

ARCHEOLOGICAL YORK



TANTALISING REMNANTS OF A GREAT ROMAN CITY AND SOME OF THE BEST VIKING REMAINS IN EUROPE

"The extraordinary thing about York...is that it's like an enormous trifle – wherever you dig, you discover amazing layers of history. You can find the jelly of the Vikings, the sponge of the Middle Ages and the marashino cherry of the Romans!" Actor and television presenter, Tony Robinson, Time Team Live 1999, Channel 4 Television

An archaeologist's delight

The city is an archaeologist's delight. York contains one of Britain's very few 'wet sites', where organic materials such as wood and leather survive. Thanks to the combination of excellent preservative conditions and an extraordinarily rich and eventful history stretching back to the 1st Century AD, archaeologists the world over recognise York as a treasure trove which has yielded many secrets, but which still holds many more.

JORVIK

1,025 years ago the City of Jorvik (York as we know it today), bore witness to an unprecedented technological innovation. This was the 'big bang' of the Viking age. First great tracts of oak forests were felled, the timber was brought to York and from this a series of quite unique and - for their time - highly sophisticated, high-rise buildings were created. These began to replace the crude wattle and daub huts of previous generations.



How do we know this? In 1976, a team of archaeologists uncovered the substantial remains of those buildings, filled with earth, along with all the everyday rubbish of the townspeople, items such as broken combs (with head lice still between the teeth), socks, shoes, bees, flies and other insects. When this amazing dig was finished, the excavation was made into a cellar and over it a modern shopping centre was constructed (Coppergate). In the cellar was placed a life-sized recreation of part of the site, which became the Jorvik Viking Centre.

JORVIK, as it is now known, is a renowned archaeological site in the city, and since the beginning of the dig in 1976, it has captured and sustained the public imagination. Over 15,000 objects were recovered in the process of uncovering a Viking city complete with workshops, rubbish pits, latrines and wells. The most spectacular find was an exquisitely preserved Anglo Saxon helmet. JORVIK provides a spectacular vision of exactly what it was like to be in this part of York in AD975 during this exciting year of change.

Layers of history

There is a whole mass of York's heritage, buried – completely out of sight, sometimes as much as 5-6 metres deep, and representing nearly 2,000 years of human habitation; that's buildings, defences, churches, cemeteries, streets and rubbish.

Take the Roman period. From AD71 there was a massive fortress housing 5,600 Roman soldiers. The Minster sits in the middle of the Roman fortress, but almost all traces of that huge defended area have now become buried beneath the muck of subsequent generations. Petergate, Stonegate and Chapter House Street (behind the Minster) were the main streets through the fortress, and indeed York's most famous ghosts are reputed to have been seen marching the line of Chapter House Street (the Via Decumana), up to their knees on the cellar floor.

Beneath the whole area of the fortress there are still rows of barracks, remains of exercise halls, warehouses, baths – the **Roman Bath Public House** has remains on view in its cellar, and although there is an intact Roman sewer running beneath the former Tandy shop in Church Street, it is completely inaccessible now as it has become 'live' again as a sewer.



You can also visit officers' houses (parts can be seen in the **Undercroft** of the Minster), the Legion's headquarters building, also on view beneath York Minster, with a reconstructed column in Deangate giving an excellent idea of scale - even if it has been reconstructed upside down!

As well as the below ground stuff there are also small bits from that era that still poke up into our lives, and you can see them today. The corner of the fortress defensive wall for example in Museum Gardens is still standing to an impressive height, and still as difficult to scale now as it was in the 4th century, or in the mid-ninth century, when the Vikings found that to take the City they were obliged to climb over it.

Apart from one late Viking-age church tower of St Mary Bishophill Junior, and some sculptures (also in churches, for example the north aisle of All Saints Pavement) one is forced to look to the work of archaeologists to discover York's Vikings.

It is testimony to the amount of muck that our forefathers left strewn about that to reach **Viking** levels at the **JORVIK Viking Centre**, one has to descend a flight of stairs down several metres from 20th century Coppergate to its Viking equivalent. A succession of wet deposits towards the river Foss built up fast during the 9th and 10th century, and became remarkably well preserved. This means that not only is York's buried heritage deep, but it contains amazing evidence of how people lived in the past

since these layers contain all manner of organic material, including wood, leather, textiles, leaves, bugs and beetles.

Amongst a wealth of wonderful things that archaeological excavations can show us, is how very much of an influence the past has had on the modern City of York we live in and use today. Striking evidence was found in the Viking excavations that revealed the amazing pedigree of the properties lining several of our modern streets. It seems quite clear that **Viking age** property lines established in c 910 were respected generation after generation and never lost, for they were traced all the way through the 11th, 12th, 13th centuries, and beyond through to the 20th century. So next time you go into a shop in High Ousegate, remember the size of the ground floor was determined by a Viking town planner who was probably a relation of Erik Bloodaxe!

Moving on to those heady years around 1066, traces from the **Norman** period have all but disappeared, but if you know where to look you can again see quite a few fragments that poke above the ground. Apart from the Minster's amazing Norman crypt, there are several minor churches beyond the River Foss that have lovely Norman doorways, St Deny's, St Margaret's, and the old St Lawrence's. If Norman castles are your thing then the green hill under Clifford's Tower belongs to that period, as does its sister castle across the Ouse, on this occasion though without a stone tower up atop, and now called Old Baille – the Old Bailey. One of the less well-known gems of the Norman period, and a rarity for this country are the remains of a **Norman stone house** accessible down a narrow public passage that runs by number 55 Stonegate. Here two whole walls with intact arched windows survive, found when a later medieval structure was being replaced a few years ago.



If it's the **Medieval period** you are into, where do we start, defences by the mile, churches by the dozen (don't miss Holy Trinity, Goodramgate) and many, many houses. However if its 15th century everyday life you want to find out about, rather than 20th century tearooms or gift shops in 15th century buildings, then there can be no better experience than **Barley Hall** in Coffee Yard, off Stonegate, where an entire medieval household is being recreated in the heart of York, and all aspects, from knives and spoons to beds and rich hangings, are being brought back and peopled as they would have been in the reign of King Richard III (for details call 01904 653000).

Barley Hall

Barley Hall is a stunning medieval house, once home to the Priors of Nostell and the Mayor of York. Until the 1980s the house was hidden under the relatively modern facade of a derelict office block. Only when the building was going to be destroyed was the amazing medieval building discovered and its history uncovered.

The oldest parts of Barley Hall date from about 1360, when the Hall was built as the York townhouse of Nostell Priory, the monastery near Wakefield in West Yorkshire. A new wing was added in about 1430. Soon after, the Hall became the home of a leading York citizen, William Snawsell, goldsmith, Alderman and Lord Mayor of York.



The house was bought by York Archaeological Trust in January 1987. Later that year, a full archaeological investigation of the interior was carried out through one metre of deposits to the 14th century levels, revealing the remains of the floor of the Great Hall. Further investigations in 1990 to 1991 looked at the courtyard and found the remains of the exterior stairway to the Great Chamber on the first floor. Work to restore the Hall to its former glory began in 1990 and it re-opened to the public in 1993.

The building has now been lovingly restored to its original splendour with stunning high ceilings, beautiful exposed timber frames, and possibly the only horn window in England. It has been decorated to replicate what it would have looked like as the Snawsell home around 1483 and boasts a magnificent Great Hall. Visitors to Barley

Hall can make themselves at home and sit on the chairs and handle the objects and experience what it would have been like to live in Medieval England.

About the York Archaeological Trust

York Archaeological Trust is one of the largest archaeological units in Britain. It was founded as an educational charity in 1972, and has carried out over 1000 archaeological investigations in York. It also works routinely in the towns and countryside of Yorkshire, and offers specialist services on a national and international basis. You can find detailed academic reports on its work in York and its on-going 2-volume series, *The Archaeology of York*. There is also a wide range of scholarly reports in specialised journals, a host of popular publications and reports on the internet. For an introduction to York's archaeology, see RA Hall, *The Archaeology of York* (Batsford/English Heritage, 1996). For Roman York see PJ Ottaway's *Roman York* (Batsford/English).

DIG

In 2005 York Archaeological Trust were awarded a £750,000 funding grant from the Millennium Commission to develop a new tourist attraction in the centre of York. The Archaeological Resource Centre at St Saviours Church in York closed in July 2005 and reopened as DIG in March 2006. DIG provides a unique and exciting archaeological experience. St Saviours has been transformed into a simulated archaeological investigation including an excavation, site hut, and science laboratory and research library. Visitors can excavate parts of a Roman fortress, Viking City, Medieval burial site and Victorian workers' cottages.



Gladiators in York?

The discovery of a rare and unusual Roman cemetery on the outskirts of York has created one of the greatest mystery's to surround the city colourful past. Over a timescale of 10 years archaeologist exhumed over 80 skeletons from gardens on the edge of York. The results of forensic work on the skeletons suggested they may have been part of the world's only well-preserved Roman gladiator cemetery. The skeletons date from the late first century AD to the 4th century AD, and marks on the remains suggest some individuals died in a violent manner. The injuries on the bodies included some healed and unhealed weapon injuries, possible hammer blows to the head and a high incidence of substantial arm asymmetry – a feature mentioned in ancient Roman literature in connection with gladiators.

The research from this rare discovery was featured in a Channel 4 documentary, Gladiators: Back from the Dead in 2010.

For more information and to book your stay in York:

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Press contact: Kay Hyde, Head of PR & Communications.

Tel: 01904 554451 Email: Kay.Hyde@makeityork.com