

# STATUES AND SYMBOLS IN YORK

*The long history of York is clearly illustrated throughout the city, not only in its architecture, but also in monuments, statues and symbols which each give clues to earlier lives in York.*

## York's Bars



The bars of York - ancient gateways built along the city walls - still display defensive symbols, such as those which peer down from the battlements as if ready to hurl stones down upon their enemies. The rather more grand figures above Bootham Bar represent aspects of York's history, with the Guild Master in the centre, the Lord Mayor on one side (York's Lord Mayor being second in importance only to London's), and a knight in armour on the other.

Royalty have emblazoned their colourful Coats of Arms on York's Bars in proprietorial fashion too. On Bootham Bar is the Royal House of Stuart, on Micklegate Bar is King Edward III's and that of the Lord Mayor of York in 1737 (when the Bar was restored), and on Monk Bar is the Coat of Arms of the Royal House of Plantagenet.

## Statues

The statue of artist **William Etty** stands outside York Art Gallery, facing Bootham Bar which he helped to protect from misguided town planners in the early 19th century. He was born in York in 1787, the son of a baker in Feasegate. Although he spent most of his working life in London he returned to York in later life and bought a house and studio over-looking the River Ouse close to where he was born. Etty was very active in campaigning to preserve York's historic buildings. He is buried in St Olave's churchyard, near the Museum Gardens.



As a monument to York's earliest times, Roman Emperor **Constantine the Great** sits in splendour outside the south door of York Minster, the first emperor to embrace Christianity. This magnificent statue was a gift to the city from York Civic Trust. The marble head of a much earlier statue of Constantine - thought to date back to around the time he became Emperor in 306AD - was found during excavations in Stonegate. This is now on display in the Yorkshire Museum, along with many other Roman, Anglo-Saxon and later artefacts which have been discovered in York, including the 12th century, life-size sculpture of the **Figure of Moses** which once supported the vaulted ceiling of St Mary's Abbey.

Just opposite stands one of the **Roman Columns** which stood within the Great Hall (or Principia), the remains of which were found beneath the foundations of the Minster. This one was found beneath the South Transept of the Minster during excavations in 1969, and was re-erected to stand opposite the south door of the Minster in 1971, commemorating the city's 1900th birthday.



**York Minster** itself is, of course, full of statues, carvings, symbols and symbolism. The West Window is known as the Heart of Yorkshire, because of its shape, and it contains the twelve apostles and beneath them, the eight archbishops of York. Below the window, the West Door was reconstructed as recently as 1998, when the Minster's craftsmen painstakingly carved an archway every bit as impressive as the original, which had decayed beyond repair. Intricate figures all around the arch

represent the early chapters of Genesis in exquisite detail. This is a real work of modern art in true medieval craftsmen's style. The East Window (the size of a tennis court) is the largest medieval window in England, taking as its theme the beginning and end of all created things. A figure of God presides at the top over saints and angels, and panels illustrate scenes from the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation. **Tombs** and **plaques** commemorate many notable figures and the choir screen carvings represent fifteen kings of England, from William I to Henry VI. These are just a few examples of York Minster's treasures.

A more humble symbol of religious devotion can be found inside number 35 The Shambles, in the form of the little statue of butcher's wife **Margaret Clitherow**, a Roman Catholic who sheltered priests from persecution during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. In 1586 she was caught, tried and sentenced to death by crushing. In 1970 she became a saint, and the tiny Shambles house is now a chapel and shrine to her memory. Next to St Margaret's is a statue of **Thomas Thwing**, catholic priest and the last man to be hung in York, in 1680.

**Dick Turpin's** rather humble gravestone still stands where St George's churchyard once was, in George Street. The church no longer exists but Turpin was reburied here after being dug up several times by grave robbers following his public execution at York's Knavesmire in 1739.

## Signs and symbols

Look up above the doorways and shop windows along York's historic streets and you will find all kinds of fascinating signs and symbols. The figure of an **American Indian** at 76 Low Petergate once advertised the location of the tobacconist's shop –the boy's kilt and headwear represent tobacco leaves.

**Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom**, sits on the corner of Minstergates, leaning on a pile of books, to advertise the bookseller's shop below, where authors and literary readers met as members of one of Britain's earliest book groups.



York was a prominent centre of the book publishing business in the 17th century. At number 35 Stonegate, the sign of the **Holy Bible**, dated 1682, still hangs over the

ornately carved doorway of what was once Francis Hildyard's bookshop, which was visited even by Royalty. At that time, booksellers were often publishers as well, and Laurence Sterne's novel 'Tristram Shandy' was published here in 1760. And above number 33, at Stonegate's entrance to Coffee Yard, sits the bright red "**Printer's Devil**", a carved sign which indicated the location of the print works up until the 18th century. The apprentices, who carried the hot plates, were known as the printer's devils.

York Civic Trust has erected over 60 **bronze information plaques** on buildings and sites of historical interest around York which help to tell York's history through the centuries.

To discover these and more statues and symbols of York's colourful history, join a free **walking tour** of the city with York's Volunteer Guides. Tours take about two hours and depart every day at 10.15am (further tours at 2.15pm from April-September and 6.45pm in June, July and August) from Exhibition Square outside the City Art Gallery.

**For more information and to book your stay in York:**

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