



THE HISTORY OF YORK TOUR

Where the pictures and surroundings shed a little light on each other

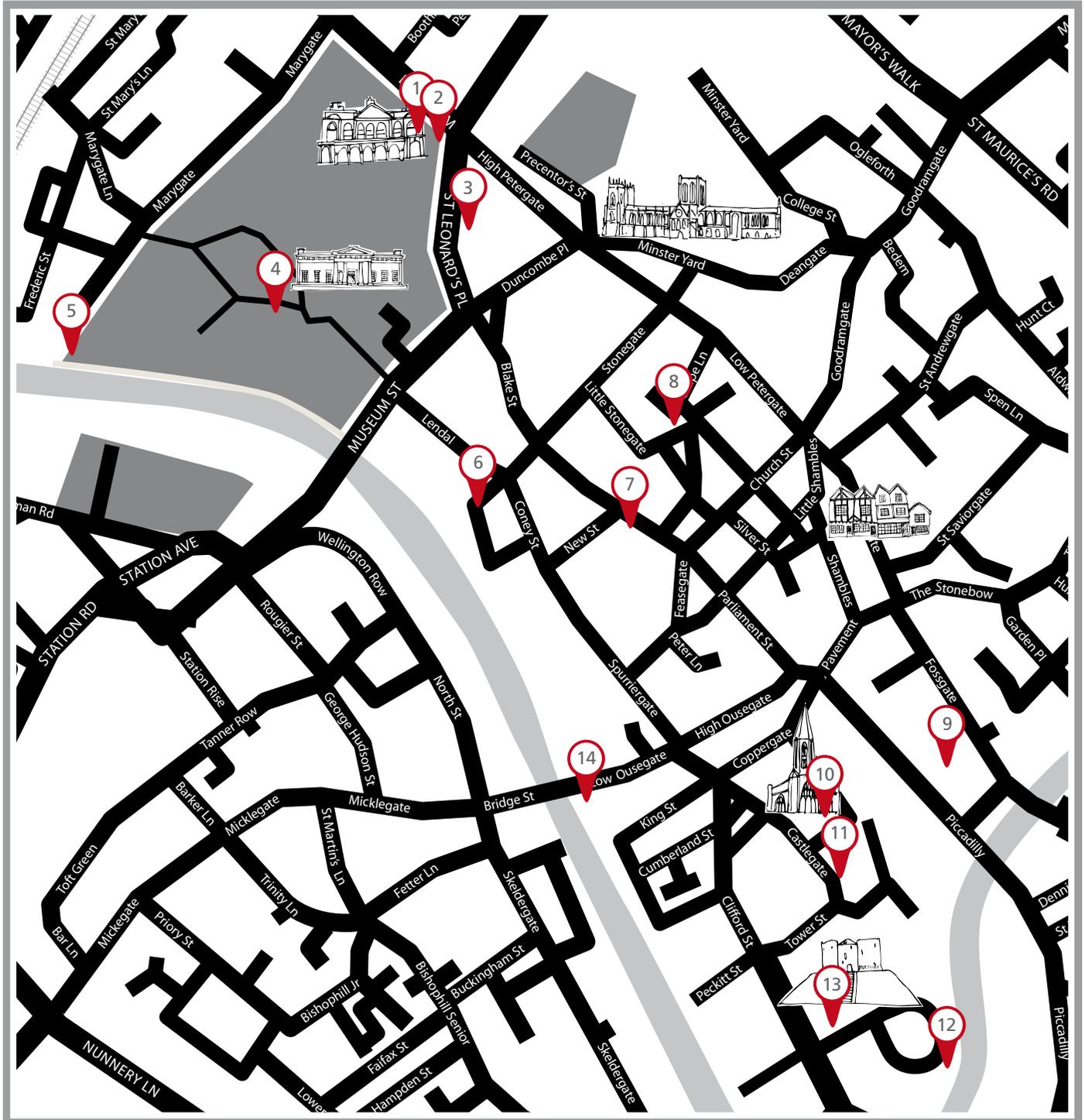
HISTORY OF YORK



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1 Whistlejacket, about 1762
George Stubbs
Exhibition Square

Both the horse, Whistlejacket, and the painter, Stubbs, had strong connections with York.

During the 18th century York was transforming into a playground for the rich. The racecourse got a smart new stand, designed by John Carr, in August 1755 and Whistlejacket won the first race run in front of it. The horse went on to win his biggest prize - 2,000 guineas - at the York Races four years later.

Stubbs's link with the city was early in his career, in his twenties he lived in York for six years. This was a crucial time for his development - the young artist honed his craft by dissecting and drawing bodies at the prestigious new County Hospital. His skill with the knife is said to have earned him some 'vile renown' locally.

The story is told in the exhibition 'Stubbs and Whistlejacket in York' at York Art Gallery until 31st August 2008.



2 Christina of Denmark, Duchess of Milan, 1538
Hans Holbein the Younger
York Pullman Bus,
Bootham Tower

Holbein's picture of the demure widow Christina of Denmark was painted for Henry VIII, who was looking for a fourth wife after the death of Jane Seymour. This portrait was painted when Christina was just sixteen and a renowned beauty.

The King was said to have fallen madly in love with Christina on the strength of the painting, but she wasn't his only obsession at the time. In 1538 Henry's reformation of the Church was in full swing and monasteries were being abolished at a remarkable rate - that autumn, six of York's priories and friaries were handed over to the crown.

To the left of Christina's portrait is an arch that was one of the main gates of York's biggest monastery - the enormously wealthy York Abbey, dedicated to St Mary. The red-brick building that can be seen through the gate was once the Abbot's palatial house. It's now known as the 'King's Manor' because a year after Holbein painted Christina, Henry VIII took possession of the Abbey and all its lands throughout the country.

Christina, however, never belonged to Henry, apart from in this portrait. The marriage never was, and she lived into old age.



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3 A Scene from 'The Careless Husband', 1738
Philip Mercier
York Theatre Royal

'The Careless Husband' was a popular 18th century play by Colley Cibber.

York was becoming a fashionable society city at the time Mercier painted this scene from the play in 1738. The artist moved to York soon afterwards and, like the young George Stubbs, he lived here for a while as a portrait painter to the gentry.

Mercier spent eight years in York, long enough to see the building of the city's first dedicated playhouse which was built on the site of the present theatre in 1744. It proved so popular that in 1765 it was enlarged to seat 550 people. Four years later it received a royal patent and was renamed the 'Theatre Royal'.

The theatre has seen various improvements since and now seats 1400.



4 An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump, 1768
Joseph Wright of Derby
The Observatory,
Museum Gardens

Joseph Wright came from Derby, a town that was at the centre of the Industrial Revolution, and his work reflects the spirit of progress. This painting shows a lecturer conducting a dramatic scientific experiment as family entertainment.

York largely missed out on the explosion of the Industrial Revolution, busying itself with high society at the time. But the city does have a strong scientific heritage and the York Observatory is an important part of that story.

The Observatory was built in 1832 following the very first meeting of the now prestigious 'British Association for the Advancement of Science', which was held at the Yorkshire Museum in September 1831. The telescope in the observatory was built by Thomas Cooke's company in York in 1850. Cooke was one of the great telescope manufacturers, building the largest telescope in the world in 1869.



5 The Skiff, 1875
Pierre-Auguste Renoir
Water Tower, Dame Judi
Dench Walk

The setting of this painting is not known for sure, it may be on the Seine at Chatou or Asnieres. What is clear though is that in the background of this relaxing river scene Renoir has painted an early railway bridge - you can make out the smoke from the chimney of an approaching train.

The bridge in the picture bears an uncanny resemblance to Scarborough Bridge, which you can see opposite the painting as it hangs on the Water Tower. In 1875 railways were still a recent development in both England and France, so we can be sure that the French bridge was relatively new at the time of the painting.

Scarborough Bridge was built in 1845 for a new line carrying passengers to the coast. A very early photograph shows it looking quite different from now. Originally, if pedestrians wanted to use the bridge they had to walk between the two tracks.

At the same time as Renoir was painting 'The Skiff', Scarborough Bridge was taking on its present form. In 1875 the bridge underwent major changes as part of works for

the new station. The tracks were raised by four feet and the footpath was moved to its current position along the side of the bridge.

* Paintings from York Art Gallery



6 The Doge Leonardo Loredan, 1501 - 4

Giovanni Bellini
The Guildhall

Doge Leonardo Loredan was the elected head of Venice which was then an independent republic.

The Guildhall, the traditional home of York's city rulers, dates from about 50 years before this portrait was painted. The first council meeting is recorded there in May 1459.

York's power of self-government was granted in a charter by King John in 1212, giving the City the right to elect a Mayor and collect taxes. By that time, Venice had been largely independent for about 500 years.

The leaders of the two cities share a taste for ceremony. The Doge is shown here in full formal regalia; on formal occasions the Lord Mayor of York still wears robes trimmed with gold, lace cuffs and a chain of office dating from 1600.



7 Lady Cockburn and her Three Eldest Sons, 1773

Sir Joshua Reynolds
St Helen's Graveyard, Davygate

The fate of the innocent baby in this painting, William Cockburn, tells us a lot about the way society and the church operated two hundred years ago. When he grew up this son of a Lord entered the church, becoming Dean of York for 36 years, beginning in 1822.

As Dean, William played a large role in York life. He was an active member of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society and made a large contribution (£50) towards the cost of building the Yorkshire Museum. He also had a public exchange of views with the curator of the Museum, the famous geologist John Phillips. In the York press and elsewhere, Cockburn taunted Phillips for believing that the earth was more than 6,000 years old.

This wasn't the only controversy in Dean Cockburn's life. His management of the Minster's money was questioned more than once and in 1841 he was actually found guilty of accepting bribes and sacked by the Archbishop, only to regain his post following a famous court case.

The picture hangs in St Helen's Graveyard next to a memorial stone for one Margaret Burnell, who was born at about the same time as William but died 'in the 13th year of her Age'. The stone reads:

'Nought but a heap of dust remains of me, that's all I am, and all the Proud shall be.'



8 Allegory with Venus and Cupid, probably 1540 - 50

Bronzino
Coffee Yard

The salacious An Allegory with Venus and Cupid was a carefully considered present for the King of France, a man with a notorious lust for flesh. Packed with riddles and symbolism, it would have given him plenty of excuse to ponder the work, ogling the sensual bodies of the cavorting Venus and Cupid, while decoding its finer meaning.

The picture hangs at the end of Grape Lane. It's an old painting, but the street is older. It used to be known as Grope Lane and was the traditional area of the city's prostitutes.



9 Four Officers of the Amsterdam Coopers' and Wine-rackers' Guild, 1657

Gerbrand van den Eeckhout
Merchant Adventurers' Hall

This is the meeting hall of the Merchant Adventurers – a group of tradesmen who came together in a guild to promote their business interests. The building dates back to 1357 but the guild was only given the name 'Merchant Adventurers' in 1581, by Elizabeth I.

The 'Adventurers' part of the name refers to the fact that the guild's members traded overseas, sometimes as far afield as Iceland and the Russia, but most often with the countries of Northern Europe.

The painting is of another guild based in Northern Europe, in Amsterdam to be exact. It depicts prosperous businessmen in the equivalent of a team photo. This particular guild included the men who made barrels for imported wine, and others who sampled and bottled it.



10 The Virgin of the Rocks, about 1491 - 1508

Leonardo da Vinci
York St Mary's

The picture shows the Virgin Mary, the Christ Child, John the Baptist as a baby, and an angel.

The church is dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Parts of it date back about a thousand years but most of the building dates from the 13th century.

Leonardo was commissioned to produce the painting as an altarpiece for another 13th century church - the San Francesco Grande in Milan, which has since been demolished.



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11 Portrait of Jean Abercromby, Mrs Morrison of Haddo, about 1767

Allan Ramsay

Fairfax House, Castlegate

Fairfax House was created in 1762 as a dowry for a Georgian lady, Anne Fairfax, the only surviving child of Viscount Fairfax. The house was used as a base in the town to entertain prospective husbands, though as it turned out, Anne never married.

The exquisite portrait of Jean Abercromby is thought to mark a 1760's society wedding that did take place. Abercromby married Captain George Morison of Haddo, Aberdeenshire, in 1767, when this picture was probably painted.

Both families used the very best professionals. Allan Ramsay was the finest portrait painter in Scotland at the time, and the interior of Fairfax House was designed by John Carr, the famous Yorkshire architect.

Anne's own portrait was painted by Philip Mercier (painter of no.3 on the tour - The Careless Husband). That painting can be seen in Anne's bedroom, inside Fairfax House.



12 Cavalry making a Sortie from a Fort on a Hill, 1646

Philips Wouwermans

Castle Museum

The fort and battle shown here are thought to be entirely imaginary, but the painting has found an appropriate home. A castle was first built on this site by William the Conqueror in about 1068. The defences were rebuilt in stone in the 13th century.

During the Civil War, York was a Royalist stronghold. In 1644, just two years before Wouwermans painted his imaginary scene, York was besieged by Parliamentary forces and its walls were bombarded. There were 200 soldiers billeted in Clifford's Tower, opposite this painting.



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13 Clifford's Tower, York, 1953

Laurence Stephen Lowry

Clifford Street

This painting of Clifford's Tower is a little piece of York's history in its own right. In 1952 Lowry was living in Cheshire when Hans Hess, the curator of York Art Gallery, wrote to ask if he'd produce an image of York for £50 as part of an annual award scheme.

The artists on the scheme were all asked to do a drawing or watercolour but Lowry wanted to do an oil painting. He stayed in York for a few days and was shown different views that might inspire him. He was actually inspired to paint two views, one from 'Tang Hall Bridge looking towards the Minster and Cooling Tower' and one of 'Clifford's Tower'. Hans Hess chose the Clifford's Tower painting for the gallery and the other was sold by Lowry.



14 The Fighting Temeraire, 1838 - 39

Joseph Mallord

William Turner

Ouse Bridge, King's Staith

The full title is The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her Last Berth to be broken up, 1838. It shows the ghostly, 98-gun ship Temeraire, on its way up the Thames to be scrapped. The painting is said to represent the decline of Britain's sea-power and the passing of an age, the age of sail.

Perhaps surprisingly, York has a history as a main port and centre of shipbuilding, though you have to go a bit further back than the Temeraire. In 1204 York was ranked seventh in importance among ports of the south and east coast. Throughout the Middle Ages there were docks and stores here on the side of the River Ouse.

In 1294 records show that there were 69 shipwrights employed in the city, more than anywhere else in the country. However, the tides worked against York: a boat could be stranded for a fortnight in the city if a tide was missed at certain times in the year. The industry moved elsewhere and, as for the Temeraire, times moved on.

* Paintings from York Art Gallery