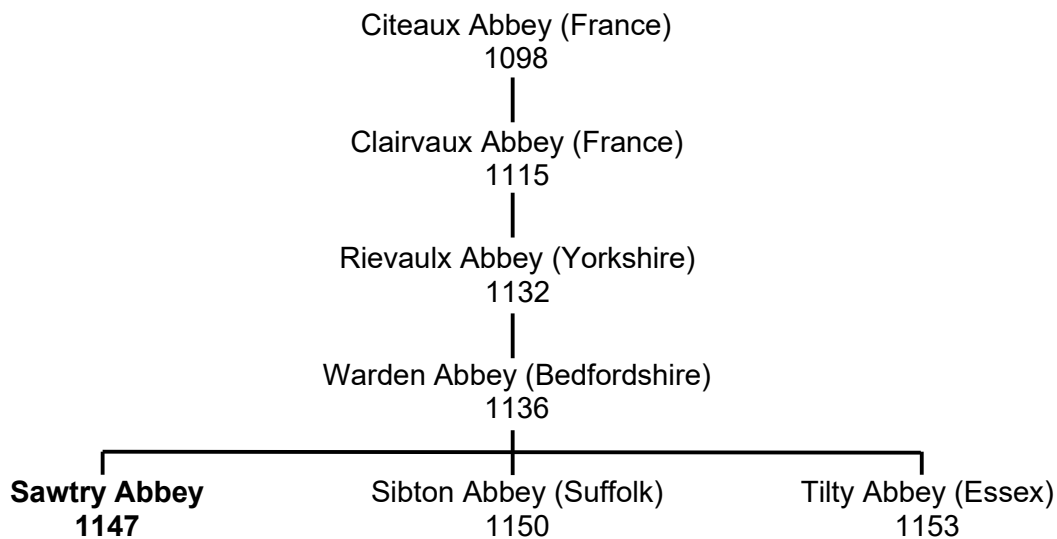
set of books would have been meticulously copied by the monks of the mother-house as part of the founding process and in preparation for the departure of the founding colony.

The founding benefactor would then issue the foundation charter that confirmed the initial grant of land and other endowments.

When the new abbey had the resources and finances to do so, construction of the abbey church would be commissioned. When the east end of the church (the presbytery, with high altar) was complete, the church was considered 'sufficiently ready' for its dedication (to St Mary in Her honour) by the diocesan bishop.

Sawtry Abbey was founded in 1147. This suggests the foundation of Sawtry Abbey was approved by the General Chapter that sat in September 1146 which, in turn, infers the General Chapter that instigated the commission to assess suitability sat in September 1145. The application by Simon II de Senlis, Earl of Northampton and Huntingdon, to found a Cistercian abbey in the manor of Sawtry Judith would, more than likely, have been made sometime between October 1144 and August 1145.

The recurring process of mother-houses despatching colonies of monks to establish daughter-houses created the filial relationships that were instrumental to the governance and efficiency of the Cistercian Order. With regard to the filial relationship of Sawtry Abbey; it was a fifth generation abbey in the Clairvaux filiation, its mother-house was Warden Abbey (Bedfordshire), and it had two siblings - Sibton (Yoxford, Suffolk) and Tilty (Essex).

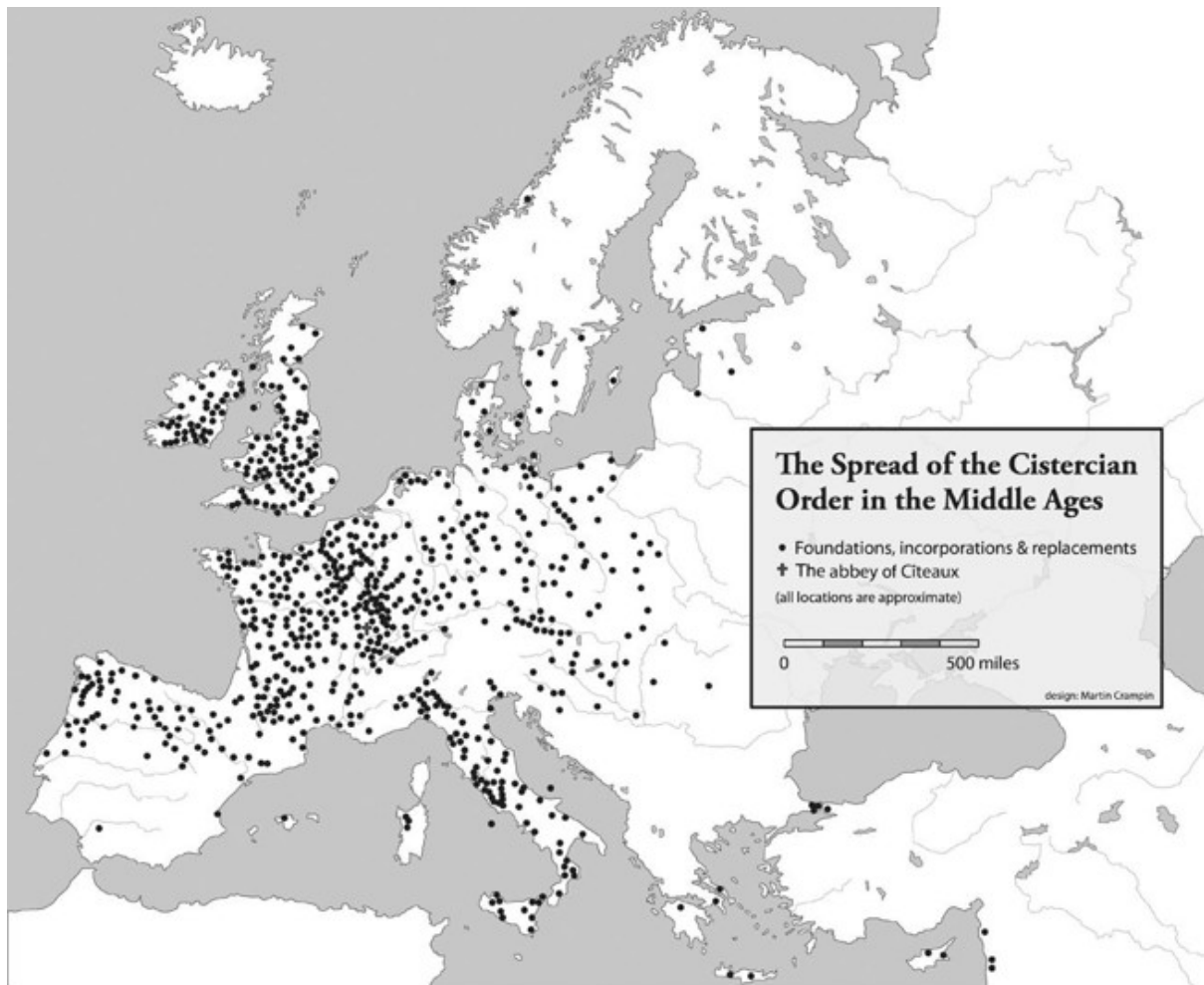


Sawtry Abbey in the Rievaulx Lineage of the Clairvaux Filiation

In addition to filial *de novo* foundations, there were also incorporations where existing abbeys of other orders were affiliated into the Cistercian Order; examples of this are the thirty-two abbeys of the Savigniac Order and seven abbeys of the Obazine Order, both of which affiliated to Citeaux in 1147. Less common was incorporation by adoption where a community of monks of another order made application to the General Chapter; an example of this is Fountains Abbey. In October 1132, a dissatisfied group of monks from the Benedictine Abbey of St Mary in York left (or were expelled from) the Abbey. Under the protection of Archbishop Thurstan of York they were brought to Skelldale Valley and took shelter under an elm tree and nearby rocks. Thurstan granted the lands at that place, in Herleshowe wood on the bank of the River Skell, so that the monks could build for themselves a monastery. The following year the fledgling Fountains Abbey was adopted

into the Cistercian Order by Abbott Bernard as a daughter-house of Clairvaux Abbey. Fountains would become one of the largest and most prestigious of Cistercian abbeys, not just in Yorkshire - or even England, but within the whole of the Order.

Expansion of Cistercian monasticism throughout Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries was prolific, to the extent that the Order had approximately 340 abbeys by the mid-12th century and approximately 680 abbeys by the mid-13th century.



The spread of the Cistercian Order by 1152 (from Burton and Kerr, 2013)

The principle reason for founding an abbey was, in the main, devotional, as a demonstration of the benefactor's piety in which they sought everlasting salvation for themselves and their family - living, dead and yet to be born. Through the endowment of lands and other gifts, the benefactor, and indeed other patrons of the abbey, expected to benefit for themselves and their families the rights to burial, commemoration and intercessory prayers in perpetuity. There were other, more earthly, underlying reasons for founding abbeys. However, the motives behind this reason were more secular: as a display of social status and wealth; as a political gesture to curry favour with factions of the nobility - or even royalty, who themselves had founded Cistercian abbeys; as an act of defiance during times of conflict in order to prevent a foe from gaining possession of the lands; and finally as an act of expiation for violence committed on the battlefield. Simon II de Senlis was a loyal supporter of King Stephen during the Anarchy (1135-1153), during which time he reputedly confiscated church lands and damaged Ramsey Abbey, and fought for King Stephen at the Battle of Lincoln (1141). Having committed offences to the church, and having delivered violence and blood-

letting on the field of battle, Simon II probably had much to atone for when he founded Sawtry Abbey.

Notes:

Carta Caritatis - the Charter of Charity, rule of the Cistercian Order

Antiphonary - the book of chants; the most important being the Introit of the Mass, the Gradual, the Offertory and the Communion

Gradual - the book of Psalms; specifically Psalms 119-133

Missal - the book prayers and sacraments of the Mass

Psalterium - the book of Psalms

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