



The Walls

From Medieval Defence to Victorian Promenade

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A walk through 1,900 years of history

The Bar Walls of York are the finest and most complete of any town in England. There are five main “bars” (big gateways), one postern (a small gateway) one Victorian gateway, and 45 towers. At two miles (3.4 kilometres), they are also the longest town walls in the country. Allow two hours to walk around the entire circuit.

In medieval times the defence of the city relied not just on the walls but on the rampart underneath and the ditch surrounding them. The ditch, which has been filled in almost everywhere, was once 60 feet (18.3m) wide and 10 feet (3m) deep! The Walls are generally 13 feet (4m) high and 6 feet (1.8m) wide. The rampart on which they stand is up to 30 feet high (9m) and 100 feet (30m) wide and conceals the earlier defences built by Romans, Vikings and Normans.

The Roman defences

In AD71 the Roman 9th Legion arrived at the strategic spot where the rivers Ouse and Foss met. They quickly set about building a sound set of defences, as the local tribe –the Brigantes – were not very friendly.

The first defences were simple: a ditch, an embankment made of turf and clay, a large timber fence, and timber towers and gates. The fortress was big enough to accommodate the 6,000 or so men of the legion. Inside the defences you could comfortably fit 50 football pitches.

By the third century AD a visitor to York would have found been met by massive stone defences which surrounded both the fortress and the large and prosperous civilian town which had grown up on the opposite bank of the Ouse (The Micklegate side). One of the most important parts of these defences – the Multangular Tower – is still here today.

The Vikings

The fate of the walls during the “dark ages” is shrouded in mystery. In the eighth century Alcuin wrote about the high walls of the City of York. By AD867, however, the walls had fallen into disrepair and were unable to resist “the great pagan army” of the Vikings led by Ivar the Boneless.

Under the Vikings York experienced a boom that was not to be repeated until the Victorian period and the arrival of the railways. The prosperous Kingdom of Jorvik was coveted by Viking and English Kings alike and as trade and prosperity grew so did the need to modernise the ancient defences. The Vikings began by covering the Roman walls with a broad earth embankment crowned with a timber fence. Over time they extended the defences to the edges of the all-important rivers.

Disabled access

Unfortunately the Bar Walls are inaccessible to many people. However, the walls can be followed at ground level with the exception of the section along Gillygate.

The Normans

It took William The Conqueror two years to move north after his victory at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. In 1068 anti-Norman sentiment in the north was gathering steam around York. However, when William marched north to quell the potential for rebellion his advance caused such alarm that he entered the city unopposed.

Immediately upon his arrival “The Conqueror” built a castle from which to control this hostile territory. In fact in York he built two castles, both of earth and wood, one on each bank of the river. The rampart surrounding the city was extended and raised and the River Foss was also dammed to create an impassable expanse of open water, which became known as “The King’s Fishpool”.

From Medieval defence to Victorian promenade

In 1226 the King authorised the city to raise money for the upkeep of the walls by imposing “murage taxes” on goods brought into the city. This allowed the stone walls which you see today to be built. In the centuries that followed the walls protected York from rebels and from the Scots and were battered by Parliamentary artillery during a three month siege in 1644.

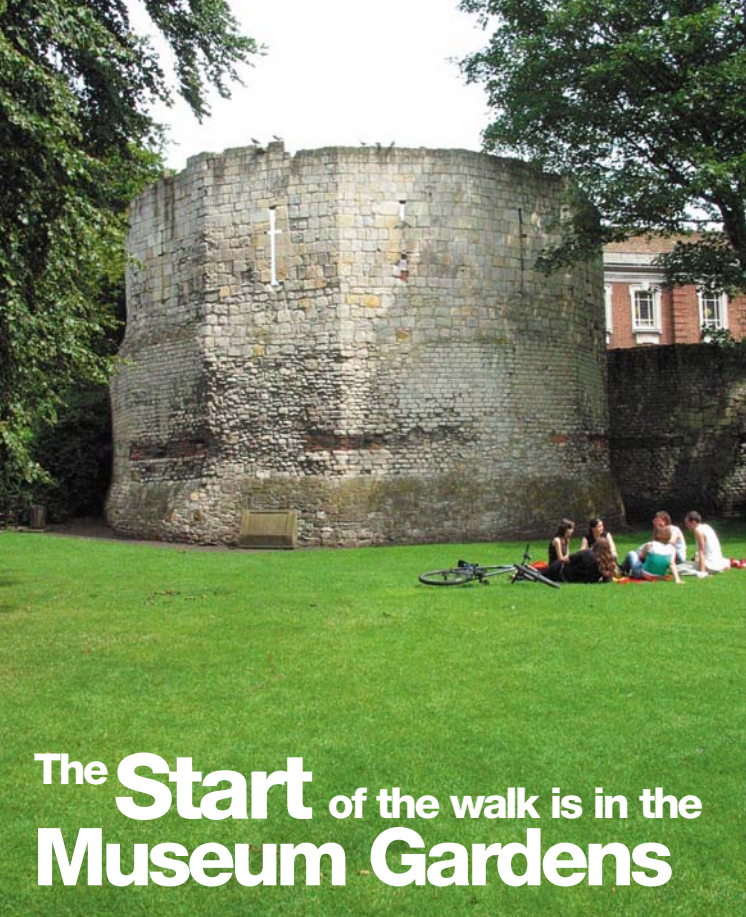
In 1800, however, the bar walls almost became a thing of the past when the City Council applied to Parliament for permission to “improve” the city by demolishing the walls! They began by destroying walls and towers at St Leonard’s Place and Skeldergate. A campaign of public resistance led to the formation of the York Footpath Association who set about restoring sections of the wall and creating the walk featured on this trail. Nowadays the focus is on conservation and the City of York Council spends around £100,000 a year on its walls conservation programme.

Closing times

With the safety of the public in mind the walls are closed before sunset every evening and re-open at 8am. Exact times are available from the Tourist Information Centre. In bad weather the walls will remain closed.

A walk around the Bar Walls of York

The gateways through York's defences are called 'bars'. The name has its origins in the simple gates, which were used to block the gateways to keep people out. There are five main "bars" (big gateways), one postern (a small gateway) one Victorian gateway, and 45 towers. The bars also acted as control points where people had to pay tolls on items brought into the city. They were normally locked at 9pm and the keys kept by the Mayor.

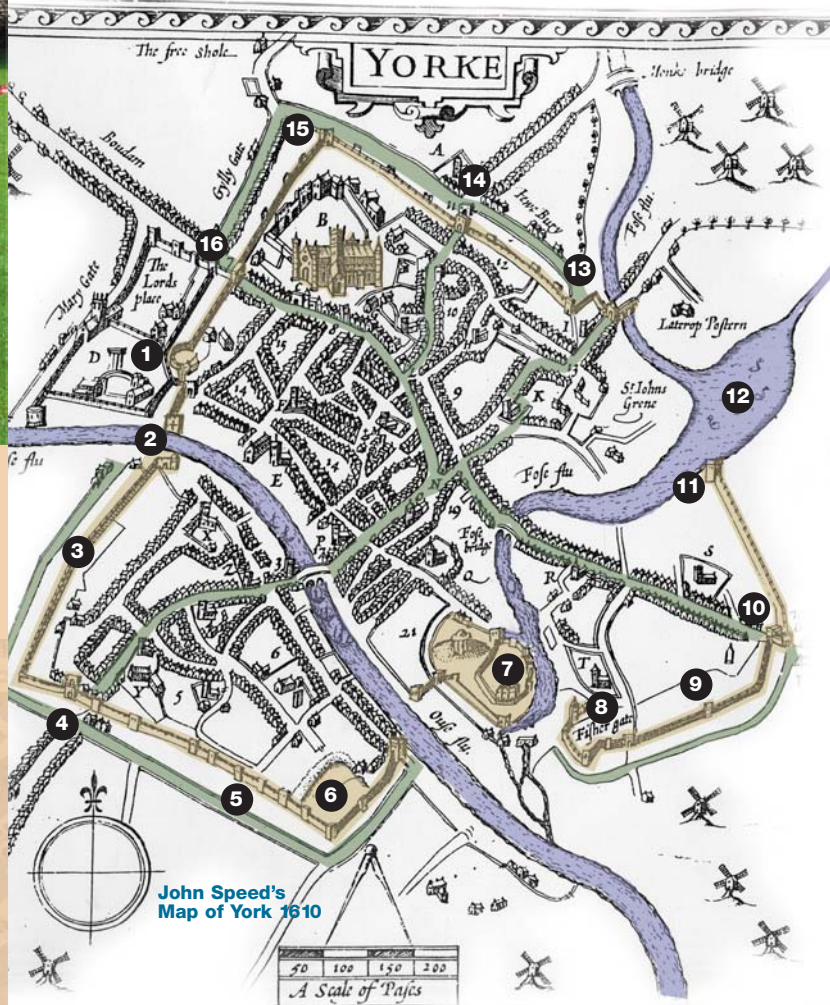


The Start of the walk is in the Museum Gardens

1. The Multangular Tower

The best place to start your tour of the walls is in the Museum Gardens where one of the most important parts of the Roman defences – the Multangular Tower – can be seen. The Multangular Tower was probably built at the command of the Emperor Septimius Severus who ruled the Roman Empire from York from 208 to 211. The tower has 10 sides and is nine metres high. Originally there were three floors on the inside and a roof on top. In Roman times it formed the western corner of the great fortress wall. There was a matching tower at the south corner of the fortress (under modern Feasegate). Long after the Romans had left the Multangular Tower continued in use. The lower part, which has small rectangular facing stones, is Roman while the upper part, identifiable by larger blocks, is medieval.

Please use care and common sense when walking the walls. They are a scheduled ancient monument. The steps are worn and there are no railings in places.



Take a look inside the Multangular Tower

2. The River Defences

Before crossing Lendal Bridge, follow the footpath down to the river's edge where you will find the 13th century Lendal Tower. Lendal Tower is very unusual in that from 1631 it was used as a water-tower, one of the earliest in the country. On the opposite bank of the river is the 14th century Barker Tower. An iron chain could be stretched between the towers to close the river in times of trouble and to ensure that boatmen paid a toll. Further downriver, near present-day Skeldergate Bridge, stood another pair of towers with a chain in between.



Railway carriages inside the walls near Lendal Bridge

3. From Lendal Bridge to Micklegate Bar

Cross the bridge and continue along the wall-walk, which takes us around the city. Outside the walls on your right you will see a little graveyard, which contains the victims of the cholera epidemic of 1832. The epidemic claimed 450 lives. According to one newspaper of the time the "pestilence silently ... entered the city, and took up its deadly stand ... in the dwellings of the poor". Although there are only twenty gravestones, many more were buried here but the graves of the poor remain unmarked.

In 1841 a railway station opened within the city walls to your left. In order to get trains into the city, the entire wall and rampart was demolished and a huge arch built to allow the wall-walk to be restored. As traffic grew more lines were needed. A second arch was built in 1845 and in 1876 a third was cut to provide access to the city centre from the new railway station, which opened outside the walls, in 1877.

At the south-western corner of the city wall stands Tofts Tower, which was blown up by the Scots in 1644 but rebuilt the following year.

4 Micklegate Bar

Micklegate Bar was the most important of York's medieval gateways and the focus for grand civic events. The ruling monarch traditionally stops at Micklegate Bar to ask permission from the Lord Mayor to enter the city.

For many hundreds of years Micklegate Bar was also home to the severed heads of rebels and traitors, which were skewered on pikes and displayed above the gate. There they were pecked by crows and magpies - a suitable indignity. The last of the severed heads was removed in 1754. The Bar is now a museum.



Victoria Bar

5. Victoria Bar

After Micklegate the wall-walk passes close by the rooftops of peaceful Bishophill and over Victoria Bar, which was opened in 1838 by the famous Lord Mayor of the time, George Hudson Esq. (the Railway King). Further along look out for the chessboard pattern carved into one of the flagstones!



The walls alongside Baillie Hill

6. The Old Baillie

The tall southern corner tower has been curiously called "Bitchdaughter Tower" since 1452 or earlier. It may have originally been part of the "Castle of the old Baillie", York's almost hidden second castle.

"The Old Baillie" was smaller than York Castle but was built at the same time by order of William the Conqueror himself. Baillie Hill is a typical Norman defensive mound or "motte" just like the one across the river underneath Clifford's tower. Unlike Clifford's Tower a stone citadel was never constructed here but archaeologists have found evidence that a wooden tower once stood on top of Baillie Hill.

To continue the trail you need to cross Skeldergate Bridge. Take the steps from the bridge down to Tower Street Gardens.

Can you see where the walls, now almost buried, once went right down to the river bank?



Clifford's Tower and the castle bailey in medieval times

7. Clifford's Tower & York Castle

Although an important part of the city's defences, the castle was never joined to the city walls and for many centuries was largely surrounded by water. The castle was first built by William the Conqueror in 1068 and consisted of a great mound of rammed earth, and a bailey - a large open area surrounded by an embankment, fence and ditch. Clifford's Tower was built between 1245 and 1260 as a self-contained stronghold on top of the mound originally constructed in 1068. The Tower lost its roof and floors in a disastrous fire in 1684 and has stood in ruins ever since.

In the 18th Century the medieval bailey was filled with prisons and law courts, which are now home to the Castle Museum. In 1190 the castle was burnt down by rioters attempting to massacre a group of local Jews who had taken refuge there. The Jews, however, "chose to die at each others hands" rather than be burnt to death.

8. Fishergate Postern Tower

Fishergate Postern Tower was built between 1504 and 1507, replacing an earlier tower on the same spot. In the medieval period the river Foss lapped at the foot of the tower. The postern, or small gate, next to the tower had its own portcullis (a heavy wooden gate, shod with iron which was lowered from above). Can you see the vertical slots it ran in?

9. Fishergate Bar

Fishergate Bar is the least well-preserved of the 5 main gateways to the city. The bar was once much like the other 4 and probably stood 3 to 4 storeys high. In 1489 the bar was so badly damaged by rebels that it was bricked up until 1827. The towers that once rose above the gateway were used by Queen Elizabeth I as a prison for Roman Catholics and lunatics.



16th century extension behind Walmgate Bar

10 Walmgate Bar

Although Walmgate is the only bar to retain its barbican, portcullis and inner doors, it has had a more torrid history than the other bars. It was burned by rebels in 1489 and battered by cannon during the siege of 1644. Until the late 19th century each of the 4 main bars had a barbican (an outer wall and gateway) just like the one that survives at Walmgate.



Robin Hood's Tower

11. The Red Tower

The Red Tower was built in 1490 by order of Henry VII. Controversially, the job of building the tower was given to the bricklayers rather than the stonemasons who resented this greatly. A bitter feud broke out, which led to the murder of a bricklayer and the trial, for murder, of the wardens of the Masons' Guild. Only the top two thirds of the Tower are now visible above ground.

From Red Tower, walk along the main road for five minutes to meet the next stretch of wall, which begins at Layerthorpe Bridge.

12. The King's Fishpool

There is no medieval wall along Foss Islands Road. There never was one. When William the Conqueror built York Castle in 1068 he built a dam across the River Foss in order to give the castle extra strong defences. This created a large lake called the King's Fishpool, which lasted for 700 years. In the medieval period, the lake extended over what is now Foss Islands Road!



13. Layerthorpe Bridge to Monk Bar

For many centuries there was a fortified medieval bridge on this spot. Outside this stretch of wall lies an area still called Jewbury, which was occupied in medieval times by the Jewish community after they were expelled from the city in 1290.

Just after the medieval Merchant Taylor's Hall, look down to your left. Can you see a small square tower and the top of a curving wall? This is the south-east corner of the Roman fortress. Keep an eye out for the medieval urinal.

14. Monk Bar

Monk Bar is the largest and most ornate of the surviving bars and dates from the early 14th century. The passageway and two lower storeys have elaborate vaulted roofs. The bar was a self-contained fortress with each floor capable of being defended. The arch on the front of the bar supports a gallery from which missiles and boiling oil could be dropped on attackers. Monk Bar still has its portcullis and winding mechanism. It is now a museum.



15 Robin Hoods Tower

The walk along the walls from Monk Bar to Bootham is particularly beautiful. Keep your eyes open for the bronze plaque fixed to the wall commemorating the restoration of this section of wall in 1888-9.

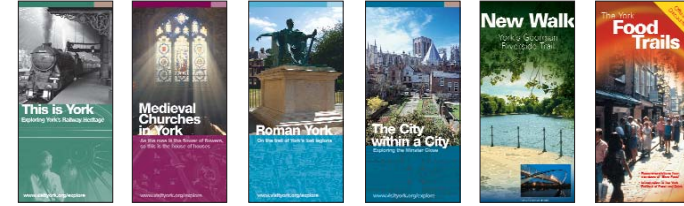
A good example of what the Victorians thought a medieval tower should look like can be found at the north angle of the defences behind the Minster. The present tower was built in 1888-89 to replace a much earlier one. The outside is faced with neat limestone blocks and the inside is built of concrete reinforced with re-used tram-rails!

16. Bootham Bar

Your walk along 1900 years of history finishes at Bootham Bar. There has been a gateway here since AD71. From here Roman Legions marched north to war in Scotland. The earliest parts of the present gatehouse date from the 11th century (the archway through which traffic still passes. Watch out for cars!).

Exploring York

York has a rich and colourful history that dates right back to Roman times. All around are clues to its past. Walking through the streets of York is the best way to unravel its many stories and to savour the rich architecture and archaeology at every turn.



Exploring York walking trails are available from the Tourist Information Centres and other outlets in York. All the trails are available online from, www.visitork.org/explore

Tourist Information Centre

To book accommodation in York and for all other visitor enquiries;

Tel: 01904 621756

Website: www.visitork.org

Park and Ride Bus Services

Buses run to the city centre every 10 minutes or less

White Line (from Askham Bar on the A64)	01904 551400
Yellow Line (from Grimston Bar on the A1079)	01904 551400
Green Line (from Rawcliffe Bar on the A19)	01904 551400
Red Line (from the Designer Outlet A19 / A64)	01904 551400
Silver line (from Monks Cross on the A1036)	01904 551400

Shopmobility

Visitors are welcome to use the excellent facilities of the Shopmobility scheme. Scooters, powered wheelchairs or manual wheelchairs are available. Shopmobility is located on level 2, Piccadilly Car Park. Tel: 01904 679222

Useful Telephone Numbers

• All emergencies	999
• York Police Station	01904 631321
• York District Hospital	01904 631313
• Lost property city centre	01904 551677

Acknowledgements

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