

GRAVEYARD, COFFIN AND PLAGUE TOUR

2000 years of corpse disposal; where have we put them all? Visit York's historic graveyard, plague and execution sites.

St Leonard's Hospital Arch

The story begins here, under the arch of the medieval hospital, with the Romans. The Romans were always buried in cemeteries along the main roads, outside cities for hygiene reasons. The Roman graveyards for York were along the Tadcaster Road, Bootham, Fulford Rd, etc.

The heavy stone coffins here came from cemeteries discovered in the 19th century, in the station/Tadcaster Rd areas. These were the coffins of those rich enough to afford them; the aim was to preserve the body for the afterlife. The coffins came, probably by river, from sandstone outcrops in the Wetherby/Pennine areas. They are so large to accommodate the embalming and grave goods, such as food, wine, jewellery and games; obviously you wanted to look your best in the afterlife and you would need the food, drink and games to wile away the waiting. One or two have the remnants of inscriptions on; one has the letters 'D M' - 'Dis Manibus' - 'to the Spirits of the Dead'

King's Manor



The second courtyard (ask Porter's permission to view) contains two fine medieval stone coffins from St Mary's Abbey graveyard nearby. The coffins are wedge shaped, made to measure to the body because Christianity stresses that as you bring nothing into this world, you should take nothing out - so no grave goods. You were buried in a shroud - in the 17th century this had to be of English wool to encourage the English wool trade! As with the Romans, the aim of the stone coffin was to preserve the body for a bodily Resurrection when the Archangel blew the Last Trumpet on the Day of Judgment.

Inside the Multangular Tower

More Roman coffins are on display here, all from outside the City. Note they are all different sizes - presumably made to measure - including two child coffins. The holes in the ends are to help lifting with giant callipers.

Bootham Bar

The place where heads were impaled on spikes after hanging, drawing and quartering, which was the punishment for traitors and rebels. The practice was first used on William Wallace in the late 13th century. It was the punishment for treason, which was regarded as the worst and most unnatural of crimes (in Dante's Divine Comedy, traitors are in the very lowest level of Hell). Treason, therefore justified the worst punishment. You were dragged through the streets, hung until not quite dead, and cut down alive. Your private parts were then cut off, cooked and you were forced to eat them. You were then drawn, which involved pulling your guts out while still alive; a particular skill was to rip the heart out, while you were still alive so you could see it beating. Then you were quartered, and the bits boiled in salted water and covered in pitch to preserve them. This was carried out at York Castle or on the Knavesmire and the four quarters set out on the four Bars of York, and the head on Micklegate Bar, but sometimes on the other Bars, or Foss or Ouse Bridge if Micklegate Bar was full! The heads would remain in place for years, no doubt gradually disintegrating on passers-by! The last heads (William Connolly and James Mayne – an Irish Protestant and Scots Catholic) were put up on Micklegate Bar after the Jacobite rebellion in 1746, and stolen by a Jacobite tailor in 1754.



You may like the story of Harry 'Hotspur', killed at the Battle of Shrewsbury 1403 in rebellion against Henry IV. He was buried at Whitchurch, but people said "Hotspur lived" so he was dug up and his corpse displayed in Shrewsbury Market, then ground like salt between two millstones, then hung, drawn and quartered. His quarters were sent to London, Chester, Newcastle and Bristol and his head to York.

St Michael-le-Belfrey Church

The triangular area in front of the church and other spaces around it including Deangate are its former graveyard. Burials are often very close to the surface – when the Public Address desk at the back of the church was being extended about 10 years ago, a skeletal hand fell out of the floor! It was quickly reburied.

Monk Bar

The worst plague in York's history was in 1604, when 3,512 people died - out of a probable population of 10,000. The arrival of the plague was blamed on the Scots, who came to England in 1603 with the new King James I of England (VI of Scotland). The plague hit York again in 1631 and this was the last major outbreak – the city escaped the great plague of 1665. Why plague died out is a mystery – one theory is that the black rats that carried it were ousted by brown rats that did not. Plague always abated in the winter when the infected rats and fleas tended to die off.

The Mayor and Council did all they could to deal with the plague, though some councillors fled the city and were fined for not doing their duty. The city's cats and dogs were killed – which actually made the plague worse as this allowed the plague-bearing rats to breed even faster! The poor who contracted the plague were housed in temporary encampments outside the city – as it was summer, this would not have been too great a hardship. These camps were on Hob Moor, near St Lawrence's church on the Hull Rd and at the Horsefair on Gillygate, where the coach park is now. The victims were supplied with food and drink and stones, with hollows filled with vinegar, to act as disinfectant. One of these – the Burton Stone (a former boundary cross of the City) – survives on the road to Clifton and another on Hob Moor. Plague victims were buried in pits in St Lawrence's churchyard and the disused graveyard of St Giles on Gillygate, where the Salvation Army Citadel now is.



Some victims were fastened up in their houses to try and stop the spread of the plague. Cleansers visited them to ensure they were quarantined and cleansed the area, and officers of the Council supplied food and drink. Payment was in money dipped in vinegar. Goods coming into the city, especially cloth, were often suspected of bringing infection, and were often impounded. In 1604, four women and a man dug up some infected and confiscated clothes. For this they were put in the stocks, then taken out one by one and whipped. In 1631 Martin Best came to York from an infected house in London. His goods were burnt and he was imprisoned in Little Ease prison in the turrets of Monk Bar 'till the change of the Moon!' Some, however, found the plague a source of hilarity. In 1604 two men were found to be fiddling, dancing and drinking on the Sabbath from sermon time to evening; they were committed to Little Ease prison. When the constable asked Edward Hall, a spinner, 'how all did in his house', he replied 'all were in health, but his cat was sick!' For this insolence, he was fined ten shillings and committed to Monk Bar.

Jewbury

This was excavated in 1982-3, in advance of the creation of Sainsbury's car park. It was probably first used in 1177 when Henry II gave Jews licence to have a burial ground outside certain cities of England. Prior to this, all Jews had to be taken to London for burial. It is known definitely in 1230 AD when land was sold by the Dean and Chapter to York Jews to extend their cemetery. Remains of nearly 1000 individuals were excavated, and examined scientifically. In 1984 Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits put a stop to examination of bones and they were reinterred by a plaque in the raised flowerbed. At the time it was said 'if these bones lie at peace, civilisation can surely rest'. The bones were later removed to a Jewish cemetery in Manchester. Jewbury was about one acre and in 13th century contained the home of 'Jacob the Cemetery Keeper', a sort of caretaker. After the expulsion of the Jews in 1290 AD, the site remained pasture till 19th century. This was the only large scale excavated Jewish burial ground in Europe. The skeletons were aligned North-South, some disarticulated – perhaps brought a distance for burial. Only one of the skeletons showed signs of a violent death, so these are not the massacre victims of 1190. There were remains of nails in coffins, in variance with modern practice. Their average height was 5'5" for males and 5'1" for females – slightly shorter than the Christian population.

They were clustered by sex and age and seem to have had distinctive facial characteristics. The total number of burials was estimated to 600 adults and 400 children –high infant mortality–the rest died during their late 40s-50s. Women seem to have lived longer than York average (compared with St. Helen on Walls). Anaemia and T.B. were common causes of death visible on the skeleton.

St Cuthbert's Churchyard

It is estimated that the city of York contains about half a million corpses and skeletons within the walls, everyone that has lived here from Anglo Saxon times to the mid-19th century. The city contained about 50 graveyards in the Middle Ages, so each graveyard contains on average 10,000 skeletons. Over the centuries the graveyards filled up, and in some cases were built on (e.g. Lady Row, Goodramgate) or roads widened over them (e.g. St Michael, Spurriergate). Many graveyards closed at the Reformation, so by the 19th century the population was rising and the graveyards were inadequate for the rising tide of dead.

Graves had originally been 6 feet down, but the ground had risen due to the sheer volume of bodies and in many cases, as at St Cuthbert's, the graves had risen 6 feet above the ground. In many cases the graves were too shallow, so the authorities heaped more earth on the graveyards to cover the burials, which made the ground rise even faster. The shallow graves stank to high heaven. St Cuthbert's graveyard was buried twice over in the 1832 cholera epidemic.

Up till the mid 19th century very few houses had piped water and depended on wells in their yards and cellars, which were often right up against graveyards. So a victim who had just died of cholera or typhoid, both waterborne diseases, would be buried in the graveyard. Their remains would then seep into your water supply. You would put your bucket down the well to get water and then you too would contract cholera or typhoid, and pass it on to your nearest and dearest via the water supply. This meant there was a cycle of death set up from house to graveyard and back again.

Another problem of shallow graves was that freshly buried corpses were very vulnerable to the body snatchers. Before the Anatomy Act of 1832, it was not possible to obtain corpses legally for medical dissection, so they were stolen from graveyards. That is why the rich paid more to be buried inside churches, safe from the bodysnatchers or 'Resurrection men'. York had been well placed for the illegal body trade, being half way on the London-Edinburgh stagecoach route and able to supply both places before the body's 'sell-by' date!

The York Cemetery Company opened its graveyard outside the city in 1837, but many were reluctant to use it as they had always buried people in the historic city churchyards and they wished to be buried next to their relatives. Some of the City clergy resisted the York Cemetery, seeing it as an attack on their income from burials. Cremation did not become legal until c.1887 and York Crematorium did not open until 1962. In the 1840s, the York Journalist Hargrove of the York Herald, led a press campaign to get graveyards shut. He recorded incidents such as children being seen playing in Walmgate with a human skeleton which was still articulated, and a dog seen running down Coney Street with a human leg in its mouth to eat it. He also recalled a funeral at St Sampson's churchyard, which was waterlogged. The mourners were sliding off the duckboards into ankle deep slutch, and the coffin having to be weighted down with stones to stop it floating up to the surface. As a result of the 1852/3 Public Health Acts, all burials inside churches and in urban graveyards were forbidden, and by 1855

the York Board of Health had closed the remaining city centre graveyards. But they are still stuffed with corpses; so you will never walk alone in York-there's always somebody under your feet!

This fact sheet has been provided by YorkWalk. Established in 1990, YorkWalk offers a programme of themed walking tours of York throughout the year. This information is intended to assist journalists with information on different York themes and has been written to give a flavour of York's themed walking tours.

Other tours include the Historic Toilet Tour, the Guy Fawkes Trail and the Bloody Execution Tour...to name just a few. www.yorkwalk.co.uk

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

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