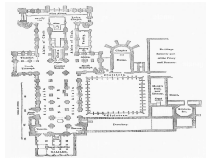
Historic Environment 2025 – Durham Cathedral



Durham Cathedral is an example of a cathedral built in the Norman, or Romanesque, architectural style. Churches in Normandy before 1066 were of a moderate size, but the wealth was available in newly-conquered England to build on a truly grand and impressive scale.

Why did the Normans build cathedrals like Durham?

Architectural Style - Durham was similar to nearly all the new cathedrals built after the Norman Conquest and was designed to impress both externally and internally.	In a Romanesque style, Durham with decorated patterned columns, and capitals with simple carved mouldings. These design features gave an imposing impression and sense of grandeur to visitors. Their simplicity also meant they were easier to produce and this sped up construction.	The nave was a vast space with the altar placed at the eastern end of the cathedral. A massive tower was built above a central crossing place between transepts on either side, which could be used as special chapels. The cathedral also had a stone vaulted ceiling which gave height and light to the building. It created a sense of awe and wonder.	St Peter's Basilica in Rome also had an influence as the original length of Durham Cathedral and its nave is almost the same while the spiral columns at Durham closely match those around the canopy of St Peter's Shrine. In this way William of St Calais was providing a fitting place for the body of St Cuthbert.	The master craftspeople who crossed the channel from France to work on Durham Cathedral also brought their own style from Normandy which Anglo-Saxon crafts people learned from. The arches in the cathedral at Durham are characteristic of Norman architecture, being round and resting on capitals at the top of the load bearing columns.
Religion	Durham was an important religious site before the Norman Conquest, as the Anglo Saxons had built a church there as a shrine to St Cuthbert. His remains were kept at the cathedral.	The layout of Durham Cathedral is designed in the shape of a cross, representing the crucifixion of Jesus, which further illustrates its religious importance. It also faces towards Jerusalem.	William of Saint Calais ordered the building of the new Norman cathedral at Durham. He was a Benedictine monk and leader of an abbey in France. He was determined to reform the monks at Durham and make them more like Norman Monks.	The Romanesque architectural style of the cathedral features large, rounded arches, thick walls, and sturdy pillars, which served not only functional purposes but also symbolic ones, conveying strength and permanence of the Norman religion.
Power and control (political)	The cathedral represented a spiritual power and suggested that to resist Norman authority was to go against the will of God. Durham was well placed to deal with threats of rebellion. It was for this reason that the Prince Bishop was based at Durham and given extensive military and political power over the region as well as religious authority.	The strategic location of Durham Cathedral played a role in defending the region against threats from Scotland and Danish invaders, making it a crucial point of power and control during a time of unrest	William saw the church as a source of power. The Bishops and heads of monasteries were the church's tenants in chief and they controlled large areas of land. They needed to be loyal supporters of William. He used pre-existing Anglo-Saxon Bishops to accept the new Norman conquerors. However, they were gradually replaced by Norman bishops who were trusted.	The appointment of Prince Bishops highlights how Durham was a powerful political entity. They had the authority to raise armies, impose taxes, and mint coins, highlighting their control over both the religious and temporal aspects of the region. Their strong political links to the Norman Kings further exemplified the intertwined nature of the Church and state.
Monasticism (monks)	William Walcher introduced Benedictine Monks to Durham and build monastic buildings. He wanted to change the way monks worshipped at Durham.	William of Saint Calais wanted to end 'unclean living' within the church such as some of the monks having wives and children. He replaced most of these monks with monks from Calais. These monks lived to much stricter standards with regular services and patterns of worship. These reforms were supported by Prior Turgot the leader of the monastic community at Durham.	The layout of the building, including the large nave and the distinctive rib-vaulted ceilings, reflects the monastic ideals of prayer and communal worship. Essential features such as the cloister, which provided a place for meditation and contemplation, and the chapter house, where monks would gather to discuss matters of the monastery, further emphasise the monastic design of the cathedral.	Built between 1093 and 1133, the cathedral was primarily designed to serve as a spiritual centre for the Benedictine monks of Durham. The layout of the building, including the large nave and the distinctive rib-vaulted ceilings, reflects the monastic ideals of prayer and communal worship.

Key People	Role
St Cuthbert	Cuthbert was a Northumbrian monk with a great reputation for Christian holiness who, after his death in 687, had many miracles attributed to him.
Prince Bishop	Prince Bishops had the combined power of a Bishop and an Earl. They owned vast estates, could raise an army, mint coins and levy taxes. It was a position of great wealth and independent power.
William Walcher	The Bishop of Durham from 1071 to 1080.
William of Calais	The Bishop of Durham from 1080 after the death of William Walcher. He died in 1096.
Ranulf Flambard	The Bishop of Durham from 1069.
Prior Turgot	The Prior of the monastery at Durham Cathedral.