

The story of Roman York

York is a city almost 2000 years old, founded when the Roman 9th Legion built their fortress on the north-east bank of the river Ouse sometime around AD71. The legion were sent north from Lincoln to rescue Queen Cartimandua of the local British tribe, the Brigantes, from the forces of her former husband, an enemy of Rome. Having saved the Queen, the Romans stayed put and over the next 300 years or so Eboracum (the Roman

version of the Celtic name meaning “the place where yew trees grow”) assumed a unique status in Britain as both a permanent military base and a civilian town of the highest rank. The population was made up not only of native Britons, but also, as inscriptions on tombstones tell us, of people from many other parts of the empire including Gaul, Germany and Italy.

The Legionary Fortress of Eboracum

In outline the plan of the fortress resembled a playing card. Initially, it was defended by a ditch and earthen rampart with palisades, towers and gates constructed, like most of the internal buildings, of timber. Inside was a grid of streets. At the centre stood the headquarters building, the legion’s command and control centre. There was a bath house, a house for the commanding officer and barracks for the 5000 or so men of the legion. 50 football pitches would comfortably fit inside the fortress.

The first garrisoning force at York was the 9th Legion. The tombstone of their standard bearer, Lucius Duccius Rufinus, from Gaul, can be seen in the Yorkshire Museum. By the year 120 when the Emperor Hadrian came to York to build the wall which defended Roman Britain from the unruly tribes of the north, the Ninth had departed. What happened to it has, until recently, been a mystery and a myth has grown up of their annihilation in a war in Scotland. What is now thought more likely, however, is that the men were transferred to a fortress in the Netherlands.

The Colonia

The 6th Legion became the new garrison at York and set about reconstructing the buildings, walls, gates and towers of the fortress in stone. An important civilian town grew up around the main approach roads to the fortress. On the opposite bank of the Ouse, where the town was probably walled, archaeological excavations have uncovered splendid public buildings, including bath houses and temples. There were also fine houses for wealthy people like Julia Velva

whose tombstone in the Yorkshire Museum shows her dining, as one did in polite society, while reclining on a couch.

Imperial York

In AD 208 the Emperor Septimus Severus set up the Imperial Court in York and from here he ruled the entire Roman Empire for three years while campaigning in Scotland. Severus died in York in the year 211. During the reign of his son Caracalla, the Roman province of Britannia was divided into two and the town at York was made capital of Lower Britain and given the honorific title of colonia.

In the year 306, a second but less well-known emperor, Constantius I, died in York. His son Constantine ‘the Great’ was then acclaimed as emperor by the army. It was in York, therefore, that the career was launched of one of the most remarkable rulers of the Roman empire, not least because he was the first to tolerate Christian worship.

Decline

By the beginning of the 5th Century the Roman political and economic system in the west had collapsed and Britain ceased to be part of the Empire. As far as is known, both the fortress and town at York were soon almost completely deserted. Archaeologists have found that signs of life did not return to the ancient city until around AD600 but in 627 York returned to documented history when, as the Venerable Bede tells us, King Edwin of Northumbria was baptised here.



Tombstone of Lucius Duccius Rufinus



Roman York

On the trail of York's lost legions

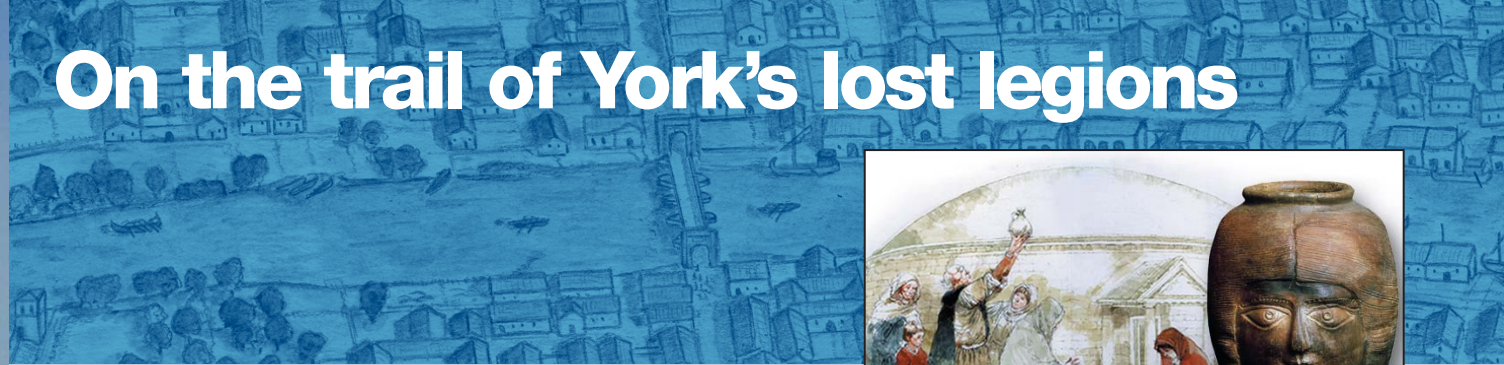
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The Start of the trail is at Bootham Bar



1. Bootham Bar is one of York's four medieval city gates, but it stands on the site of one of the main gates of the Roman fortress (porta principalis dextra). A visitor in Roman times looking out of the gate would have seen a great straight road, now followed by modern Bootham, heading north-west and eventually going as far as Hadrian's Wall. On either side of the road lay Roman cemeteries with their splendid tombstones and grand mausoleums.

On the trail of York's lost legions



Head pot used for burial

2. St Leonard's Place

In the car park next to the council offices is a small piece of the Roman fortress wall which was broken through when the street was created in 1834.



Take a look inside the Multangular Tower



3. Museum Gardens

A dramatic feature of the Museum Gardens is the Multangular Tower which stood at the west corner of the Roman fortress. The lower part is original Roman work, identifiable by the small rectangular facing stones. The upper part, identifiable by larger blocks, is medieval, the result of rebuilding the tower as part of the city defences.

In Roman times the tower may have stood at least 10m high and there was another, matching tower at the south corner of the fortress (under Feasegate). Between the two corners were six great interval towers facing the river along the line of the fortress wall. Fine stretches of this wall, standing to almost full original height, can be seen either side of the Multangular Tower. A detail to look for is the band of red tiles in the middle of the wall face which appears decorative to us but actually served to bind the structure together.

The Multangular Tower and the other towers may have been built at the command of the emperor Septimius Severus who ruled the entire Roman Empire from York in AD 208-11. Like politicians today, Roman emperors liked to build grand structures to show the world how powerful they were!



Statue of the God Mars

4. The Yorkshire museum

The museum gardens are also home to one of the finest collections of Roman artefacts in Britain. The Yorkshire Museum recalls in fascinating detail the history of the Roman settlement of Eboracum.



Roman Samian Ware from York

5. Gateway to the fortress, St Helen's Square

St Helen's Square is the site of the main south-west entrance (porta praetoria) to the Roman fortress. Standing here in Roman times you would have seen a great double-arched gate flanked by towers. Looking out of the gate (in the direction of the Mansion House and Post Office) you would have seen the river Ouse with warehouses and wharves along its banks. They would have buzzed with activity as ships offloaded goods from all over the Roman Empire like fine tableware, wine and olive oil from Mediterranean lands, and then prepared to return with grain from the rich farmland around York.

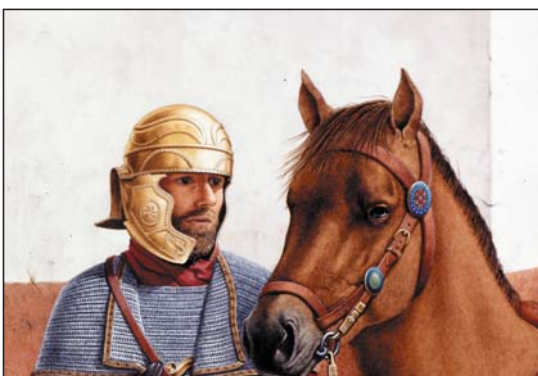
Close to the line of modern Stonegate, there was a Roman street (via praetoria) with buildings tightly packed on either side leading to the great legionary headquarters where the Minster now stands.



The Roman sewer underneath Church Street

6. The Roman Bath, St Sampson's Square Discovered underneath the aptly named pub in 1930 were the remains of the fortress bathhouse. This was not just a place to wash, but also to socialise and play sports and games – a 'leisure centre' in our terms. When it came to washing the Romans did not use soap, but sweated dirt out by vigorous exercise and by spending time in the caldarium. This was a room heated to a high temperature by a system of underfloor channels (a hypocaust) part of which can still be seen underneath the pub. The bather's next step was to scrape off the sweat and dirt using a strigil, a special metal tool, followed by a cold plunge and a massage.

Serving the baths was a great stone-built sewer which still survives under nearby Church Street. In the silt which filled the sewer, archaeologists found some gold trinkets, probably dropped by officers' wives who were permitted to use the baths alongside their men folk.



How the Minster Gates may have looked during Roman Times

7. Minster Gates

The junction of Petergate and Stonegate lies on the site of the junction of the two most important streets of the Roman fortress, the via praetoria which led to the main gate (St Helen's square), and the via principalis which joined the north-west and south-east gates (at Bootham Bar and King's Square).



Photo of the collapsed Roman column as found by archaeologists beneath the Minster

8. The Minster

Opposite the south door of York Minster there stands a great Roman column nearly 8m high. It was found by archaeologists digging in 1967 – 72 underneath the Minster tower. The column had originally been one of sixteen supporting the roof of York's greatest Roman building, the basilica of the fortress headquarters. The basilica was about 70m long and stood as high, perhaps, as the Minster nave. This is where a legionary commander, or even an emperor, could address his troops and it is quite likely that in this very hall Constantine the Great was proclaimed Emperor in the year 306. In the Minster Undercroft you can see the base of another column still in its original position along with other finds from the excavations.



9. Roman Ghosts in the Treasurer's House!

On the north side of the Minster a quiet little street, Chapter House Street, runs along one side of the Treasurer's House, close to the line of an important Roman street (via decumana) which led to the north-east gate of the fortress. The Roman street itself forms the floor of a small cellar inside the Treasurer's House, which is now open to visitors. It was here that one of the strangest stories in York's history began. In 1953 a young local man, Harry Martindale, was working in the cellar when he heard the sound of a trumpet. He turned to see a group of Roman soldiers walk out of the wall and continue past him. Later, he described how the soldiers' legs were not visible below the knee. After being ridiculed Harry stopped telling his story, but in 1954 excavations showed that a series of cobbled street surfaces had built up during and since the Roman period making sense of Harry's claim! The ghostly soldiers were presumably walking on the earliest and deepest street level!



Excavation of the Aldwark Tower

10. Aldwark - The East Corner of the Fortress

From the city walls near Monk Bar you can see the remains of the east corner tower of the Roman fortress, the site of York's first archaeological excavation in the 1920s. Clearly visible are three walls of a corner tower more than 18 centuries old which may originally have stood as much as 7-8m high. From here in Roman times you would have seen rows and rows of the long, low barrack buildings where the soldiers lived.



York Eboracum Annual Roman Festival

11. The City Walls, Monk Bar to Bootham

From Monk Bar you can return to Bootham Bar by walking in the footsteps of Eboracum's Roman defenders as this section of the city walls stands exactly where the Roman fortress defences stood almost 2000 years ago.



A Roman coin featuring the head of Constantine

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

To find out more about Roman York

The Yorkshire Museum www.york.yorkshire.museum 01904 687687
 The Roman Festival www.eboracumromanfestival.co.uk
 Roam'in Tours www.roamintours.co.uk 07931 668935
 The Archaeological Resource Centre (ARC) 01904 543403

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 every 10 minutes or less

White Line (from Askham Bar on the A64)	01904 883100
Yellow Line (from Grimston Bar on the A1079)	01904 883090
Green Line (from Rawcliffe Bar on the A19)	01904 883990
Red Line (from the Designer Outlet A19 / A64)	01904 551400

Shopmobility / Disabled Access

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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