From Roman time to the seventeenth century York was an important military and administration centre, the unofficial capitol of the north. These virtual tours take you through some of the expected and unexpected highlights of the history of York and their intersection with their contemporary culture. The tours are divided into sections that correspond to areas of study in the Department of English and Related Literature, York.

**Anglo Saxon, Norse and Celtic**

In pre-Roman times York seems to have been at the junction between the tribe the Romans called the ‘Parisi’, who occupied the Wolds, and a loose confederation called the ‘Brigantes’, who spread across north England each side of the Pennines up to Scotland. (The classic study of the Peoples of Roman Britain was carried out by Herman Ramm in a series of monographs in the 1970s.)

*Dykes and Division: Property and Propriety*

The road linking the Hull Road with the New University Road is called Green Dykes Lane. It is named after a large ditch that survived till the early 1850s (*A History of Yorkshire: The City of York*, Ed P. M. Tillot, London, Oxford University Press, 1961, p.322a and note). Such a ditch would have been in the right place to serve as a boundary demarcation between Brigantes and Parisi territory. Recent finds tend to support this interpretation. The tribes of Iron Age Britain (C 1,000-0 BC) were led by warrior elites who beheaded their enemies. These preserved heads were displayed over dwellings or at the entrance of forts to confirm the prestige of the warrior or his tribe. A skull, which had been drilled so it could be attached to a portal, was found in the entrance to Stanwick Camp ([http://www.pastscape.org.uk/hob.aspx?hob_id=21862](http://www.pastscape.org.uk/hob.aspx?hob_id=21862)) and is now displayed in the Yorkshire Museum. Often heads were buried as ritual offerings, presumably to the war god of the local pantheon. When Archbishop Holgate’s Grammar School was constructed in 1963, an Iron Age skull was found on the site. On the principle of ‘waste-not-want-not’ it was placed in the Biology Lab, so what might have been a boundary guardian ended up as a cheap educational aid. The construction of York University’s East campus in the fields below the hill on which Archbishop Holgate’s stands, uncovered a similar solo skull-offering ([http://www.york.ac.uk/campus-development/expansion/archaeology/oldest-brain/](http://www.york.ac.uk/campus-development/expansion/archaeology/oldest-brain/)).

**The Yorkshire Head Cult**

Often carved stone heads were used instead of actual heads. They are not naturalistic; they frequently have enlarged eyes, slit mouths and small noses. [http://www.brigantesnation.com/SiteResearch/EarlyChristian/CelticHeads/CelticHeads.htm](http://www.brigantesnation.com/SiteResearch/EarlyChristian/CelticHeads/CelticHeads.htm) As this site shows, many actual Celtic heads or heads made in a
similar style have been built into churches. This example is taken from Ripley, outside Harrogate:

Ripley Church exterior north wall bottom of arch over window. There was originally a head at the bottom of each arch; some are badly eroded.

Such heads are found on churches all over the country but in Yorkshire, especially in the south Pennine area of the Brigantes, the tradition of the luck bringing head seems to be especially strong and such heads continued to be carved and mounted well into the 20th century. The fiddle player Frank Weatherill of Danby-in-Cleveland, for example, was creating similar heads in the
1960s (*Folk*, Bob Pegg, London, Wildwood House, 1976, p51; photo held in Leeds archive LAVC/PHO/P1725). Frequently these heads were mounted on domestic buildings not just churches. The tradition seems especially strong in the areas around Haworth. Here is an example from the lower end of Haworth Village:
Celtic-style head, private house, Haworth, West Yorkshire. There is no means of dating such heads. It might be the same age as the house or thousands of years older, rediscovered and redeployed. The head is high up on the left of the building. It might have exchanged glances with the Brontes…
I was once told the story of the Sun Inn Haworth. The new landlord complained that his pub was haunted. The locals advised him to put a carved head over the doorway to scare off the ghost. He duly commissioned a head, put it up and the haunting stopped. Here’s the head:

Celtic-style head, the Sun Inn Haworth; round the corner from the previous building.
The twist comes in the date; the head was put up in 1975, not 1575… The picture was taken in 1987

West Campus/East Campus; The Deathly Hallows
In view of the evidence of these sacramental/apotropaic activities the University occupies what appears to have been a liminal no-man’s land or demilitarised zone reserved for the gods in Pre-roman times. Evidence of Roman settlement on Kimberlow Hill at the east end of East Campus show these sanctities did not survive a new administration. (http://www.york.ac.uk/campus-development/expansion/archaeology/roman-site/)

Cup and Ring Markings
Thousands of years before the before the Iron Age/Celtic ‘head cult’, sometime between 2,000-1,500 year BC (Neolithic to Bronze Age) what modern archaeologists call ‘cup and ring’ markings were carved into rocks on the South Pennines and North York Moors.
Cup and Ring marking from near Goathland on the North York Moors, now in the Museum Gardens, close to the Yorkshire Museum. For many years this was lost because it had been placed face down…

No one know the significance of the markings. My theory is that the cup carvings imitate the ‘cups’ worn in the rocks of Yorkshire by wind and dust. Such marks, formed without human intervention, may have been regarded as the work of the gods that could be imitated and elaborated by humans.
Sometimes cups alone are carved on rocks, elsewhere complex patterns, including, spirals and ‘ladders’ were cut (see the ‘Panorama Stone’ brought down from Ilkley Moor to stand near St Margaret’s Church). By the fifth century when the Saxons were farming the moorlands of Yorkshire, the meaning of these stones had been forgotten and the Saxons may have regarded these as supernatural manifestations of a haunted land, whose original inhabitants they called ‘the strangers’ (Welsh).

**The Romans**

The Romans constructed a vast military camp at York to police the division between the Brigantes from the Parisi. The stone walls surrounding the legion fortress were eventually elaborated in the early 4th century into a ceremonial frontage covering the legionary fort’s south side, studded with multangular towers. One was reused in the Middle Ages and was known as ‘Elrondyng’ in 1315 (*City of York: Volume II The Defences*, Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, 1972, p19b). It stands in the Museum Gardens:

![The Multangular Tower: the smaller stones in the lower course are Roman, the larger ones above them Mediaeval.](image)

The Saxon poem ‘The Ruin’ shows how impressed the Saxons were by the technology of the Romans, a technology that they could not initially match:

> Snapped rooftrees, towers fallen,
> The work of giants, the stonemiths
> Mouldereth.

Roman rule was not accepted mildly. Scotland and Ireland remained unconquered and Hadrian’s Wall was built to establish and supervise the terminus of the Roman empire. In 367 a so-called ‘Barbarian conspiracy’ saw the Picts attack Roman Britain from Scotland, the Scots from Ireland and the Saxons from Saxony. Widespread slave-revolts followed. By the time Count Theodosius recaptured the province in 369 the Romans were content to repair the fortress wall with a crude tower, now misleadingly known as ‘the Anglian Tower’.
Emergency Patch: behind the Multangular tower. Note the crudeness of the stonework compared to the neat facings of the Multangular Tower.

Oddly enough in the years following the withdrawal of official Roman protection in AD410, the inhabitants of Britain rewrote their history. In this version the Roman occupation becomes several incursions in which the Romans are frequently defeated by the natives. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s 12th century History of the King’s of Britain, canonised this version of ‘history’ that he worked up from the traditions recorded by the 6th century monk Gildas and possibly the Welsh legend of ‘The Dream of Macsen’.

The first Saxons were invited into Roman Britain to fight as mercenaries. As Roman rule collapsed, Saxon settlers moved into the power vacuum and expanded their settlements and their dominence. The chroniclers of Britain, such as Gildas and the materials assembles under the name ‘Nennius’, record the process as an invasion that was resisted by Post-Roman heroes such as Ambrosius and Arthur. These traditions are buttressed by the heroic poetry of Taliesin and Aneirin, poets of the sixth and seventh centuries. Against this tradition, modern archaeologist Francis Pryor argues that the agricultural evidence is of a slow and peaceful co-existence (Britain AD, London, Harper Collins, 2004).

Saxons to Vikings
When the Saxon took over Roman York they expanded the fortifications of Roman York to protect what had been the Roman civilian settlement. These defences consisted on an earth bank, in some cases heaped over what was left of the Roman wall, topped with a wooden palisade. These defences were improved by the Vikings when they ruled York. The chronology is complex but Viking raids began about 787. By 860 raids were succeeded by determined invasions. Alfred the Great fought back and a peace was established that created ‘the Danelaw’ in 878. This was a division of England into an Eastern half that was ruled by the Danes and a Western half ruled by the Saxons, who were calling themselves ‘the English’.

In 910 two ‘kings’ of York were killed and Vikings based in Dublin invaded the North. Between 919 and 954 York was the capital of a sea empire that incorporated the Shetlands and Ireland, ruled by men with nicknames like ‘Sigtryggr the Squinty’ and ‘Eric Bloodaxe’. Between 1016 and 1042 Danish kings ruled all England, before being replaced by Edward (the Confessor) and Harold II, the Harold killed at Hastings. For more details and comprehensive illustrations of the spread of Viking culture see Cultural Atlas of the Viking World, ed James Graham-Campbell, London, BCA, 1994.
Saxon/Viking York: The additional area fortified is the loop stretching to the South of the river. There may have been defences on the east that are lost under the later walls.

The scale of the undertaking may be seen in a photograph of the bank at the south west corner (Queen Street).
Dark Age Bank: 13\textsuperscript{th} century wall. The lower part of the bank dates from 867, the stone wall from 1250.

Such defences absorb many man hours and, though part of the motivation is prestige, this investment of time and money contradicts Pryor’s optimism. The defences reveal a landscape of fear within which the inhabitants sought to protect themselves from Vikings, Saxons, Scots or Civil Wars.

Micklegate (Viking for ‘The Great Street’) Bar may have looked like this in Viking times:
To be fairer to Pryor, this period was also one of prosperity. Supported by the rich agricultural lands outside, Jorvik could become the centre of specialised craftsmen and prestigious buildings.
Viking Plots, Walmgate: shops in Walmgate still occupy land divisions established in the Viking period. Behind the brick frontages of many of these houses are medieval half-timber buildings.

From Danish to mediaeval times York was one of the most important cities of Europe, a city of craftsmen and international traders. *Egil’s Saga*, from Viking days, attributes two storey houses to York as well as a royal palace and hall. Much of the fine work the craftsmen produced would be for the aristocratic elite. Fine helmets and weapons would be especially valued.
Saxon Parade or Ceremonial helmet. C700-50. In the Yorkshire Museum.
Like Beowulf it combines pagan imagery (a dragon nose-guard) with a Christian text. Inside is a Latin prayer: ‘In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and God; and to all we say amen Oshere’. (Oshere was the owner).

http://www.historyofyork.org.uk/themes/anglo-saxon/the-york-helmet
A Viking Warrior & his weapons.
Middleton Cross N. Yolk.
This carving of a Viking warrior poses him like an Action Man with his accessories beside him. Good mail, swords and spears would be expensive. Not only did such weapons make the Vikings fearsome opponents but the expense of maintaining such a lavishly equipped elite stimulated further raids and conquests.
Muzzled bear: Hogback tombstone fragment Brompton Co. Durham

Viking Crown England

Viking Beast from York Brooch 9th-10th century
Viking art, like Saxon, encompassed stone-carving as well as metalworking, with a similar delight in turning birds and beasts into decorative, often highly stylised modes of decoration.

Saxon tower, St Andrew’s
By the end of the Saxon period the Saxons were capable of building stone buildings. These skills were deployed on church, rather than military buildings. The Normans demolished most Saxon churches, including York Minster, and built new ones, as if to show the new masters controlled Heaven as well as earth.

The end of Saxon England
In 1066 England faced a double threat, a northern invasion by Harold Hardrada and Harold of England’s brother Tostig and a southern invasion by William of Normandy, depending, literally, on which way the wind blew. To increase the irony the ‘Normans’ were Vikings, who were settled in a part of France in the 8th century. This are became known as ‘Normandy’: ‘the place of the Northmen’.

The Battle of Fulford Gate
After a tense summer, no invasion materialised and Harold of England demobilised his peasant militia to gather in the harvest. Shortly afterwards, in September, the invasion winds blew, firstly from the north, so the Viking invaders struck. A fleet of fast Viking ships crossed the North Sea and anchored at Riccall. Hardrada’s army marched towards York, as elements of his fleet sailed up the Ouse, uniting at Fulford.
The sword on Eric Bloodaxe’s York-forged coin reveals firstly, Vikings, as well as the rest of Europe claimed to be inheritors of the Roman empire; ‘rex’ is the Latin for ‘king’, secondly, the sword reminds subjects of the Vikings’ ferocious military reputation. At Stillingfleet, eight miles downstream as the Ouse flows, Viking
ships were remembered in the ironwork on the church door. Sagas often refer to Viking war vessels as ‘Dragon Ships’ because of their frequent use of dragon figurheads, as in the modern replica above.

The Viking army was awaited by Earls Edwin and Morkere (or ‘Morcar’) with the Saxon fyrd, a peasant militia who had been through basic training. Two interpretations of the battle are possible. Assuming Edwin and Morkere had no patience or tactical insight, they launched an immediate attack. This drove the Viking right backwards as they came across Germany Beck but the other two divisions of the Viking army moved up from the road and the river to attack the Saxons on the flank, driving them towards a ditch and a marsh to the East, where many Saxons got bogged down and slaughtered. (see Harold and William: The Battle for England 1064-1066, Benton Rain Patterson, Stroud, Tempus, 2001, pps 120-3)

A more forgiving interpretation of Edwin and Morkeres’ action is that they held their men back. As the Vikings advanced their line would have become ragged, men on the road overtaking men on each side. Knowing their less battle-experienced troops could only succeed through shock, Edwin and Morkere urged an attack when the Viking right was at its most disorganised.

In all events the result was the same. The experienced Vikings retreated rather than broke before launching a counter attack and Edwin and Morkere, seeing their army disintegrate, fled.

According to saga tradition, the attacks that routed the Saxons were led by ‘berserkers’, warriors who would run mad with battle fury.
The Battle of Fulford Gate: Sept 20th 1066

The Battle of Stamford Bridge

The Vikings settled down in Stamford Bridge, five miles east of York, leisurely negotiating the surrender of the city, when they were surprised by Harold of England, who had marched his army up from London in less than a week. The
Viking army was spread out on each side of the River Derwent and according to the *Heimskringla*, the saga of Harold Hardrada, the first the men on the north bank knew about Harold’s advance was the glitter of steel in a cloud of dust, like sun on ice. Harold’s men destroyed the lightly armed northern group, before crossing the river and fighting through two more Viking lines. According to the saga before the final battle Hardrada was offered ‘six feet of English earth or more if he’s taller.’ Both Hardrada and Tostig were killed in the fight. (Patterson, 127-34). Perhaps rashly, Harold hardly paused for rest and reinforcements before marching south to deal with the Norman invasion. The death of Harold and his bodyguard at the battle of Hastings deprived Saxon England of its leadership, allowing William a complete triumph.

**The holding of the Bridge**
The most famous incident in the Battle of Stamford Bridge, according to saga, is the defence of the bridge of Stamford by a lone berserker armed with a two-handed axe, who held up Harold’s army, killing 40, before a Saxon floated downstream in a tub and impaled him with a spear.

Even when the exaggerated body count is removed, this incident does not make much sense. Firstly an axe man armed with a two-handed axe would lack a shield and be vulnerable to thrown spears or axes. Secondly Patterson mentions most of Harold’s army charging ‘across the stony shallows of the Derwent’ (Patterson p132), which would have outflanked the bridge. Thirdly if the bridge was only wide enough for one man to hold, it would not have been of much use.

A rationalisation might be to consider that the man was a swordsman. This is asserted by local tradition. The pub next to the modern bridge is called ‘The Swordsman’ and the pub sign shows the defender and his assassin. Such a man could have carried a shield to defend himself against missiles. The incident itself might have taken place during a lull in the battle. Harold may have reached the battlefield with his swift-moving mounted elite troops, cleared the northern bank and then had to wait before the rest of his force could arrive. In this gap there might have been time for the single-combat challenge, beloved of saga writers to actually take place.

**Sagas and the Game of War**
Sagas like to consider war as being an elaborate game in which heroes can make good the boasts they made in the ‘mead hall’ the night before battle. *Beowulf* shows the process in action. When Beowulf arrives in Hrothgar’s Hall, Unferth challenges him verbally by reciting a hostile account of Beowulf’s deeds. Beowulf responds with his version of events and a ‘boast’, better considered a pledge, that he will deal with Grendel (*Beowulf*, trns., Seamus Heaney, London, Faber and Faber, 1999, ins 506-606, p18-20).

A similar event occurs in the saga of *The Battle of Maldon*. Here Earl Brithnoth offer the Vikings he has trapped on an island the chance to come across to the mainland and fight on equal terms, as if champion was challenging champion. Unlike many sagas, the poem is surprisingly accurate on the topography of the 991 battle of Maldon in Essex and presumably equally accurate on the events of the battle. Generally the text has been seen as glorifying Brithnoth’s daring and
sympathising with the consequence; the death of Brithnoth and the heroic stand of his bodyguard. In a deliberately provocative reinterpretation J. R. R. Tolkien asserted the saga condemns Brithnoth for overweening pride and a mistaken allegiance to a code of warrior glory. (http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/The_Battle_of_Maldon)

This opinion is deeply important to Tolkien and finds its most vivid expression in Tolkien’s imaginative rather than critical work when Bilbo visits the dying Thorin in Chapter XVIII of The Hobbit. Here Thorin dismisses the warrior values he has lived and died by: ‘If more of us valued food and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world.’ (The Hobbit, J. R. R. Tolkien, London, Allen & Unwin, 1937, p299).

Historians have tended to see Tolkien’s interpretation of Maldon as an anachronistic injection of post Great War pacifism into Saxon warrior culture. Their analysis sees Brithnoth as realising that the battle had reached a stalemate where the only chance of a decisive outcome is a dangerous invitation to the Vikings to come to land. Brithnoth’s action cost him life but his bodyguard killed so many Vikings that the survivors had to abandon the raid. See http://www.battlefieldstrust.com/resource-centre/viking/battleview.asp?BattleFieldId=23
The Battle of Stamford Bridge: Sept 25 1066.

Though not as famous as Hastings, the battle of Stamford Bridge was one of the most decisive in English history. If Harold had lost, William might have had to face a Viking army marching south, reinforced by anti-Norman elements. The result might have been a new Danelaw with the north separating from the south. Certainly William was nervous about the loyalty of the north and built two castles to try to control each side of the Ouse, the Viking invasion route (see map above).
York’s Second Norman Castle (Bailey Hill) The picture shows the castle mound (motte) of York’s second castle, lying under a dome of trees. It would have had a timber tower surrounded by a wooden wall when William built it.

He was right to be suspicious. In the days when Northumberland meant, literally, the ‘land north of the Humber’, the north was reluctant to be ruled by the south. William’s castles did not work. In 1069 a Saxon rebellion supported by a Danish fleet destroyed or damaged the castles. William reacted with the ‘Harrowing of the North’; a scorched earth campaign that starved out rebels and killed vulnerable civilians by destroying crops and burning villages.
Clifford’s Tower: the motte is clearly visible in this picture. This is the keep (the strong tower) of York Castle. In 1069 there would have been a wooden tower on the summit. Clifford’s Tower itself occupies the motte, the courtyard (bailey) is now filled by the 18th Assize Court, still in operation, and two prisons, now museums.

This castle was rebuilt in stone around 1250, whilst Bailey Hill was dismantled. In 1190 the Jews of York took shelter from an anti-Semitic riot in the wooden keep that was burned by the mob.
The imagery of the Norman arch seems derived from pagan rather than Christian imagery; the beakheads on the second arch from the top are similar to creatures found on the Iron Age Gundestrop Cauldron. See panel ‘C’

Anyone entering the building enters through what looks like a toothed mouth or a series of talons. The clichéd description of mediaeval cathedral is ‘sermons in stone’; if this porch is a sermon what is it saying? The Normans control both Christian and pagan worlds, this world and the next? The intent seems to be to intimidate not succour.

A Last Glimpse
Siward’s Howe. Under these trees above the University library, next to the old water tower, is a choice to distinguish Realists from Romantics…

To Realists this is the base of a windmill. To Romantics this is the burial place of Earl Siward’s body. His heart was given a Christian burial in St Olave’s Marygate, whilst his body was laid beneath a Beowulf-like mound. According to what I was told when I attended Heslington Primary School, the old water tower is haunted by the ghost of a man who appears on one of the balconies inside. Is this Siward exploring the intrusion on his burial place?

The historical Earl Siward was one of the Saxon lords who marched north to fight and overthrow Macbeth.

Places to Visit:
Ilkley: Easily accessible by train from Leeds. Saxon Crosses inside the parish church; cup and ring markings near St Margaret’s church and scattered across Rombald’s Moor to the south of the town, though you’ll need a specist map to find most of them.
Leeds: Easily accessible by bus or train from York. Saxon Crosses in the cathedral church.
(All these Saxon crosses mix pagan and Christina iconography and stories, much as Beowulf does.)
Ripley: Accessible by bike or from the Harrogate-Ripon bus (Harrogate is easily accessible by rail). The village not only has the church with ‘Celtic’ heads, and bullet scars on the east wall, where Cromwellian executions were carried out, but also a castle with secret rooms for concealing Catholic priests and one of the best ice-cream shops in Yorkshire.
York:
In addition to the sites shown above, The Yorkshire Museum has many important artefacts from the period. For those who want a recreation of the sights and smells of Viking York, there is the Jorvik Centre. Some of the voices speaking Norse in the background are staff and students who studied Anglo Saxon and Norse at York University.