

## ROMAN YORK



*Walk anywhere in York and you're walking on top of a major city of the Roman Empire.*



### **Eboracum and the Legion of the Ninth**

In 71AD the legendary 9th Legion was ordered to march north from its Lincoln stronghold and subdue hostile northern tribes, which were threatening the Roman advance. A fortress was established at Eboracum – ‘the place of yew trees’ – and this developed into a sophisticated centre of government and commerce as well as a military headquarters.

In fact, Roman York evolved in a unique way in Roman Britain. Facing each other across the Ouse was a great military centre and a great civilian centre – a thriving, cosmopolitan place, which enjoyed a Mediterranean-style lifestyle.

### **Roman Roads, Roman Baths and a Roman Fortress**

York's essential ‘bone structure’ is still Roman. The two keystreets in the ancient city, the Via Praetoria and Via Principalis, later became known as Stonegate and Petergate, but they still run along the same routes as they did two millennia ago. Other reminders of the imperial age are the Roman column in Deangate recovered from the foundations of the Minster and all that survives of what was once a massive military nerve-centre, the remnants of a bath-house in the Roman Baths Public House in St Sampson's Square, and perhaps most impressive of all the Multangular Tower, dating from 1st century Eboracum and part of the legionary fortress. The chisel marks of Roman masons can still be clearly seen.

### **A Lost Monument?**

The Roman sewer network still survives, and reappears whenever the Victorian sewer tunnels require attention. Indeed, whenever there's a major archaeological dig in York, for whatever reason, chances are that more secrets of the city's Roman era will be unearthed. Recent work in Micklegate, for example, discovered evidence of fine Roman townhouses in the area, and fragments of jet pin and ceramics pointed to a comfortable and wealthier lifestyle. Experts predict that somewhere lie hidden a forum and a theatre, and perhaps an amphitheatre – a great lost monument.

## The Time Team Dig

Time Team, the popular Channel 4 archaeology series, visited York in 1999 and excavated a site in the garden of what is now the Royal York Hotel. It was known that this ground, just outside the ancient city walls, had once been a huge Roman cemetery. What they found was extraordinary: a Roman woman's skeleton complete with sandals on her feet, rings on her fingers and even a coin in her mouth, ready to pay the ferryman.

## End of an Era

In 306 Constantine the Great was crowned Roman Emperor at York, probably on the site what is now York Minster. A statue now stands in front of the Minster to commemorate the event: he was to become the first Emperor to embrace Christianity. Just over one hundred years later, the Romans abandoned Eboracum and the rest of Britain. The tribes that the Romans battled to keep out, overcame the city, and the so-called 'Dark Ages' began. When the Vikings conquered Jorvik they would find the locals still living in the 800-year-old ruins of a once great European city.

## ROMAN YORK – YORKWALK

*Discover that the imprint of Imperial Rome is still present in the city under the modern streets. The origin of the modern name of York is from Roman Eboracum to Dark Age Caer Ebrauc, Anglo-Saxon Eorfwic, Viking Jorvik and modern York*

*\*This section of the 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 Graveyard, Coffin and Plague tour, the Guy Fawkes Trail and the Bloody Execution Tour...to name just a few. Tel: 01904 622303, [www.yorkwalk.co.uk](http://www.yorkwalk.co.uk)*

## Multangular Tower

Romans came to York in 71AD under Emperor Vespasian. Petilius Cerialis advanced from Lincoln with the IX Legion "Hispania", previously on Danube and Pannonia (now Austria/Hungary). The legion was formed of about 5400 men.

Eboracum = Place of Yew Trees or Eburos. A fifty-acre Legionary Fortress was built in turf and rebuilt in stone c. 100AD. The Multangular Tower was built to take a catapult in the early 4th century (in reign of Constantius Chlorus) to combat the Anglo-Saxon menace. York was the seat of 'Dux Britanniarum' and capital of Province of Britannia Inferior. The Multangular Tower was built of 'saxa quadrata' (squared stones) and tile layer, which was to bond inner and outer faces of wall.

Go inside the Multangular tower. Note how the ground level has built up within the city due to the accumulation of rubbish. Roman coffins from outside the city – of millstone grit for durability, are present. Note that one of them has been used as horse trough. Note the ledge on the Multangular tower at the top and spine wall to take weight of catapult.

## **Eboracum (71-410AD)**

'Roman Bank' is a turf rampart of the 1st century, which had timber battlements. Legions left York in 407 to take part in dynastic struggles of the Roman Empire. The Rescript of Honorius, from 410 says: "henceforth British cities had to look to their own defence". This was the formal end of Roman Britain.

## **Caer Ebrauc (410-c.600)**

The British name for York in the days when York was part of the Celtic Kingdom of Elmet.

## **Eorfwic (c.600-867)**

The English conquered York c.600, and may have patched up Roman Walls with the crude Anglian Tower. Under Edwin, York became capital of Kingdom of Northumbria (c.620).

## **Jorvik (867-954)**

The Vikings conquered York under Ivor the Boneless in 867, and York was under Viking rule until the death of Eric Bloodaxe in 954. Vikings did not build in stone, and Roman walls crumbled and disappeared under earth banks with timber walls, hence the 'Dark Ages Bank'.

## **York (954-present)**

The Normans raised the height of the bank again in about 1069 after York burnt down and when the present walls were built in 13th century, the Roman walls had disappeared under earth banks, so the present walls were built higher than and to one side of the Roman walls.

**Bootham Bar**, on the site of Porta Principalis Dextra (Right Hand Main Gate). The archway incorporates re-used Roman stones and coffins. Possibly used by Hadrian as he may have come to York in 122 to build Hadrian's Wall. He was born in Spain in 76AD and was emperor from 117 to 138.

## **The Roman walls were excavated and are visible just east of Monk Bar, they date to the time of:**

**Septimius Severus:** born in Leptis Magna in Tripolitania, N. Africa in 146AD. He was emperor from 193 to 211 and came to York in 208 – despite arthritis! He brought his sons Caracalla and Geta to get them away from the luxury and decadence of Rome. He died here and was cremated; his ashes were returned to Rome. The empire was bequeathed to sons Caracalla and Geta, but Caracalla killed his brother to become the sole ruler.

## **Treasurer's House**

In February 1953, Henry Martindale, an 18 year old apprentice heating engineer, claims he heard a weird sound, faint at first, but then louder 'like a wireless coming though the wall'; then it became apparent it was a horn being blown.

Then he saw Roman legionaries in twos led by a horseman in cellar, marching through, all cut off at their knees! He was fixing central heating pipes and fell off his ladder. He hid in a corner on seeing the ghosts, and was off work for two weeks with shock.

The story came to prominence in 1971 due to his description of the insignia and uniforms of legionaries, and the Roman road found 18" beneath the cellar.

One theory is that the ghosts are of the lost Ninth Legion (IX Hispania), which disappeared c. 120AD and was replaced by the Sixth (VI Pia Fidelis Victrix), which remained until 407AD. In fact, the Ninth Legion was transferred to the Rhineland and then to Mesopotamia, and there it disappeared.

**Chapter House Lane** – This was the Via Decumana of the Roman Fort. It was once 70 Roman feet wide like all Roman roads in York. The road surface has been found 15 feet below the street. The Road has been narrowed by the Eastward expansion of the Minster – in fact Goodramgate grew up from Viking times to avoid the Minster and Chapter House Street. Chapter House Street is lined up with the site of the Porta Decumana.

**Minster** – Note that the east end leans out four feet, due to the Minster breaking its back across the Roman Headquarters building beneath. This was one of the causes of the collapse of the Central Tower in 1407 and which led to the underpinning of the Tower in 1967-72. Note the markers in the grass on the lawn between the Choir and South Transept showing the site of the Walls of Roman H.Q. Building (Principia).

**Roman Column** – Re-erected from H.Q. Building of Roman Fort – discovered under the Minster in excavations of 1967-72.

## King's Square – Eric Bloodaxe

Eric Bloodaxe, the Last Viking King of York, was son of Harold Fair Hair, King of Norway. He killed his five brothers with a battle-axe and became King, hence his name. He was driven out of Norway as he was unpopular, "cruel and pitiless in battle, delighting in war; a bad-minded, gruff and silent man" according to his contemporaries.

He was once King of the Viking Kingdom of Dublin. He was also King of York, as Vassal of King Athelstan, in 947, but driven out in 948. He returned in 952, and was killed in an ambush in 954 on Stainmore, where his burial mound is still seen. King's Square, formerly Coney Garth, is probably the site of the residence of the Viking Kings of York.

His mortal enemy Egil was a poet who composed a rude poem about Eric. Egil got shipwrecked and taken before Eric, who got ready to kill him. But the sun had set so Egil got a night's respite, and composed a flattering poem about Eric, thus earning his release. (You could not kill your enemy after sunset in Viking society, as the soul could not find its way to Valhalla in the dark!).

## Statue of Constantine The Great



Constantine was proclaimed Emperor in York in 306AD on the death of his father Constantius Chlorus (Emperor of the Western Roman Empire 293-306). Constantine defeated his main rival in the West, the pagan Maxentius, at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge 312. On the night before the battle, Constantine had a vision of a cross and was told: 'In this sign you shall conquer' and attributed his victory to Christ. He published the edict of Milan 313, which granted toleration to Christianity. Constantine built the first St Peter's in Rome and presumably a church in York, as there was a Bishop of York at the Council of Arles in 314. This Bishop of York was so poor that he claimed his travelling expenses to the council. Constantine became ruler of the whole Roman World after defeating Licinius, his rival in the East at the Battle of Chrysopolis in 324. He founded a new capital for the Empire in 329 – Constantinople. He was only baptised as he lay dying in Nicomedia (in Asia Minor) in 337, and was buried in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. Constantine was

the first Christian Roman Emperor.

The statue of Constantine was unveiled in 1998 and was designed by Philip Jackson. It represents Constantine after The Battle of the Milvian Bridge contemplating a broken sword, which also forms the shape of a cross: the symbolism is that the battle is over, the sword broken, and Christianity has triumphed.

**Crossroads of Stonegate – Petergate:** This is the crossroads of Roman York. Petergate is the Via Principalis; Stonegate Via Praetoria and Minster Gates led to Principia/H.Q. Building. Go along Petergate – note the bend in the road. The medieval road is probably avoiding collapsed ruins of a Roman Bath House. Petergate was once 70 feet wide – and shrunk due to the collapse of Roman Buildings and encroachment by houses.

**King's Square** – on the site of Porta Principalis Sinistra (Left Hand Main Gate) and probably later the seat of Viking Kings (including Eric Bloodaxe) using a derelict Roman gateway.

## St Helen's Square (Church to Constantine's mother)

Constantine's mother was Helen (c. 250-330AD). She was born at Drepanum, in Bithynia (now Asia Minor) – later renamed Helenopolis, and she was possibly originally an Innkeeper's daughter. She is said to have been a courtesan and the Venerable Bede describes her as the 'concubine' of the Roman General Constantius Chlorus.

She bore him Constantine at Naissus (modern Nis in Yugoslavia) on the Danube. When Constantine Chlorus became Emperor in 293, he divorced her. But Constantine greatly honoured his mother and upon becoming Emperor made her Dowager Empress. She converted to Christianity in 312AD, aged over 60, but was so devout that contemporaries thought she had been so since childhood.

She dressed quietly, gave generously to churches, to the poor and prisoners, and made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.



Here she is said to have discovered the true cross, on the hill of Calvary, where a great Church was rising at her son Constantine's orders. She died in the Holy Land, and she was buried in Rome. Helen is a Saint in both Eastern and Western Churches, but her son Constantine is a Saint only in the Eastern Church!

The site of Porta Praetoria leading to the bridge across Ouse is in the square. The Mansion House preserves the alignment of the Roman Road to the bridge. The stone was brought to build the Minster this way from the river – hence STONE-GATE.

## Roman Bath Pub



Rebuilt in 1930-1, when a cellar part of a Roman Bath House was found. A Roman bath was similar to a sauna, or Turkish bath, with a series of rooms, heated by an underfloor heating system or hypocaust, fired by a charcoal furnace. One undressed and went through a series of rooms getting progressively hotter; then the dirt was scraped off by a slave with a strygil, in the 'Caldarium' or very hot room, before taking a cold plunge in the 'Frigidarium' or cold room. The Roman Bath has remains of the caldarium with its apse, and the Frigidarium cold plunge, with its thick tile base. The bath house was too small for the whole legion and was perhaps only for the officers. The remains date to the 4th century, and the masonry is very similar to that of the Multangular Tower, and re-uses tiles of the 6th and 9th Legions.

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