

1. Fishergate Postern Gate & Tower

In 1068 William the Conqueror cleared a large area of the old city to build a mott & bailey castle. He also dammed the River Foss to form a castle moat and a large marshy lake. Earth ramparts were built in Fishergate some 100 years later; and in 1345, masonry walls replaced the timber palisade. A 'New Tower' at Fishergate is mentioned in 1388, and in 1503 the Corporation ordered this masonry tower to be built.

Initially the tower had battlements at the top, with a flat lead roof and a small look-out post, but the 1610 map of York by John Speed shows the tower with a pitched roof, giving an additional room.



The roof-top room with 'battlements' incorporated into the walls

A watchman lived in the tower and controlled entry into the city, collecting taxes from traders and locking the postern gate overnight. Living quarters were quite reasonable for the period, with fireplaces on two floors, mezzanine floors for sleeping and storage, and a garderobe (*lavatory*) discharging into the river.

There is no record of the tower ever being attacked, although there was fighting nearby during the 1644 Siege of York. During the 18th century the need for full-time defence of the city diminished. The last occupants of the tower are recorded as a 'poor family' in 1803, shortly after the cavalry barracks were built in Fulford Road.

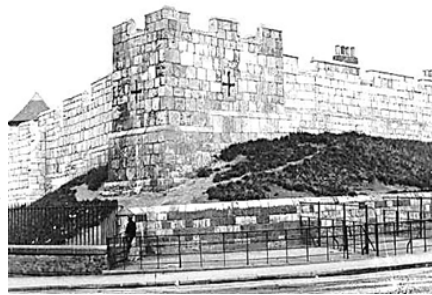
2. City Walls to Fishergate Bar

The lock-keeper's house and some of the buildings along Fishergate were built soon after the Foss was canalised in 1794. The new road and bridge encouraged development, particularly as Fishergate Bar was still blocked to vehicles.

The Masons' Arms has recently lost its stained glass Masonic sign, but still displays other heraldry and imagery. It was rebuilt in 1935, with a fireplace and oak panelling from the gatehouse of Clifford's Tower. Oxtoby's was founded in 1889 and imaginatively advertised its business and skill, but is now a shop and flats.

The corner tower of the walls has a small room with arrow slits under the walkway roof.

Festival Flats were built 1951 as part of post-war housing improvements and won architectural awards.



Corner tower and roadside cattle pens

Fishergate Bar is on the Roman road to Selby, and was built along with the adjoining masonry walls in 1345. Now much reduced in size, it originally had a 2-storey building above the arch and square defensive towers.

The Bar was blocked to vehicles in 1489 after the "Yorkshire Rebellion" against Henry VII's new taxes. The Earl of Northumberland was killed and the revolt, only 4 years after the death of Richard III, shows the unpopularity of Henry VII in York. The king sent the Earl of Surrey to regain control and the rebel leaders were hanged. You can still see the hinges for the gates which were burnt in the rebellion, scorching the adjacent stones pink.

3. Pubs, Cattle Market & All Saints' Church

The Bar was re-opened in 1827, when the cattle market was moved out of the city to the area around the Barbican Centre, with animal pens at the foot of the ramparts along Paragon Street. The influx of farmers, drovers and buyers led to a great many pubs and inns being built in the area, some with extensive stabling and overnight accommodation.

The Cattle Market Inn is now Toto's and the City Arms has been converted into flats, but the Seahorse Inn, which once had stables for 50 horses, still provides food and accommodation. Behind the Woolpack Inn was a butcher's shop, and for many years the wood carver, Dick Reid, had his workshop in the lane. The coat of arms now hanging on the Merchants Adventurers' Hall was made here.

On the corner of Kent Street, an archaeological excavation in 2007/8 found the remains of All Saints' Church, one of the 3 'lost' Fishergate churches. Founded before the Norman Conquest, All Saints' Church was given to Whitby Abbey on condition that monks should live there and pray for the souls of William II and his successors. The dissolution of the monasteries led to the church being closed, and in 1586 the parish was added to St Lawrence.

A great many graves were found when the land was cleared for the cattle market, suggesting a sizeable population lived around here during medieval times. Archaeologists found the remains of over 100 soldiers who died during the 1644 siege of York. They also found the skeleton of a middle-aged woman, buried in 1448 in a semi-foetal position in the apse of the church.



Skeleton of Anchoress

She is thought to have been an Anchoress who lived in the church for 20 years in deep religious seclusion.

4. Fishergate School, Roman Cemetery and St Helen's Church and Hospital

Fishergate School was opened in 1895 and is the first of Walter Brierley's magnificent York schools. All have large windows and high classrooms opening off a large central hall. In 1910 there were 581 seniors, 123 juniors and 280 infants. Today, this very happy primary school has just 230 children.

A number of Roman graves and cremation burials were found when building the school and Tower House (*the large former War Office building nearby*), including this funerary statue of a lady with a 3rd-century hair style. Roman cremations were also found in the grounds of Fishergate House in Blue Bridge Lane, where St Helen's, another 'lost' church, was also identified. A scallop shell in one of the 250 medieval graves suggests the person had been on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella.



© York Museums Trust



In 1364, the church had a small hospital attached to it for the poor and infirm, and possibly for lepers too. It was demolished in 1622 and the "timber and stuff" was re-used in St Antony's Hospital in Peasholme Green.

5. Blue Bridge Lane, New Walk, Anglian Eoforwic & St Andrew's Priory

In 1730, a tree-lined New Walk was laid out along the river Ouse through St George's Field. The walk became so popular that it was extended in 1738, with a new blue-painted timber lift-bridge over the Foss. This was replaced in 1794 by a larger bridge, to accommodate barges on the newly canalised river.

The present hand-operated bridge is very similar to the previous one, installed in the late 19th century. Until 1941, two Russian cannons from Sebastopol 'guarded' the bridge, with an adjacent plaque recording the names of York men killed in the Crimean war.

Before the flood barrier was built in 1986, high water in the Ouse used to flow back up the Foss and inundate large areas of the city. Up to 30 tons of water per second can be pumped around the barrier when it is closed.

The brick walls below the Novotel were originally part of a large glassworks that operated from 1797. Barges and Humber Keels unloaded here bringing sand, coal and fuel oil to the factory until its closure in 1988.

Before the Novotel and houses were built, archaeologists found remains of St Andrew's Church, recorded in the Domesday Book as being owned by Hugh FitzBaldrick. In 1202 it was re-developed as a small Gilbertine Priory and reconstructed and enlarged in the mid-14th century.

(Sadly, the last section of the priory wall was destroyed when the new apartments were built.)

Archaeologists also found thousands of items dating from 7th – 9th centuries on the priory site, including kilns, metal slag, loom weights, jewellery and bone combs.

Some pottery and other items came from northern France, Holland and Germany, and historians now believe that during the Anglian period, between the Romans and the Vikings, this area was probably part of 'Eoforwic', the city's important manufacturing and international trading centre. The first timber church was built here just after the Viking period. Graves included a group of 24 skeletons with weapon injuries, possibly from the Battle of Fulford in 1066.



Anglian period (410-866)
Fishergate Ring found at the Glassworks.

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6. River Foss to Castle Mills Lock

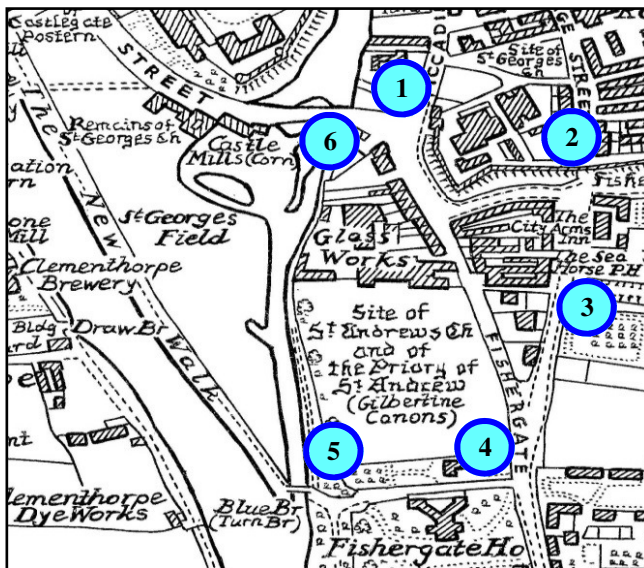
Protected from the swift currents of the river Ouse, Brownie Dyke has long been an important wharf for the city and is still used by boat repairers and fishermen.

The river Foss was canalised in 1794, bringing 50-ton barges into the city and upstream for 12 miles to Sheriff Hutton. Although little used beyond York, barges brought sand, gravel, coal and cocoa to the industrial heart of the city for 200 years. The last regular traffic, delivering rolls of newsprint to the Evening Press, ended in the late 1990s.

Castle Mills and St George's Chapel were built here soon after the Normans dammed the River Foss. The chapel was partially demolished in 1571 and its stones used to rebuild Ouse Bridge. It was rebuilt in timber in 1576, becoming the Windmill Inn.

The former chapel and Castle Mills were demolished in 1856 when the lock and basin were enlarged to allow much bigger barges to reach Leetham's Mill in Walmgate.

Start at Fishergate Tower and follow the walk using the numbers marked on this 1849 map.



For more history of the area, see the website of the Fishergate, Fulford & Heslington Local History Group.

See also Van Wilson's book: 'Beyond the Postern Gate: A history of Fishergate and Fulford Road'.

The Friends of York Walls open Fishergate Tower most summer weekends between 11am and 4pm.

Grateful thanks to the following for information, pictures and assistance:
YAT, YAYAS, York Museums Trust, Van Wilson, On-Site Archaeology, Archaeological Planning Consultancy Ltd.

Thanks and apologies to any others not specifically mentioned.

A History Walk Around Fishergate



Fishergate is often overlooked by visitors heading for the city centre, but archaeological discoveries have revealed a fascinating history.

This has been the main route to Selby since Roman times, and Roman graves have been found nearby.

Food for the city was grown on adjacent fields and the river Foss provided fishing and a safe harbour.

A community lived here long before the Norman conquest, and by the 13th century there were 3 churches, a small priory and a hospital.

The churches and priory were demolished in the 16th century and the community dispersed, leaving open fields, market gardens, orchards and windmills. Modern Fishergate began with the canalisation of the river Foss and new development in the 19th century.

Use the map on the back to trace a brief history of Fishergate through the ages.