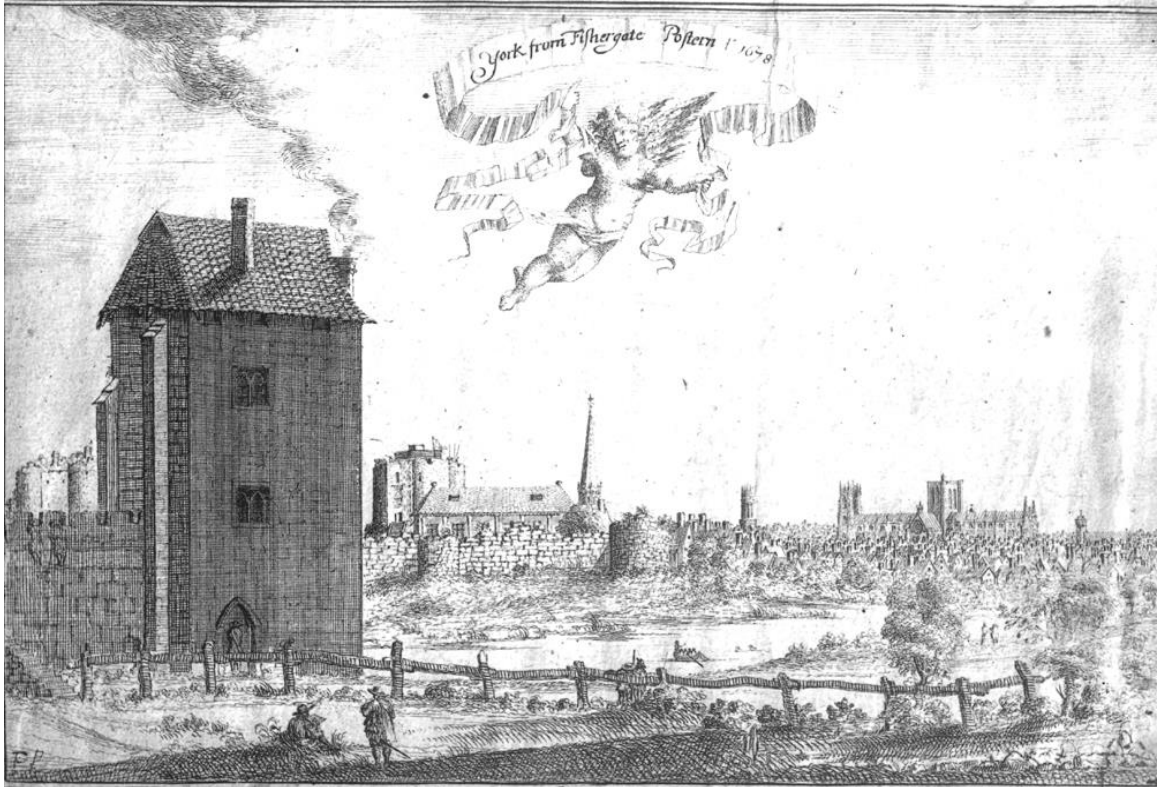


Fishergate Postern Tower

This booklet tells you about the tower, its history and some of the many mysteries which are linked to it.



'York from Fishergate Postern Ao 1678' – William Lodge. British Museum AN115145001
This old picture of the tower has its mysteries: it says it shows York from Fishergate Postern but it seems to have been drawn from Fishergate Bar –and where is the postern, the small gateway through the City Walls next to the tower? It should be clearly seen from this angle.

Friends of York Walls



<http://yorkwalls.org.uk>

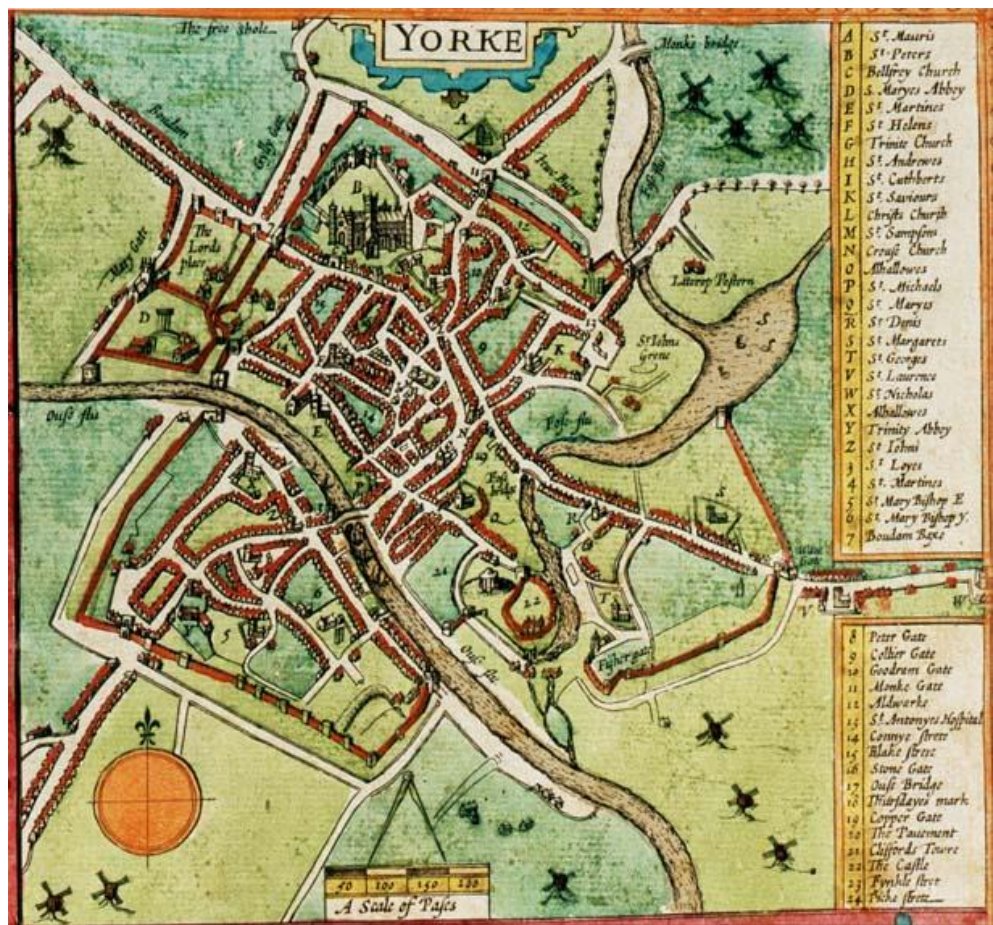
Booklet - 50p

Donations and “sponsoring a stone” help us open the tower.

18 December 2020

Fishergate Postern Tower – An introduction

Fishergate Postern Tower is an impressive, Grade I listed, tall stone building at the end of an east section of York's medieval city walls. This length of wall protects the part of old York east of the River Foss, at its other end is Red Tower. The postern tower is divided from York Castle by the river. The Foss was much broader in earlier days and came up to the foot of the tower. A postern is a minor gateway so the tower guarded a gateway as well as an end of the city walls.



Map of York – John Speed, 1610 [the tower is here: ^ , it's just above the F of 'Fishergate']

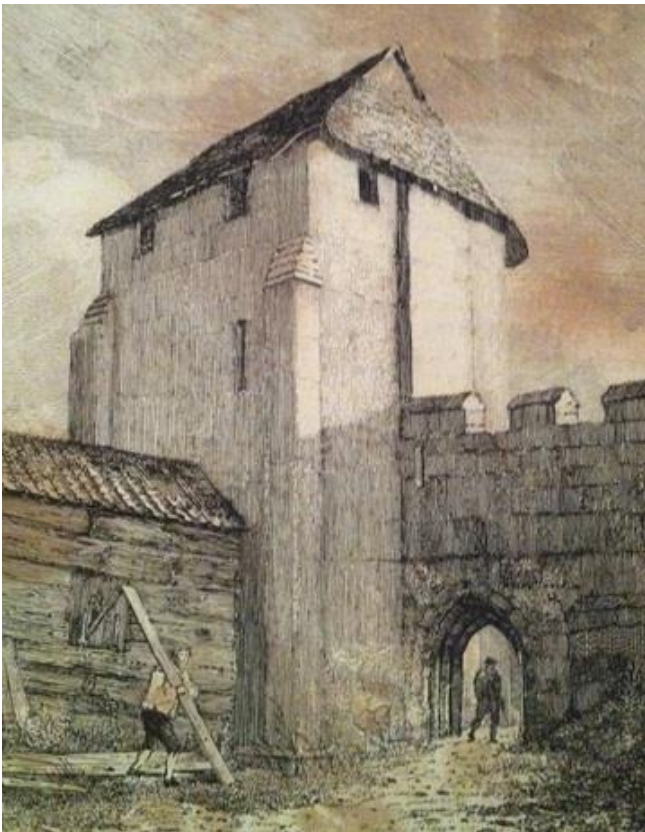
This is not the first Postern Tower on this site. The first was probably built some time after 1345 as it is not mentioned in the 1345 contract for building this part of the city walls {1}. The earliest mention of a postern here ('posterne de Fisshergate') is in a 1403 document called the 'Custody of the Walls' which lists key holders for gates through the walls; three key-keepers are mentioned for the postern {1 & 2}.



The first tower was sometimes called Talkan Tower, probably after Robert de Talkan, a wine merchant, who was York Mayor in 1399. This suggests that the first tower dated from this time. We don't know if it was in stone or wood. It is recorded that in 1449 a woman named Joan lived in Fishergate Postern Tower {1}.

Rent for the tower increased from 1s 4d per annum (£0.07) in 1503, to 10s 0d (£0.50) in 1507 so this probably tells us that the tower was rebuilt then with better accommodation. This fits with a 1502 City decision "that ther shalbe a substanciall posterne maid at Fyshergate which is now closed up an by reason thereof aswell the stretts and beldyngs within the wallez as without ar clerly decayed and gon down" –but this wording brings us a mystery: why was this neighbourhood without any working gateway through the City Walls?

We have some clues to solving this mystery. Any postern gate here that Joan lived next to back in 1449 was only a minor gateway into the city. In her time there was a larger entrance just round the corner at Fishergate Bar. But in 1489, Fishergate Bar was badly damaged in a popular but short lived Yorkshire revolt against Henry VII. The rebels met with the Earl of Northumberland who told them that the King was not going to let them off a new tax he wanted them to pay. The earl did not get out of the meeting alive and some say 5,000 people went on to attack and burn Fishergate Bar and the even larger gateway north of it, Walmgate Bar. The revolt soon failed but Fishergate Bar was bricked up afterwards and it wasn't re-opened until 1834. No record has yet been found of what happened to Fishergate Postern in the revolt but perhaps it was damaged so badly it wasn't usable –this would mean that you couldn't get through the city walls here, so people wouldn't want to live and trade around here so the streets and buildings here became “decayed and gon down”.



Henry Cave's Engraving of 1813

Records of payment to bricklayers for work at the tower in the 1700s may be to do with blocking under some windows (see lowest photo on p.6) –it seems someone in its history didn't like window seats. But generally the tower seems remarkably unchanged.

At the start of the 19th century the Postern Tower clearly had no defensive function and was “now inhabited by a poor Freeman of the City” according to Hargrove {3} (1818). At about this time Henry Cave's engravings were published; he wrote that “the structure is a beautiful piece of masonry, and is now occupied by a poor family”. Cave showed it (above) with a wood building attached(?), the purpose of this building is unknown.

The Royal Commission for Historic Monuments wrote that the present postern archway was “of 14th century character” but was “probably reset in the 16th century”. Perhaps this ‘reset’ was of stones recovered from a ruined archway that was impassable from 1489 to 1502.

Another little mystery is when the tower gained its present roof. It was originally designed to have battlements open to the skies with a small look-out tower above them but a 1610 map (see p.2) shows it with a roof -for more on this mystery see page 7.

There appears to be no mention of the tower during the Great Siege of York of 1644, so presumably it was not badly damaged, unlike Walmgate Bar which was almost destroyed by cannon fire.



Architecturally, the tower has neatly laid, smooth cut blocks of magnesian limestone. Rectangular buttresses stick out from the west corners. The walls haven't been altered except by unsuitable repointing with cement (the original lime mortar is better). It has a moulded plinth at the base on the east, west and south sides. This plinth drops in stages to the north and is not visible on the north side because the land once dropped steeply there, dropping down to the river. The hipped, tiled roof has small gables (or 'gablets').



Early 20thC postcard (G H Thomas collection)

Legally, the tower, as part of the city walls, belongs to City of York Council. But, as a scheduled monument, it is protected by Historic England. The council have leased it to Friends of York Walls, trusting them to help care for it and to make it more open to the public.

INSIDE THE TOWER: GROUND FLOOR

The door to the tower is at ground level on the city side of the city walls. The room here is the smallest in the tower as its walls are the thickest. Its window looks north where the land plunged down to the river. It has a big open fireplace. The photo above shows the pointed archway to dark, narrow, spiral stone stairs that wind steeply up to the other floors. You can see traces on the walls of where there was a wood staircase, entered along the wall to the right then going steeply up to the left; this reached the first floor just above the arch. It's a bit of a mystery but someone, sometime after 1818, wanted modern wood stairs. These stairs were removed in 1960 and new wood floor/ceilings were put in for all floors but little else was changed. The remaining, Tudor stairs are narrow, so if you go up, please go carefully.



Around December 2018 mains electricity was being put into the tower so archaeologists, with volunteer help, carefully dug a trench for the cable. It went under the front door and straight along the wall with the stairs. They found the brick footings for the 19th century staircase and, below these, a mysterious pit. It seemed like a rubbish pit dug into ground that had not been disturbed since the present tower was built (probably around 1503) –but who digs a rubbish pit inside their home? Could it have been dug by very tidy builders before the tower was a home? It

contained animal bone, charcoal, mortar flecks and pottery – 20 sherds of mainly Roman pottery – apparently Roman pottery got everywhere in old York. The prize find was found between the pit and the bricks – an ivory comb, perhaps lost 300 years ago by someone in the tower.

FIRST FLOOR

The first floor is through the first door up the stone spiral staircase. This floor has a blocked fireplace on the coldest wall, the one facing north. The fireplace has a shapely stone surround which is oddly clean for the surrounds of an open fire. There is what is probably a Tudor mason's mark cut neatly into the bevelled lower edge of the main stone on the left; such marks are explained on page 7. Shallow square holes, at about head-height in the east and west walls have no obvious purpose, they are another little mystery.



To the left of the fireplace is something with a very obvious purpose: a short narrow passage leads left within the thickness of the wall to a 'Garderobe' or medieval-style toilet. The part of this toilet where you can sit sticks out from the main northern wall of the tower. This projection has a small window and is supported on stone corbels under it.

In 1068 William the Conqueror had the river Foss dammed to form moats around his castle. The dam widened the River Foss and this tower was built (much later) on the banks of this wide river.

Its north wall was sometimes lapped by the waters of the Foss. We know there were weirs by the dam so the water wasn't stagnant and the toilet discharged directly onto the waters or slopes below it. If the garderobe was used today it would discharge directly onto the pavement below!

A small pollution puzzle is that most think that this postern was the one sometimes described as being 'next to Scarlet Pits'. In medieval times there were several orders in the City Books that filth and dung "shall not be thrown" into these pits but what they were is not known. The tower still has no piped water so the river was probably the main water supply near to the tower and would be used for bathing, washing clothes and even drinking!



There is a modern nail in the wall facing the "Garderobe" – perhaps a modern joker put it there to hold a toilet roll! Not a Friend of York Walls we hasten to add. Historic England must give permission before anything is fixed into the walls. We put in Tudor-style toilet wipes –leaves, wool and moss.

The recess hacked into the east wall on this floor seems to have created a shallow cupboard. The rough inside of the cupboard shows us that these stone walls are like a sandwich with a very thick filling: they have smooth, square-cut stones that you see from outside the building or inside it but behind these is a filling of rough uncut stone. The walls are a little more than a metre thick on this floor, but even thicker below this.

According to William Hargrove {3} (1818) this room had a railed gallery in his time –there is more about this on page 6.

SECOND FLOOR

The second floor has a wide window facing east, into the city. It matches the one on the first floor. It also has two much narrower windows, each little more than a narrow arrow slit.

One looks west, out of the city, but looking out of it you can see on the right the towers and walls of York Castle on the other side of the River Foss. The dual carriageway bridge taking the road towards the castle is where the river was dammed by order of William the Conqueror. This tower with this window could help guard the dam and the old route to the castle that ran over it.

The other narrow window looks over the modern road called Piccadilly, this was built on land reclaimed from the long lake created by William the Conqueror's dam.

There is no sign of a fireplace on this floor but there's a mysterious arched recess in the north wall. What could it have been for? –the photo above seems to suggest use as a bookcase but this use isn't likely in early Tudor times!



Early 19thC view [?] with hinged gate to postern

door left like a small gallery to the first floor. It seems an odd room for a 'poor freeman' to have in the middle of his house but Hargrove says he has an old document saying "I am told that concerts of music and dancing used formerly to be in Fishergate Postern".

The second floor was probably replaced in 1838, as there was restoration then.

Much less of a mystery is the ledge on the top of the east and west sides of this room –this probably supported the roof beams because this was planned to be the highest room in the tower. Probably a flattish roof was seated there for almost a century; there's more about the roof on page 7.

More of a mystery is that William Hargrove {3} in 1818 wrote that a poor freeman of the city inhabited the tower where "a flight of winding stone steps led to the top. About half way up these steps is another room, with other conveniences and at one end of it a curious gallery in the form of a music gallery of a modern assembly room; it is railed around and is entered from a door above, from the winding staircase". So it seems the present second floor was mainly open to the floor below with the part by the



THIRD / TOP FLOOR



with a pointed roof, possibly the current roof which looks pointed from the south. The roof looks similar to today's roof in a 1678 drawing by Lodge, (see p.1).

The stairs continue climbing after this floor. They rise to a small stone platform which presumably was once the floor, or part of the floor, of a look-out tower about 2.5 metres higher than the walk behind the battlements. Most think this roof was added before 1610 to a tower which had had battlements, a look-out tower and a flattish lead roof for some years.

In the north wall are traces of the chimney shown smoking in the 1678 drawing. The lower part of a brick chimney is against the east wall. There was re-roofing in 1740. Experts have failed to date the beams but most think they were used before 1610 to make this roof on-site. A big low tie-beam crosses the middle of the room, two queen posts slope up from this to long, horizontal purlins, all of these have holes that show they were used in house building before being made into this roof.



The bits of battlements defenders look through and fire through are called embrasures. The sides of the embrasures and the stairs have masons' marks, which show which mason had shaped the stone. The marks identified their work to the master mason so he could check the work of masons



who were new to him -or sometimes masons were paid by the stone. Here the commonest mark is a split arrow head.

Fairly modern graffiti has been carved into the stone (G Hunt 1975 & Keith Martin) sides of the northern embrasure on the west wall. This is obviously not allowed but you can attach your name to a stone in a useful way by sponsoring a stone. Please see the Friends of York Walls website for details at: yorkwalls.org.uk

Fishergate Tower from the north-west, castle walls on the right –unknown date/origin

THE POSTERN GATE



A postern is a small gateway, probably mainly for people on foot. We know of seven posterns into the city; this is the only one left. There probably was a postern here from medieval times, it is named in the city house books of 1440 as 'posterna iuxta ecclesiam Sci. Georgii' (Latin for 'postern next to St George's Church'). It has had its present name since 1548 but in 1642 was still sometimes called St. George's Postern {2}.

It has a pointed arch with portcullis slots about 12 cm. wide – a portcullis is a gate which slides down slots to close. Metal fixings remain for a hinged gate that would have opened inward (see p.6 view). Both sorts of gate still exist at Walmgate Bar, a larger gateway into York, 400 metres east of the postern. Cooper {4} writes of "a strong oak door, the crooks of which remain" at the postern. The wall here is almost 2 metres thick and 7 metres high including the parapet. There is no access from the postern tower to the wall-walk above the postern (see lower picture p.3). But it would have needed a winch on the wall-walk above the gateway to raise a portcullis that was roughly 3 by 1.5 metres in size.

A watchman was employed at the postern to check who was coming in. He would probably have the key to the hinged door. He had to swear an oath that he would examine people entering the city. This was carried out especially carefully when there was a threat of plague or violence. But in some times of danger the posterns were sealed up completely. Usually gates were locked daily at 9pm and not re-opened until 4am. But a watchman might open up for you at night for a tip. If you had goods for sale in York you might have to pay 'murage'.

In the 15th century watchmen were told to keep out "rogues and vagabonds, and other lewd persons libel to disturb the peace" and in 1501 Scots got a special mention: they should "not to entre this Citie without licence of the Maier or wardeyn or constable of that ward upon payn of imprisonment of their bodies". In 1645 they were told (more mysteriously?) to exclude women who pretended that they were the wives of soldiers {2}. The last recorded watch on the gates through the city walls was in 1803 {2}.



2012 Original Research: Chris Dowell, Friends of York Walls
Gavin Thomas, Fishergate, Fulford and Heslington Local History Society
Original layout & Photos: Alan Fleming, Friends of York Walls.
2020 Research & Revisions: Simon Mattam, Friends of York Walls

Sources and References -

Ref: {1} Raine, A. (1955) "Mediaeval York" p19-20. Published by John Murray, London
Ref: {2} RCHME (1972) "An Inventory of the Historic Monuments of City of York: the Defences" HMSO
Ref: {3} Hargrove, W. (1818) "History and Description of the Ancient City of York", Volume II. p23-25. Alexander
Ref: {4} Cooper, T.P. (1904) "York: The story of its walls, bars and castle". Published by Elliot Stock, London.