

York 800 – A City Making History

Celebrating the 800th Anniversary of York's Charter

Exhibition Panels made by Dick Raines

YORK 800 – A CITY MAKING HISTORY

Exactly 800 years ago King John took the power to raise taxes in York away from his own Sheriff and gave it to a group of local merchants.

He recorded this decision in our first civic charter, signed on 9th July 1212. The merchants took on the task of looking after the city in return.

They formed the first Corporation of York – a wealthy group of local people governing their own city.

Over the next eight centuries the Corporation slowly developed into the elected Council of today.

The charter of 1212 was the first step on the long road to local democracy.

Books of old and new remembrances

Through the Corporation's registers, archives and other books of old and new remembrances, we can tell the story of everyday life in York over the last 800 years. The documents record the experiences of all kinds of people, not just the rich and powerful. Some of the earliest were for food, but the registers didn't get as detailed until the 16th century.

On the streets of medieval York
Although the centre of the city's economy was the Minster and the Great and Little Streets, in which the city clerk wrote his important Council decisions, they gave us something of a glimpse of life on the streets of medieval York. In the 14th and 15th centuries, York's streets were crowded with people, pigs and other animals – and a lot of noise.

For you might be surprised to hear that even then the Council was trying to keep the city 'cleanly kept and well ordered'. They fined a butcher for putting out the rubbish before 7 o'clock in the night. Another decision was a pollution case. Complaints were made about people breaking through windows while playing football!

Everybody needs good neighbours
Medieval York could be a noisy and busy place, but it was also a place where people were friendly. How would you have dealt with the thousands of monks, nuns and friars who lived in the city? In the 14th century, when the population was at its peak, there were about 10,000 people living in the city. There were also many other people who lived in the city, but not in the city walls. They lived in the suburbs, and the city walls were built to protect the city from the enemy.

Books promises
Walking down the streets in 1481, you might have heard the gentle clink of a sword called Margaret Lancel. A new soldier John Lancelotti promised to marry her if she was a fair girl. He gave her a sword and a horse, and she was a fair girl. The sword was a gift, and the horse was a gift. The sword was a gift, and the horse was a gift. The sword was a gift, and the horse was a gift.

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'Well kept against your enemies'


In the years following the 1212 charter York became England's 'second city'. There were Royal weddings in the Minster and Parliament sat here instead of at Westminster during the wars with Scotland between 1296 and 1328.

The importance of York and the threat of invasion from Scotland caused both King and Corporation to improve the city defences. York Castle and city walls were rebuilt with stone mined in Tadcaster to provide protection against attacks during this troubled period.


Helping hands...
The walls were expensive to build and maintain. During the Middle Ages a special tax called a 'murage' raised money from citizens for constant repairs, but the records tell us that by 1480 York's walls were falling down. In 1487, the city seemed that York 'seemed not to kept against years against and rebellion'. The once-bustling textile industry was in decline and the city was in economic crisis. The walls needed the help of the people to stay standing and the Corporation enlisted volunteers across the city.

We have records at this time of orders for 'the ditch and walls of the city to be cleaned by the inhabitants of every ward', and for every person to pull up 'wickets and all other works that are growing about the walls of the city'.


... help themselves
While the expensive battle to keep the walls continued, some people in York found more creative ways of dealing with the problem. Some two hundred years later, we see parishioners for people carrying away stones from the walls for their own buildings. In 1665, it was recommended that the city should take 'down the houses upon the walls that way from [indistinct] in case an enemy should appear'. There is even a case of someone building a door and a window through the walls one way of getting a better view!




York's map of York, 1480. Although this map was drawn after the medieval period, it shows York's walls very much as they would have been during the Middle Ages.




York Castle, photographed in the 19th century, shows a glimpse of York's medieval defences. The tower was built in a last line of defence. Some of the stone walls were later ordered to be as good as new.



Private undertakers who paid for the upkeep of public spaces on or near their premises including York's walls, made and helped maintain them. The stone and all other these private walls. York Minster from the Minster.



York's walls in the 19th century. The walls were built in a last line of defence. Some of the stone walls were later ordered to be as good as new.



This 1860 photograph of York shows how the city walls have been repaired, extended and put in all sorts of new uses. A stone structure which is nearly 14th century. It was built during the Civil War for the 14th House of York and subsequently repaired with stone taken from St Nicholas Church. In 1793 the wooden building up top, which is Elizabethan, was used as a police house.

Palace of the Duke of York, shown by Oliver Nicholls in 1814. York Minster from the Minster.

'Perish and Die'

A 'Plague of Pestilence'

The Black Death first reached York in May 1349 and raged through the city's population throughout the following summer and winter. An average of 1 in every 3 people may have died. The Register of Freemen of the City from this period shows an influx of new men were needed from the surrounding countryside to fill the gaps left behind. Many of the city churches stood silent as their pews had also died.

It didn't end there. York suffered outbreak after outbreak of 'plague and pestilence' right up to the 1640s. The Corporation tried to take precautions: during epidemics residents were ordered to stay in their houses for fear of spreading the disease to others. Entire streets were placed off-limits. During the outbreak of 1350 people were instructed to sweep outside their front doors twice a week and to keep their streets clear of dead animals. Weavers and tailors were forbidden to sell old clothes on Cross Street for fear they might be contaminated.

Some tried to escape to the country. In June 1485 the apprentice of Robert Hewarth, shoemaker, fled 'for his service was his proper friends, for fear of the plague of pestilence that reigned.' Robert asked the Mayor to guarantee that once 'it shall please our Lord God to cease the said plague' his apprentice would be made to come back again.

Desperate measures

Disease also created practical problems. The council was forced to appoint four men specifically to collect and bury the dead. The risk of infection was high, and the job must have been gruesome. If they survived, the council promised to pay the men extra wages as danger money.

As death rates soared during epidemics, fewer people were able to work. Food supplies dwindled. Farmers began to hoard their own grain and refused to share it with the rest of the city. In 1485 the situation became so bad that the King issued a statement that accused the farmers of being uncharitable. Their greediness was causing the whole of York to 'perish and die'.



The plague was often considered a punishment from God. Many religious manuscripts have illustrations showing people suffering from disease. (Manuscript from York, 1485, 1487)

The illustrated letter shows people suffering from the plague being treated by a priest. People who died were often buried in the streets. In medieval York, a priest was just as valuable as a doctor. Their houses were thought to help cure the sick. Unfortunately many of the priests also died as a result. (York City Library)



In this document from the York archives, the name of Robert Hewarth is mentioned as left York in the record. Perhaps Robert never got his money. I thought ordinary handwriting is difficult to read, but this was just the words 'plague and pestilence'.



The Black Death Plague Stone. During the 14th and 15th centuries, plague victims were put on one of the city and buried in a wooden box on the stone. They were usually washed in water in the corner of the stone. The inscription reads: 'This stone is the 14th of the year 1349, when the plague was first seen in York and gave the name of the plague.' (York City Library)



A page from the common Register of York Freemen, which dates from 1372, the register was destroyed, but it did lead to the registration of many more people than the common register. York Freemen Register. (York City Library)

'A City of Bells and Spires'

With life so uncertain and death around every corner, it is hardly surprising that God and the promise of the afterlife were so important to York's medieval citizens. By 1428 there were 39 parish churches in the city, not counting the Minster. The city was literally full of priests, monks and friars. The ringing of the church bells most sometimes have been deafening.

The churches of York weren't just places of worship and prayer. They were also houses of memory. Family chattrins were created with priests employed especially to say Mass for dead loved ones, and stone and brass memorials were fitted to the floors and walls. Even the stained glass windows told a story. In the north aisle of the Minster is the Bell-Founder's Window paid for by York MP and bell-maker Richard Tansoe who died in 1330. All around the edges gold and silver glass bells ring out for eternity in his memory.

Stained glass was also designed to tell the story of the Bible and act as a warning to sinners. In the church of All Saints on North Street one window depicts the end of the world imagined by a medieval poet. In the poem the sea burns, the dead come back to life and stars fall from the sky. You might imagine that this window was designed by the Church to put the fear of God into the people. But like the Bell-Founder's window it was actually paid for by a pair of ordinary medieval families, the Harrysons and the Hewites.

It sometimes seems as though the churches and the city's government moved in two separate worlds but this was not the case. The same residents found in the pews on Sundays sat in the Council Chamber on Ouse Bridge.

Right above: The Bell-Founder's Window, York Minster. The York Chapter House.

Right: The anonymous medieval poet who inspired this window imagined that at the end of the world, the sea will burn, the dead will come back to life, and stars will fall from the sky. (York City Library)



The doors to the Priory of St. Mary's were made of metal. Many of the families who appeared in medieval manuscripts or stained glass windows can be traced back to the archives. These were often merchants in medieval times, heavily involved in running the city. (All Saints Church North Street, York, York City Library)



Speed's Map of 1610 showing positions of York's churches in 17th century.

Right: Extract from York Freemen's Register. As the name implies most Freemen were men, but there were exceptions. A woman called Joan de la Bouchard entered its roll was made free in 1330, the same year that Richard Tansoe died.

Photograph of the spire of All Saints' Church, North Street, c.1898.



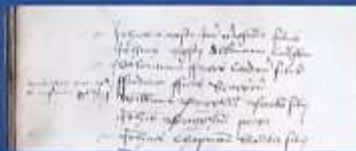
King's Law or God's?

Medieval York was transformed in the 1530s by the Protestant Reformation. Over the next few decades the city was stripped of Catholicism. The monasteries and friaries were closed. The great church of St Mary's Abbey was used as a stable. Thirteen of the city's poorer churches were abandoned and pulled down. The mid-1500s must have been a troubling time for ordinary people in York. Both Catholics and Protestants suffered religious persecution for believing the wrong things at the wrong time.

Valentine Frege was a shoemaker, the son of a Dutch immigrant in York. In 1539 he became a Freeman of the city. In 1540 both he and his wife were burned at the stake on the Knavesmire for heresy because they didn't believe in transubstantiation: the belief that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Jesus during Holy Communion. Valentine was too Protestant for the time. Just one hundred years later his beliefs would be commonplace.

Other citizens were reluctant to give up their Catholic faith. In 1586 Margaret Clitherow, the wife of a butcher, was sentenced to death for hiding Catholic priests in her home. Margaret was born after the Reformation but converted as a young woman. In 1576 she was one of 59 recusants listed and fined by the Corporation for her faith. As a Catholic she chose to do her 'necessary duty to God' by turning her home on the Shambles into a refuge for persecuted priests. Charged with this offense, she refused trial. The judge passed a cruel and terrible sentence: 'You shall [be]... laid down on your back... and your hands and feet shall be tied unto your back... and [with] weight being laid upon you, you [shall] be pressed to death'.

After her death Margaret became a Saint and her house is now a shrine to her memory. Her hand is still preserved as a relic at the Blue Convent in York. Unfortunately she was not the last Catholic to be executed in York. Between 1582 and 1586 fifteen more Catholics were burnt at the stake on the Knavesmire, today the site of York's famous racecourse.



Valentine Frege appears in the Register of Freeman and next to his name the words are written in Latin: 'Confessionem et ad gratiam Romanam per se accessit'. This translates as 'He was turned to the Roman way for heresy'. Being a Freeman was the promise where religion was involved.



List of catechisms from 1576. This list of recusants living in Monkgate Ward tells us about the beliefs of individual York people. The strange marking at the edges is caused by an unfortunate attempt to conserve the manuscript in the late 19th century.



Book of Martyrs. The Book of Martyrs was first published in 1563 and described the gruesome torture and death of protestants during the reign of Queen Mary. These people who refused to give up their beliefs were executed by burning at the stake.



Margaret Clitherow's house on the Shambles



This plaque on Chase Bridge marks the place near where Margaret Clitherow was executed to death. The city council also had their meeting chamber on this bridge.

After the Dissolution of the Monasteries the stones from St Mary's Abbey were used to repair York's Minster and, later, to build the County Jail. This photograph shows the remains of the Abbey ruins in Museum Gardens in 1855.



'Repairing and beautifying the city'

The 1212 charter gave York's medieval merchants the freedom to control the city's economy and for 300 years it boomed. But by the late 1600s York was stuck in a rut.

The city walls weren't the only things falling down. The narrow streets and snickleways that visitors now admire were cramped and dark. Market stalls, horses, carts and carriages made it difficult to travel from A to B. There was very little space for industry and business to grow. One visitor summed up the situation three hundred years ago: 'The City itself is *but poor*', he said.

The Corporation decided a programme of improvements was needed to make the city more attractive to visitors. They wanted to make it a place to see and be seen. The first project they supported was the building of York Racecourse, which the Council said would be 'of advantage and profit to the City.' It certainly was! After the Races were established in 1709, people flocked from across country looking for entertainment. Another York landmark built as a result was the Assembly Rooms on Little Blaken Street. It opened in time for Race Week in 1732. The nobility and the gentry could enjoy music and dancing there after a day in the track for the small sum of '2 guineas each for the whole week.'

Ordinary residents had their own role in improving the city too. In 1716, the Corporation asked inhabitants 'to make good the paths and pavements before the respective fronts of their houses'. These were the days before Neighbourhood Services. Not everyone complied - John Girdler had to be ordered to repair his house on February 1st of the same year. Appearances were everything. York was now in the entertainment business.

One resident who embraced the new social industry of York was Dickie Naylor, born in 1791. He was the city's last official town crier, but had previously been a shoemaker, fishmonger and sedan chair carrier. He officiated tours of the city in English and French. Dickie typifies York's entrepreneurial spirit in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, changing and adapting to the times.



This plan of York was first published in *Observations on the History and Antiquities of the City of York* by Francis Drake in 1758. The street plan is slightly different today but the shape of the 18th century city is still very familiar.



Dickie Naylor embraced change in all areas except the one: he always proudly refused the Corporation's offer to buy him a new hat. He preferred to keep his 18th century cocked hat, as seen here in this photograph of 1871.



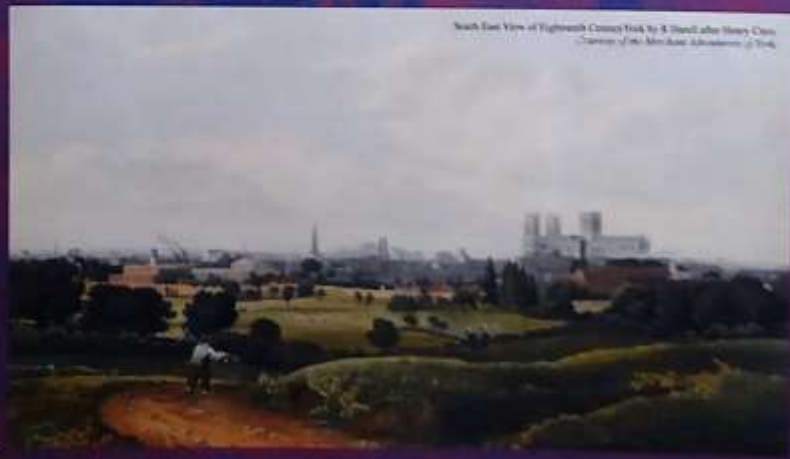
This engraving of Water Lane by Henry Cove shows how cramped and dark York streets could be, with the houses almost growing towards each other to block out the light.



Many local nobles and gentry paid a subscription to support the building of the Assembly Rooms. Weekly meetings had previously been held in King's Manor. The design didn't last longer with all. The Duchess of Marlborough complained that she 'could not go to town the 17th June in a heated state.'



This document gives the names of subscribers to the Assembly Rooms and how much they paid. You can be able to spot some quite eccentric names, such as Baron Mordaunt, Esq. He made the smallest contribution of £20, which is about £2000 in today's money.



South East View of Eighteenth Century York by B. Sturtell after Henry Cove
(reproduction of the original by Henry Cove)

'An act of Vandalism!'

Can you imagine York without its iconic walls? They have played such an important part in shaping the city's identity. They were a defence against Scottish invaders in the 13th century and against Cromwell's army during the Civil War siege of 1644. Nowadays they are a prime tourist attraction.

But in 1800 the Corporation decided the best thing to do was to demolish them. They were in disrepair and getting in the way. The streets needed to be widened to admit more traffic. Unsanitary makeshift houses had grown up on the ground close by them. Parliament refused to allow it but the Corporation went on to demolish three gates and towers between 1808 and 1811.

The walls became a hot topic of conversation. Scandal after scandal appeared in the local papers. City officials were blamed for making money charging rent for access to the walls. Even Joseph Florence was accused of plans to 'get-rich-quick' by selling his land around them for development. There was popular outrage. England's first public footpath association was established in York in 1829 as part of the campaign to protect the walls.

'[The] towns of reform and improvement has gone forth, and unless stopped in its mad career it will ere long be the ruin of everything we have hitherto prized to rescue.'
Yorkshire Gazette, 10th February 1832.

The crisis became a national issue. When questioned by the Attorney General the Mayor and Aldermen quoted the charter of 1212 in their defence claiming they should have free government to do what they wanted in the city. Only in 1836 did the Corporation finally decide to preserve the walls as a public walk and market them as an attraction.



The Council's record of the decision to demolish the walls. York City Museum 22.2.4.48



A letter to the editor of the York Herald in 1832 about the decision to demolish the walls. York City Museum 22.2.4.48

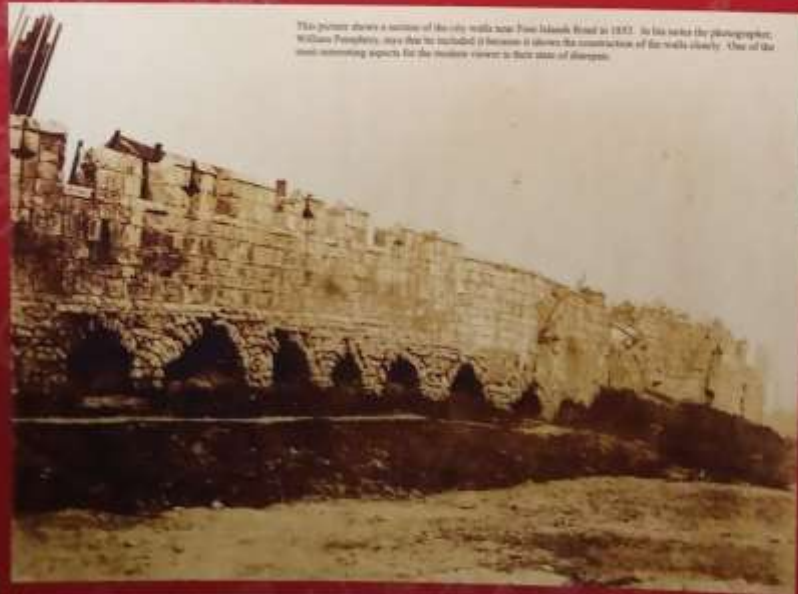
An original sketch drawing of the walls in 1812 by J.W. Wood showing which sections of the wall should be demolished.



The Red Tower is on the city walls near Minster Gate. It is now home to 17-18 as a private museum, but for the moment of rubble covers around the base of the walls.



Minster Gate pictured after it was recovered in 1878.



This picture shows a section of the city walls near from Islands Road in 1882. In his book the photographer, William Parslow, says that he included it because it shows the construction of the walls clearly. One of the main remaining aspects for the student viewer to take note of is the state of the walls.

Life was a daily struggle for many working-class families in York, despite attempts to improve the city. Records from the workhouse show that in the 1880s up to a dozen people were being admitted each day.

By 1901 nearly one-fifth of the population lived in poverty. Appalled by this hardship, Seebohm Rowntree carried out an extensive study of the city's poor. This was published in 1901 as *Poverty, A Study of Town Life* in an attempt to highlight the issue.

In the same year the Medical Officer of York reported that the living conditions of York's poorest were "in no sense healthy. Houses were damp, cold and overcrowded. Some were so small that if you stood with your arms outstretched you could almost have reached from one side of the house to the other. Beneath your feet was a single layer of damp and dirty bricks sitting directly on bare earth. Many homes were infested with beetles or other vermin and up to fifty people could share a single toilet block."

Rusworce stressed how poor diet and stress affected the health of the city's poor. It was not uncommon for families to go without food. One father of four reported 'if you go to my place you will find that we had nothing all day.' Despite the best efforts of residents throughout York, many were frequently unable to provide for their families. One woman lamented 'I am 44, but I know I look much older, and so would anybody who had gone through the anxiety I have had.'

Rowntree's work inspired reforms which aimed to solve some of the worst problems. Once again the Council tried to improve the situation, demolishing the slum housing in the Hungate and Walmgate areas and building new housing like Tang Hall estate.



Lower Lesley (left), 1933. Poorer areas of the city were particularly vulnerable when the river flooded. Wooden platforms were built so that people could reach their homes.

Date		Time		Place		Remarks		Remarks	
Day	Month	Year	Hour	Minute	Location	Time	Remarks	Time	Remarks
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29	29	1918	10	00	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000
30	30	1918	10	00	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000
31	31	1918	10	00	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000

A page from *Wall Street Advertising Register*, 1981, showing the individuals admitted for "indoor relief" in November of that year.



Thompson Street Map, 1907. This map marks in red the houses in Thompson that were 'unsuitable for human habitation'.

Life wasn't always grim in Hong Kong. In 1987 the York Adult Schools – which gave classes for poor adults – celebrated their jubilee. Over 2000 people took part in the celebrations, decorating their streets for parties.



This picture of the houses in Bulstrope's Yard in Hongkong was taken prior to their demolition in 1912. The background is dominated by the massive walls of I. cathartus's Mill.



'York, do them honour, those who paid their toll with their all'

2.36 a.m. on the 29th April 1942 marked the beginning of York's darkest night. In a devastating attack German forces dropped sixty nine highly explosive bombs on the city, causing widespread panic, damage to thousands of homes and the deaths of 94 citizens. The bombing was one of the so-called 'Blitzkrieg Raids' ordered by Joseph Goebbels. These raids targeted historical cities like York, Exeter, Bath and Norwich in response to the bombing of the German city of Lübeck.

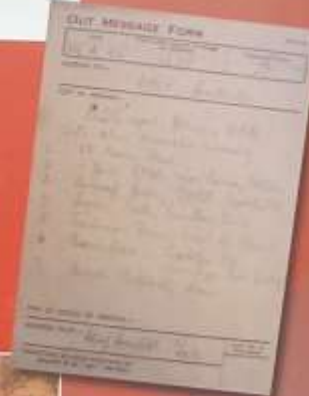
The records of the York Air Raid Precaution Service reveal the minute by minute story of the night. Both male and female wardens across the city rescued the injured, doused incendiary bombs and recorded the names of the dead. The medieval Guildhall, home to the Council for 600 years, was gutted by fire and St. Martin's Church in Coney Street suffered a direct hit.

In the days following the devastating attacks, the local press were full of stories of hope and uplifting tales which attempted to boost the morale of the community. These included the tale of a pair of swans who were left adrift in their nest despite a bomb falling only twenty feet away from them. The stories encouraged citizens to unite by concentrating on the amazing response that had been shown by so many.

'How York rose to the occasion and mastered the situation so admirably after the German bombing attack has won admiration inside and outside the city'.



On the second anniversary of the disastrous Blitzkrieg Raid, Lord Mayor and civil defence officials gathered around the 100m high Explosive Bomb in the street of the Guildhall. The city mourned the bomb lost the ARP, who had been using it to collect money for air raid victims as a sign of defiance. The Lord Mayor said that the Guildhall would be rebuilt as a sign of the liberation of the world.



After the raid was over the ARP were faced with the problem of 'CDBs' or unexploded bombs. This original telephone message (left) lists the places evacuated so that a disposal team could visit. It includes Avenue Marmery Hospital.



The Guildhall on fire on the night of the 29th April 1942 when it was severely damaged. The present Guildhall is a rebuilt version of the 15th century building, and was opened by Queen Elizabeth II in 1966.



Left: Civil Defence poster of the Ministry of Defence. After the war York continued to be haunted by the threat of attack, this time during the Cold War.

Right: Blitzkrieg Raid Map, the map shows where and which type of bombs fell across the city. Its area completely escaped attack although the area around the train station was particularly targeted.

Severe damage to suburban York.



MYSTERY...WHAT'S THE MYSTERY?

The York Cycle of Mystery Plays is a series of short religious plays, which take the audience on a journey from the 'Creation of the World' to the 'Day of Judgement'. The plays were first performed by the medieval craft guilds in the city. The 'Mystery' of the title is not a religious one, but refers to the craft learnt by the apprentices of the guilds.

It was normal for a guild to perform the same play each year; it helped them learn the parts and organise the props. The archives show the Plasterers performed the 'Creation of the World to the Fifth Day'; Fishers and Mariners performed the pageant of 'Noah Launching his Ark after the Flood'; and the Roof-Silers performed the play where Joseph and Mary find only a stable for lodging.

Smaller guilds combined to perform plays. The City Memoranda Books record - 'It was determined that the Carpenters, cordwainers and hymenists of this city be together associated to the bringing forth of the pageantus'.

In 1570 the plays were stopped, after a tradition of over 200 years, as they were thought too Catholic for the new Church of England. They were revived in 1951 as part of York's celebrations for the Festival of Britain. 'The York Cycle of Mystery Plays, resurrected from a pile of dust in the British Museum'. *Yorkshire Post* 20th May 1950.

There was some opposition to performing the Mystery Plays on a Sunday because of the Sunday Entertainment Act 1932. However, the plays were a huge success. '1951 was to boost everyone's morale and make us all feel happy'. Ursula Groom in 2002, remembering 1951.



Guild of Builders Wagon, performing the Creation Play in Green Park in 2010.



First performance of the revived Mystery Plays in Museum Gardens in 1951. National Cinema for Early Media.



Three panels from the first of 21 windows in All Saints Church, North Street, showing scenes of the subjects of the plays: Death (above) and the Flood (below). All Saints Church, North Street. Photo: Roger Rook.



Left: Trinity Priory University by Francis Holland in 1840. Trinity Church was where the Wagon Plays started off each year. York Museum Trust.

Right: The *Griff. Fragmentum*, the List of Pageants (Plays) and pageants mounted by the Corporation. Their records begin in Latin and some are in French.



'SEVERAL PIGEONS STRUCK BY LIGHTNING'

The Mystery Plays are spectacular wherever they are performed, whether on wagons being pulled round the city or at set locations like the Museum Gardens.

The medieval plays were performed on wagons pulled round the city by men, starting from Holy Trinity Church in Micklegate at 4.30 in the morning. The wagons stopped at twelve stations around the city finishing in Pavement late at night. Residents hung tapestries from their windows to act as scenery; the city was the real backdrop for the plays.

In 1951 the revived Mystery Plays were performed in the grounds of St. Mary's Abbey in Museum Gardens, and again every three or four years after that until 1983. Outdoor performances could lead to unforeseen drama.

'In 1988 one performance was cancelled mid-performance due to weather. Lightning was dancing off the seating canopy. A tree at the entrance to Museum Gardens and several pigeons were struck by lightning. ...' John Hall, local actor, 2011

1992 and 1996 saw the Plays performed in the Theatre Royal and in York Minster in 2000. After these indoor performances wagon Plays returned to the streets of York in 2002, 2006 and 2010.

'We used a regular farm wagon. The set was quite tall and we had a serious problem getting it under most' Tony Wright, Guild of Butchers, describing 2002.

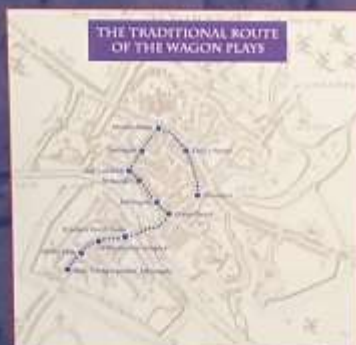
'You couldn't see the Cross but you heard Christ shrieking out' Patrick Olsen, Set Designer 1969.



Josh's Ark Wagon Play, 1994. In early February one wagon play was performed as well as the main play in Museum Gardens. *National Centre for Early Music.*



Green faced devil performing in Pious and Perils, inside St. William's College, 2010. *Photo: Lydia Thomas*



Stagwagons in 1896, one of the traditional stopping places for the Wagon Plays.

John's Skene's sketch for the Resurrection scene in 1954.



Child's Diary per. *Journalism*, showing the performance in the grass in Museum Gardens in 1954. *National Centre for Early Music.*



'HEROD WAS A LEATHER-CLAD PSYCHOPATH'

Costumes and props help the modern audience understand the Mystery Plays. The producer decides on the period in which the plays are to be set, and then a dedicated team of sewing volunteers start making the costumes.

Sketches of some of the costumes for 1951 are in the archives, together with a description of fabrics for the main characters. Some of these were based on medieval drawings.

In 1954 the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) asked to borrow York's costumes. The Play's wardrobe mistress, Olive Detch, agreed, "...it would be a great reminder to a large audience of the York Mystery Plays". Her daughter Judi made her acting debut in the production.

For the 1969 plays sewing started as early as 13 February, initially for one day each week. Additional days were quickly added for the 30 or so volunteers. St. Mary's Lodge in Museum Gardens was used for the wardrobe - this was then used for dressing rooms during the production.

Mark Reilly 2006, who produced the wagon play 'Entry into Jerusalem' said - 'Sixty costumes ... we've got to provide all these because we've got people from six to sixty-six ...'.

Traditionally the costumes have been designed to look medieval. However, there have been some more interesting interpretations. The productions of 1992 and 1996 in the Theatre Royal allowed for more modern dress. In 2000 the colours of the costumes reflected the Minster's stained glass. The plays of 2012 in Museum Gardens will be in 1940s and 1950s costume.

'Herod was portrayed as a leather-clad psychopath and four years earlier as a crude between Ed Amin and Colonel Gaddafi'. John Hall, local actor, 2011.



Below: Costume designer's sketch of Pilate's costume for the 1969 production.

Left: Local man Cyril Livingston playing Pilate in 1968, posed in the rehearsal room (De Grey Rooms) wearing the costume.

National Centre for Early Music.



Tim Hudson as Herod in the 2000 production. National Centre for Early Music.

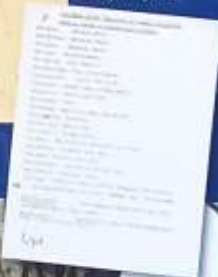


Lady sewing costume while wearing a. Above: A. Below: Pilate's Library.

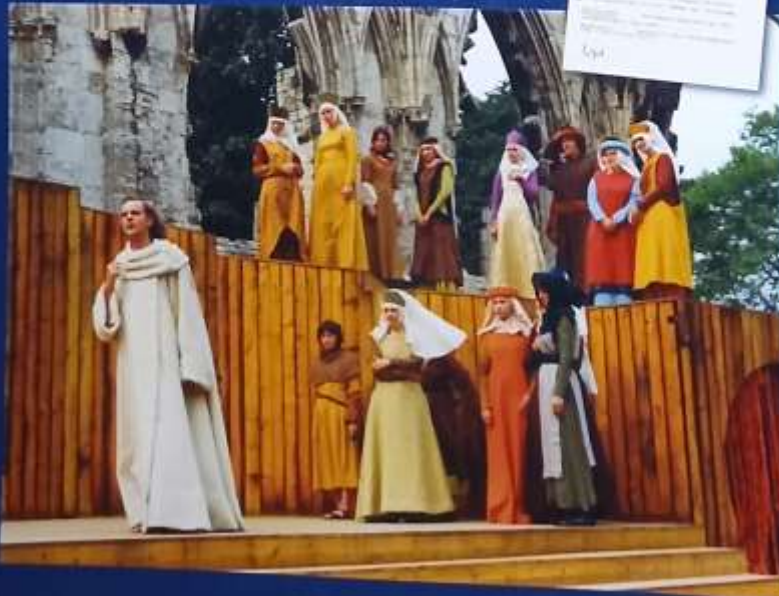


Costume designer's sketch of Minster of the Minster costume, 1969.

Below: A list of the sewing ladies, probably 1950s.



1972 performance in Museum Gardens with orange and yellow medieval costumes. National Centre for Early Music.



'COMEDY TO TRAGEDY, BLASPHEMY TO BEAUTIFUL POETRY'

Lia Luckhead, *Mystery Plays Writer*, 1912

One of the many mysteries of the plays is that no author or authors are known. There is only one complete manuscript of York's cycle of 48 plays, kept since 1809 in the British Museum. It dates from around 1470 and has additions and alterations from different periods.

'The Mystery Plays in York is a perfect fit of history, art and language spanning the years and shrinking the centuries'
Ian McMillan, *Yorkshire Post*, 2010.

The craft guilds had their own copies of their individual play. A battered 16th century copy of *Twisting Thomas*, the play of the Scrivener's Guild, survives in the city archives. York Archive's 'Recreation' of the plays shows the city corporation checked the guilds' performances and any script changes they made.

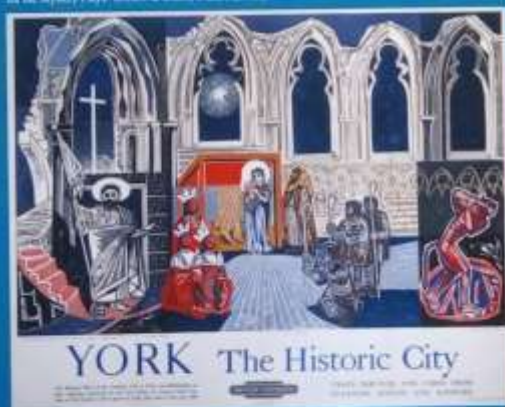
'The modern guilds, until taken by the City Council, have taken it upon themselves to invent a wagon play tradition for the community of the 21st Century'. Professor Margaret Rogerson, specialist in the legacy of the Middle Ages, 2011.

Texts of the medieval plays are in rhyming verse. Since 1951, the writers and producers have selected from the 48 plays, to make the total performance an acceptable length to a modern audience.

Interest in the plays is such that 'there is now a waiting list for York Festival Library's one copy of the plays'. *Yorkshire Gazette*, 30 December 1949.

The play texts have inspired some ambitious staging even in medieval times: '...a church and it goes of Ransom of Symon... a cross with [gold] of him that gold will sit upon whom he call say [and] up to heaven'. Extract from 1431 Merchant Adventurers' record about the 'Last Judgement' pageant.

Below: 1970s Railway poster by Richard Buxton, presenting York as a venue for the Mystery Plays. Source: York City Library



Gold, Jesus and golden-haired angels, the Last Judgement in 1998. Railway Centre for Early Media



Manuscript of medieval song of praise to Mary, from the original script, with words and musical notation.

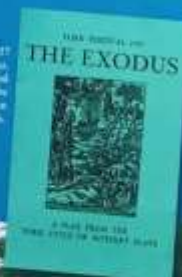


Left: 1918 Programme showing a stylised depiction of medieval York



Below: Adam & Eve 'The Creation Play'

Right: Cover of the 1957 programme of The Exodus, a wagon play performed in the streets before the main event in Museum Gardens.



'ALMOST RICH AND FAMOUS'

The York Mystery Plays are all about you – or the person standing next to you. It is the people of York who make the Mystery Plays, although there have been famous faces in the past.

The 48 medieval plays have over 300 speaking parts, as well as non-speaking parts. Local schools and amateur dramatic groups have provided many actors over the years. In 2012, for the first time, two casts have been used allowing even more local people to be involved.

Casting of the actors has caused controversy at some points, especially the role of God. In 1984 God was played by Keith Jefferson, an Afro-American, in 1998 by Jon Lacey-Culson, a school boy, and in 1996 by a woman, Ruth Ford.

The first time 'Christ appears and walks around in the light, they really seem to hush. The first words were 'Peace be with you' and the whole place shivered'. John Smith, Junior Reporter in York in 1951 (2002 interview).

When the first note of the Minster organ sounded at the start of the performance the stage shook. I got goosebumps every night. It was the greatest theatrical experience'. John Hall, playing God in York Minster, 2000 (2011 interview).

Last night we rehearsed training Christ on the cross 'Ach's a big lad'. Neil Matthews, on the Northern Echo, playing a soldier in 2000, telling Ray Stevenson as Christ.

1988 Programme with 'Pentecost' section, the last time the plays were performed in Minster Church until 2012.
Copyright: Roy Bebbey



A 17th century painting of the Creation scene given to the City Archdeacon, showing an angel. The angel is not recorded.

York Mystery Plays 2008. The Agency in the Garden with the Angel appearing to Isaac.
Photo: John A. Williams

The 13th and 14th century play in 1911. Actors play through by carrying beam-props. The wooden frame was in the West End of the Minster. It stood until 1911.
Photo: J. A. Williams



Christ being raised on the cross outside St Wilfrid's College in the 2008 mystery play. Photo: Linda Turner



CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This exhibition was created by a team of 12 volunteers. Working in three teams they spent 6 months tirelessly researching, writing and revising each panel. It would not have been possible without them:

Panels 1-5: The Medieval Team – Erica Lumley, Steven Newman, James Tynan, Antony Yerasimou.

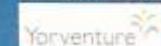
Panels 6-10: The Modern Team – Sarah Binks, Sarah Cox, Ceri Lumley, Rebecca Russell.

Panels 11-15: The Mystery Plays Team – Judith Hoyle, Jill Robinson, Margaret Scott, Lynda Timma.

Thanks also to Laura Chesworth and Emma Kennedy, who supported and co-ordinated the volunteers throughout the project, and to Dr Kate Hargreaves of *York Lives* and Liam Evans-Ford, Community Producer of the York Mystery Plays 2012 for recruiting them.

The exhibition volunteers would like to thank the staff of the *National Centre for Early Music*, *York Museums Trust*, *Explore York Library Learning Centre*, *The National Railway Museum* and *York Civic Trust* for their invaluable assistance during the project.

The display units used for this exhibition have been funded by a generous grant from *Yorventure*.



Images were kindly supplied by:
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& Roger Keech

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York Minister
York Museums Trust

Research Co-ordinator &
Project manager:
Victoria Hoyle

DESIGN & ARTS

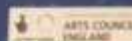
Design:
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Construction:
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John R Walker Ltd
Graphic production:
Leach Colour Group



The 1701 Pageant, Episode VII, Scene I, AD 1641, Charles I, with the Lord Chief Justice
Hale and Lord Herbert in attendance, being met by the Lord Mayor of York.



MYSTERY PLAYS IN 2014



York Festival Trust has been active in helping the local community to engage with this unique Cycle of Mystery Plays for many years. Since 1998 we have staged quadrennial productions of the Plays, with our next productions being 2014 and 2018.

These large scale productions of the plays on waggons performed at various locations throughout the City have met with popular, academic and critical acclaim, and involve hundreds of people from a wide cross-section of the community. The involvement of the community is an essential part of York Festival Trust's method of working and the education elements of the project equally important.

We believe it is possible to help York understand its present through its past and we are committed to giving ordinary people the chance to do something extraordinary.

Over the next 4 years York Festival Trust will contribute to nurturing and developing artistic talent within our city; engage an even greater diversity of participants; and establish a firm financial footing for its future work.



These photos show scenes from the 2010 performance of the Mystery Plays in the ruins of St Mary's Abbey. Photos: Linda Cherry



Above: The Deposition from the 1973 production of the Mystery Plays.



YORK 800 - A CITY MAKING HISTORY CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This display uses 5 panels from the original exhibition for YORK 800 which was mounted in York Explore in 2012.

The research team for Panels 11-15: The Mystery Plays Team - Judith Hoyle, Jill Robinson, Margaret Scott, Lynda Timms.

Thanks also to Laura Chesworth and Emma Kennedy, who supported and co-ordinated the volunteers throughout the project, and to Dr Kate Harper of York Cares and Liam Evans-Ford, Community Producer of the York Mystery Plays 2012 for recruiting them.

The exhibition volunteers would like to thank the staff of the National Centre for Early Music, York Museums Trust, Explore York Library Learning Centre, The National Railway Museum and York City Trust for their invaluable assistance during the project.

Images were kindly supplied by: All Saints Church, North Street, York & Roger Keech, Lewis Ouring, Dick Raines Design Ltd, National Centre for Early Music, Science & Society Picture Library, York City Trust, York Glaziers Trust, York Local History Collection.

Research Co-ordinator & Project manager: Victoria Hoyle

DICK RAINES DESIGN

Design: Dick Raines Design Ltd, Construction: Dick Raines Design Ltd, John R. Walker Ltd, Graphic production: Launch Colour Group



Above: The Castle of Perseverance performed in the Eye of York in 1973. Below left: The Noah Play at Marygate Landing in 1973. Photos: Dick Raines. Below: Refurbishing one of the carts in 2010. Photo: Linda Cherry

