

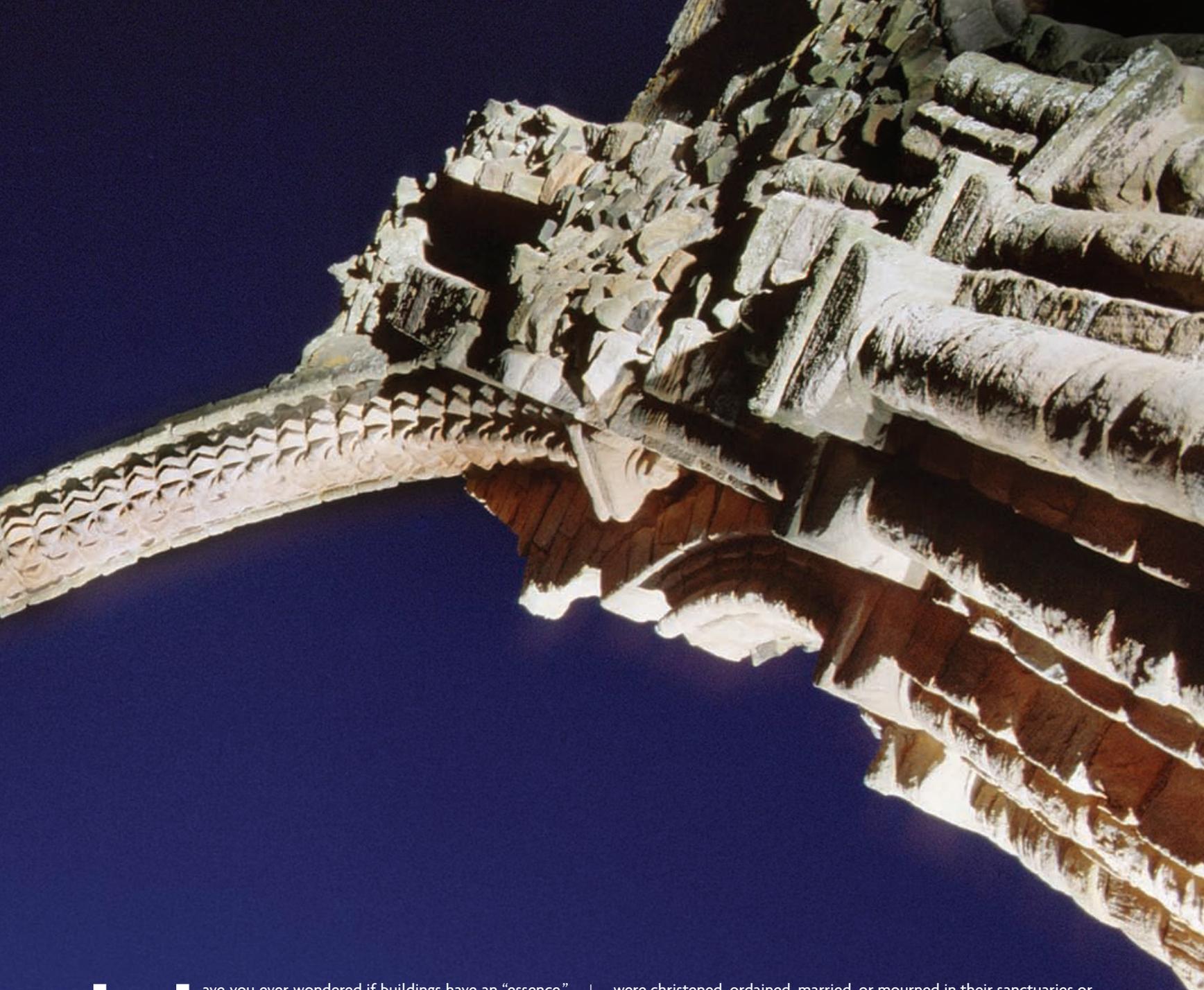
# SACRED LIGHT

The sublime, yet fragile splendor of Great Britain's Ancient Abbeys

photographs by BERTHOLD STEINHILBER



SERVING AS A PLACE OF CHRISTIAN PILGRIMAGE FOR MORE THAN THIRTEEN CENTURIES, THE ISLAND ABBEY OF LINDESFARNE IN NORTHUMBRIA WAS SACKED AND REBUILT NUMEROUS TIMES OVER ITS TURBULENT HISTORY. THE ABBEY'S TWELFTH-CENTURY PRIORY ECHOES THE ARCHITECTURAL STYLE OF DURHAM CATHEDRAL. THE SITE'S ADVANCED STATE OF DECAY, HOWEVER, CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO EXPOSURE TO THE ELEMENTS AND THE INHERENT WEAKNESS OF THE SOFT RED SANDSTONE FROM WHICH IT WAS BUILT.



**H**ave you ever wondered if buildings have an “essence,” a spirit that is given up when they lose their usefulness and are cast aside, abandoned to decay into mere shadows of their former selves? At some point a last door was slammed shut. Did someone bother to lock up? For sacred sites in particular, one wonders whether they were granted last rites or were they left in limbo neither in this world nor the next?

Berthold Steinhilber poses such questions through the camera lens—the shutter cast wide open in an endless exposure sensitive to each and every timeworn stone and blade of grass. Through his images, Britain’s abbeys, most of the Medieval Age, are transformed from sublime and fragile relics to ghostly, yet valiant warriors, scarred over the centuries in a never-ending battle with man and time.

Each frame reveals a last bit of blue in the sky. But is it the last glow of a day just ended or the first promise of a new one? In this suspended time, a fairy-tale moment between yesterday and tomorrow, one observes these ancient shrines in a new light—estranged from the people who

were christened, ordained, married, or mourned in their sanctuaries or interred on their hallowed grounds, yet challenging us to reconsider our relationships to them.

Photographs of abandoned sites are inevitably portraits of missing owners, of people long gone. When so many of Britain’s abbeys were consecrated, their cornerstones laid, they served as town focal points, places of refuge and great levelers before God in a cruel and feudal world. When Henry VIII dissolved Britain’s monasteries in 1536—of which there were once more than a 1,000—his instruction was to remove church roofs to speed the ruination of these once-great buildings. Their walls, now crumbling, are imbued with vows of the chaste who dedicated their lives to serving the Almighty.

Through these images, Steinhilber has revealed the distilled essence of potent landscapes that refuse to surrender their spirit. Some 400 of Britain’s abbeys and priories remain, most standing as partial ruins, many on the verge of collapse. How long they will continue to survive, even in fragmentary form, however, is a question for the preservation community. Patiently, these ancient shrines await a response. ■

A photograph of the interior of Sweetheart Abbey, a late thirteenth-century Cistercian abbey in Scotland. The image shows a long, narrow nave with high, pointed Gothic arches supported by tall, slender columns. The stone walls are heavily weathered and partially ruined, with some sections missing, revealing a clear blue sky. The floor is covered in green grass, with several stone slabs or foundations visible. In the foreground, a large, rectangular stone slab lies on the grass. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights, suggesting a bright day.

THE LATE THIRTEENTH-CENTURY  
CISTERCIAN SWEETHEART ABBEY  
IN SCOTLAND WAS FOUNDED BY  
DEVORGILLA, LADY OF GALLOWAY,  
IN MEMORY OF HER HUSBAND JOHN  
BALLIOL. SHE IS BURIED IN THE  
PRESBYTERY WITH A CASKET  
CONTAINING HER HUSBAND'S  
EMBALMED HEART.

# Athassel Abbey

Set in an idyllic landscape of verdant rolling hills along the banks of the River Suir, the ruins of Athassel Abbey stand as a romantic symbol of Ireland's legendary past. Dedicated to St. Edmund, the abbey was founded in 1192 by William Fitz Aldem de Burgo, a Norman aristocrat, for the Augustinian Order. Athassel grew to become the largest medieval priory in Ireland and a force in local politics. Unfortunately, this led to friction with a local ruling family, the O'Briens, who put Athassel to the torch in the mid-fifteenth century. Among its surviving features are the chancel with its lancet windows, multiple carved elements, the remains of the cloister, and a bridge with its associated gatehouse.

For all of its splendor, and despite the fact that the abbey is recognized by the Irish government as a national monument and protected structure, Athassel continues to deteriorate at an alarming rate as a result of exposure to the elements, seasonal flooding, and cattle grazing around the monument. Being in desperate need of conservation and consolidation, Athassel was inscribed on WMF's 2004 list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*. Collectively, Britain's ancient abbeys present one of the great conservation challenges of the coming century if these great works of piety are to be preserved for future generations.



THE SPLENDID FAÇADE OF CASTLE ACRE PRIORY IN NORFOLK, FOUNDED BY THE CLUNIAN ORDER OF BENEDICTINE MONKS IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY, BEARS A BLEND OF GOTHIC AND ROMANESQUE ELEMENTS.





AFTER ECCLESIASTICAL INFIGHTING AND MANY A FALSE START, BYLAND ABBEY, ABOVE, WAS FOUNDED IN 1177 BY A BAND OF CISTERCIAN MONKS ON A SWAMPY TRACT OF LAND NEAR THE SMALL NORTH YORKSHIRE VILLAGE OF COXWOLD. FOLLOWING HENRY VIII'S DISSOLUTION OF THE MONASTERIES IN 1536, BYLAND WAS STRIPPED OF ITS SALEABLE ASSETS—ITS ONCE-MAGNIFICENT BUILDINGS ABANDONED. IN THE 1920S, THE SITE WAS CLEARED AND CONSOLIDATED BY ENGLISH HERITAGE. MANY OF ITS EXTRAORDINARY ARCHITECTURAL ORNAMENTS ARE HOUSED IN THE BYLAND ABBEY SITE MUSEUM.

THE THIRTEENTH-CENTURY BENEDICTINE CHURCH AT WHITBY ABBEY IN NORTH YORKSHIRE, RIGHT, WHICH OVERLOOKS A PICTURESQUE FISHING VILLAGE, SERVED AS A BACKDROP FOR BRAM STOKER'S NOVEL, DRACULA.

BUILT BETWEEN THE TWELFTH AND FIFTEENTH CENTURIES, THE NORMAN CHURCH AT CROWLAND ABBEY IN LINCOLNSHIRE, FACING PAGE, CONTINUES TO SERVE THE LOCAL PARISH.



