

A friendship built on solid foundations

Andrew Gallon meets a group working to preserve the Bar Walls of York



Fishergate Postern Tower, which the Friends hope to reopen, above, and, right, the logo of the Friends of York Walls

There is no finer way to see York than from its Bar Walls, an elevated promenade offering unique views of a beautiful city. The walls, a two-mile (3.4 km) circuit dotted with impressive gateways and towers, act as a magnet for visitors and boast numerous admirers. They can count on a few supporters, too.

The Friends of York Walls (FoYW) was set up in 2011 to promote and preserve the city's ancient defences, which include the Bar Walls,

the surviving precinct walls of St Mary's Abbey, Clifford's Tower and York Castle's bailey wall. The not-for-profit group has more than 500 members, about sixty active volunteers and is run by a committee of twelve.

It is about to take a giant step forward. FoYW expects shortly to secure registered charity status and sign a thirty-year lease with City of York Council, owners and custodians of the Bar Walls, for Fishergate Postern Tower,

a four-floor structure on the southern edge of the ring between Walmgate and Micklegate Bars.

Over the last three years, FoYW has provided periodic public access to the tower, erected between 1504 and 1507 where the walls ended at the River Foss, whose waters once lapped its foundations. The group would like to reopen the tower and improve its condition and facilities. A "sponsor a stone" initiative, based on its west wall, has raised more than £5,000 since a 2012 launch and a comprehensive new walking guide to the Bar Walls, written by FoYW member Simon Mattam and published in May, should help swell the coffers.

As a registered charity, FoYW will be in a much stronger position to tap into pots of money such as the Heritage Lottery Fund. "Until we get something in the form of grants, we can't move very much further forwards," says committee member Alan Fleming, a York resident. "The biggest things we're struggling with are the need for more active members and money. We don't charge for membership or for entry to the tower. The only money we have is from donations, sponsor a stone and book sales. Running any organisation, you have to spend money to earn money."

Latterly, City of York Council used Fishergate Postern Tower as a store. Cleared of debris, this quirky structure is of great interest, but would benefit from a facelift. "It's relatively dark, there's no electricity or water and the link between the four floors is a spiral staircase wide enough only for one," explains Alan, who spent most of his life in Lancashire, Staffordshire and Cheshire before retiring to York, where his sons work. "The tower walls are thick, so the rooms are not

large. They get larger as you get higher. The top floor used not to have a tiled roof, which was added later. It's the nicest room for any display, but the worst to access.

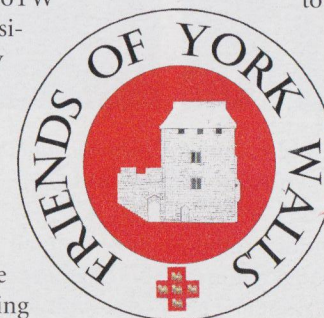
"As with any building of that age, there is erosion on some of the stonework, but the biggest worry is the roof. The clay pantiles are held in place by wooden pegs and a number of these need re-laying to make the roof watertight. We're hoping repairs are still of a manageable size, but one day you could imagine the whole roof would need to be stripped or rebuilt, which would be a colossal expense – far too much for the Friends to bear. It would be nice if we could get some funding to provide displays on the history of the tower and more literature that can either be handed out or sold."

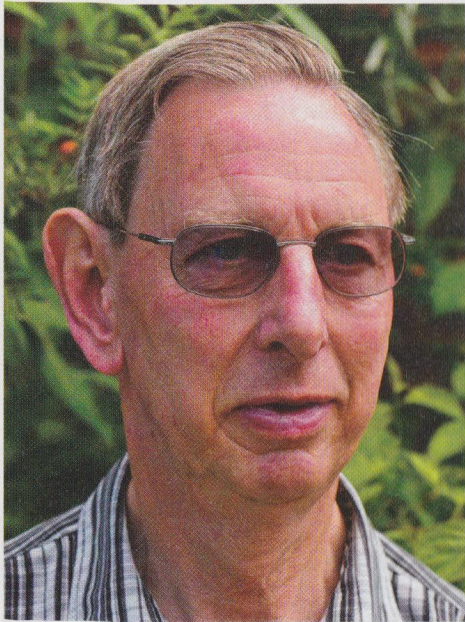
FoYW is also keen to involve schools. In July, Bootham School visited to survey the tower's stonework. "One of the longer-term aims is to invite school groups," says Alan. "We can explain the tower's history to them and they can do projects."

A further possibility is reopening the Red Tower, north of Walmgate Bar and next to Foss Islands Road. Here, the King's Fishpool – a swamp created for defence by damming the Foss – once ended. "It's another tower that has been empty for years and until recently the council was using it for storage," says Alan.

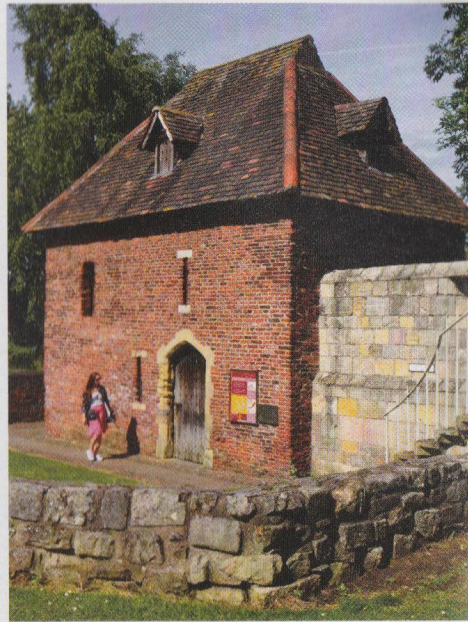
"The council would like to see someone take it over and we are certainly interested."

When FoYW opened the Red Tower in January for the city's annual Residents' Weekend, hundreds flocked to explore its two-storey interior. In June and July, Fishergate Postern Tower hosted music and dance as part of the York Curiouser arts festival, and the public reaction was similarly enthusiastic.





Alan Fleming, Friends of York Walls committee member, and the Red Tower, a structure the Friends are keen to revitalise



Another of FoYW's key activities is monitoring the Bar Walls and reporting maintenance issues to City of York Council. The masonry element of the structure, a real mish-mash of Roman, medieval and Victorian contributions, was built mainly using magnesian limestone sourced in nearby Tadcaster.

Porous limestone isn't noted for its resistance to Yorkshire weather, and Alan describes as "variable" the condition of Fishergate Postern Tower. "A lot of the blocks look as perfect as they did when put there, but others are badly eroded. The erosion has been caused by the use of modern cement mortar, repairs that need to be removed. Walking round the walls, the main structures look pretty solid, but anywhere you get arrow slits and embrasures it is badly eroded."

Normally, the Bar Walls close at dusk, but FoYW has been given permission by City of

York Council to open the section between Bootham and Monk Bars for the cutting-edge Illuminating York festival. It can be accessed on 29-30 October from 6 to 10pm. In autumn, with the leaves off the trees, this stretch will offer superb views of the floodlit Minster.

Next spring, FoYW plans to revive the Lord Mayor's Inspection of the Walls, last staged in 2013. The Lord Mayor of York, Coun Ian Gillies, takes an active interest in the group's activities. When, come late March or early April, a fabulous profusion of daffodils emerges on the Bar Walls' grass banks, Coun Gillies will walk between Bootham and Monk Bars before school pupils accompany him on his return via Lord Mayor's Walk.

This is Alan's favourite stretch. "It's the most heavily walked section, but is nicest for the views, not only into the Minster gardens and the back of Grays Court, but also onto

Lord Mayor's Walk. You can appreciate the original ditch and it's part of the Roman line, but what you walk on is all Victorian; complete with reused tramlines inside Robin Hood Tower as reinforcements!"

Alan, formerly a computer hardware designer, plans to place, section by section, Simon Mattam's guide text on the FoYW website. Smartphone users out on the Bar Walls will be able to access it easily by scanning a QR matrix barcode.

Another possible source of EU grants is through European Walled Towns (EWT), an international association that asks a sizeable membership fee. Alan believes City of York Council, rather than FoYW, should join. Ten UK towns and cities are members. Chester, whose city walls rival York's in length and scale, is one and recently received a £3m EU grant through EWT towards major refurbishments.

With registered charity status on the way, Alan is positive about FoYW's future. "I'm hoping things will really start to happen," he says. "I would like us to offer more to our members. Apart from helping out at the tower, participating in occasional litter picks and inspecting the walls for damage, there aren't a lot of other activities for members to get involved with. We do have ambitions to offer regular guided walks, and Simon Mattam has done a few.

"Our main problem is low visibility. People don't know about us or about what we can do. We need to formulate something that draws in more awareness and more volunteers. We'd love to have a dynamic, extrovert volunteer fundraiser, which we haven't found yet. It's been hard work over the last three years, but we're slowly getting there." ■

For more, visit yorkwalls.org.uk

ASHLEY JACKSON'S SKETCHBOOK



Burnsall: Nestled amongst the trees alongside the River Wharfe in Wharfedale is the village of Burnsall with its five-arched bridge and St Wilfrid's Church in the background. It is probably one of the most popular villages to visit in the summer, with families picnicking on the banks of the river. It is not far from Hebden and Appletreewick, which are also very much worth a visit.

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