

Bitchdaughter Tower



This strangely named tower is on the corner of the city walls near the old Norman castle mound of Baile Hill, between Skeldergate and Bishopthorpe Road.

The origin of its peculiar name is uncertain, but in 1451 the tower functioned as the King's prison and city records refer to it as '*le bydoutre*'. In 1566, the name had adapted to '*Biche Doughter*'.¹

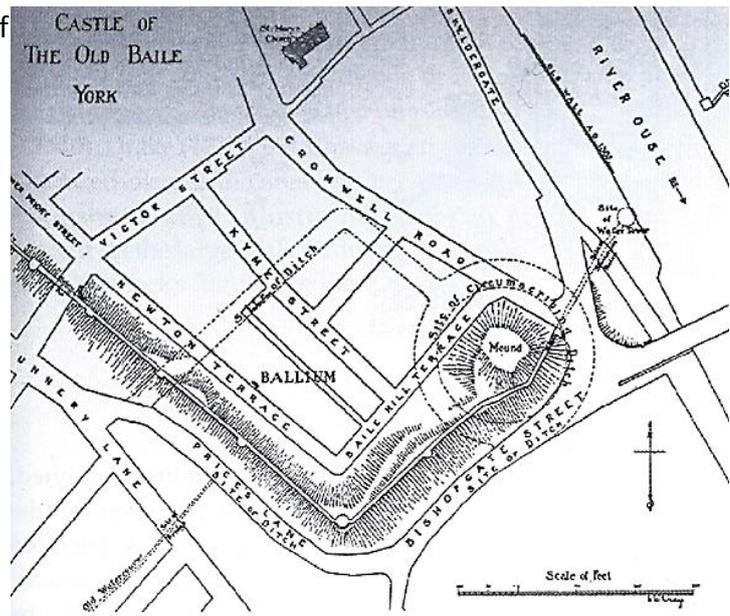
It has been suggested that this prison was called '*Biche Doughter*' because it was considered a '*nightmare*' room in which to be incarcerated.² Being on a high promontory, exposed to the prevailing south-westerly winds, this was probably a cold, damp and miserable place to be imprisoned.

The word '*dortour*' does not refer to a woman, but is old French, meaning a bedroom. It is also a monastic name for a dormitory.³

Bitchdaughter Tower was originally part of the outer defensive wall of the bailey adjacent to William the Conqueror's second castle, which was built in 1069.

The bailey of this castle was rectangular and surrounded by a moat and rampart, probably topped by a timber palisade. The castle was also built of timber.

This map of 1904 by Wray, shows the castle mound and city walls as they are today. It also shows the ditches which surrounded the motte and bailey, now built over by Victorian terraces.



¹ RCHM VII p91

² The British Historic Towns Atlas, Vol. V. York, p76

³ Wikipedia: Dorter



In 1315, maintenance and defence of the Old Baile is defined in *the 'Custody of the Walls'* as being the responsibility of the Archbishop of York. In 1320, Archbishop Melton (who led the men of York to defeat by the Scots at the battle of Myton in 1319), undertook to defend the Old Baile in time of war - providing that men of York would also come and help.⁴

In 1326, the north was again under threat from the Scots and a dispute arose as to whether the Archbishop should not only defend the walls around the Old Baile, but also pay for their repair. As a result of this case, Archbishop Melton renewed the bailey defences and it was probably at this time when the timber palisade was replaced with masonry to match the adjacent city walls.⁵

By the mid-14th century, the city authorities had taken over responsibility for the Old Baile walls and in 1538, when the traveller, John Leyland visited, he only reported seeing muddy ditches where the inner walls had been.⁶

In 1562, the city paid 3s-4p for *'bearying up [recovering] 278 stones which had fallen from the south side of the Old Baile.....to be saved for repairing the same wall'*.⁷

In 1559 and 1564, the city records say that the Old Baile area was being used as the assembly place for the musters (military service and archery practice) of Micklegate Ward.⁸

In 1566, it was reported that *'Biche Doughter, already shrunken from the citie wall'* could be removed without weakening the rest of the wall, and the stones from the tower would be useful for rebuilding Ouse Bridge.⁹ This was the time when a flood caused the central two arches of the bridge to collapse, and they were replaced by a dramatic new single span.

From 1585, responsibility for repairing the walls rested on the City Husband. Edmund Giles was elected as the Husband in 1644, and the following February he was granted the large sum of £48 *'to repair the decayes in the corner of the cittys walls on the Ould Baile and other decay thereto adjoining.....and to make a watch house of brick and stone 5 yerds in length and 2 1/2 yerds broad within'*.¹⁰ These works were probably to repair damage sustained the previous year during the Siege of York, when two cannons were placed on top of the motte of the Old Baile by the Royalist defenders, making the area a prime target for the Parliamentary army.

⁴ Mediaeval York. Angelo Raine, p25

⁵ Mediaeval York. Angelo Raine, p24

⁶ Mediaeval York. Angelo Raine, p25

⁷ Mediaeval York. Angelo Raine, p25

⁸ Mediaeval York. Angelo Raine, p25

⁹ Mediaeval York. Angelo Raine, p25

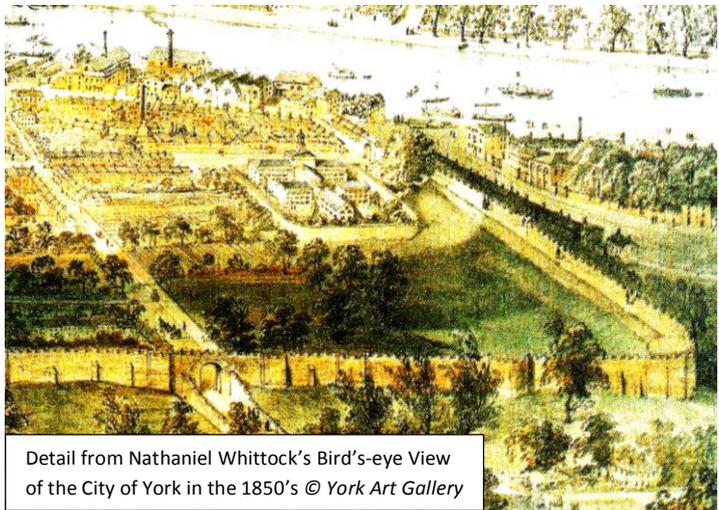
¹⁰ RCHM VII p91

This 1676 panoramic view of York from the south, by Francis Place, shows a circular Bitchdaughter Tower, slightly higher than the adjacent walls, with a smoking chimney projecting from the roof. This suggests that the repairs by Edmund Giles included a fireplace in the new room, as it has today.



©York Art Gallery

In 1801, the city authorities decided to replace the old gaol on Ouse Bridge with a more suitable building, and used their land adjoining Baile Hill for the purpose. The new gaol was designed by Peter Atkinson Jnr. and "erected on an elegant scale, reflecting much honour on the city and the architect". The gaol covered the area on which Baile Hill Terrace and Kyme Street were later built. It was closed in 1869, and subsequently taken down.¹¹



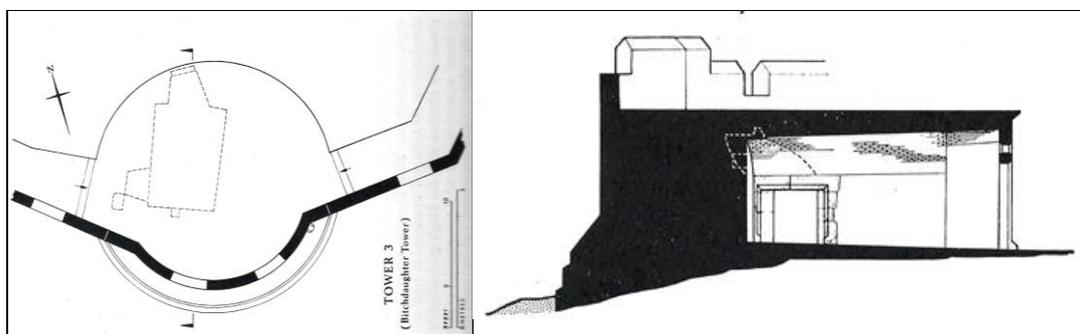
Detail from Nathaniel Whittock's Bird's-eye View of the City of York in the 1850's © York Art Gallery

In 1834 the tower was described as a 'cow house lighted by narrow loops'.¹²

The walls around this area of the city were probably restored around 1878, when Skeldergate Bridge was built. Skeldergate Postern Gate was replaced by the present polygonal tower and staircase and the walkways around the walls were widened to create a pleasant pathway, with a stone-flagged platform on top of Bitchdaughter and the other nearby Towers.

Inside the tower, the roof is formed by a brick arch and the room has a fireplace with its flue blocked by the slabs of the stone platform. These features probably date from the post-Civil War repairs by Edmund Giles in 1645.

Surprisingly, there are no arrow slits today, possibly due to insensitive restoration at a time when it was thought that the room would not be needed again.



This plan and cross section are copied from Volume two of the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments. The plan on the left shows the small room within the larger almost circular tower and the cross section on the right shows the room, with a recessed fireplace.

Report on Bitchdaughter Tower by Christopher Rainger for The Friends of York Walls. January 2016.

¹¹ This is York. Charles Brunton Knight. P166

¹² RCHM Vii p92