The story of York's medieval churches

Did you know that in medieval York there were around 40 churches, eight monasteries and friaries and countless chapels and chantries. This leaflet will help you explore some of York's lesser known treasures, the surviving medieval churches. It may take a day or more to visit all of the churches featured inside. Take your time, each and every one is worth it.

In the beginning
Christianity first came to York at the time of the Roman occupation as a forbidden faith whose followers could expect to be persecuted. The Romans worshiped a variety of gods, goddesses and dead emperors and in York there were temples to Mars, Mercury, Venus and even the Persian god Mithras. It was the coronation of the Roman Emperor Constantine, here in York in AD 306, that changed forever the fate of Christianity. In AD 312 Constantine declared religious tolerance throughout the Roman Empire. Christianity flourished and the oldest Christian churches in York and all over Europe trace their origins right back to this time.

The fall and rise of Christianity under the Saxons
After the Roman occupation, Christianity declined in the North of England. In 625, however, the pagan King Edwin of Northumbria married Ethelburga, a Christian Princess from Kent who insisted on bringing her priest, Paulinus, with her to York. Two years later, Edwin converted to Christianity, built the first York Minster and was baptised there. In the centuries that followed more and more Kings and Noblemen became Christians. Christianity became the major religion of Britain and the Church became rich, powerful and politically influential.

Medieval wealth and power
The Church dominated life in medieval Britain. Everyone was expected to attend church, and pay a tenth of their earnings to it. Monasteries grew wealthy and powerful and churches were richly adorned with carvings, paintings and stained glass. St Mary's in York was the richest abbey in the North of England and owned vast tracts of land all over Britain. By 1428 there were 39 churches in the city, eight monasteries and friaries and countless chapels and chantries. Nineteen medieval churches are still standing and many are featured in this leaflet.

The Reformation
Between 1536 and 1539 King Henry VIII smashed the power and seized the wealth of the monasteries in England. In York, virtually all of the glorious monastic buildings were confiscated, sold and torn down for their scrap value. Only traces of St Mary's Abbey and Holy Trinity Priory remain. In 1547, all traces of catholicism were stripped from churches. Shrines were destroyed, chantries closed, and statues were desecrated.

When Mary, became queen, she set about undoing the recent Protestant changes, restoring catholicism as the official faith and persecuting Protestants by the thousands. When Mary died in 1558, Elizabeth was crowned, established The Church of England, and resumed the persecution of Catholics! In York, many Catholics, both lay people and clergy, were publicly executed for their faith at the Tyburn (near where York Racecourse now stands).

Fire and Brimstone
In 1644, during the English Civil War, York was besieged by the Parliamentarian Army. St Denys', Walmgate and St Olave's, Marygate were severely damaged by cannon fire and according to legend, Sunday morning services in the Minster were disrupted by cannon balls, shattering windows and bouncing off pillars (the story goes that, instead of evacuating the building, the congregation sang louder and louder to drown out the noise!). The Royalist Army eventually surrendered to Sir Thomas Fairfax on the condition that his forces would not loot the Minster. Under Puritan rule, worship in York was stripped to its bare essentials - music, pomp and ceremony were forbidden and plainer Puritan sermons took their place.

Today, York's churches reflect the numerous denominations of modern Christianity and welcome all visitors; whether you come to look at art and architecture, enjoy a moment of peace, or to become involved with the life of the church. Regular services are still held in the majority of churches. All city churches are grateful to receive donations towards their care and restoration. Please give generously and don't forget to sign the visitor book.
York Minster
Open 9:00am – 6:30pm. Contact 01904 557216. Admission charges apply.

York Minster is the mother church for the North of England and the heart of this historic city. The first Minster was built for the baptism of King Edwin of Northumbria in 627. The present building was begun in 1220 and took 252 years to construct. Roman, Saxon, Viking and Norman remains lie within it and beneath it. York Minster is the largest Gothic Cathedral in Northern Europe and inside you will find a treasure house of 800 years of religious art and some of the finest 14th and 15th Century stained glass in the world.

The start of the Walk is at York Minster

Location for the start of the walk which is 10 minutes walk from the Railway Station, close to car parks at Marygate and Union Terrace and very close to the Park & Ride terminus on Museum Street (Green Lane).

Medieval Churches in York
As the rose is the flower of flowers, so this is the house of houses

1. St Michael le Belfry, High Petergate
Open most Mon – Sat 11 - 4. Contact 01904 624190
St Michael le Belfry is so named because it stands in the shadow of the Minster bell towers. It was completed in 1536. In 1570, Guy Fawkes was baptised here. The magnificent reredos behind the altar was painted by York-born artist William Etty whose statue now stands in front of the Art Gallery.

2. Holy Trinity, Goodramgate
Open April - September
Mon to Sat 10 - 5, Sun 12 - 5
October - March Tues to Sat 10 – 4.
Contact 01904 613451
Holy Trinity, the second oldest of York’s medieval churches, stands in a secret oasis of calm in the heart of the city. It escaped the wave of Victorian refurbishment that swept over so many of York’s churches and is the only church in the city to retain its original box pews. In Georgian times, each family had their own pew. Wealthy families sat at the front, and poorer families at the rear of the church! The church is now in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust. www.visitchurches.org.uk.
3. St Helen's, St Helen’s Square
Open Mon – Fri 10 - 5.
Contact Rev Anthony Hodge, 01904 625186
Extensively restored in the 19th Century, only the magnificent Baptismal font gives a clue to St Helen’s Norman origins. There is also medieval glass in several windows, one of which features the badge of “The Worshipful Company of Glaziers”, recalling medieval times when Stonegate was home to a thriving glass painting industry and St Helen’s was the glazier’s guild church.

4. St Martin le Grand, Coney Street
Open Mond – Fri 10 - 5.
Contact Rev Anthony Hodge, 01904 625186
St Martin's today occupies only the south aisle of the original, much larger church. The building was severely damaged by bombing during World War II and stood in ruins for decades afterwards. In 1968 it was re-consecrated as a “shrine of remembrance for all men who died in the two world wars”. The organ was a gift from the German Government as a token of reconciliation. The magnificent St Martin window, depicting the life of St Martin of Tours, originally stood in the west wall of the 15th Century church.

5. St Michael's, Spurriergate
Open Mon - Fri 10 - 4, Sat 9.30 – 5.
Contact 01904 629393
Once a parish church with a dwindling congregation and few funds, this ancient church was reborn in 1989 as a wonderfully atmospheric place to relax in the heart of York and now offers people good food, fair trade goods and a listening ear amid the beautiful church features.

6. All Saints, North Street
Open for visitors Mon – Fri 10.30 -mid-afternoon. Contact Dr Robert Richards 01904 728122 / 0771 8749959
Probably the finest of York’s medieval Churches, and the site of many visions of the Virgin Mary. The Chancel roof (supported by a re-used Roman Column) features spectacular painted angels carved in 1470. In the north aisle are two famous stained glass windows. The first, called “The Corporal Acts of Mercy” (c1410) portrays a good man as he visits the sick, clothes the naked and feeds the hungry. The next, called “The Pricke of Conscience”(1410), is the medieval equivalent of a horror movie and depicts the last 15 days of the world. In one window on the south aisle keen-eyed visitors may even spot a man wearing medieval spectacles!

7. Holy Trinity, Micklegate
Open most Mon – Sat.
Contact 01904 623798
Once a substantial Priory, Holy Trinity was the starting point for the annual performance of York’s Mystery Plays in medieval times. The city’s stocks remain in the churchyard today.

8. Bar Convent Museum, Blossom Street
Open 10 – 4 Mon to Fri, closed Christmas, January, & Easter. Contact 01904 643238
The history of Christianity in the North of England is explained in this charming museum housed in a Georgian building which is also home to the oldest active convent in the country. The beautiful chapel was hidden in the centre of the building to avoid detection at a time when Roman Catholics were subject to persecution.

9. St Mary's, Bishophill Junior
Open 12 – 2, Wed & Fri, Apr –Sept. May be open by appointment.
Contact 01904 623798
Hidden away in the lanes behind Holy Trinity, St Mary's is the oldest church in the city. Parts of the tower date back to Saxon times (11th Century) and contain re-used masonry from Roman times.
The Churches Conservation Trust www.visitchurches.org.uk

Visiting churches in Yorkshire
The Churches Conservation Trust
www.visitchurches.org.uk

North Yorkshire Church Tourism Initiative
www.yorkshirechurches.com

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