

Visit to York



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Title page: Tour boat passing under the Ouse Bridge, the wall to Monk Bar, St. Mary's Abbey ruin, Shambles butcher's shelves, Bootham Bar, York Minster east front with its exceptionally medieval stained glass window, the Roman column.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Pierre de Villiers was born in Durban, South Africa. He was trained to World Meteorological Organization class one meteorologist and multi-discipline weather forecaster in the South African Weather Service where he reached the rank of Director. He served on a weather ship in the South Atlantic. He served on World Meteorological Organization expert teams and was World Meteorological Organization rapporteur for the Africa region. He was also a commercial pilot and flying instructor. More recently he was a weather forecaster in the United Arab Emirates, then in England. Now retired.

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My first visit to York was in September 1976 when on holiday from South Africa with my wife. Among other places visited, my memory is of visiting the Yorkshire Moors, Scarborough, Whitby (beautiful scenery) and York. We walked around York and saw the Shambles (a narrow street of mostly timber buildings that date back to the 13th Century) and York Minster (the cathedral).

September 2016, we spent two days in York. Travelled by train from our home in Solihull on the 14th. Excellent weather sunny and warm. Took too many photographs. We arrived at York Station just before midday. After a fifteen-minute walk to our hotel to leave our luggage, we started off to see the sights.

We covered a lot of ground. First stop the River Ouse and a guided tour boat trip to get first impressions and useful information of places to visit. We passed under pretty bridges. The guide pointed out a building with bombing scorch marks from World War II. Saw an amusing The Full Moo ice cream narrow boat.



On the tour boat approaching Lendal Bridge and the Full Moo ice cream narrow boat.

Next stop Clifford's Tower. The original wooden motte and bailey castle was built in 1068 following the Norman defeat of York by William the Conqueror in 1068 as a statement of his



Clifford's Tower with clover leaf shape.

power over the region. A motte and bailey castle consists of a wooden or stone keep on a man-made mound of ground called the motte with a walled courtyard, the bailey. It is then usually surrounded with a ditch and palisade. Relatively easy to build with unskilled labour, but still militarily formidable.

It was burnt to the ground in 1190 when, on the night of the 11th March 150 Jews were massacred. Having sought protection in the castle from a mob they chose to die rather than renounce their faith. The timber castle

was rebuilt on a raised mound, but was again destroyed in 1245. The tower was rebuilt, again, this time in stone in the form of overlapping circles, like a four-leaf clover. Unique in England. In 1596, the castle's jailer, began selling the stone as building material for personal gain. It took some time before he could be stopped by the city council (History of York).

Across the street is the York Castle Museum. It was originally a debtors' prison. An impressive building. On the right flank, is a building that was a female prison. On the left flank is the York Crown Court building.



On the right, the York Castle Museum, originally a debtors' prison. On the left what was a female prison. Below left is the York Crown Court building situated on the left flank of the museum building.



We then headed to the Shambles. The last time I was at the Shambles was in September 1975. This time I knew a bit more about the place.

Officially it is Shambles without the word the. It is really Shambles Street. A narrow street where, in places, the timber buildings lean so closely toward the middle from an upper window one can shake hands with a neighbour across the street. The street was originally home to butchers, each shop specialising in a different meat. Although the butchers are now absent, a few of the shops still have the shelves on which meat was displayed.



Shambles with shelves on right.

We then continued west to the York Museum Gardens with lots of information boards. Situated alongside the River Ouse, apart from being a botanical garden, it is also home to historic buildings and ruins with traces of a Roman fort, remains of a medieval religious centre and buildings dating from the Georgian era (roughly 1714 to 1830) that includes the Yorkshire Museum.

Near the park entrance are the stone remains of the entrance passageway to St Leonard's Hospital, "one of the oldest and largest hospitals in medieval England", according to an information board. "Medieval hospitals did not aim to cure disease in the way that hospitals do today. This often meant looking after the spiritual as well as the physical wellbeing. They tended the poor, infirm and elderly and gave them a bed, warm fire and nourishing food." Because it was a religious building it was disbanded in 1540 during the dissolution of the monasteries. In the more recent past, the building was "used as farm buildings, a boatyard, stables and even an air raid shelter."



Remains of St Leonard's hospital on the left, remains of the Multangular Tower on the right.

Further on, still standing after about two thousand years, one comes across the remains of a Roman fort, the tall Roman Multangular Tower, except the larger stones at the top are later medieval additions. The tower was built about 300 A.D. on the site of an older tower. The tower was the north-west corner of the Roman Legionary Fortress of Eboracum.

One then passes the Georgian museum building before arriving at the remains of St Mary's Abbey. The thickness of the walls of these buildings never ceased to amaze me. This Abbey was no exception. About 2 metres thick for major supporting walls. No wonder some still stand



The Georgian building housing the museum with the abbey ruin on the left.

intact and many never completely demolished. Building of the Abbey began in 1089 by Benedictine monks after a visit from King William Rufus, son of William the Conqueror. The original church was founded in 1055. It met its end during King Henry VIII's Reformation and dissolution of the monasteries between 1536 and 1540.

Close to the river, in the south-west of the garden, is the Hospitium. It is thought that it was originally a guest house for abbey visitors of low social rank, or maybe a barn. An attractively restored building. Somewhat unusual to me, it consists of a stone lower story, dating from the 14th century with a timber framed upper story. Nearby were stone sarcophagi from excavations of Roman burials in the garden.



The Hospitium and stone coffins.

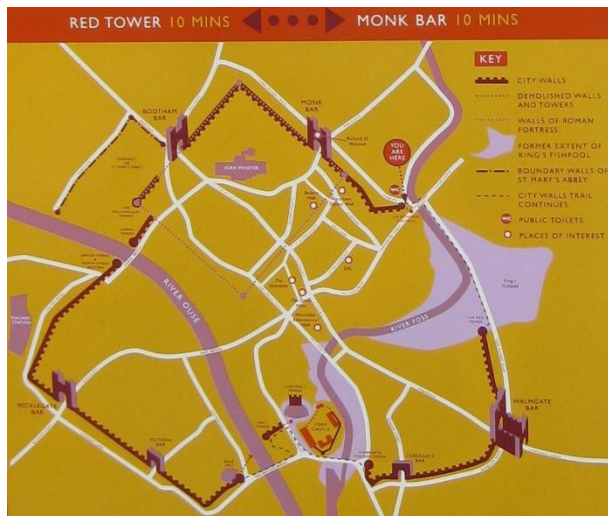
Between the Hospitium and the river there is a flood embankment. About 2.5 metres high and 130 metres long, it was constructed following the floods of 1982. It protected the building during subsequent flooding of the river until November 2000. Subsequent flooding in June 2007, autumn 2012 and December 2015 were below the height of the flood defences, with the exception of November 2000. Construction was due to begin in August 2021 to raise the embankment by 30 to 60 centimetres. Presumably now, in 2026, completed



Mickle Bar and on Skelder Bridge looking north-west to the Ouse Bridge.

After a brief rest at the hotel, at about 5 o'clock we walked to Micklegate Bar. No, not a boozer. It was the most important of the four gateways in the old wall around York. Traditionally, reigning monarchs had to stop here and ask for the Lord Mayor's permission to enter the city. The lower section dates from the 12th century, the top two storeys from the 14th. From here we walked along the wall to Skelder Bridge, near to Clifford's Tower. A plaque states "This bridge

was formally declared free from tolls on April 1st 1914.” Then alongside the river back to our hotel before setting out back along the Micklegate Road to the Priory pub close to the Micklegate Bar for a meal and drinks. We took note of the pub on our earlier walk. A good pub. We ate there again the following evening.



A photograph of the map at Layerthorpe Bridge showing the wall remains and gates. The distance around the walls is 3.1 kilometres.

Day two, was a misty start crossing the Ouse heading northward via Shambles, to take better photographs of shops with butcher's ledges, then on to Layerthorpe Bridge and the Layerthorpe Postern. More useful notice boards. The postern, built in the 13th century, was a large fortified gateway where traders had to pay a toll before entering the city. It had a heavy wooden portcullis with iron spikes that could be lowered to block the road through the archway. Sadly, we were a bit too late to see it. It was demolished in 1829 when Layerthorpe Bridge was built. Nevertheless, it was from here that we started our walk north-westward along the section of the city wall to Monk Bar and Bootham Bar. Small crenulated towers are built into the wall at irregular intervals, named New Tower, Harlot Hill Tower and Robin Hood Tower.



Monk Bar with the later road entrance in the wall.

The four-story Monk Bar (with notice boards) was originally known as Monkgate Bar. Built in the early 14th century, the top floor in the 15th century, was designed for defence. It is the strongest of York's medieval gateways. It includes a working portcullis with original winding gear, which was raised and lowered until 1970. Tiny circular rooms in the two turrets served as prison cells, in particular for rebellious Catholics and mutinous apprentices in the 16th century. It has also served as a house and a police house. It now houses a Richard III Museum.

Figures on top of the tower crenellations represent men hurling boulders. The six figures date from the 17th century. On the outward facing front of the bar are three coats-of-arms. The two lower left and right shields are the City of York coat-of arms. The higher central shield bears the royal arms of England and France. The arms, introduced by Edward III, include the English lions passant and the French fleurs-de-lis, indicating his claim to the French throne.

Continuing along the wall to Bootham Bar it is a short walk to York Minster. Probably the most impressive cathedral I have seen. Took lots of photographs inside and out, of which I kept 26.



Cathedral in the mist.

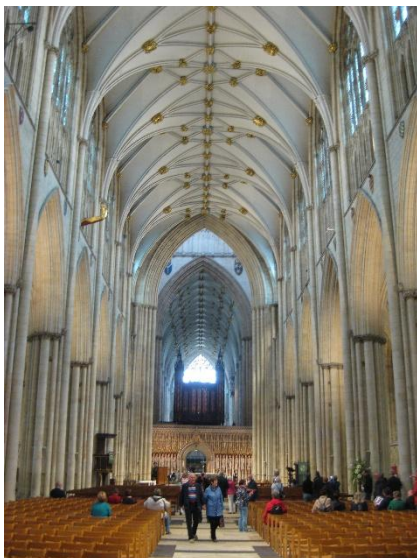
It is Impossible to get a photograph of the entire minster due to the close proximity of other buildings. The best view of the entire cathedral, in mist and low cloud, was from the wall before reaching Bootham Bar.

The £18 entrance fee is for two valid for 12 months. Built over 250 years, building of the medieval Gothic cathedral was completed in 1472. It has 128 stained glass windows, more than half of England's surviving medieval stained glass. Apart from the big collection of the usual and ostentatious tombs in a place this size, the Kings Screen is particularly

impressive. Why it is called a screen, I do not know. It is not really a screen. Rather a line of fifteen carved stone statues, separated halfway by an arch. It consists of the Kings of England who were on the throne from William the Conqueror to Henry VI. We were particularly impressed by the scale relief map of the area outside the entrance to the cathedral. It is for blind people to feel the buildings, etc., with braille inscriptions. Incredibly thoughtful.



The screen and braille relief map.



The immense size of the cathedral and the war memorial.

In the 1960s and 1970s the remains of Roman barracks in the then city of Eboracum were uncovered beneath the cathedral. The remains can be seen in the cathedral's undercroft section. Standing outside is a Roman column. In 1969 the collapsed column was found during excavation beneath the transept of the minster. In a forecourt area, is a war memorial to the South Africa (Boer) War. I

immediately recognised the uniforms worn at the time. Not that I was there at the time. Not that old.

Around midday, I made the short walk to the National Railway Museum. Not surprisingly, Roz was not interested and stayed in the hotel room reading. I found it very interesting. Locomotives range from a full-size replica 1829 Rocket (built in 1934 using, where possible, the methods and materials used in 1829) to the A4 Pacific class London North England Railway Mallard No. 4468 (built in 1938) holder of the world speed record for steam locomotives at 203 km/h), to a Japan Shinkansen Bullet (entered service in 1976, withdrawn in 2000) to a Eurostar 3308, BR class 76 26020. Not always able to get into a suitable position to take photographs. The place is rather packed. Not complaining. It was fascinating. More can be read about the museum in the article “Memories of locomotives and trains, old and recent.”



Raindale Mill.

After lunch, we walked alongside the Ouse past Clifford's Tower and across the River Foss passing the Raindale Mill. In the 1960s, the early 19th century flour mill was removed from Raindale Valley on the North York Moors and reconstructed alongside the River Foss in the grounds of York Castle Museum as an example of a Victorian mill. In 2012 it was restored to working order. The waterwheel is powered by a mill race from a mill pond using water from the river below.

Leaving the mill behind we arrived at our destination, the alleged grave of the highwayman Dick Turpin at the corner of Lead Mill Lane and George Street.



Dick Turpin's (John Palmer) grave

Looking at the width of the grave's stone border he was as wide as he was tall. It is the only visible grave in a smallish plot of land, all that remains of the graveyard that belonged to St George's church diagonally across George Street.

The gravestone reads John Palmer otherwise Richard Turpin the notorious highwayman and horse stealer executed at Tyburn April 7th 1739 and buried in St George's Churchyard. It says Tyburn, but it was really Knavesmire, York, the equivalent of London's Tyburn.

A very informative notice board (another one, excellent) states that apart from being a highway robber he apparently accidentally killed a gang member and deliberately killed a man who attempted to apprehend him earlier in his career. He was, however, found guilty on two charges of horse theft and sentenced to death on the 22nd March 1739. Probably easier at the time to get a conviction for horse theft (and more serious) than murder. At the time of his arrest for horse theft he lived under the name of John Palmer. While imprisoned in York Castle, he revealed his true identity when a letter he wrote to his brother-in-law was intercepted and his handwriting

was seen by James Smith who taught Turpin to write. He travelled to York Castle and identified Turpin on the 23rd February 1739 for which he received a £200 reward offered by the Duke of Newcastle.

We then went back to the hotel via Piccadilly Road past the Merchant Adventurers' Hall; a medieval timber framed guild hall built in 1357. It consists of three main rooms; the great guild hall, the undercroft serving as an almshouse and the chapel for spiritual care of those in the two other rooms. Finally, another pub dinner at the Gare II listed The Priory.



The Merchant Adventurers' Hall and Grade II listed The Priory.

The next day we travelled home.



At York railway station waiting for our CrossCountry train home.

Reference

History of York. Clifford's Tower. <https://www.historyofyork.org.uk/themes/york-castle/clifford-s-tower> . Accessed 2026-08-30.