



A Chaplain in the Abbey

Fountains Abbey is Britain's largest monastic ruin and one of the few National Trust properties with its own chaplaincy team.

“I may never know how I have supported our visitors, however if they felt welcomed and had the opportunity to chat in this awe inspiring place, then I'm sure that was helpful”, says John Ridley who became a National Trust volunteer in 2016 before applying to join the chaplaincy team. Dr John Ridley is a retired primary school headteacher and former lecturer with the Open University. He worships at Richmond Methodist Church, North Yorkshire.

Many visitors are surprised to see a chaplain working among the Abbey ruins and the Georgian water gardens. The role involves engaging with visitors and a lot of chatting about the historic location.

About 15 miles northwest of York, Fountains Abbey was founded in 1132 by thirteen Benedictine monks and is now a world heritage site operated by the National Trust, attracting thousands of visitors each year.

“I am aware that many visitors have an emotional connection with Fountains Abbey, perhaps through family visits past and, for them, returning is rather like a pilgrimage” says John. “Some visitors are curious and ask questions about my role, and often talk about their own church connections. On one occasion, I met a family who, with special permission, were scattering their grandparent's ashes, for them this was clearly a very special place. For others, who were feeling tired and exhausted, simply arranging a lift on the minibus is an act of Christian kindness.”

“Some eye contact, a smile, and a general comment such as ‘How's your visit going?’ usually gets someone talking. I avoid pestering people and it is usually obvious if visitors wish to follow up with a conversation. I am an abbey guide and, in my chaplain's role, often talk about the history of the abbey and the life of the monks. Medieval history can be a reflective topic and prompt discussions about belief; the abbey was, after all, a powerhouse of prayer for 400 years.”

Chaplaincy has long been an important aspect of life at Fountains Abbey, “We are part of a long tradition of hospitality,” says John. “Here the team works very much along the lines of the Cistercians who occupied the abbey until its dissolution in 1539, and traditionally welcomed travellers. St Benedict and his followers made a special effort to look after visitors and always looked for Christ in them. There is a sense that we carry on their legacy.”



history of the abbey.

The Chaplaincy Team plays an important part in regular worship at the site, organising annual services in the abbey and leading the two Christmas ‘Carols by Candlelight’ services held in the cellarium, a large vaulted space in the ruins, each attracting around 300 visitors. On Good Friday, a chaplain leads a service and each summer a mass is held, alternately for St Benedict or St Bernard, both significant figures in the

Justin Scully is General Manager for the National Trust at Fountains Abbey. “I feel chaplaincy is an essential part of what the Trust does. The team connect our visitors, and indeed our staff and volunteers to the long monastic history and spirituality of the World Heritage Site. We always say that Fountains is more than simply a visitor attraction, it is so much more special than that and the chaplaincy team are a vital part of making it a special place.”