

SAINTS AND SINNERS

St Olave's Church – St Olaf

The church was founded in 1055 by Earl Siward of Northumbria, who led Birnam Wood on Dunsinane in Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'. St Olaf was a King and Martyr, born Olaf Haraldson c. 995AD in Norway. He took to the seas as a Viking Mercenary at the age of twelve! He was baptised at Rouen in Normandy, c. 1013. He claimed the throne of Norway in 1015, and adopted a policy of death or baptism, i.e. forcible conversion, which was very successful! He was driven out in 1027, and nobles sided with King Cnut of Denmark. Olaf made a comeback attempt in 1030, but in a battle at Stiklestad, he was killed by an axe. He was made a saint in 1032 by the Pope, and was buried in Trondheim Cathedral. He is the patron saint of Norway.

St Mary's Abbey – William Rufus

The original abbey was in St Olave's Church, c.1080, but in 1088 William II "Rufus" – very irreligious King – founded an Abbey on the present site to expiate the many bloody and horrible deeds he and his father, William the Conqueror, had committed in York. Also because the Church disapproved of his 'sins offensive to both God and man', i.e. he had boyfriends – but they took his money, and the 50 monks were to pray for his soul. It was closed in 1539 by another sinner – Henry VIII, and fell into ruin.



York Minster

The Minster was founded by the Anglo-Saxon King Edwin of Northumbria in 627AD; he was converted, after a lot of nagging, by his Christian wife, Queen Ethelburga and her chaplain Paulinus. All three are reckoned saints in the church.

St Michael-le-Belfrey Church – Guy Fawkes

Guy Fawkes was baptised here on 16 April 1570. Go in and see a photocopy of his baptismal entry. He was born not on Petergate, but somewhere off Stonegate near Godfrey's bookshop. His father, Edward Fawkes, was a church lawyer. Guy went to St Peter's School, then in Gillygate, now in Clifton. In c.1580 his mother remarried on his father's death, and his new stepfather Dionis Bainbridge, was a Roman Catholic living in Scotton, Yorkshire. In 1591 he came of age and spent all his inheritance. In

1593 he enlisted in the army of the King of Spain, and served in the Spanish Netherlands, now Holland and Belgium.

In 1604 he was roped into the Gunpowder Plot by his old schoolfellows Christopher and John Wright. He hired a cellar under St. Stephen's Chapel, then the meeting place of the House of Lords, to blow it up on the day of the State Opening of Parliament – 5 November 1605. Thus King, Lords, Bishops and Commons would all be destroyed and the King of Spain could invade from the Channel ports and there would be a Catholic uprising across the Country. But one of the conspirators, Tresham, warned his relative Lord Monteagle not to go to the State Opening. This letter was shown to James I, the Cellars were searched and Guy Fawkes was caught with 32 hundredweight of gunpowder. He was taken to the Tower and tortured for three months until he revealed the names of the conspirators. He was tried, and hung, drawn and quartered. There were bonfires and rejoicing throughout the country, a tradition that has since become Bonfire Night.



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 he 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.

St Helena (or Helen) was Constantine's mother (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 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.

St William's College – St William of York

St William was born c. 1100, the illegitimate son of William Fitzherbert, the King's treasurer. His mother was Emma, the illegitimate daughter of the Count of Anjou and King Stephen's half sister. So William was surnamed 'Fitzherbert' i.e. Herbert's bastard! He became a churchman and Treasurer of York Minster living in the Treasurer's House. He was appointed Archbishop in 1140, helped no doubt by the fact that his uncle Stephen, was King!

He was very popular and hospitable, drinking, giving feasts and parties. But he had enemies among the more ascetic wing of the Church, especially the Cistercians; they did not like a free and easy royal, illegitimate royal nominee as Archbishop and wanted their man for the job. William was supported by his uncles the King and the Bishop of Winchester, but he was opposed by the rival to the throne of England, the Empress Matilda.

The Cistercians, led by the Abbot of Fountains and St Bernard of Clairvaux, persuaded the Pope to depose William in 1147 for alleged riotous living and sexual incontinence. He was forced into exile with his Uncle, the Bishop of Winchester, but appealed against his sacking. In 1153 the Pope, the Archbishop of York, the Abbot of Fountains and St Bernard of Clairvaux all died in the same year, struck down, some said, by the hand of God for their ill treatment of William. William was re-instated by the new Pope, and returned to York in triumph in 1154. The whole city flocked onto Ouse Bridge to see him return, thinking no doubt that party time had returned; so many, in fact, that the bridge collapsed, throwing the crowd into the river. But William, who had got across, prayed on the far bank and they were all washed ashore by a miraculous tidal wave! People said he was a miracle worker.

Shortly afterwards, he was celebrating Mass at the High Altar of the Norman Minster, when he collapsed at the altar and was taken to the nearby Archbishop's Palace where he died – this building stood in Dean's Park near the Minster Library. It was soon said he had been murdered by a chalice poisoned by the Cistercians. This made him a Saint and martyr, murdered at the altar of his own Cathedral. This was a godsend to the Minster, which had had six sainted Bishops and Archbishops – but not one of them had left their body in York: St Wilfred was buried at Ripon, St Paulinus at Rochester and St John at Beverley. The body of a saint was essential to bring pilgrims and money, so William was canonized in 1227 and a great shrine erected first in the Nave then the new Choir of the Minster. But the body of a saint was too good to keep in one place so his head was housed in a separate shrine in the Nave! His shrine was demolished by Henry VIII, but his body is now housed in a Chapel in the crypt. He is a colourful Saint, perhaps the patron Saint of Boozers and Partygoers! But he did have a saintly characteristic – he tried to make peace with his enemies and held no grudges – so perhaps he is a Saint after all!

National Trust Shop – George Hudson

The ‘Railway King’ was born in 1800 at the little village of Howsham, near Malton. He had to leave his native village when he was 15 for getting a girl pregnant. He came to York to work in this building, which was his uncle’s drapers shop. In 1827 he inherited £30,000 from another uncle and married his master’s daughter. He went into politics for the Tory party and used his fortune to bring electoral corruption to new heights, ensuring that for 20 years none but Tories were elected to York City Council.

He was Lord Mayor three times – in 1837, 1838 and 1846, and MP for Sunderland. He also became Chairman of many Railway Companies, eventually with an empire stretching from the Thames to the Tweed. He is alleged to have aimed ‘to make all t’railways come to York’, and he certainly succeeded in making the city a major railway centre. In 1849 he had to resign from all his Railway chairmanships, due to his massive embezzlements and shady dealings coming to light. But he could not be arrested for his debts, as he was still MP for Sunderland and MP’s could not be arrested for debt. As soon as he lost his Parliamentary seat in 1853, he fled to the continent. He died in 1871 in relative poverty and is buried in the little churchyard at Scrayingham, near his birthplace.



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 at one time King of the Viking Kingdom of Dublin. He was King of York, as Vassal of King Athelstan, in 947, but was 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 enemy Egil, shipwrecked and came to York to seek refuge with his noble friend Arinbjorn, not knowing Eric was King of York. He had been outlawed by Eric. He fell at Eric’s knees and begged mercy. Eric could not kill him, as it was not etiquette to kill by night – it had to be daylight, as the dead man could not find his way to Valhalla by night. Eric agreed to let him off, if he wrote a poem praising him, which pleased him. Egil wrote it and it survives – Egil’s Saga.

The Shambles – Shrine of St Margaret Clitherow

Margaret Clitherow was born in 1556 and baptised Margaret Middleton in St Martin-le-Grand church. In 1571 she converted to Catholicism and also married John Clitherow, a wealthy butcher, who was much older than her. She did not live in the house, which is now her shrine, but in the houses opposite – numbers 10 & 12. She hid priests in her house and had the Mass said in secret, which was very



dangerous when England was in imminent danger of invasion by the Catholic super-power Spain, and Catholic priests seen as spies. She was imprisoned several times in York Castle for these activities.

On 12th March 1586 she was arrested for harbouring Jesuits and allowing Mass to be said in her house. She was also accused (falsely) of immorality with the priests. She was tried in the Guildhall, but refused to plead to prevent the trial starting, thus protecting her children and associates from being called as witnesses. For refusing to plead she was condemned to 'peine forte et dure' (long and hard pain), originally a torture designed to make people who refused, accept trial by jury. She was held in the prisons in the bowels of Ouse Bridge. She was martyred by the old Tollbooth at the south end of Ouse Bridge on 25 March 1586. Clothed only in her nightshirt, she was crushed under a door with progressively heavier stones put on it and a

sharp stone under her back. Her body was thrown on the public dunghill, but her hand was rescued and remains as a relic at the Bar Convent to this day. She was canonized by Pope Paul VI in 1970.

St George's Churchyard – Dick Turpin

Dick Turpin was born in 1705 in Hempstead near Saffron Walden, Essex. He went to school, trained as a butcher and sold meat stolen by night. In 1734-5 he joined Gregory Gang, a vicious gang of horse-breakers who tortured householders into revealing the whereabouts of their valuables. Most of them were caught and hung in 1735. In 1737, Turpin set up with Tom King as highwayman in Epping Forest. In an ambush by the authorities at Whitechapel, Turpin accidentally shot Tom King and escaped. He eventually moved north and changed his name to John Palmer. He settled in Ferry House Inn, Brough, and became a horse 'dealer' (stealer).

On 2 October 1738, he shot a cock in Main Street of Brough, and then threatened to murder somebody who complained. He was committed to trial at Beverley, then York for breach of peace. Early in 1739 he wrote to his brother. The letter was seen in Hempstead, where his old schoolmaster recognised his handwriting and travelled to York to identify 'John Palmer' as Dick Turpin. On March 22, he was tried for horse-stealing and condemned to death. Executed on Knavesmire on 7 April 1739, he behaved with great assurance on the gallows. He was buried in St George's Churchyard in quicklime as 'body snatchers' tried to steal it. Black Bess first appears in 1834 novel 'Redwood'. The ride from London to York was actually done by 'Swift Nicks' John Nevison in 1676 to provide an alibi.

Cumberland House

It was built c.1710 and renamed in 1746 in honour of 'Butcher Cumberland'. The Duke of Cumberland defeated Bonnie Prince Charlie at Culloden and got his nickname because of the savagery with which he treated the defeated Scots. He was, however, hailed as a national hero at the time and was given the Freedom of York at Grays Court on his way south to London from the battle.

Site of Buckingham House/Palace

The first Duke of Buckingham met James I in 1613, when he was plain George Villiers. He was made Lord High Admiral, a King's Chief Minister and made Duke for "services rendered" (in the bedchamber!). He was assassinated in 1628 by a disgruntled naval officer.

His son (1627-1687) was George Villiers, second duke. He took part in the civil war for the King, but escaped confiscation of estates, by claiming he did not know what he was doing as he was only 14 at time! In 1657 he married Mary Fairfax, daughter of Sir Thomas Fairfax, the parliamentary general involved, with his father Ferdinando, in the 1644 siege of York. At restoration he supported Charles II and became one of his inner cabinet or CABAL.

He was in later years very fat – “Georgy Porgy, Pudding and Pie”, and very promiscuous – “kissed the girls and made them cry”. In 1667 he had an affair with the Countess of Shrewsbury, and the Earl of Shrewsbury challenged him to a duel – “when the Boys come out to play”. In this duel – which the Countess of Shrewsbury attended, disguised as a page, both men were wounded, but the Earl of Shrewsbury died of the wounds. Then George Villiers installed the Countess in his London residence, and his wife objected, so he told her he had already ordered a coach to take her to her mothers. In 1677 he fell from favour with the King, was imprisoned in tower, and only let out provided that he kept away from the Countess of Shrewsbury. In 1684 he retired from public life to York.

So “Georgy Porgy ran away”. He spent the last years of his life in Buckingham House in York. He went out hunting one day from Helmsley Castle, and his horse dropped dead due to his weight. He lay on wet grass, caught fever and died (1687). He was buried with his father in Westminster Abbey, but had no heir. His property in Yorkshire and London split up. Fairfax House belonged to one branch of family, and later in the 18th century a later Duke built Buckingham House in London, sold it to George III in 1762 and it was the origin of the present Buckingham Palace.

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.

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