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CLIFFORD'S TOWER



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Department of the Environment
Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings

CLIFFORD'S TOWER

and the castles of York

by D. F. Renn

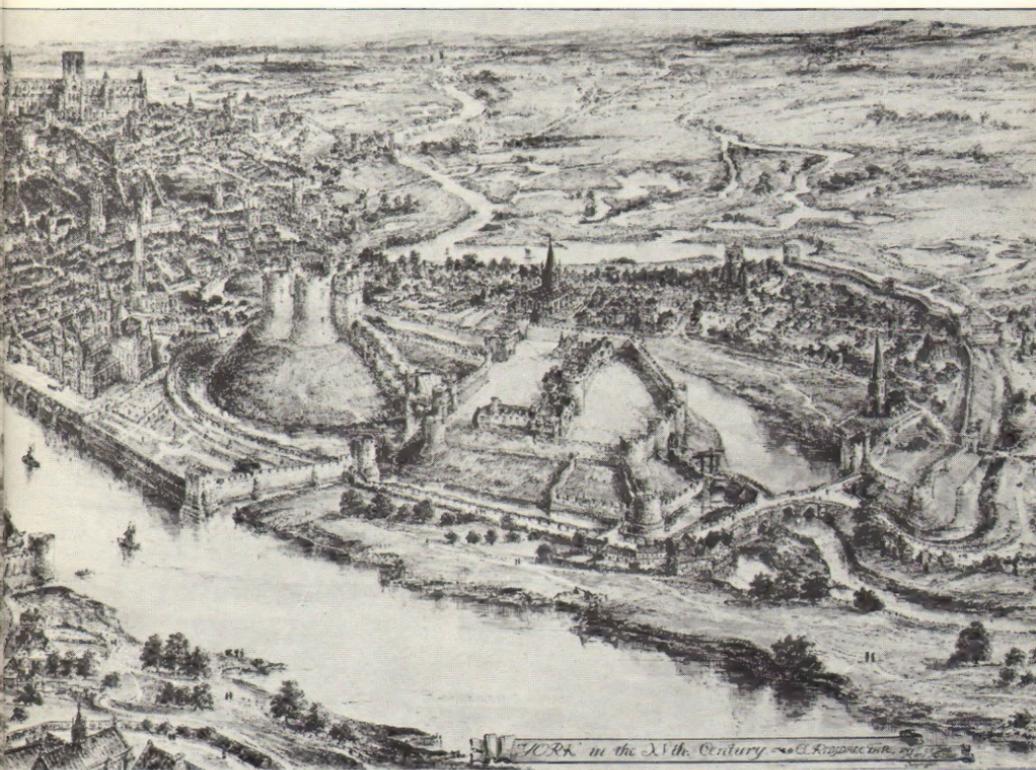


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Above: a drawing dated 1914, showing York as it probably appeared in the fifteenth century

Cover: the south-east prospect of York, engraved in 1718



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*A coin showing a
portrait of Constantine the
Great*



The Vale of York is the most northerly part of lowland Britain. Beyond it the hills close in from either side on the approaches to the disputed land of the Border counties, which were fought over for centuries. The broad glacier that carved out the valley left it with a poor soil and natural vegetation varying from forest to heath and swamp. However, the melting of the glacier left behind a moraine which provided a causeway across the lowlands from the Pennines to the Wolds. The Vale was drained by the river Ouse and its tributaries, and some prehistoric settlement may have grown up at the point where the Ouse breached the causeway. When the mound of York Castle was opened in 1902–03 to put in concrete reinforcements to support Clifford's Tower, a skeleton was found below the old ground level, buried in a crouching position in a coffin made of sandstone slabs.

York before the Normans

The first main phase of the Roman invasion of Britain was halted along a line from the Bristol Channel to the Humber estuary, and the conquest was consolidated in the south of England. Late in the first century A.D. the Roman army moved forward again beyond the Humber. Whether or not there was any permanent Iron Age settlement at York, it is clear on archaeological evidence that the tribes inhabiting the Wolds on either side of the Humber had similar cultures, and the main opposition to the Roman advance lay farther north. The Ninth Legion was moved up from Lincoln to a new fortress at *Eburacum*, and a new road network created to provide rapid access to trouble spots. The attraction of the site of York lay in its river system, which provided another means of rapid travel and a method by which the fortress could be relieved even if cut off by land. The legionary fortress was built north of the river Ouse, with its centre a little to the south

*An aerial view showing
Clifford's Tower in the
centre*

of the site later occupied by York Minster. It was of the standard Roman pattern, like a playing-card in plan, rectangular but with rounded corners and internal watch-towers at regular intervals. The Roman walls remain to a considerable height north of the Minster, but they are hidden by the later earth bank which supports the medieval walls whose foundations rest on the Roman walling. The most spectacular part of the Roman walls still to be seen is the Multangular Tower in the grounds of the Yorkshire Museum; this tower is a late Roman addition to the fortress walls. Its upper part was rebuilt during the Middle Ages. The present-day Petergate and Stonegate follow the lines of the two principal Roman streets crossing the fortress.

By the early third century A.D., a civil settlement (or *colonia*) had grown up to the south-west of the fortress, on the other side of the Ouse. The area to the east of the fortress and *colonia* was used for burial. Two inscribed (and one plain) Roman stone coffins have been found on the site of York Castle, together with another of lead and two wooden coffins. Tombs made of Roman tiles have been found at Baile Hill, just across the river from the castle. In 306 the Emperor Constantinus Chlorus died at York, and his son was proclaimed emperor by the garrison. This Constantine was to re-found Rome and to become the first Christian emperor.

One of the Roman stone coffins, inscribed "JULIA VICTORINA"

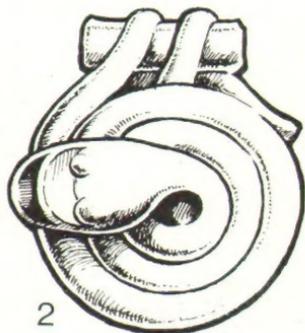


Although a church was built at *Eoforwic* for Paulinus, a missionary helper of St. Augustine, in 627, little trace has been found of any Saxon settlement apart from a silvered bowl and weights intended to keep taut the threads of a weaving loom. Again, these were found on the site later occupied by York Castle. Viking raids on the eastern coasts of England culminated in the capture of York by a Danish army in 866, and the development of the site as an important trading centre, for the Vikings fully understood the importance of trade, and only took to piracy when forced to do so by circumstance. The city of York abounds in Scandinavian place- and street-names – its own name derives from the Danish *Jorvik*. Traces of contemporary wharves have been excavated in Hungate, and a remarkable group of eleventh-century finds were made when the Friends' Meeting House was built, a hundred yards north-west of the castle. It was principally workshop waste, with much worked bone, including pins, combs and flutes, amber and glass beads, pottery lamps and wooden spoons. An oxbone carved with Viking patterns was found on the site of the castle itself. The city changed hands between different Viking and Saxon groups half-a-dozen times, but was under the control of the ruling Saxon house of Wessex by 1066. However, personal ties and trading links had forged bonds with Scandinavia as strong as those with Southern England.

The death of Edward the Confessor in the early days of 1066 led to a disputed succession. Harold Godwinson was elected, but his brother Tostig joined Harold Hardrada, the king of Norway, in an invasion by way of the Humber. The fleet anchored at Riccall, and the Norsemen overcame the defenders led by the earls Edwin and Morcar at the battle of Gate Fulford. Harold Godwinson brought up reinforcements from the south and crushed the invaders at the battle of Stamford Bridge, and then immediately had to about-turn and go south to challenge the invasion of William, duke of Normandy.



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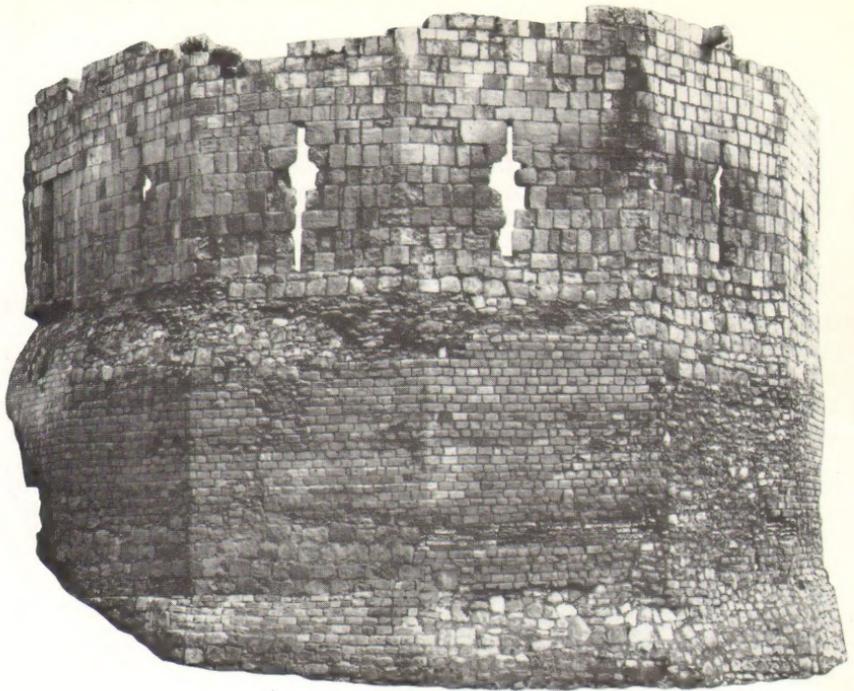


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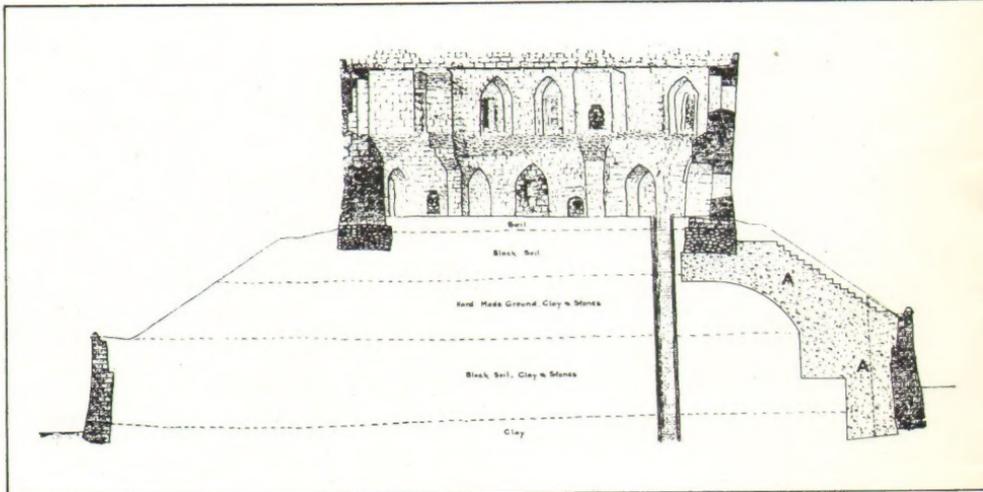
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Viking finds from York. 1. Bronze sword chape. 2. A jet pendant. 3. Ornamental metal device



The south-west multangular tower showing the Roman wall supporting the medieval foundations

A cross-section of the motte, from the 1902 Report of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society

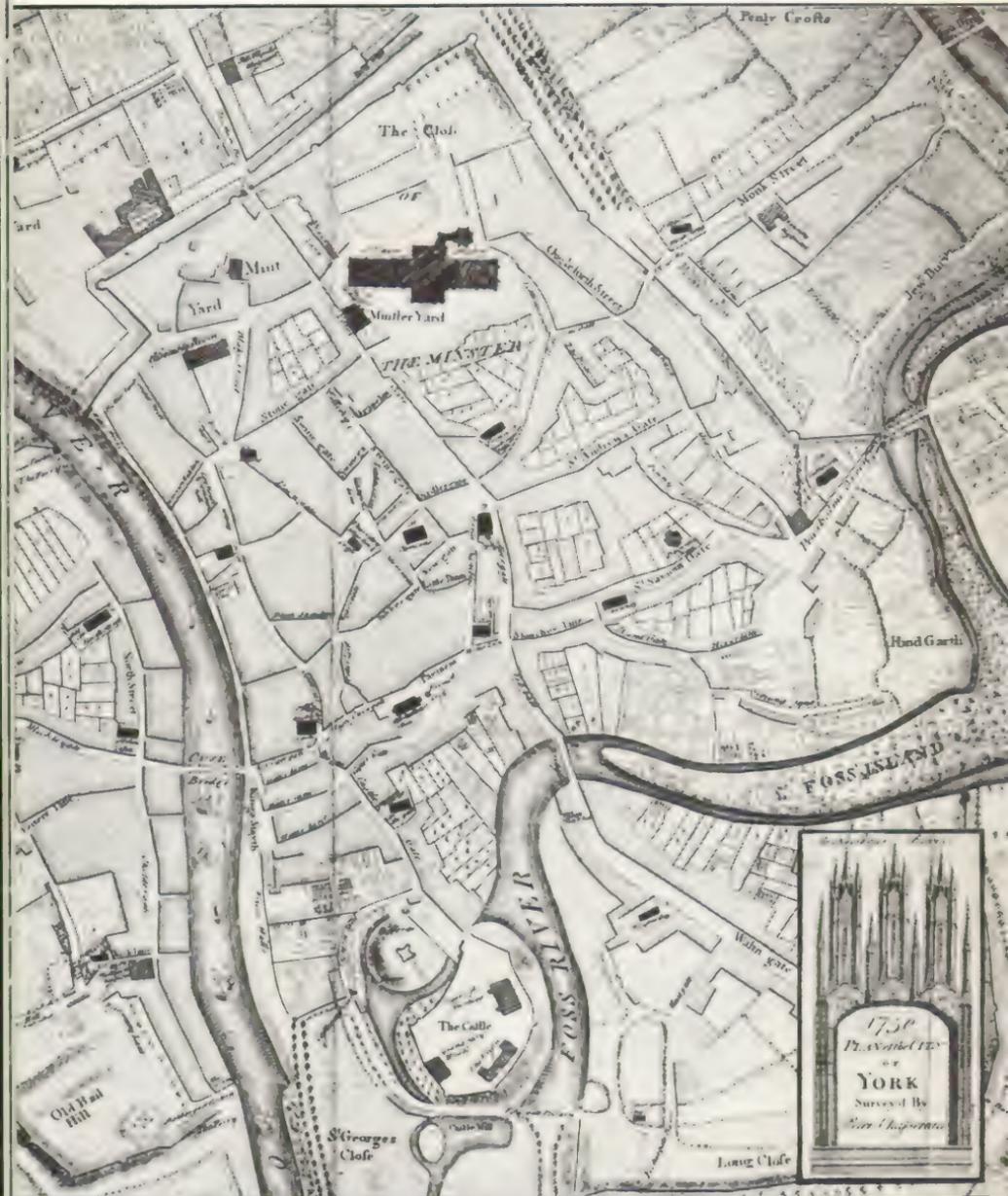


the building of the castles

The North submitted very reluctantly to the Norman Conquest. William I built one castle at York in 1068 and a second early the next year to overawe the city and to help control the region. In the autumn of 1069, a Danish fleet entered the Humber estuary and sailed towards York. The local population rose in their support, and converged on the city and its newly-built castles. The Norman garrisons set fire to some nearby houses to deny cover to the attackers, but the flames roared out of control through the city. The garrisons were overwhelmed and the castles dismantled by the Danes and their allies before the Conqueror could organize a relief expedition. Finding York deserted, William burnt many towns and villages in Yorkshire as a grim warning to any future rebels; the "Harrying of the North" can be traced in the valuations in Domesday Book nearly twenty years later. The castles at York were rebuilt, and at least one of them enlarged.

The early castles were often built, not of stone, but of earth and timber. A wooden tower would be supported by a high flat-topped mound or *motte* made of earth excavated from the surrounding ditch. Other buildings – the hall, chapel, barracks, stables, kitchens and workshops – were clustered round the motte in an enclosure protected by a bank and ditch, the bailey. Timber fences were built round the edge of the motte-top and along the bailey banks to increase the strength of the defences, and a ladder or staircase erected against the side of the motte to provide access between its tower and the bailey below.

The two castles of York remain to this day, facing each other across the river Ouse near Skeldergate Bridge. The square bailey of the castle south of the river has been built over, but the motte survives at the eastern corner and the roads to the south and west – Bishopsgate Street and Prices Lane – follow the line of the bailey ditches. The castle site is still known as the Old Baile, and a pot filled with coins of Edward the Confessor and William the Conqueror was found here in 1802. Excavation of the Baile Hill in 1968 revealed a flight of steps cut into the clay



side of the motte, leading up to an early Norman building on top.

Across the river, the mound of York Castle is prominent. During the underpinning of the tower at the beginning of this century, it was noticed that the motte was based on a layer of marl overlying clay, suggesting that the site had been pools of a tidal river at one time, and then the motte had been built up in horizontal layers of gravel, clay and stones to about two-thirds of its present height. At this level two timber platforms were found, one above the other, with a layer of charred wood between them. The platforms were made of thick oak slabs, with piles and forked uprights made from roughly-trimmed tree-trunks, against which was piled an "apron" of large stones. This was probably part of the castle of 1069-70 whose tower (presumably of timber) was repaired at the King's expense in the twelfth century. The only coins of William I found during the excavations, however, were lead forgeries. The oval bailey has been much altered, although traces of the early palisaded bank and ditch were found in front of the modern offices east of the mound. The river Foss was dammed by the Normans to provide a reservoir for the water defences and a fishpond for food, so creating a great artificial lake known as the King's Pool.

By the middle of the twelfth century, York was seeking its independence. The city's first charter dates from the early years of Henry II (1154-58), and there is both architectural and documentary evidence of Norman work in the walls and gates of the city. In 1190 a murderous riot took place at York. The Jewish community in England had loyally appeared at the coronation of Richard the Lionheart in the previous year, only to be attacked by the mob. This event sparked off similar outrages elsewhere; the harassed Jews of York were permitted to shelter in the tower on the motte, but when they refused to readmit the sheriff, they were besieged. Offers of ransom money were refused, and the heads of several leading Jewish families thereupon killed themselves and their kinfolk. The whole castle was burnt down in an over-hasty attempt to cremate the bodies. Soon after, the castle was rebuilt and probably it was at this time that the motte was raised to its present height. Although much money was spent on masonry during the reign of King John (1199-1215), the castle's wooden palisades and houses were repaired in 1225, and timbers blown down by a storm collected three years later. Old prints of the Castle Gate which stood on the site of the new offices suggest that the central archway was Norman. The great gate behind the Assize Courts used to open on to the area called Walmgate, which was surrounded by a bank and ditch in 1215-16.

Opposite: A map of York by Peter Chassereau, published in 1750

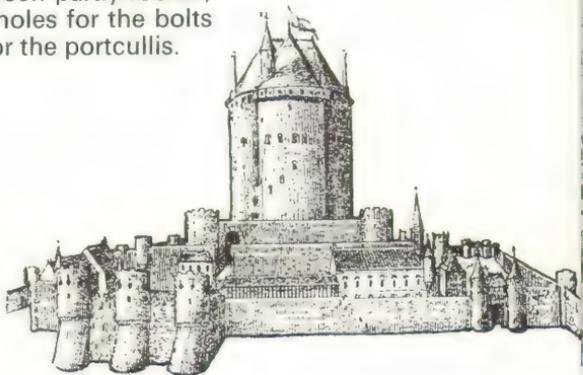


Clifford's Tower

War between the Scots and English kings had been narrowly averted in 1244, and Henry III determined to strengthen York Castle, bringing it up-to-date with the latest style of fortifications. Master Simon of Northampton and Master Henry of Reynes, the senior carpenter and stonemason respectively of Windsor Castle, were ordered to York to confer with other experts as to the manner of the reconstruction of the castle. Master Henry had probably spent some years in France, and Clifford's Tower on the motte at York is very similar in shape and size to the tower built earlier at Etampes, thirty miles south of Paris. The work of building Clifford's Tower went on slowly from 1245, with several interruptions, for the next twenty-five years.

The present staircase up the side of the motte is modern, but probably follows the line of the earlier approach from the bailey. The plan of the keep is a quatrefoil – four overlapping circles. The intersection of two of the "foils" at the top of the steps is covered by a projecting forebuilding. This was largely demolished when the castle was bombarded by the Parliamentary army during the Civil War, and then rebuilt after the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, with panels over the archway carved with the Royal Arms above those of the Clifford family. The right-hand side of the archway and the stone bench within are the remaining parts of the thirteenth-century forebuilding, and the projecting corbel-stones above the bench supported the original first floor timber joists. The ruined inner archway has been partly rebuilt, but the visitor can still see the holes for the bolts and bars and the vertical slots for the portcullis.

The Château d'Etampes



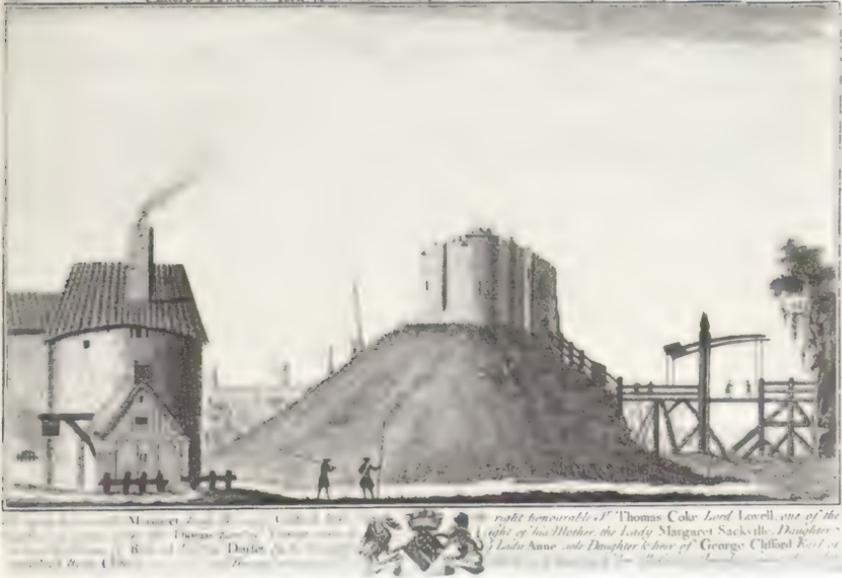
Clifford's Tower from the south

Within the tower, spiral staircases right and left of the archway lead up to the former upper floors and to the battlements. The stair on the left also leads to the chapel over the entrance passage. The chapel has been much altered: the floor level has been raised, and the arcading against the walls has been awkwardly rebuilt, probably in 1312. Originally there must have been another room above the chapel from which the portcullis was worked. In the "up" position, the portcullis must have hung against the left-hand arcading within the chapel.

The castle well can be seen on the right of the entrance, going down at least 50 ft [15 m] to the level of the bailey. The interior of each of the four "foils" of the keep is very similar, with two pointed embrasures lit by narrow loops at ground and first floor levels. The upper floor was supported on cross-beams resting on a central octagonal pillar, whose base remains, and on the walls at the intersection of the "foils". The upper embrasures nearest the spiral staircases had large pointed windows (now blocked up). Probably the best rooms were here, catching the sunlight and protected by the bailey defences. There were more spiral stairs from the upper floor to the battlements at the junction of the "foils" to right and left: the junction straight ahead had latrines at both levels, with fireplaces in the rooms on either side. In 1596 the prison gaoler, Robert Redhead, began demolishing the castle and selling the building materials. In Clifford's Tower, his method was to remove the inner face and core of the wall, leaving the outside face as long as possible to camouflage his depredations. Eventually, after he had demolished the turrets and battlements of Clifford's Tower, as well as some outworks in the bailey, his operations were stopped through the energetic efforts of the mayor and corporation of York. Traces of Redhead's demolition can be seen at the tops of the walls; the reddening of the stonework is the result of the fire in 1684 (*see page 16*).

Before leaving the summit of the motte, it is worthwhile to walk round the outside of Clifford's Tower. Looking out from the entrance archway down the steps, the three blocks of eighteenth-century buildings in front mark out the limits of the bailey of York Castle. To the left was the great artificial lake known as the King's Pool, which supplied water for the royal moats and fish for the royal table, and also drove watermills on its banks from Norman times. The cost of upkeep was very heavy, and although the mills were equipped with a steam engine in 1778, the Foss river was made navigable again soon afterwards and the Pool was drained in 1853 to remove the danger to public health, and the area was later built over. Behind the Debtors' Prison (immediately facing the entrance to Clifford's Tower) are the remains of the stone wall and two round towers of similar construction to Clifford's Tower, while behind the Assize Courts (to the right) are the foundations of the outworks destroyed by Redhead. Further right, in a clump of trees on the far side of the river Ouse beside the

Clifford's Tower in York, as it stood, situated within its own Park of the 1730's



right honourable J^{ts} Thomas Coke Lord Lovell one of the
eight of his Mother the Lady Margaret Sackville Daughters
of Lady Anne sole Daughter & heir of George Clifford K^{nt} of

An engraving dated 1730, showing Clifford's Tower before it was blown up in 1684

An early eighteenth-century drawing of Clifford's Tower and Castle Gate





The interior of Clifford's Tower

bridge, can be seen Baile Hill, the motte of the other castle of York. Points to notice about the outside of Clifford's Tower are the fine masonry of magnesian limestone of which it is built, with a spreading plinth and loops with a large square opening at the top and a small round one at the bottom. The junctions of the "foils" are covered by small rounded turrets supported on corbel-stones. As we saw inside, the two nearer the entrance contain spiral staircases and the other one, the sewers from the latrines.

In the early fourteenth century, York was often the seat of government while the King was campaigning against the Scots. The castle was refurbished and repaired, and temporary buildings were erected for the army of officials. Documents were brought up by the wagon-load, packed in barrels. After Bannockburn (1314), Edward II was continually at the castle. The bodies of Sir Roger Clifford and other leaders of the Lancastrian party were hung in chains from the tower, after the battle of Boroughbridge in 1322. (However, the keep was usually called the King's Tower in official documents until about 1596, when the present name of Clifford's Tower first occurs.) At the same time, the Old Baile was refortified with 18 ft [5.4 m] long planks and a stone wall, but by the fifteenth century the site was in the hands of the citizens.

Cracks in Clifford's Tower were reported in 1358, possibly due to the severe floods of 1315-16 which washed away part of the motte. Although the whole castle was repaired at heavy cost in the next ten years, the gaol was in a dangerous state in 1377. Between 1353 and 1546, gold and silver coins were minted in the castle, and the buildings were repaired from time to time, but the castle, although still Crown property, was in a state of decay generally. In 1614 it was sold, but both York Castle and the Old Baile were fortified and garrisoned for a time both during and after the Civil War. In 1684, Clifford's Tower was burnt out: sabotage was suspected, since the military and the civilians did not get on well together. Thereafter, the Tower became a garden ornament until it was incorporated in the extensions to the prison in 1825.



The entrance from the south-east

A present-day view of Clifford's Tower from the south-east





Clifford's Tower, 1807

*A drawing by Francis Place of York Castle in 1699, showing the
Great Gate*





John Howard, a contemporary portrait by M. Brown

Repairs to a gaol in the castle are on record as early as 1205, and five years later, iron fetters were bought for prisoners taken to York after King John's campaign in Ireland. After the Welsh revolt of 1294, 75 hostages were distributed among the castles of Yorkshire, ten being kept at York. Imprisonment might be more or less comfortable: in 1307, the Earl of Strathern was to be kept in custody (but not in fetters) at York Castle with two yeomen and two servants, and his wife with two damsels. The only restriction on the household was that the chaplain was to be an Englishman. As Crown property, the castle was not part of the liberties of the city, and those authorities had no jurisdiction there. Robert Aske, the leader of the Pilgrimage of Grace, was hung in 1537 "on the height of the castle dungeon" (i.e. the *donjon* or keep), as Sir Roger Clifford had been 200 years before.

the prison



The prison became ruinous by the seventeenth century, and the Debtors' prison was rebuilt in 1705 on the far side of the castle bailey from Clifford's Tower. It had a central clock tower and a railed-in exercise yard between projecting wings; until 1846 the clock had only one hand. At first the debtors occupied the right-hand wing, as did the prison governor, while the felons' cells were in the left-hand wing. John Howard, the prison reformer, said in 1774 that the debtors' prison did honour to the county. He was less pleased with the felons' wing:

"It is too small and has no water . . . The cells are in general about $7\frac{1}{2}$ feet by $6\frac{1}{2}$ and $8\frac{1}{2}$ high [2.2 by 2 and 2.5 m] [in which] three prisoners are locked up at night; in winter from fourteen to sixteen hours: straw on the stone floors, no bedsteads. . ." Nine felons were accidentally suffocated one night in 1739, the year of the execution at York of Dick Turpin, the notorious footpad. For five hundred years until 1774, prisoners had to pay for their food, and even pay fees to the gaoler and turnkeys on their release, even if found not guilty upon trial. At York, prisoners had to bring bed and bedding – or pay for it.

Several gallows were erected in and around York in the Middle Ages for the execution of criminals; such executions were a recognised public spectacle. In 1280 a man was hung on the Ainsty gallows (near Dringhouses) so inexpertly that he recovered and received a Royal pardon. In 1801, the city gallows was re-sited between the Debtors' Prison and the Assize Court House, which had been designed by the eminent Yorkshire architect, John Carr, in 1773–77. In 1813, fourteen men convicted of Luddism – murderous affrays arising out of the destruction of new machinery for fear of unemployment – were hanged at the "New Drop" in front of an enormous crowd. Not until 1868 were executions carried out within the prison, and not publicly.

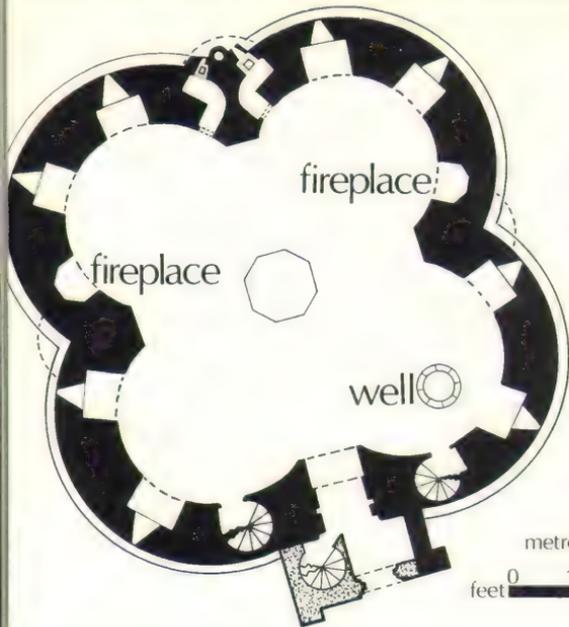
In 1802 the prison on the Ouse bridge was closed and replaced by one in the Old Baile. This in its turn was demolished in 1880, and its materials built into the nearby bridge. Between 1826 and 1835, a prison of the new "Dartmoor" type was built between Clifford's Tower and the Female Prison; the latter had been built opposite to (but soon after) the Assize Courts. The new prison had a separate governor's house with cell-blocks radiating from it. It was paid for by a tax on the whole of Yorkshire, and was closed as a civil prison in 1900, but remained a military detention centre until the first World War.



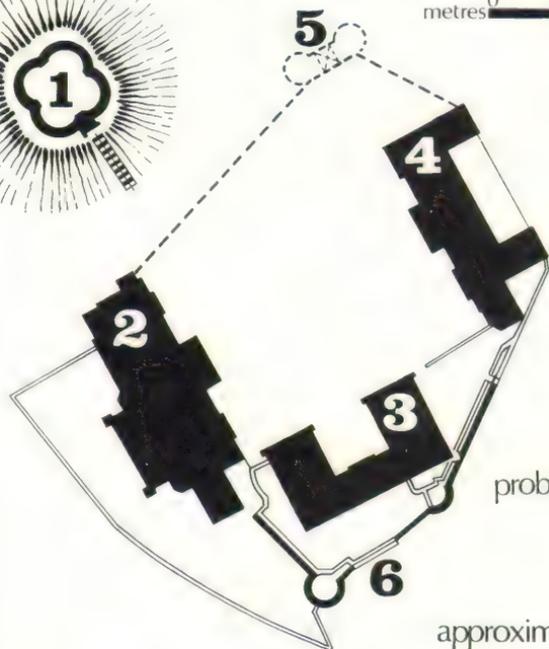
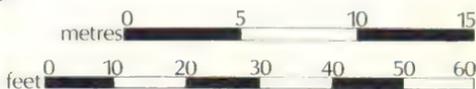
William Wilberforce. An unfinished portrait by T. Lawrence, 1828

The Castle Green, or the area of the bailey, was a public meeting place for centuries, and was often referred to as "The Eye of the Ridings" (less politely, Clifford's Tower was called "The Minced Pie"). At a time of Parliamentary election, the whole county voted on Castle Green. At first the franchise was restricted to substantial freeholders, and the poll was public, on the "show of hands" principle, but by the middle of the eighteenth century voting was at small booths, with facilities for the investigation of doubtful votes. The poll was open for fourteen clear days, and there were great opportunities for bribery and corruption of the voters. Despite this, the poll was headed five times from 1784 by William Wilberforce, the philanthropist and campaigner for the abolition of the slave trade. In 1821, the number of members of Parliament for Yorkshire was increased from two to four, and the 1832 Reform Bill increased it again to two from each Riding. The North Riding results continued to be declared in the Castle until 1885, when the county seats were redistributed into Parliamentary Divisions.

the eye
of the
ridings



early 14th century
17th century



- Clifford's tower **1**
- assize courts 1777 **2**
- debtors prison 1705 **3**
- female prison 1780 **4**
- probable site of castle gate **5**
- site of great gate **6**
- medieval walls ———
- approximate line of curtain - - - -

acknowledgments

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