

**York's Medieval City Walls**  
**Festival of Ideas 2023**  
**Barry Crump**

*This is a transcript of a non-academic talk presented as part of The University of York's Festival of Ideas 2023, at King's Manor. Some complex issues have been simplified for the purposes of the talk, and only minor edits have been made to this text for ease of reading.*

**Introduction:**

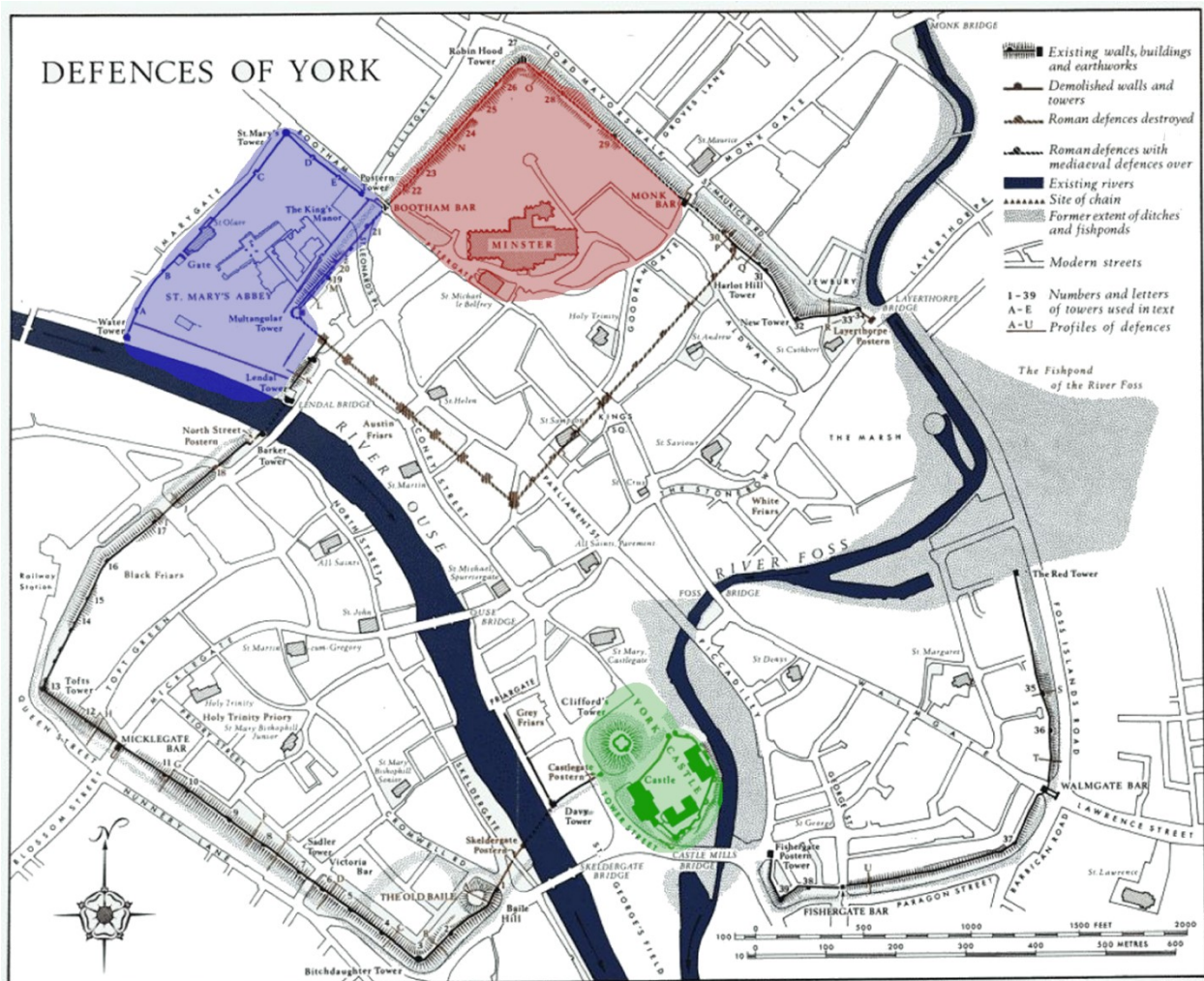
I'm here to talk about my research exploring York's city walls, linked with the Friends of York Walls and York Walls Festival. I am not a medieval specialist or a buildings expert. My background is as a small finds specialist and theoretical archaeologist, using ideas from philosophy and literary theory alongside archaeology and historical documents to try to make sense of the past. My work with Roman coins made me think about the flexibility of meaning and use. One of the key issues that interested me was what coins were used for. Instead of the usual discussion looking at how coins were *intended* to be used (such as wages, taxes, buying and selling) I wanted to think about how people *actually* used them. We know that they did many things with them – they hoarded them, defaced them, turned them into jewellery, buried them with the dead, and threw them into sacred springs...

Coins are not simply money. A Roman coin can't be spent today, and it has been 'not money' for much longer than it was money. If we keep a coin for long enough, it will cease to be legal tender. If we take a coin to another country it might not be usable there. The coin is not changing, but the context is, changing how it is used and understood. Don't worry; I am not here to talk about coins! But some of the ideas that made me fascinated by coins also led me to become fascinated by York's city walls. In the same way that a coin can be used for many things other than just as money, city walls could also be used for many things, with a similar flexibility.

Before we start we need to clarify just what York's medieval city walls were. York's city walls were the stone walls built and managed by the civic authorities, forming a circuit around the city. This is an important definition as there were other walls in the city that

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were not part of the city walls. There were also parts of the city that lay outside of the walls: the medieval suburbs (less protected, more ambiguous, and at times disputed).<sup>1</sup>



(After RCHME 1972)<sup>2</sup>

- **In Green** - we see the castle area, which was a separate liberty enclosed by its own walls, outside of the city jurisdiction
- **In Blue** - we see the St Mary's Abbey complex, which was also outside of the city jurisdiction, with its own walls and gates.
- **In Red** - we see the Minster Yard area which, although within the city walls, had its own legal jurisdiction (sub-enclosed by a 12 foot wall built in 1285).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> York House Books

<sup>2</sup> RCHME (1972) York Vol 2 'The Defences'

<sup>3</sup> Calendar of Patent Rolls

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The complexity of these walled jurisdictions can perhaps best be understood by imagining a short five minute journey by foot for a visitor to the abbey wishing to visit the Minster church, at the end of the 1400s. To get from accommodation at the abbey to the Minster church would involve leaving the abbey complex through Queen Margaret's arch and entering the suburb of Bootham. Turning right you would enter the walled city centre through Bootham Bar. After a short distance, turning left would take you into the Minster area via one of the four gateways through the Minster Yard walls. This short journey would mean passing through three distinct sets of walls and four different areas or jurisdictions.

York's city walls are an intrinsic part of the city, linked with the development of civic power and economic prosperity in the medieval period. The walls would have been a fundamental part of how the city was experienced: how people got in and out of the city, and how they moved between different areas.

There are a wide range of potential uses of medieval city walls:

- As military defences
- To keep people out (including troublemakers, people from the wrong areas, and people carrying disease)
- To provide a sense of security for visitors and merchants, and give the impression of a prosperous and well managed town
- For displays of power, loyalty and propaganda
- To control the movement of goods into the city, allowing taxes to be collected and standards to be enforced
- To mark the boundaries of jurisdictions, and to mark the limits of the town
- For a wide range of more mundane practical uses, including living space and storage in the bars and towers, grazing on the ramparts and ditches and fishing in the moats

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**Defences:**

Much of the literature discussing York's city walls over the years refers to them as 'defences' (such as the Royal Commission on the Historic Monuments of England York volume on the walls).<sup>4</sup> However, the walls are so much more than defences. I do not mean to argue that medieval city walls were never built with a defensive function in mind, or that they could not be used to defend the city. The term 'defences', however, can oversimplify the role and function of the walls, and the choice of words shapes how we might think about them.

Literacy theorist Roland Barthes discussed the advertising of cleaning products to think about how the choice of language links with contemporary social values, and creates modern mythologies, something he referred to as the "disease of thinking in essences".<sup>5</sup> In the world of advertising for cleaning products, dirt and germs are portrayed as a kind of evil. They need to be purged from surfaces. Dirt is the disease and cleaning products are sold to us as the cure. Today, kitchen and bathroom cleaning products are sold as offensive, aggressive and powerful, to 'kill germs'. On the other hand, for things we don't want to be attacked, like our clothes or our skin, cleaning products are sold as gentle purifiers, delicately separating the bad dirt. So we might see very different language used to describe essentially similar products.

Beyond advertising, simplified ways of portraying complex realities can lead to what Barthes called the concept of the privation of history, where the history behind a myth is removed. No-one asks where the myth came from, or what the history behind it was, instead they just believe it. I am sure Barthes would be fascinated by the use of words like 'defences' to describe the city walls. It is not wrong to say the walls may have been built as defences, and may have filled a role as defences, but Barthes would likely have been acutely aware of the risks of simplifying them and how this might hide the complex reality of what they were and how they were used.

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<sup>4</sup> RCHME (1972) York Vol 2 'The Defences'

<sup>5</sup> Barthes, R. (1957) 'Soap Powders and Detergents', in *Mythologies*

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Interpreting the Walls:

Moving away from Barthes, and on a more fundamental level - if we call the walls defences, this arguably causes us to have a positive interpretation. It can lead us to conjure ideas of protection and security. We naturally tend to assume that we would be the people on the inside being defended. But if we refer to the walls as something equally accurate, as 'barriers', this can bring negative connotations. Ideas such as: control, restriction of movement, or an authority imposing its will on the people. All of these can be problematic concepts today, and might bias us against the walls unless we understand them better. We might not think of them in this way, but the walls are a barrier even today, even with modern gaps and open gateways, as they can still limit movement through the city like any other large structure. Most of us will agree that the walls are a fantastic feature of the city, but the language and psychology of barriers is more immediately problematic than that of defences, until we start to think about what they really mean.

So, what were the walls actually used for? The walls could indeed serve as formidable defences if needed. The city was intended to be fortified and defended by its residents when needed. Following the incursion of a Scottish army at Carlisle, a letter from Edward III to the Mayor of York in 1327 instructed the city to **'inspect and overlook all your walls, ditches and towers, and the ammunition proper for a defence'**.<sup>6</sup> A letter from Henry VII dated 1492 states **"This Citie be yerly fortified with gones, gonne powder and other abilements of warre, with part of suche mony as the Citie hath of the kyngs gifft and graunt, and the walles, dikes, and yates to be maid, clenched and prepared in suche wise as may be suertie and savegard for the same"**.<sup>7</sup>

Outer ditches (up to 66 feet wide and 10 feet deep) and steep earthwork ramparts could in theory keep attackers at a distance and safeguard against tunnelling, before even considering an attack on the stone walls themselves. However, the nature of the ditches and defences was not consistent across the city, varying in size significantly.<sup>8</sup> It is now believed that many of the gateways and towers added to city walls in the later 1300s and

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<sup>6</sup> Translated in Drake, F (1736) 'Eboracum' Book 1

<sup>7</sup> York House Books

<sup>8</sup> RCHME (1972) York Vol 2 'The Defences'

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1400s were not for military purposes, but instead for civic pride and local governance.<sup>9</sup> There is also evidence that building stone walls could be beneficial to a town beyond military defences. When the stone city walls at Coventry were finally completed in 1534, after 179 years of building work, the town flourished.<sup>10</sup> In 1327, the town of Hull wrote to the crown requesting a licence to enclose the town with stone walls. The application suggested that the security of walls could improve trade in their town and the surrounding area.<sup>11</sup>

City walls allowed a medieval town to control the movement of people and goods, deciding who and what could enter. This control was not just achieved by the stone walls, ramparts and ditches - but also by water. The King's Fishpool and the River Foss created effective barriers as part of the circuit around the city. Where the River Ouse flowed through the walls, great chains hung across the river, effectively controlling river traffic. These chains were placed between Lendal and Barker Towers, controlling river traffic entering from the West, and between Davy Tower and Skeldergate Postern Tower, controlling river traffic from the East. This controlled movement could allow the various specialist craft and trade guilds to enforce standards and quality of goods sold in the city. Restrictions on the movement of bread into the city are well documented, but there are many other cases where there were similar controls.<sup>12</sup> Cloth dyers for example were forbidden to buy their cloth from outside of city, and were forbidden to take cloth out of the city to be dyed, detailed in a City Ordinance of 1477.

The controlled movement of people and goods also allowed taxes and tolls to be collected. Initially, most of the funds to maintain the walls were from murage. This was the right to raise money from taxes and tolls at the walls, granted by the king, with the money to be used exclusively for the repair and upkeep of the walls. Murage grants were issued for most years, from 1251 to 1449.<sup>13</sup> It would have been in the interest of the crown to have a network of well defended urban centres, so the granting of murage was not simply a benefit to the city. Murage rolls survive for York from 1442 and 1445, detailing the taxes

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<sup>9</sup> Creighton, O.H. & Higham, R. (2005) 'Medieval Town Walls: An Archaeology and Social History of Urban Defence'

<sup>10</sup> Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society 81 (1966)

<sup>11</sup> Calendar of Patent Rolls

<sup>12</sup> York House Books

<sup>13</sup> Calendar of Patent Rolls

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and tolls collected from the walls and river trade, as well as the costs related to the maintenance and manning of the walls.

The 1442 murage roll shows that:

- £22 11s 6 1/2d was raised from the walls
- £16 18s 3d went back into repair and building costs (with 20 1/2 tons of stone purchased for Fishergate Bar, and mason John Ampliford employed)
- The remainder was spent on staffing the walls

Where funds raised from murage grants had to be spent on maintenance, this changed in 1449.<sup>14</sup> The city was granted permanent rights to raise money from the walls. However, these new tolls and customs no longer had to be spent on maintenance, and the money could be directed elsewhere. This gave a greater freedom to decide how the walls should be maintained, with such decisions made locally rather than by the crown.

Further funds were raised by renting out parts of the walls as accommodation or storerooms, and leasing parts of the ditches for fishing and grazing (referred to as 'herbage').<sup>15</sup> Some of the documents related to these everyday details really stand out. For example, pigs appear to have been a persistent problem for the city and its walls, ditches and ramparts. A council ordinance from 1371 describes the methods employed for dealing with this issue: pigs found on the ramparts were captured and impounded, and the owner had to pay 4 pence to get the pig back. If they did not pay promptly, the pig was killed and the sergeant who captured it would get to keep the 4 trotters as a bonus. At this time the value of the pig would have been more than 3 shillings (36 pence), so the fine does not seem unreasonable. Another council ordinance from 1397 shows an updated arrangement. This time if a pig was found on the ramparts the owner was fined 6 pence and the person who supplied the information leading to the pigs capture was rewarded with 2 pence. This was perhaps a better solution, even if the sergeant might not have received trotters as a reward. At this time the reward of 2 pence might have been enough to buy a chicken, or a few dozen eggs (a good incentive for an enterprising informant?).

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<sup>14</sup> Calendar of Patent Rolls

<sup>15</sup> York House Books

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Similar council ordinances appear as late as the 1600s, so pigs on the walls presumably remained a concern.<sup>16</sup>

Many of the surviving fifteenth century documents regarding York's city walls are concerned with upkeep, and the often poor state of the walls. The Recorder of the Walls (the official tasked with investigating their condition and maintenance) recommended to the civic authorities in 1486 **"help your walles with a litil good to be gadered amonges your self"**. Soon after, in 1487, Mayor William Todd wrote to Henry VII to warn that York **"can not wel be kept agenst youre ennymess and rebelles"** due to the **"falling downe of the wallis"**.<sup>17</sup> In the same year William Todd paid to repair 60 yards of the wall at Fishergate.

York was a prosperous and expanding city in the 1200s and 1300s when the walls were built, but started to struggle financially later in the 1400s. Large civic structures like city walls might have been a burden to maintain for a city suddenly not as affluent. Were the walls in disrepair simply due to a lack of funds, or could there also have been a more complex change in priorities regarding how available funds were spent, and how the walls were regarded and maintained? Although they might not always have been sound military defences when in a relative state of disrepair, the walls may have been more than adequate to control the movement of people and goods, including by river. So just as cleaning products might be seen as either 'attacking germs' or carefully 'removing dirt', depending on the context, perhaps the walls might sometimes have been seen as useful 'barriers', rather than just 'defences'.

### Interpretation and Place:

Barriers, as we have seen, can bring negative connotations - and seemingly negative interpretations of heritage and history can be problematic. There are challenges when peering under the surface and looking at the less romantic (and sometimes difficult) implications of surviving structures. It is tempting to see the walls as a single thing, a circuit around the city – but we also know that interaction with the walls is typically just with a

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<sup>16</sup> York Memorandum Books

<sup>17</sup> York House Books



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small section (walking by a small stretch, or entering and exiting via a particular bar or gateway). Each part of the walls is different, and each interaction with the walls is different.

The walls can be seen as a place, and each gateway or small stretch of wall where people interacted with them (or had their movement controlled by them) can be seen as a microplace. These microplaces are small snapshots of individual or communal interaction with the city - by people living, working and visiting the city. This is true today as well as for the medieval period. The walls brought so many positives to the medieval city, developing civic power and status and generating economic development, and they bring so much to the modern city, history and heritage, identity, and pride. However, every person would have understood the walls in a different way.

**The Walls as Barriers:**

The city gates were locked at nightfall each day, and opened again in the morning.<sup>18</sup> Only high status citizens with keys to the bars and gates would be allowed to enter and exit the city while the gates were locked. The York House Books surviving from 1489 describe the closing of the gates at 9pm each day, to be reopened at 8am (**“nyghtlie at ix of the clok to be shet and lokked and openyd even day ayane at 8 of the clok in the mornynge”**). Later surviving documents show that these times could vary, or be changed. For example, in 1537 they were locked at 10pm and opened at 4am during a feast, and in 1559 they were routinely shut at 9pm and not opened before 5am.

The surviving custodies documents of 1315, 1380 and 1403 detail the key holders who controlled and administered the keys to the bars and gates. Amongst the key-holders are wealthy merchants and local civic dignitaries. The custodies documents also list the ‘constables’ and ‘sub-constables’ who manned the walls and kept watch, they are also more loosely referred to as ‘watchmen’ and ‘sergeants’ (in the medieval period this described any person with an element of official protective responsibility). There were usually one or two permanent watchmen employed for each bar, but the number of

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<sup>18</sup> York House Books

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watchmen was increased at times, such as during a royal visit, or when plague threatened.<sup>19</sup>

Later surviving records also detail the importance of keeping 'undesirables' out of the city (a term potentially encompassing a broad demographic of the poor, mentally ill, and disabled). This was not merely a local initiative - a letter to the civic leaders from Henry VII in 1492 stated that "**Al vacabunds and vagrants or mysgided persons**" should leave the city or face imprisonment.<sup>20</sup> Somewhat ironically this same letter urges the civic authorities of York to treat all men equally. When the walls had failed to keep these outside 'undesirables' out of the city, orders could be issued to remove them or arrest them. Records of a council meeting in 1503 proposed that "**All vacabundez, beggers and idyll persons**" that had entered the city were to leave the city or face imprisonment.<sup>21</sup>

### The Walls as Propaganda:

The walls could also be utilised for ceremony and propaganda, sending powerful messages of loyalty or power - from the royal heraldry and City Arms on the bars, to displays of heads and quarters of traitors. For a royal visit to York, the welcome would begin at the borders of the Ainsty (an area of countryside around York controlled by the medieval city council) and the royal party escorted to Micklegate Bar to be received by the mayor, aldermen, and 'the 24' (a group of ex-sheriffs).<sup>22</sup> Similar events occurred, albeit on a smaller scale, for lower ranked VIP visitors. A scene in the Saint William window of c1414 in York Minster depicts William Fitzherbert (later archbishop, and subsequently canonised) entering the city in this grand manner in 1154. In contrast his rival Henry Murdac is reported to have been greeted by having the city gates closed on him.<sup>23</sup> Henry VII's visit to York in 1486 prompted a remarkable welcome, with a man dressed in character as 'Ebrauk' (a fictional prehistoric founder of York) granting the king the keys to the city. The city officials had publicly supported Richard III against Henry until Richard's death at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. Rather than being greeted in the usual way by the

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<sup>19</sup> Freeman's Register/York Memorandum Books

<sup>20</sup> York House Books

<sup>21</sup> York House Books

<sup>22</sup> York House Books

<sup>23</sup> Walham, J.R. (1863) 'Memorials of the Abbey of St Mary of Fountains'

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expected collection of officials, a potentially embarrassing and uncomfortable situation was avoided.<sup>24</sup>

At a more personal level, Mayor William Todd (who wrote to the king about the poor state of the walls, and repaired a section of wall at Fishergate in 1487) also had three inscriptions made on the walls. Of particular interest, Fishergate bar displays **'Sir William Todd, Knight and Mayor. This Wall was made in his days, 60 yards'**, and accompanying a sculpture of William Todd and his wife formerly at Fishergate read **'60 yards of length 1487 Sir William Todd, Mayor, Knight and Long Time Sherrif did this cost himself'**.<sup>25</sup> The inscriptions could be interpreted as a message encouraging others to invest in the repair and upkeep of the walls. Alternatively they could be seen as a form of self-promotion, using the walls for display of personal pride and status, and a less than subtle way to draw attention to the recent award of a knighthood.

**A 'Narrative' or 'Biography' of the Walls:**

Ultimately, what survives of the walls today is part of a long sequence - an object biography, or an ongoing narrative. The sequence starts with the reasons for wanting walls, followed by the process of building them, then subsequent repairs and rebuilding, attacks and damage, modifications and adaptations, and through more recent history such as Georgian and Victorian urban development and restoration. We cannot just look at what remains standing today to hope to fully understand the medieval walls. We need to consider this wider story, including all of the changes and what is lost.

At the start of the medieval period, York had two Norman castles built in wood (one, in the area now known as Baile Hill, soon fell out of use).<sup>26</sup> The Norman city walls were also mostly of wood, on top of earth works. The first Norman stonework to be built on the walls would have been the gateways (or 'bars'). This would have meant a city with wood and earthwork walls, but with strong stone gateways, and two wooden castles. After the castle was rebuilt in stone, between

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<sup>24</sup> York House Books

<sup>25</sup> RCHME (1972) York Vol 2 'The Defences'

<sup>26</sup> RCHME (1972) York Vol 2 'The Defences'

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1244 and 1272 under Henry III, the civic authorities started to do the same for the city walls.<sup>27</sup>

David Palliser argued that different towns would have built their walls for different reasons dependent on the time, place, and circumstance.<sup>28</sup> Building in stone in the medieval period was a substantial undertaking. Stone city walls were often built slowly, bit by bit. Coventry, as previously mentioned, took 179 years to complete its city walls.<sup>29</sup> However, we know that when there was a pressing political or military risk, town walls could be built much more rapidly. Caernarfon had its stone walls mostly completed in just two years as part of Edward I's plans to construct a fortified English town within Wales.<sup>30</sup>

York's walls seem to have taken around 75 years to rebuild in stone, at a time when wood and turf defences were increasingly vulnerable, and with potential danger from the Scots and unruly barons. The last sections of York's walls to remain as wooden palisades were the Old Baile area, rebuilt in stone between 1330 and 1340, and the Walmgate area, with rebuilding in stone starting in 1345.<sup>31</sup> At this point the walls had reached their peak, and what followed was mostly decline and repair. There were some changes and additions, such as Fishergate postern tower being rebuilt, and the Red Tower added, both around 1500.<sup>32</sup>

After the medieval period the walls were occasionally improved or adapted when needed, whether to use a tower as a cattle shed, or to shore up the walls to create defences during the Civil War or Jacobite uprisings. Antiquarian Francis Drake wrote about the walls in 1736, noting: **“what adds most to the ornament, if not to the strength of the city, are the reparations of the walls from Northstreet to Skeldergate Posterns; and again from Fishergate Postern to Walmgate Bar; these were about fifty years ago levelled upon the platform, paved with brick, and made commodious for walking on for near a mile, having an agreeable prospect of both town and**

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<sup>27</sup> Calendar of Close Rolls

<sup>28</sup> Palliser, D. (1995) 'Town Defences in Medieval England and Wales

<sup>29</sup> Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society 81 (1966)

<sup>30</sup> CADW Scheduled Monument Record

<sup>31</sup> Calendar of Close Rolls

<sup>32</sup> RCHME (1972) York Vol 2 'The Defences'

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country from them.”<sup>33</sup> This use of the walls for pleasure walks in the early 1700s might be surprising for anyone who thought that this was a Victorian phenomenon.

In the early years of the 1800s the York Corporation petitioned Parliament for the right to remove the walls, bars and posterns - all to be demolished completely. Their justification was due to problems with access **“all the Bars, Posterns, Gateways or public entrances... are narrow and inconvenient”** and with the cost of maintenance **“the Towers, Turrets, Walls and other stone works... are mostly of great antiquity and by reason thereof are becoming ruinous and liable to fall into decay and cannot be repaired, maintained, kept up and preserved in good order and condition but at a great annual charge and expense”**. All of this was technically completely true, and to an extent it is still true today.<sup>34</sup>

Thankfully, the requests to remove the walls were denied, possibly due to the efforts of the residents and archbishops who lobbied for the preservation of the walls, or possibly as they had only recently been repaired in 1745 with the second Jacobite uprising.<sup>35</sup> The walls survived other than the loss of four postern towers and three barbicans. William Etty, the famous York artist, noted that the walls were a tourist attraction, and in 1839 he called for their complete restoration (although he was not the first to do this).<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, preservation won over 'progress' and the walls were repaired (albeit with changes and modifications) by 1889.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Drake, F. (1736) 'Eboracum'

<sup>34</sup> York House Books

<sup>35</sup> Curr, Geoffrey. G, (1980) 'Who Saved York Walls?'

<sup>36</sup> Yorkshire Gazette, 6th January 1838

<sup>37</sup> RCHME (1972) York Vol 2 'The Defences'

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**Summary:**

- On a national level, you might see York as part of a defensive network of walled towns, funded by grants from the crown.
  
- At a city level you might see an embodiment of civic pride, security, a stimulus for trade, and a source of income, and later a difficult and expensive structure to maintain...
  
- At the level of the individual you might see a barrier controlling entry into and out of the city. This would change with circumstances (such as a royal visit, threat of invasion, or a plague) and would affect people differently, from the important residents with keys to the gates, to those denied entry.

We can't expect anything as large or as long lasting as the city walls to have had the same meaning and function at all times and to all people. The walls were not static. They could be re-built, re-made and re-negotiated. Even when they were not changed in form, they could potentially change in how they were used and understood. The meaning and function of any object or structure is shaped not only by its initial production and its form, but also by the identity of the user, and the context of its use. We can consider the systems and structures that led to the walls being built, and defined and facilitated their use (such as political unrest, trade and the economy) and we can consider the conscious experience of the people who interacted with the walls, shaped by their identity and prior experiences. Shared experiences can shape shared identities, relationships and communities.

We need to look at all the roles the walls played, and all of the interactions with them. The walls are a remarkable survival from the medieval period, but even if they have not changed much, the city and its people certainly have. This means it is relatively easy to see what the medieval walls looked like, but not always what they meant. Our experience of the walls, and the way we understand them, is very different to how people would have experienced and understood them in the medieval period. The people have changed, the walls have changed, and most importantly the context has changed. Above all, I feel that

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the walls can be seen as flexible, understood differently by different people at different times, and put to different uses based on changing needs and circumstances.

And finally, talking of 'experiencing' the walls, the last thing I wanted to mention today is a reminder of the York Walls Festival (a great opportunity to learn more about the walls and experience them) as well as the Friends of York Walls, who have walls trails, open days of Fishergate Postern Tower, and opportunities to get involved as a volunteer (with lots of information online at [yorkwalls.org.uk](http://yorkwalls.org.uk)).