

EBORACUM

York's Roman Legacy

A walking tour to explore
the fortress of Roman York



This plaque records the rebuilding of the Temple of Hercules. It is the only artefact ever to be found in York which refers to the city as being named Eboracum.

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Text and Images by John Parkinson

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Eboracum: Face to Face with the Romans



The Yorkshire Museum is currently undergoing an **amazing transformation**, with a full refurbishment of all the exhibitions. The new look museum reopens on 1 August 2010 with fantastic new displays of its significant scientific and archaeological collections.



The new Roman exhibition takes a fascinating and unique look at the men, women and children who lived in Eboracum (Roman York). A garrison city, Eboracum was also a cosmopolitan centre, home to people from all over the Empire.

The stunning artefacts and extensive archaeology left behind offer us a real insight into everyday life in Eboracum. Building on new research this exhibition will bring you face to face with the Romans.

Visit the new look
Yorkshire Museum from
1 August 2010

The Romans in York

Roman York was the largest military base and civilian settlement in Northern Britain. It became a Colonia, the highest rank of Roman city; one of only four in Britain. People from all over the Roman Empire lived here.

The site was well chosen, on a low headland overlooking the boggy Vale of York at the junction of two rivers. It gave the Ninth, and later the Sixth Legions, rapid access to all points of the compass to control the local Brigantes and Parisii tribes.

The playing-card shaped fortress influenced how the city looks today. The main streets follow the line of Roman originals. Spaces left by large Roman buildings within the fortress now house impressive later buildings such as the Minster. Saxon and Danish trading posts which grew close by the old Roman fortifications and the rivers are now the site of commercial heart of modern York. Without Eboracum, modern York would not have existed and York's role in British history has been crucial. Many of Britain's most important bloodiest battles, such as Stamford Bridge (1066), Towton Moor (1461) and Marston Moor (1644) were fought close by the city.

For 1900 years, York has remained an important military, religious, commercial and cultural centre, a true legacy of our Roman past.

This tour takes you around the modern streets tracing the walls and buildings of the Roman fortress, known as Eboracum, meaning in Celtic, 'the place where the Yew trees grow'.



The Fortress

The legionary Fortress covered 20 hectares, the size of 28 football pitches. It had a grid of streets, tightly packed barracks, stables, granaries, workshops and a large Bath House, all overlooked by the imposing HQ building, known as the Principia. It housed 5000 soldiers, all squeezed into a space measuring some 400 metres by 475 metres.

The fortress walls and gates were originally wooden, built on a mound of clay and timber logs and reinforced with an earth rampart behind it, in the years after 71AD. They were replaced by stone defences from 107/8AD onwards. The fortress was partly rebuilt several times over many years. The last rebuilding phase was around 306AD, under Emperor Constantine, including massive towers facing the civilian town or Colonia that projected out from the walls; possibly for defence or for show.



Start of the Tour

The Yorkshire Museum

Only 50 metres from the Yorkshire Museum is the western corner of the Fortress. The Multangular Tower is the best preserved of the fortress towers, probably dating from the time of Constantine.



The South West frontage of the fortress in the 4th century would have been an impressive structure, but with troops being used to fight elsewhere in the Empire after Constantine's death in 337AD, the walls slowly fell into disrepair. Looking closely at the tower you can see the original, small and tidy, Roman limestone blocks near the base.

The Medieval city wall was built on top, and you can see the larger, crude stonework which dates from this time.



ON THE MAP

1

There is a small gate in the medieval wall nearby through which, to your right, the inside of the great tower can be seen to roughly its full original height. Looking down you can just see the original playing card curve of the Roman wall before the huge protruding Multangular tower was added on at a later date. The stone coffins (sarcophagi) are from the Colonia, located across the River Ouse.



ON THE MAP

2

06 Building stones which were originally built into the lower courses of the Multangular Tower.

Library Gardens

To your left, the inner row of walling is the Roman fortress with its facing of small neat blocks and rough inner core. The North East and North West sides of the fortress were buried under later earth mounds used by Angles and Danes for defence. Medieval walls were then built on top of these ramparts. The roman fortress therefore laid the pattern for later defences. The earth rampart was removed in 1971 from this fortress section which, mysteriously, sits a few feet inside the later medieval city wall.



Legions stamped their titles into the goods they made in this case the ninth legion based in York until its disappearance in the early second century.



The Anglian Tower is roughly built so it was thought to have been constructed after the Romans left. We now think it was erected by the Romans around 375AD, because later builders often re-used existing Roman stones, and this does not happen at the Anglian Tower. We think it replaced wall damaged by subsidence. This could also be why the medieval wall does not sit above the roman wall in this area. The Anglian Tower was built only three generations after the magnificent Multangular Tower, showing how standards of work declined towards the end of Roman York. Beyond it is a cross section of the earth rampart, showing how the defences developed over time.



ON THE MAP

3

Museum Gardens

Back through the gate into the gardens, a fine stretch of fortress wall connects the Multangular tower and medieval St Leonards Hospital. It displays bands of red tiles to bind the inner core to outer wall facing, suggesting a later date (early 4th century) than other parts of the fortress.



Six smaller interval towers protruded out from the wall along this river frontage in an imposing way. The older, longer sides of the fortress each had seven internal towers. The curving foundations of Interval tower 6 can also be seen jutting out from the Roman defences near to the entrance to the gardens.



Roman comb, made from bone, discovered within the Interval Tower.

ON THE MAP **4**

St Helens Square

Lendal tracks the South West frontage of the fortress. A massive double-entranced main Gate, the Porta Praetoria (a fragment still exists in a storeroom beneath Harkers' Bar) lays under St Helens Square. The present day Guildhall entrance slopes down to what would have been busy wharves and the 2nd century Bridge across to the Colonia. Looking left, Stonegate overlays the Via Praetoria leading to the great Principia or Headquarters building.



The line of the fortress wall is picked out around the city by brass plaques and distinctive blocks set in the ground above where the wall now sits, covered by 10-16 feet of later overlay and sealed in the waterlogged ground that so effectively preserves ancient remains in York. A sign outside Harkers Bar provides more information.



ON THE MAP **5**

St Sampsons Square

Walk to your right along Davygate. This runs inside the line of the South West wall and over a range of barrack buildings uncovered in the 1950s. On reaching St Sampsons Square you have nearly walked the full width of the fortress.

The South Corner Tower is a mirror image of the Multangular Tower and stands up to 10 feet high under Costa Coffee. The site can be found, about 75 metres from the Square along Feasegate. Here the wall line at the tower is indicated by black tiles in the road.



From St Sampson's Square the wall then turns back across Parliament Street in front of you. It is marked by another plaque amid the trees and cycle stands. Near to this, a shop has an oddly narrow frontage, uneven roof line and crooked windows (can you spot it?). This building could have subsided as it stands partly over the buried Roman wall and also across soft earth from the filled-in defensive ditch that enclosed the walls. This suggests the wall still stood above ground in Danish times when many building plots were laid out and that pressure on space forced people to use these infill gaps in later times.

The wall here finally disappeared below ground as stones were taken for Saxon and Norman church building and as debris piled up in this busy commercial area.



ON THE MAP **6**

Marble statue of athlete found at the site of the bath house.

The legionary bath house was uncovered in 1930 under the Roman Bath public house in St Sampsons Square. It drained through a huge millstone grit sewer, 50 metres of which were excavated in 1972 running underneath Church Street. Water still flows here and coins and trinkets found in the silt date the Baths to around 300AD. The Roman Bath Museum shows and explains these fascinating structures, the largest military bath house complex found in Britain.

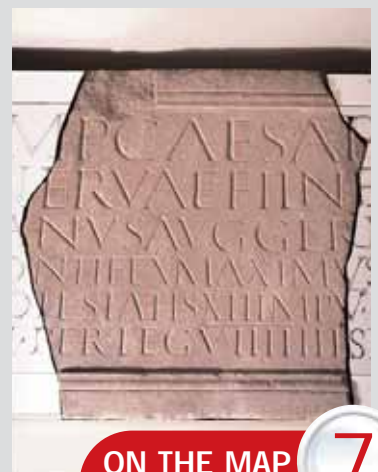


ON THE MAP **6**

Kings Square

The wall continues parallel to Church Street into Kings Square and the Porta Principalis Sinistra (South-east gate).

The Trajanic stone tablet which would have been above the gate is now in the Yorkshire Museum and dates this gate to 107/8AD.



ON THE MAP **7**

Aldwark & Eastern Tower

To find the Eastern Corner Tower, walk down St Andrewgate and Aldwark, a derivation of the Danish 'Aldwerk' meaning 'old works', referring to the Roman defences still standing in the 9th century. Outside the defences there seems to have been an industrial area used for iron smelting, dyeing and tile making. The Tower is best viewed from above, standing on the city walls. Climb the steps on the righthand side of Monkbar and walk 50 metres along the wall.



The tower dates to around 110AD. Non-protruding, it still stands 12 feet in height. The connecting walls are of later 2nd century date as can be seen from the different masonry style. This walling can be seen, along with another interval tower, at the base of the medieval wall. From here, the Roman wall circuit is embedded in medieval earth rampart that follows its' exact line round to Bootham Bar. Nothing is visible above ground level but it is a very pleasant walk with picturesque views.



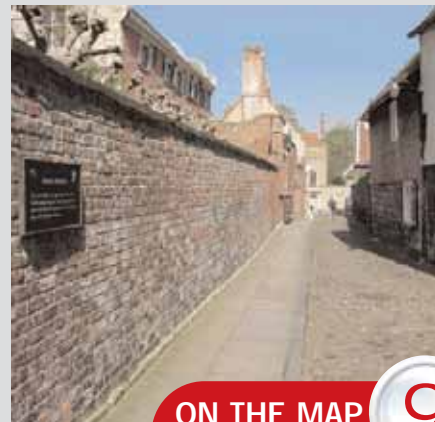
ON THE MAP

8

Drinking may have helped the guards to pass away the time. Some drinking vessels were fine glass bowls.

Chapter House Street

Walking along Chapter House Street you will trace the route of the Via Decumana, evidenced by column bases found in the 18th century under the footpaths. Via Decumana sits 18 inches below the cellar of Treasurers House. A year before its discovery in the 1950s, a young man working in that cellar, saw a troop of ghostly soldiers, in late 4th century dress walk through the cellar, on the line of the road, and they were only visible above the knees, as though they were walking on the actual Via Decumana. This remarkable story is recounted to visitors to the Treasurers House.



ON THE MAP

9

Minster Yard

Chapter House Street and Queens Path lead you to the main door of York Minster, the site of the military Headquarters of the province, known as the Principia. It is fitting that a Statue of Emperor Constantine sits here, as it was in York he was proclaimed Emperor. He enforced toleration of Christianity and overcame other claimants to become the sole ruler of the Empire. York basked in his reflected glory. The Principia is displayed in model form along with original column bases and walls (with painted plaster) in situ in the Minster Undercroft.

The Principia faced down the Via Praetoria, (Stonegate) to the Porta Praetoria past it's junction with the Via Principalis at Minster Gates.



ON THE MAP

10

Minster Yard

The low three-sided range of buildings was completed by a huge Basilica, 70 metres long and almost as high as the Minster Nave today. It was a meeting place, religious site, bank and the Legate's (chief of staff) residence all rolled into one. A re-erected Basilica column stands close by, near to where it was found fallen in the 1960s.

One of 16, it held up the top section of the Basilica and was just a third of the height of the whole structure.

The famous carved head of Constantine in the Yorkshire Museum was found close by. The head and its wooden body would have stood some 10 feet high at the front of the Principia building.



Constantine the Great, acclaimed Emperor by his troops in York.

The Principia was the biggest building ever seen in Northern Britain, and was to remain so until the building of the Norman Minster above it in the 12th century. It probably remained standing, (with Anglian burials nearby) until at least 867AD when the Danes occupied York. It left the only space large enough in a crowded city for the building of our Minsters, the latest of which we can see today.



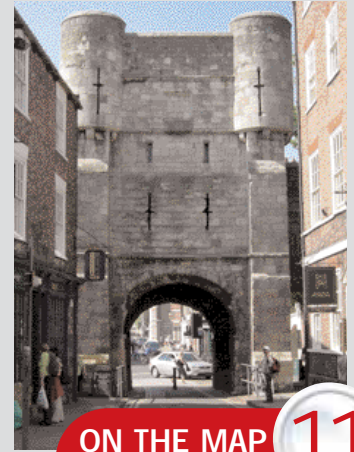
ON THE MAP 10

Reconstructed view of inside the Roman Principia.

Bootham Bar

Heading down High Petergate you will see the Medieval gate of Bootham Bar. In Danish and early Norman times, the remains of Roman York were a huge stone quarry with much of its masonry re-used in the later walls and churches of the city. Bootham Bar used Roman masonry reclaimed from the Porta Principalis Dextra which lies below, just under ground level. It faced the road north to Hadrian's Wall. The Roman gates defined the lines of the later main streets of the city, Petergate, Stonegate and Chapter House Street.

As the Western Roman Empire declined and trade diminished the double gates were reduced to single entrances which align closely with the later streets.



ON THE MAP 11

Exhibition Square

The wall then continued across Exhibition Square and a short stretch of it can be seen outside the Council Offices where St Leonards Place was created (and the decaying city walls and earth rampart were removed), in 1834. From this point, close by the tea rooms of the City Art Gallery, you can see the Multangular tower, completing your circuit of what was the most important military base in Britain from 200AD until the end of the Western Roman Empire.



ON THE MAP 12

The fate of the fortress

No reliable written records and few physical remains exist from the time when Roman influence collapsed in York and those that do seem to be from Anglian settlers in the area, but they help us guess at what happened.

Troop numbers reduced as they were frequently taken to tackle trouble elsewhere; so trade declined. Citizens became poorer and avoided taking up positions of public office. Many moved out the city. Towns became less important as the Roman economy ceased to work. Mass production of things like pottery stopped and by 400AD, most people were engaged in cottage industries and agriculture once again.

By 425AD, Anglian settlers arrived. There is little evidence of a military invasion. They did not need the massive glowering walls, the enormous Principia, the decaying barracks and temples for daily life. It must have been a silent and strange place to live in. However, some people probably did, using the old public buildings as workshops, courtrooms and meeting places.



Special pottery urns were made to bury cremated remains.

Fifty years later, the weed choked streets and collapsing roofs were the boundary between the new Romano-British kingdom of Elmet to the west and the Wolds, now settled by the Angles. Layers of dark earth from this time contain remnants of fire and vegetation. It is possible that some of the old barracks were cleared for agriculture and orchards. The major buildings and walls would still have provided defence in times of unrest and Eboracum was probably seen as a useful ruin, a meeting place or royal enclave spaciouly arranged like a walled park.

Around 600AD Eboracum came under Anglian control. By 627AD, the old Principia courtyard probably hosted the first wooden Minster. Following centuries saw the stones of Eboracum used to build Danish and Norman York securing its' role as the Centre of the North up to the present day.

What we do know is that the position of the fortress and its layout has had an enduring legacy on how the streets and buildings of modern York look today.



Cloaks were worn to keep warm. They were fixed over the shoulder using a pair of brooches with a chain between.

By 410AD the last of the Roman troops had been withdrawn from Eboracum, in the reign of the Emperor Honorius.



Timeline

69 – 71AD

Brigantian Queen, Cartimandua rescued by Rome from her husband, an opponent of Rome. York is the base for the subsequent Roman invasion of the north. Work starts on the fortress; earth ramparts with timber foundations topped by wooden walls and towers.

100AD

Work begins on military HQ (Principia)

107 – 108AD

Emperor Trajan orders the fortress rebuilt in stone.

150AD

Civilian town and cemeteries grow across the River Ouse.

208 – 211AD

Emperor Severus uses York to suppress unrest in the north. Stone defences completed at York. Severus dies here in 211AD.

212 – 237AD

Severus's son, Caracalla, splits Britain into two provinces with York as capital of Britannia Secunda. The civilian town is granted the highest rank of Roman settlement; Colonia, along with stone curtain walls.

306AD

Constantius Chlorus dies in York. His son, Constantine, creates mobile, defensive Cavalry Units. York becomes capital of Britannia Inferior and HQ of all military units in the north. Fortress defences partly rebuilt, including the great projecting towers overlooking the Colonia. The military Bath House built.

337AD

Constantine dies. Tribal pressure on frontiers. Internal Civil Wars.

367AD

The Great Barbarian "conspiracy" (tribal attacks and damage along all frontiers). Run down of roads and buildings in Eboracum. Debris builds up on Via Principalis. Principia used as a workshop. "Anglian" tower built to plug gaps in the fortress wall.

402 – 407AD

Supply of coins to Britain cease as troops move abroad. Britain effectively declares independence. Heavy depopulation in the fortress.

450 – 550AD

Eboracum deteriorates and sits between Anglian incomers from the east and the Romano British kingdom of Elmet.

627AD

King Edwin of Northumbria, baptised in the first wooden Minster, probably within the grounds of the old Principia building.

1822AD

The Yorkshire Philosophical Society forms and establishes the Yorkshire Museum as a showcase for the growing number of finds from Roman York.

For a full timeline of York's history, please visit The History of York website: www.historyofyork.org.uk



Find out more about the history of York at York Art Gallery, York Castle Museum and the Yorkshire Museum. Our special programme of adult learning events provides opportunities to dig a little deeper into a wide range of subjects. Below is selection of what's on offer.

Saturday 20 February 2010

2.00pm – 4.00pm | York Art Gallery

A Passion for the Picturesque

Examine images of Medieval and Elizabethan images of York, recording buildings now lost.

£5 per person

Wednesday 16 March 2010

10.30am – 12.30pm | Yorkshire Museum

The Geology behind York's Buildings

Take a tour of York and a surprising look at what the city's buildings are made from! Meet outside the Yorkshire Museum.

FREE ENTRY

Thursday 18 March 2010

12.30pm – 1.30pm | York Castle Museum

The Life and Times of York Castle 2010

A journey through 1000 years of the history of the site of York Castle and the people who inhabited it.

FREE ENTRY

Monday 12 July 2010

12.30pm – 1.30pm | York Castle Museum

A Tale of Two Rivers

York was born at the confluence of the Rivers Ouse and Foss, but its story begins long before the Romans settled 2000 years ago. Join the Yorkshire Museum curators to explore a tale of these two rivers.

FREE ENTRY

Booking is essential.

To book or for more information please call

01904 650333

For full details of our programme, opening times and admission prices please visit our website:

www.yorkmuseumstrust.ork.uk

