

ISOBEL AKERMAN

SECRET YORK



AN UNUSUAL GUIDE



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

THE NAILS OF THE STATUE OF EDWARD II

②

The bored king

York Minster Choir Screen

York Minster, 8 Minster Yard, YO1 7HL

Monday, and Wednesday–Saturday 9.30am–3.45pm, Sunday 12.45pm–2.45pm

For admission prices and booking, see website yorkminster.org



The Minster's ornate choir screen presents beautifully carved depictions of several English Kings, starting with William the Conqueror and ending with Henry VI. Each almost life-sized statue is a charming depiction of the real thing, and their individual personalities are represented through period fashions, distinctive details, and recognisable facial features chosen by the sculptor, Willian Hyndeley.

The screen was commissioned by Henry V around 1420, but Hyndeley did not finish it until Henry VI had ascended the throne, which is why there are seven kings on one side and eight on the other, with the young King Henry VI squeezed onto the end.

Medieval humour is a constant feature in the carvings of York Minster and the choir screen is no exception. At first glance it might seem like a proud line of England's royalty but there is one king who has been given a bit of a hard time. Prowess in war was the defining feature of a "good king" in medieval England and yet, while most of these kings have been carved holding a sword in preparation for a fight, Edward II stands on his pedestal swordless, more preoccupied with examining his nails than winning any wars.

By all accounts Edward was not a great soldier. During his reign (1307-1327) he had some crushing defeats on the battlefield – most famously his humiliating failure in the battle of Bannockburn against Scotland. The English people were not happy with their less-than-ideal military leader, which is why he is shown to be an oblivious bystander while his father stands disapprovingly next to him.



BEDERN HALL

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Just one “regular” mistress would be considered acceptable ...

Bartle Garth, St Andrewgate, York YO1 7AL
See website for opening times and admission prices
bedernhall.co.uk



Bedern Hall is one of those puzzling places that can only be found if you already know where it is, and even once you have been, you will struggle to find again. Accessed either by walking right to the end of Bartle Garth Road (which disguises itself as a cul-de-sac) or through a tiny archway just off Goodramgate, the beautiful medieval hall is now an events space run by the Bedern Hall Company, but was originally built for the Vicars Choral of York Minster in the 13th century as a place of communal dining.

The Vicars Choral was a respected college of men whose role was to sing services at the Minster. Yet, despite their ecclesiastical occupation and the fact that Bedern is an old Anglo-Saxon word for “house of prayer”, the Vicars were slightly more liberal than you might expect, even by modern standards. They wore expensive jewels, gambled with dice and were often quite rowdy, usually after having a few pints of ale in the city. On some occasions they were even chased back to Bedern by the city police who, unfortunately for them, did not have jurisdiction over the Vicars once they had claimed the sanctuary of the Hall.

The college of Vicars were also renowned for their relationships with women. Contact with the fairer sex was officially banned by the leaders of the Church, but this does not seem to have stopped them. The officials had such a hard time getting the college to play by the rules that eventually it was agreed that as long as the men had just one “regular” mistress, it would be considered acceptable.

After the Reformation it was decided that the Vicars would be allowed to marry if they chose to, and many did. The impacts of this can be seen in the architecture of the hall today. The original arches built into the back wall once led to the pantry which fed the college during their communal dinners, but as individuals married and moved in with families, the number of vicars who dined at Bedern decreased, until the dinner parties were so small that the pantry was no longer needed and the arches were filled in.

ST ANTHONY'S GARDEN

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A secret garden

*St Anthony's Hall
Peasholme Green, YO1 7PW
Open 24/7*



Below the City Walls, the garden of St Anthony's Hall is a secret garden designed for the senses. Full to bursting with aromatic herbs, textured plants and bright colours, the garden won the York Design Award in 2009, although it is still generally unknown and thus often completely empty. Sitting alongside a naturalised meadow, woodland trees, a water rill, sculptures and a summerhouse, St Anthony's garden is one of the most calming places in the city.

The garden is owned by the York Conservation Trust, and is situated in the grounds of St Anthony's Hall, a former guildhall, prison, workhouse, school, and now exhibition space. The garden itself was once the concrete playground of St Anthony's School, but when the Trust bought the grounds in 2006, they decided to create a sensory space for the public. They planted sweet smelling lavender and thyme next to the soft foliage of lamb's ear in order to create an experience of nature which anyone, especially the visually impaired, could enjoy. As well as the scented and tactile plants, a few symbolic designs are incorporated into the garden. The stone wall represents the path of life, starting with the security of the low enclosure, then leading you up and down until you reach the highest point of the Tau Cross which symbolically heals you after your long journey.



NEARBY

New School House Gallery

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At one end of St Anthony's Hall is the New School House Gallery, a lesser-known intimate display room of contemporary art which has featured more than 50 exhibitions involving over 450 local artists. An added bonus is that while you admire the work, you can also order hot food and drinks and have a rest on the various sofas and chairs which, given their various designs, could almost be part of the exhibition themselves.

JACOB'S WELL

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The house worth a single rose

5 Trinity Lane, YO1 6EL

jacobsweellyork.org

Every other Wednesday 10am–12.30pm or by private appointment



Tucked away next to the gardens of the Holy Trinity Church is the timber-framed lodge called Jacob's Well. The combination of its location on the quiet residential road of Trinity Lane and the long list of better-known medieval attractions in the area has meant that this modest little house is often overlooked, yet Jacob's Well has been officially recognised as one of the most important properties in the city due to its intriguing history and unique architectural features.

The house was originally built as a place of private worship for the Benedictine Monks of Holy Trinity Priory: to the right of the house, you will see a private entrance leading to Holy Trinity Church.

In the 16th century, the Priory itself was disbanded by King Henry VIII as part of the dissolution of the monasteries and the house was put up for sale.

It was purchased by Dame Isabella Ward, the wealthy prioress of York's Clementhorpe nunnery who, after retiring from monastic life, gifted the land to her charity trustees. Isabella continued to lodge in the house until she passed away three years later, paying a peppercorn rent each year on Midsummer's Day in the form of a single red rose.

The charm of the building continued even after it was converted to an alehouse in the 1800s, during which time it was given the name Jacob's Well, as seen on the simple black sign outside the entrance. It is thought that this name was chosen to promote the inn as a place of romantic chance encounters through the connection to the biblical story of Jacob and Rachel who fell in love by the side of a well while Rachel was watering her father's sheep.

The Micklegate parish took on ownership of Jacob's Well when the inn lost its licence in 1904, re-establishing the link to the Holy Trinity Church, which remains to this day.

Comic carvings

The unique 15th-century wooden canopy that hangs over the entrance to Jacob's Well was added in the 1900s. It is not known who designed it, but they certainly had an odd sense of humour, as among the more traditional carvings – an angel, an eagle, a rose – you will see on the right-hand corner of the canopy a moulding of a heated argument between a husband and wife. On the opposite side, the husband has been replaced with what looks like a coffin next to what appears to be a very happy widow!

Carvings of quarrelsome and even violent interactions between the sexes were common in medieval architecture and can be seen in other examples throughout the city, most notably on the sculptures around York Minster.

CAT SCULPTURES

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The York Cat Trail

Low Ousegate 9-11, YO1 9QX

Cat trail maps available at *The Cat Gallery*, 45 Low Petergate
Monday to Friday 10am-5pm

Playfully scampering over various buildings around the city are 23 cats that are said to bring luck to those who find them.

All unique with their own identities and stories behind them, the two cats climbing the walls of Low Ousegate were the first to appear in the city. They were made in the early 1900s for Sir Stephen Aitcheson as decorative ornaments to brighten up the walls of the buildings he owned, with the added benefit of scaring away pigeons from the windowsills.



A local architect called Tom Adams was the leading force behind the York cats from the 1970s onwards. Adams had been using the black cat as a signature for twenty years before he hired sculptor Jonathan Newdick to create life-sized statues to put on his buildings. It is said that Newdick based his designs on cats that he visited at the York RSPCA animal home, and each sculpture displays the feline personality of its original.

Interest in decorative cat sculptures grew after Adams' statues became a familiar sight in the city, and many other individuals began placing similar moggies on their own houses and businesses. Some are wooden carvings rather than metal statues, a few have companions alongside them, and one is even used as a door handle.

Several of the cats have disappeared over the years, but most have made their way back to their homes safe and sound, usually without any explanation for their mysterious adventures. The original black cat you can see on Low Ousegate was stolen in 1984 by an opportunistic thief who climbed onto the temporary scaffolding attached to the shop next door in order to reach it. In the morning, all that remained on the wall was a little white paw. Luckily, it was found a few days later by a local teacher and returned to its rightful place.



Half a cat

The only kitten in the clowder of cats can be found on the house at ½ St Andrew Gate, just off King's Square. Designed as a mini sculpture due to its unusual address, this is one of Tom Adams and Jonathan Newdick's creations.

The York Cat Trail map

All the current 23 felines that can be found in the city have now been connected by the York Cat Trail, a useful map describing each of the cats and their locations. Started in 2010 by Keith Mulhearn, owner of the tour company Complete Yorkshire, the most recent edition of the York Cat Trail can be picked up at *The Cat Gallery* on Low Petergate Road.

ST OLAVE'S CHURCHYARD

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A sanctuary of calm

8 Marygate Lane, YO30 7BJ

To arrange to look around the churchyard email churchwardens@stolaveschurch.org.uk

Church is open daily, see website for details: stolaveschurch.org.uk



The fenced off St Olave's cemetery is locked away between the towering remains of St Mary's Abbey and the old Viking church of St Olave. Separated from the energetic picnic atmosphere of Museum Gardens, and particularly beautiful in the spring when the cherry blossoms are flowering, St Olave's small churchyard is a sanctuary of calm. It can only be accessed through the back door of the church when unlocked by St Olave's wardens, which means it is hardly ever occupied.

The dominant feature of the churchyard is the tomb of William Etty, the famous York artist. The imposing grave is situated at the top of the burial ground, overlooking all the other headstones. Much of the tomb's stonework has now crumbled, and there is a conservation effort led by the church to restore it.

Born the seventh child of a baker, Etty became a celebrated painter and eventually took commissions from Prince Albert. He was also a prominent local figure in his later years due to his campaigns to protect the city's medieval walls from demolition: his statue now stands outside York Art Gallery. As the *Yorkshire Gazette* wrote upon his death, "Mr Etty was indeed a man of whom not only the City of York, but England as a nation, has a right to be proud".

Considering Etty's national celebrity, it may seem odd to lay him to rest in the quiet and secluded churchyard of St Olave's. In fact, Etty had originally planned to be buried prestigiously in York Minster, but upon his death in 1849 it was discovered that he had failed to cover the cost of the extravagantly expensive Minster burial in his will. His friends decided the best option would be St Olave's so that he could still be close to the Minster, and the public were still able to pay their respects through the holes in the ancient abbey walls.

The Viking church

St Olave's is a rare example of a Nordic church – it was allegedly the first one in the whole of the British Isles dedicated to the first king and patron saint of Norway, Olaf Haroldsson. The church has undergone a few reconstructions, and most of what is here dates from the 15th century, although the 11th-century Viking foundations remain. It is thought that the founder of the church, a Scandinavian traveller-turned-politician called Siward, is buried somewhere in the churchyard, but no one quite knows where. A statue of St Olave (the Anglicised version of Olaf) stands above the main entrance to the church, holding a large cross to demonstrate his conversion from paganism to Christianity.

PUBLIC VEGETABLE BED

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“If there’s food you see, it’s yours for free!”

*Outside the entrance to the Barbican Centre, Paragon St, YO10 4AH
edibleyork.org.uk*

The middle of a city seems like an unlikely place to find people foraging for wild food to eat. The most you might expect to see is the occasional walker picking a few blackberries to make a home-made apple and blackberry crumble. But in recent years foraging has become popular both as a hobby and as an attempt to be more sustainable. The Public Veg Bed, an initiative designed by the horticultural charity Edible York, has created foraging for the modern city. Edible York own a number of community vegetable patches that offer free food to anyone walking past: according to Edible York’s website, “if there’s food you see, it’s yours for free!”

The primary purpose of the bed is to feed the people of York and foster a sense of community participation. The campaign began in 2010 with the first Veg Bed being planted by volunteers outside the York Barbican Centre. Although the rows of plants look quite out of place in

front of the concrete building, they act as a reminder of the importance of healthy living and sustainable practice within urban life.

The upkeep of the miniature allotment falls to a team of locals who call themselves FOBBY (Friends of Barbican Bed Edible York). They change the edible plant menu every year, growing everything from sweet peas to herbs, and currents to kale – occasionally they give out free seed packets alongside the vegetables for people to grow at home.

Edible York aims to educate and engage people of all ages in the practice of gardening and horticulture, with the ultimate ambition being that every single person in York will soon grow, cook, and eat their own food.

As well as the Public Veg Beds, the charity has a number of initiatives to turn this idea into a reality. The “Patchwork Orchard” plants edible fruit trees around the city, creating a network of metropolitan orchards that has so far grown over 300 new trees. Another project, “Abundance”, is a harvesting exercise which aims to reduce waste by identifying wild fruit trees around the city whose fruit can be donated to food charities. The organisation is always looking for new initiatives to help make York a horticultural paradise, so be on the look-out for new gardening freebies popping up around the city.



THE SOLAR SYSTEM CYCLE PATH ⑩

Cycling faster than the speed of light

Cycle path just off Sim Balk Lane, YO23 2UB

As you leave York on the bicycle track going in the direction of Selby, for every 100 metres you travel you will have covered 57 million kilometres in space: the 6.4-mile route that once formed part of the East Coast railway line has been transformed into an intergalactic journey through our solar system, at a scale of 575,872,239 to 1.

Models of all the planets are found along the cycle path (Pluto makes an appearance, as well as a couple of spacecraft) and each sculpture gives a little description of the planet's characteristics and discovery. The



cycle path, as a whole, is therefore a beautiful and instructive way to understand better the scale and distances of the solarsystem.

The space-path was officially opened in 1999 after six months of planet-building. The bases of the models are made from old sewer pipes filled with concrete and most of the stainless-steel planets went through an abrasive technique of shot blasting before being attached to their bases.

The only exception to this method is the Sun, whose enormous model was made from two halves of a fibreglass sphere, moulded together and attached to a steel frame, which then had ten tonnes of concrete added inside to ensure the whole thing would not blow over. It is naturally the first model to appear on the route – it hangs in the middle of a group of trees, almost levitating out of the bushes.

Aside from the planets, there are also two man-made space objects to be found: the Cassini spacecraft and the Voyager 1 space probe. The real Cassini spacecraft, named after the 17th-century Italian-French astronomer Giovanni Cassini, was launched in 1997 by a partnership of international space organisations in an unprecedented attempt to find out all there is to know about Saturn and its moons. It spent almost twenty years in outer space exploring Saturn's atmosphere, taking incredible pictures and samples of unexplored regions of the ringed planet, before the mission ended in 2017. York's Cassini sculpture was created to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the mission and can be found near the Saturn model.

Voyager 1 was also record-breaking in its achievements. It was launched in 1977 and is continuing on its journey further and further into outer space. In 2012, it became the first man-made object to enter the region between the stars, the interstellar atmosphere. In York it stays right where it is, at the last point of the trail, signalling the end of our solar system.



VITA YORK

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*The nun-to-student housing**Lawrence Street, YO10 3FT**Available to look round on request: hello@vitastudent.com*

With the increasing number of undergraduates heading to York's two universities, student accommodation has been cropping up everywhere, even in former convents.

Inside the swanky interior-designed buildings of Vita York are the last traces of the Monastery of Poor Clare Nuns. The fusion of old nunnery and new student living makes for a brilliant design, and although the reception area keeps the riff-raff out, you can still tour the grounds if you ask in advance.

The Poor Clare Nuns were part of the Catholic Order of Saint Clare, and in the late 1800s the Saint Lawrence Convent was built as their home. There, they were completely self-sufficient: they grew their own food, fasted for long periods at a time and always remained inside the high brick walls. The orchard where they picked fruit is still growing today and the grass is cut into the shape of a cross as a homage to its previous life.

The Order of Saint Clare advocated extreme poverty and separation, but the York nuns were slightly more open than the norm. They hosted a documentary about the convent in the 1960s, giving insights into their daily routine of 5am prayers, chores, meditation, and 8pm bedtime (probably slightly different to the routine going on there now). They were also famous for their Rhubarb Wine, made from the rhubarb grown in the convent's vegetable patches and sold at local fairs.

The monastery continued until 2013 when the large building and five acres of ground became a bit too much for the declining order – by this point there were only eight nuns left. It was empty for a few years until Vita York decided to purchase the land and build premier student accommodation around the historically protected buildings. Objects relating to the leisure and work activities of the nuns have been incorporated into the interior design, so you still get a sense of the history of the place. Old tennis rackets and croquet mallets hang on the walls of the games room, pieces of a domino set were made into a clock, and the nuns' sewing machines are on display in one of the study rooms. The old chapel is undoubtedly the most impressive room in the complex: the designers preserved the pew-seats along the walls, added old bells to the décor and kept the original stained-glass window to let in the light.



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SECRET YORK

AN UNUSUAL GUIDE

Where can you find a fully functioning windmill in the middle of a residential road? Or reach the very end of the solar system? Where can you walk in the middle of a 15,000-year-old bog or swim in a pool once powered by fruit pastilles? Discover Britain's last remaining railway nursery, Bettys' underground Dive Bar, the fastest rocket to ever have flown in Earth's atmosphere, the secret ceremony room of the Freemasons, and even York's most prestigious postbox.

Far from the crowds and the usual clichés, York has plenty of undiscovered hidden treasures for people who know how to wander off the beaten track.

This is an indispensable guide for those who want to really get to know York ... and especially for those who think they know it already.

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