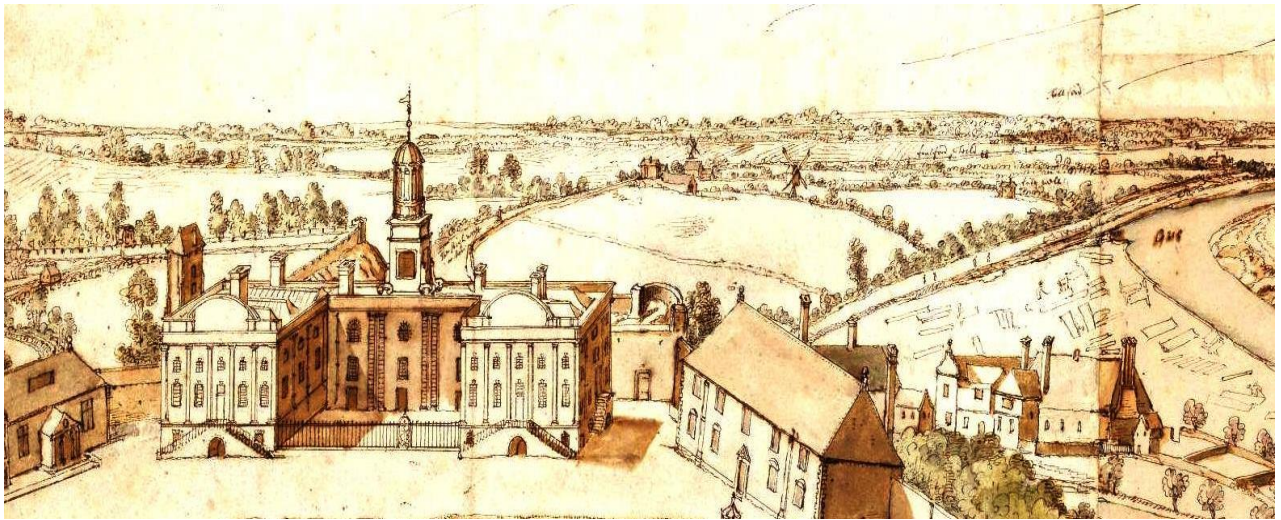


Fishergate Postern Tower

A Brief History of Fishergate and the Postern Tower



Looking towards the open fields and windmills of Fishergate from Clifford's Tower.

The Postern Tower and city walls are on the left and the Debtor's Prison in the foreground.

Fishergate runs up the centre of the picture, and on the right are Castle Mills and the Windmill Inn (formerly St George's Chapel). Cloth can be seen drying on St George's Field

Francis Place c1710

The 12th century earth ramparts and ditch ended here, next to the causeway over the Norman dam which flooded the river Foss, with a stone or timber Postern Gateway into the city. The earliest record of a defensive tower is a 1388 reference to a 'New Tower' which was probably a small stone structure, perhaps similar to the corner tower, and built soon after the masonry walls in 1345. There is also a note of this being repaired in 1453. Fishergate Bar was closed in 1489, after being badly damaged in the Yorkshire Rebellion against Henry VII's taxes, so Fishergate Postern became a more important entry point to the city and required better defence.

In 1502, the mayor and Corporation ordered that a 'substantial Postern Tower' be built in stone. The building was finished by 1507 and is largely as we see today, except that it originally had a flat roof (like Monk Bar) and a watch tower.

The hipped roof we see today was added to give additional storage and is shown on John Speed's 1610 map of York.

There is no record of the tower being attacked, even during the 1644 Siege of York, and by the mid-18th century the walls and towers were neglected and decayed and the system of Watchmen had become defunct.

A recent visitor to the Tower brought a birth certificate of his relative, Thomas Swann, who was born in the tower on 28th August 1840. His mother and father had come to York from Brandsby, North Yorkshire, and married in St Denys Church. William Swann ran a bricklaying business from the Tower, apparently living there with his family.

1. Outside the Tower

The Tower is built with ashlar masonry blocks on the outside and inside, using magnesium limestone from Tadcaster (like the Minster). You can see the central core of lime-bound rubble in the cupboard on the 1st floor. The stones are very carefully cut and have thin mortar joints, showing it was a 'high status' building for the city.

The projecting blocks of masonry high up on the north wall were the discharge chutes draining the lead roof. Below these, the garderobe overhangs the marshy water which lapped against the northern side of the tower until Piccadilly was built in 1840.

A plinth course of sloping masonry runs around the walls, stepping down into the pavement on the east and west sides as it follows the original river bank down to the water of the dammed-up river Foss.

The Postern Gate still has its lower hinge and there is metal in the opposite wall where the lock would have been.

The slots for the portcullis can still be seen in the arch above the door and continuing up the outside of the Tower above the walkway. This would have had a windlass to raise and lower it, probably on a platform above the door.

Looking at the Postern Gate from the outside, you can see different types of masonry, showing how the doorway has been integrated into the walls and Tower through various periods of rebuilding.



2. Inside the Tower – Floor by Floor

Ground Floor Room

The ground floor was where the Watchman sheltered and collected taxes from traders entering the city through the Postern Gate. The room has a stone flagged floor and a large fireplace.

A window looks up Piccadilly, which was originally part of the marshy water of the dammed-up river Foss.

The small passage in a corner of the room leads to the spiral staircase and the living and storage rooms above.

There are faint marks where a staircase was once placed against the south wall, probably in the 19th century, when the tower was no longer defensive and it is known to have been used the adjacent Phoenix Foundry and by a bricklayer.



First Floor Room

The large mullioned windows still have hinge pivots which are generally thought to support shutters. It is not known if the windows were originally glazed, but given the date and status of the building, it seems quite possible. Other towers have windows made up of small squares of glass, although these are thought to have been installed more recently. The masonry around the window has been damaged by frost, which is why there is modern brickwork replacing the masonry below the window.

The windows, garderobe and cupboard are on the 'town' side, as this is safe from attackers and not vulnerable to damage from cannon balls.

This room is where the family lived, as it has a good sized fireplace and garderobe.

The purpose of the sockets in the walls is uncertain, but they probably supported a mezzanine floor, for sleeping and storage.

As with the ground floor room, there are sloping marks on the wall from a 19th century wooden staircase.

The floor joists to this room and the one above, are seated on their original position. The present floors were installed by the council in the 1970's and have a hatch to allow large items to be lifted through the building. It is not known if this replicates the original design, or was a modern idea.

Second Floor Room

This room is simpler than the first floor and doesn't have a fireplace, although the fires downstairs would probably have kept it warm.

The recess in the north wall was probably used for storage. Like the large windows and first floor cupboard, it is built on the 'safe' side, so the reduction in wall thickness does not matter.

As well as a large mullioned window, there are also two vertical slit windows. One looks over the river Foss lake, now Piccadilly. The other window is the only one to look over the dam and its causeway and was intended to be used to fire a musket or arrows at attackers. The thickness of the walls can be easily appreciated by looking at these windows.

There are three sockets in the walls. These probably held beams which supported the original heavy lead roof. Similar sockets and beams can be seen in Monk Bar, where the lead roof is still in place.

Roof Room

The wooden floor of this room was originally the roof. It was covered in a sheet of lead (like the Minster Tower) with gutter channels on each side for rainwater to flow through the openings in the north wall, leading to the drainage chutes.

The hipped roof must have been added before 1610, when John Speed's map was published showing the roof as we see today.

The spiral staircase continues upwards and leads to a stone platform, which originally formed the base of a look-out tower. This was removed when the timber roof was added.

Some of the roof timbers have come from other buildings, as they have slots and holes which do not have any purpose for this structure. The roof construction looks somewhat ramshackle and the use of second hand timber may suggest it was cheaply built. Many of the tiles are original and still have their wooden pegs.

When the roof was installed the 'battlements' were retained and could still be used for defence, with good views along the walls towards Fishergate and across the causeway to the former Castle Gateway and Castle Mills.

Notice how the masonry blocks have been specially cut for their location. Arrow shaped masons marks can be seen on the side of the embrasure opposite the stairs and on the one diagonally opposite across the room.

The flue from the 1st floor fireplace has been removed, but the recess can still be seen rising up the north wall. The ground floor fireplace flue has been repaired in brickwork.

3. City Walls Through Fishergate

Although the exact date is not firmly established, the earth ramparts were probably built around the south east of the city in the mid-12th century, when Walmgate Bar is first recorded.

The embankment probably had a timber palisade on top and masonry gateways at Walmgate Bar and Fishergate Bar. A deep moat in front of the ramparts was fed by water from the Kings Fishpond at Red Tower, and flowed to the river Foss at Fishergate.

The rampart ended at Fishergate Postern Gate, on the edge of the lake created by damming the river Foss. A 'memory' of the sloping river bank can still be seen where the chamfered masonry wall-plinth of the Tower steps down into the pavement.

The earth ramparts probably had a Postern Gate next to the lake. This was later re-built and integrated into the masonry walls, and later incorporated into the Tower. You can still see the groove in the Tower wall above the gateway, where the portcullis slid up, and where there would have once been a windlass to wind it up and down.

The walls between Fishergate Bar and Postern Tower were built on top of the existing ramparts in 1345 by Thomas de Staunton. Significant restoration was undertaken in the 19th century, so some elements, such as the wide walkways, may be 'improvements'.

The walls curve southwards as they approach the corner tower opposite Festival Flats.

This was designed to increase the length of wall facing the river Foss, so more men could be accommodated to fire on attackers before they reach the castle.



Unlike other Bars, Fishergate Bar never had a Barbican, although there was a 2 story building on the inside. It was repaired and improved in 1485, but was badly damaged in the Yorkshire Rebellion of 1489.

The magnesium limestone masonry was scorched pink by the heat of the burning timber gates, and is still visible today.

After the rebellion, the Bar was blocked up with a masonry wall and remained closed until 1827, when the cattle market was moved to the area now occupied by the Barbican Centre.



Fishergate Bar - Joseph Halfpenny 1817

4. Looking towards the Castle from the Top of the Tower

The Romans, Vikings, and Anglo Saxons, all had wharves along the river Foss between the confluence with the Ouse and the bridge in Fossgate.

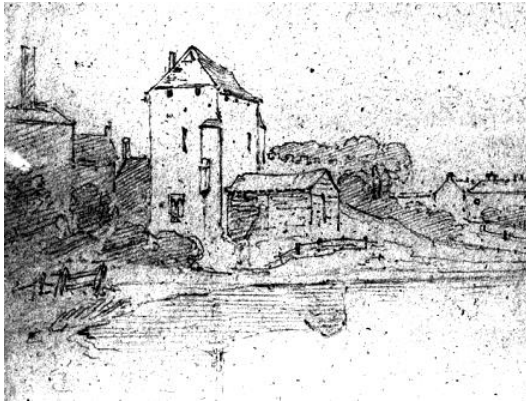
When William the Conqueror built his Motte and Bailey Castle, now Clifford's Tower, he also constructed a dam across the valley of the river Foss. This raised upstream water levels by 2m (6 feet), filling the moat around the castle and also forming a long defensive lake protecting the south east side of the city.

The long dam stretched from the Fishergate Postern Tower to the Corner Tower of the Castle, roughly following the alignment of the southbound lane of the modern dual carriageway.

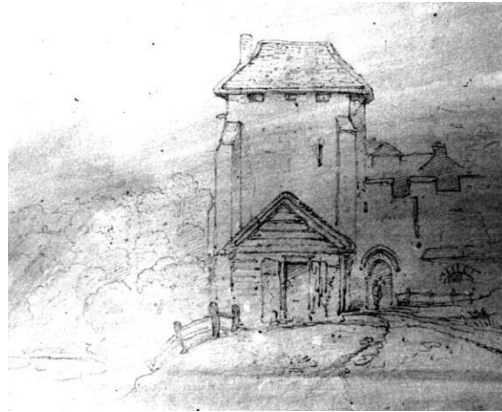
Looking upstream from the Tower, the banks of the river would have roughly followed the pavement of Piccadilly. Much of the area became marshy over the centuries and must have been badly polluted, due to the discharge of sewage, refuse and industrial waste.

A path ran along the crest of the dam, giving access to Castlegate Postern and the southern Gateway of the Castle Bailey. The river ran under a timber footbridge, with a weir incorporated into the structure to maintain upstream water levels.





*Fishergate Tower looking from the river Foss, with Phoenix Foundry on the left.
George Nicholson - 1827*



Fishergate Tower looking from the Causeway over the dam, showing the ground sloping into the water. GN.

Castle Mills is first recorded in 1135. It was owned by the King, but granted to the Knights Templar, who built a large chapel adjacent to it, dedicated to St George, hence St George's Field. The Chapel was partly demolished in 1571 and some of the masonry was used to re-build Ouse Bridge, which had recently lost its two central arches in a flood.

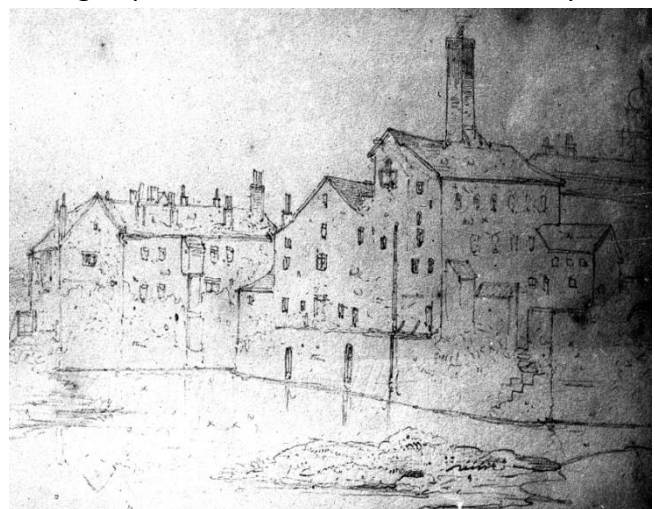
The Chapel was rebuilt with a timber framed upper building on top of the lower masonry structure, and became the Windmill Inn.

During the Civil War, the Castle Gateway was blocked up and the timber bridge over the river Foss was demolished. The Gateway was never re-opened and the new masonry wall and remains of the draw-bridge pit can still be seen today. The Causeway Bridge over the Foss was rebuilt in masonry, reflecting the increasing importance of this route into the city.

Castle Mills and the Windmill Inn were retained when the river Foss was canalised in 1794, but were demolished in 1856, when the lock and river basin were enlarged to accommodate larger barges serving Leetham's Mill in Walmgate. The picture opposite shows Castle Mills and the Windmill Inn in 1826. Note the chimney for the steam engine, installed to allow the mill to operate when flow in the Foss was too small to turn the water wheels and fill the lock.



Windmill Inn - Henry Cave c1826



Castle Mills - George Nicholson 1826

5. Looking towards Fishergate from the Top of the Tower

Roman burials and cremation urns have been found in Fishergate, and evidence of Roman-period farming has also been discovered.

Archaeological and documentary evidence is very limited for the period immediately after the Romans left York in 407AD, but it is likely that people continued farming and fishing here over subsequent centuries, as immigrants began arriving from Anglia, Friesland and the Saxon Coast (modern Denmark and northwest Germany).

Archaeology at Fishergate House, Mecca and the Novotel found evidence for craft working and manufacturing communities from the mid 600's. This was probably part of the Fishergate 'Wic' providing food and crafts for the increasingly wealthy city. Finds include clay loom weights and spindle whorls, needles and shears, suggesting wool processing, weaving, bone and horn working to make combs.

Droplets of lead, copper and iron slag show that a range of metals were being worked. Imported glass and pottery indicate the Foss and Ouse being used for international trade, and both river and sea fish were probably being unloaded here.

The Viking period, 866 – 954, interrupted occupation of these sites, but communities were sufficiently re-established and populous by the 10th century to support three churches; All Saints, on the corner of Kent Street; St Helen's, in the grounds of Fishergate House; St Andrews, in front of the Novotel in Fewster Way.

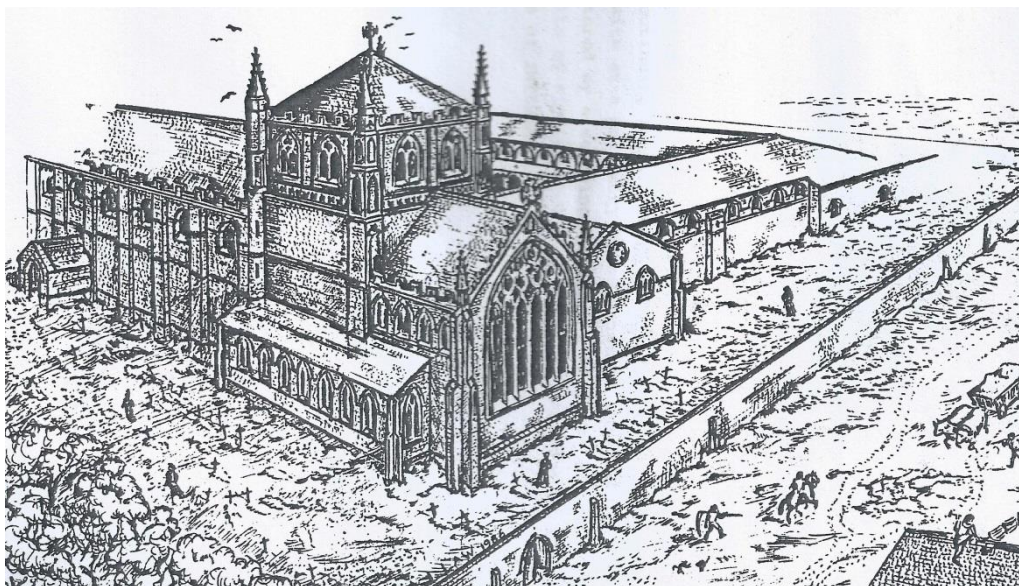
Graves found in the churchyard of St Andrews have skeletons with battle wounds.

Archaeologists suggest they may have been local men defending York from Harald Hardrada's invasion of 1066, just before the battle of Hastings.

It is not known if the post-invasion battles with the Normans and the subsequent 'Harrowing of the North' had any impact on the communities in Fishergate, but in 1086, the Domesday Book records William's kinsman, Hugh FitzBaldrick, owning St Andrews Church. Like the other churches, it had probably been re-built in stone by that time and served the fishing, trading and manufacturing community in the area.

St Andrews church was given to Gilbertine monks in 1202 and they demolished it to build their Priory. It was substantially rebuilt in 1335 and the Bishop of Lincoln built himself a house for use when visiting York.

A staithe in Brownie Dyke owned by the Priory, was used in 1442 to unload stone from Tadcaster for repair of the city walls near Fishergate Bar.



An imagined view of St Andrews Priory in the 14th century. Drawn by York Archaeology Trust

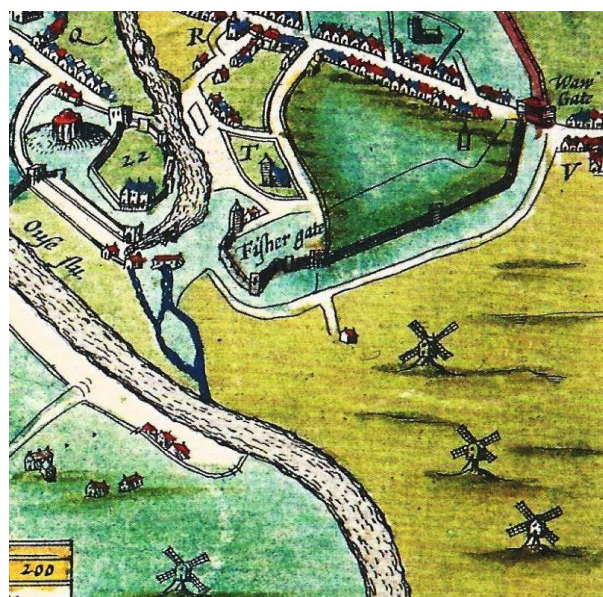
The landscape of Fishergate changed dramatically and quickly after the dissolution of the monasteries. St Andrews Priory was demolished and some stones were even burnt in the nave of the former church to create lime for mortar. All Saints and St Helens were also closed and their parishes combined with St Lawrence's, although St Helen's Hospital survived until 1622.

Evidence that people continued to live in Fishergate after the dissolution, is seen in the Wardmote Court records of 1575.

Complaints are made against a number of residents, including "Mistress Goodyere, for stopping up a common water sewer [drainage ditch] which should have passage from 'Fyshergate' through the late dissolved monastery of St Andrews to the Ouse"

John Speed's 1610 map doesn't show the Priory or churches and only has one house, possibly a remnant of All Saints Church, and three windmills along Fulford road. However, this may not represent the true layout, as Speed's interest was focussed on the historic city centre, so he may not have surveyed Fishergate.

Walmgate Bar was badly damaged by cannon during the Siege of York and there was a skirmish near the junction of Cemetery Road and Fulford Road (possibly at a windmill which was a useful look-out point), but there is no record of any fighting near Fishergate Tower. The Royalist defenders cleared many of the buildings surrounding the city, so any remaining housing in Fishergate may have been demolished at this time.



John Speed - 1610

A map by Archer published in 1680, shows fields and roads, but no buildings.

Subsequent 18th century maps also show fields and windmills, but a view south from the Castle in 1705 by Francis Place (at the start of this article) shows a small group of houses near two windmills in the area of Fulford Road and Blue Bridge Lane.

Maps of 1750 and 1770, show the triangle between Fishergate and Fawcett Street, divided up into neat gardens, and the land where St Andrews Priory once stood is shown as open fields.

A larger bridge was built on the dam causeway in 1794 when the river Foss was canalised, and the lock-keeper's house and other new development began to spread along Fishergate. Some of the buildings along Fishergate still have their early/mid-19th century door cases.



Opening the Foss to barges stimulated industry and the first glassworks was built opposite Castle Mills. By the time it closed in the 1980's the factory dominated the area and extended almost as far as Blue Bridge Lane.

This picture shows the factory in 1956, just before the 19th century bridge was replaced with the present wide-span dual carriageway.

The Mason's Arms was built in 1935 and until recently had an illuminated stained glass masonic sign. Inside, there is oak panelling and a fireplace taken from the Gatehouse in Clifford's Tower.

Oxtoby's was founded in 1889 and the skills of the family business survive in the carved wooden lettering. Horse Trams started running from Castle Mills Bridge to Fulford in 1880, soon after the Infantry Barracks opened. Overhead electric cables replaced horses in 1910 and the trams ran until 1935.



For more information, look at the websites of the Friends of York Walls and Fishergate, Fulford & Heslington Local History Society.

See also York Archaeology Trust, York City Council and pictures on 'Imagine York'.

For reports on the archaeological excavations, Google the church names; eg. Archaeology at St Andrew's church, Fishergate, York

Van Wilson's book 'Beyond the Postern Gate – a History of Fishergate and Fulford Road has detailed information on the buildings and people of the area.

York Reference Library has many maps and books on York history, including the Royal Commission reports. The Victoria County History is available on line and has excellent detailed information and a good search facility.