

CLIFFORD'S TOWER

Tower Street, York YO1 9SA

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I had no knowledge that Clifford's Tower existed until our first visit to York for a week's holiday. As we strolled into the city that evening in intermittent drizzle, it was impossible to miss. The intriguing tower standing on its high mound begged a future visit, but to begin with I had to content myself with the strange sight of geese waddling their way happily up its steep, grassy bank...



Geese can't read...

I was surprised to learn that Clifford's Tower is just about all that remains of York Castle, first established by William the Conqueror (c.1028-1087). Archaeology has uncovered evidence of Roman occupation in the area, with a Roman cemetery on the site, although there is the possibility of earlier activity. However, after William's 1066 victory in Kent, the whole of the north was in rebellion and in particular, the influential Viking city of York was seething with resentment.

The presumably incensed William therefore marched on York in 1068, determined to make the large and prosperous city part of his kingdom – and to keep it that way. First of all he had one wooden castle built and then another one in 1069, housing a garrison of 500 knights.

York thus had the dubious distinction of being the only place in the country outside London with two castles. These two castles were either side of the River Ouse, one at the Clifford's Tower site and the other at Baile Hill. The former was later rebuilt in stone, while Baile Hill remains just a man-made mound, or motte.

Those original castles were built in haste as basic motte and bailey structures. The first, Clifford's Tower, was built in an urban setting and hundreds of houses had to be destroyed in the process. The motte was originally about 200 feet/61 metres wide at the base and the Sheriff of Yorkshire, placed in charge, managed to successfully defend the castle against an immediate uprising by members of the local population. After destroying hundreds of houses, this is no surprise!

Later in 1069, a Danish Viking fleet sailed up the River Ouse and attacked both castles, with the help of the Earl of Northumbria and some local rebels. When the Normans attempted to drive the attackers back, they managed to set fire to some city houses and also York Minster. The castles were captured and partly dismantled, while the Sheriff of Yorkshire was taken hostage by the Danes. He managed to recover his freedom and again enter the service of William the Conqueror, although he was no longer the sheriff and lost some of his lands.

After this destruction, the two castles were rebuilt, once again in wood. The bailey at the site of Clifford's Tower (at that time referred to as York Castle) was slightly enlarged, with probable buildings such as kitchens, stores, barracks, workshops, stables, forges and a chapel.

By 1086, the castle was surrounded by a moat and a large artificial lake, which was fed from the River Foss by a purpose-built dam and known as the King's Pool. However, more property was destroyed in the process, including two watermills. The Baile Hill site was abandoned, while York Castle became an important royal fortification in northern England.



Impressive Clifford's Tower

King Henry II (1133-89, reign 1154-89) visited York Castle four times during his reign, during which time the royal chambers were inside the keep for safety. In 1175, he used the castle as the base for receiving the homage of William I of Scotland (1143-1214, reign 1165-1214), also called the Lion of Scotland. Mills were built nearby to support the garrison, of which the military order of the Knights Templar was granted ownership in the mid-12th century. Unfortunately, the mills were prone to flooding by the rivers Ouse and Foss and needed frequent repair.

In 1190, the castle was the location of one of the worst organised massacres in England during medieval times. After the Norman Conquest, the early Norman kings needed to borrow money to build castles, but money-lending was forbidden for Christians. However, it was permissible for Jews and so a number of Jews came to England from Rouen in France. These French-speaking Jews, protected by the Crown, established communities in many English cities, including York.

Tension and hostility increased during the 12th century for several reasons. As well as people being in debt to Jewish moneylenders, there were several public theological disagreements between Jewish scholars and English churchmen, which escalated when untrue rumours were spread of Jews murdering Christian children. When King Richard I (1157-99, reign 1189-99) announced his intention to join the Crusades, the ensuing crusading fervour added to anti-Jewish attitudes, including another untrue rumour that he had ordered a massacre of the Jews.

In York, brewing antagonism gave way to outright violence. Richard de Malbis was a member of the aristocracy who was in a considerable amount of debt to the powerful Jewish merchant, Aaron of Lincoln. When a fire broke out in the city, de Malbis seized the opportunity to incite a local mob into attacking the home and family of a newly deceased Jewish man, who had been an employee of Aaron.

The leader of the Jewish community, Josce of York, obtained permission from the warden of York Castle to take his family and the rest of the Jews into the castle, where the warden most likely placed them in Clifford's Tower. The mob surrounded them and when the warden left the castle to discuss the situation, the Jews refused to let him back for fear of being handed over to the sheriff, or of being bombarded by the mob. This constituted a challenge to the king's authority and troops joined the mob outside, where they were pelted with stones by the besieged Jews.

It became apparent that they were being forced either to renounce their faith and be baptised into the Christian religion, or to face death at the hands of the mob. Their chief rabbi, Yom Tov of Joigny, urged that they kill themselves rather than yield, a choice made by some of their ancestors. Most Jews chose suicide, with the men killing their wives and children, followed by each other. They set fire to their goods and garments, so these would not be taken by the mob.

A few Jews chose to surrender, but were killed by their attackers, who searched the castle for deeds of indebtedness to the Jews. After the deeds had been located at York Minster, where they had been put for safe-keeping, they were destroyed. Around 150 Jews died in the massacre.

Between 1190-1194, the castle was repaired at great expense, with the mound raised by 13 feet/4 metres. Jewish life revived in York a few years later, but ended in 1290, when King Edward I (1239-1307, reign 1272-1307) banished all Jews from England. It was an exile that lasted until the 17th century.

King John (1166-1216, reign 1199-1216) visited York Castle a great deal during his reign, using the keep as his personal accommodation, to afford him security. This had its benefits, as the castle was well-maintained throughout that time. Records were also kept of how the castle was used as a gaol, referring to prisoners held there after being taken during King John's Irish campaigns. By the 13th century, castle-guards in the form of knights and crossbowmen were being used.



A significant motte

King Henry III (1207-72, reign 1216-72) also made considerable use of the castle, although the second timber structure was destroyed in a gale. Under pressure from his wars with the Scots, he had the tower rebuilt and strengthened in stone.

A senior carpenter and a senior stonemason from Windsor Castle in London were sent to York for a consultation about the new design, which was presumably an unusual step. The result was a quatrefoil with four overlapping circles resembling a four-leafed clover, which was unique in England at that time.

The work was carried out between 1245-1270 and included the building of a towered curtain wall, a significantly-sized gatehouse with two large towers, two smaller gatehouses, a small gateway into the city, a small watergate, a chapel and a new stone keep. The latter was originally known as the King's Tower, not to be known as Clifford's Tower for another few hundred years.

King Henry III extended the castle's use as a gaol, so that it held a wide range of prisoners. The sheriff was ultimately responsible, while his deputy acted as full-time gaoler. The castle held up to 310 prisoners at any given time, but the conditions were appalling and led to many deaths among the detainees. Break-outs were fairly common, with many of them achieving success.

When the military order of the Knights Templar was dissolved in 1307 in England, many of the arrested knights were held in York Castle. King Edward II (1284-1327, reign 1307-27) also used the castle as a gaol during his campaign against rebellious barons in 1322. After the Battle of Boroughbridge, between the king and his barons, many of the defeated rebels were executed at York Castle.

During the Scottish wars between 1298-1338, York Castle was often used as the centre of royal administration for England, with many Westminster institutions basing themselves within the castle compound. The Exchequer commandeered Clifford's Tower, but because there was insufficient room for the others, some city buildings were taken over and a temporary structure was erected. The castle even acquired its own mint in 1344, to serve the needs of northern England.

By the end of the 14th century, the castle bailey was mostly occupied by local administration, with prisoners in towers around the bailey. The old castle-guard system had changed, with local men hired to guard the castle, while royalty was staying at the no doubt more comfortable Franciscan priory nearby.

The castle required continuous investment in order to function as a military fortification. Winter floods caused damage and in about 1359, the heavy stone keep weakened from subsidence and the south-eastern lobe of the quatrefoil design cracked from top to bottom. The recommendation that the keep should be completely rebuilt was ignored and instead, repairs were carried out.

Even repairs became less frequent from 1400 onwards, with the inevitable detrimental outcome. King Richard III saw what was happening and set about having the most decrepit structures removed, but in 1485 he died at the Battle of Bosworth before replacement work could start.

As well as continuing as a gaol, the castle had a macabre use in the 15th century, as a place where traitors were executed by being hanged from the top of Clifford's Tower (rather than the previous location at Micklegate Bar).



Micklegate Bar (photo by Alan Santillo)

By the reign of King Henry VIII (1509-1547), the castle had reached a sorry state of disrepair, although its water defences had somehow managed to stay intact. The king had to be informed that there was no longer an official residence where his councillors could stay and work when they were in York, which presumably wasn't particularly well-received.

However, a decline in use occurred in 1553, when the castle lost its mint. A further downturn occurred at the end of the 16th century, when the castle's gaoler started to demolish the tower and sell the stone as building material. Fortunately, he was stopped after persistent protest from the city council – and I should think so too!

The first recorded use of the name 'Clifford's Tower' wasn't until 1596, when the Clifford family became the hereditary constables of the castle. It's generally considered that the tower, previously known merely as the King's Tower, took its new name from around that time. However, a more sensational possibility is that Clifford's Tower could be a reference to the fact that Roger de Clifford was hanged in chains from the tower walls in 1322, when he committed treason against King Edward II. Both possibilities seem equally likely.

The tower's final military role commenced in 1642, when it was repaired and refortified in order to accommodate troops taking part in the Royalist defence of York during the English Civil War (1642-51). It was also used as a magazine, for storing gunpowder and shot.

In 1644, the city of York fell to the Parliamentarians, when the tower continued to be used by a garrison of between 40 and 80 men. George Fox, founder of the Religious Society of Friends, was held in custody there for two nights in 1655, on his way to imprisonment at Scarborough Castle.

Parliament appointed the local mayor as the governor of Clifford's Tower, which was a respected position that lasted until the Restoration in 1660. Around that time, there were efforts to separate the structures of Clifford's Tower, used by Parliament as a garrison, from the outside bailey buildings that continued to be used as a gaol. Within the bailey, improvements were made to the Grand Jury House and the Common Hall. In 1650, Oliver Cromwell himself visited Clifford's Tower and received a gun salute.

However, there was ongoing trouble at the castle, when the alleged decadent behaviour of the garrison gave rise to numerous grievances amongst the citizens of York, who disparagingly referred to Clifford's Tower as 'The Minced Pie' and were known to toast its demolition.

On 23 April 1684, the interior was severely damaged by an explosion in the magazine. This had allegedly been caused by a fire resulting from a ceremonial salute for St George's Day, although some garrison members had moved their personal possessions to safety just before the explosion. Nobody was injured and many historians suspect that this was not accidental.

The heat of the fire is said to have turned the tower's limestone into its current vaguely pink colour and the ruined tower was returned to private ownership. It eventually formed part of the property belonging to the neighbouring house and gardens – quite a garden feature.

By 1701, the county gaol conditions were considered to be disgraceful (the mind boggles) and it was decided to redevelop the area of the old bailey. New buildings were eventually erected, including a county gaol built on the south side of Clifford's Tower and the Assize Courts on the site of the old Jury House on the west side. The Sessions House and Common Hall were replaced by the Female Prison on the east side, although the Female Prison and the county gaol later combined to become the Debtors' Prison.



What remains from inside (photo by Alan Santillo)

By the end of the 18th century, there was criticism of the prison's facilities and it was also considered unseemly for crowds of spectators to gather outside when prisoners were taken into York for execution. From 1803, the former castle courtyard was used for this grim task, but crowds still formed outside the bailey to watch the slow death of those executed.

Ten years later, the process was hastened by the 'short drop' hanging method, which allowed the speedy execution of fourteen Luddite agitators at the castle in 1814. I suppose it was a case of being thankful for small mercies. Overcrowding was such a problem, though, that sometimes up to 40 prisoners awaiting trial had to be kept in the gaol yard.

An official complaint was made at the 1821 assizes, followed by an investigation. Demolition was considered, but a campaign to save Clifford's Tower for posterity succeeded. Instead, the tower and nearby house were purchased by the county of Yorkshire and new prison buildings were constructed in a Tudor Gothic style on the castle site in 1825. Clifford's Tower was redundant...

The back yard of the Female Prison that was hidden from public view by a new wall, was used for hangings from 1868. Only nine years later, however, the Prison Act of 1877 reformed the English prison system and in the following year, the gaol of York Castle came under the control of central government. It was used as the county prison until 1900, when its remaining inmates were transferred to Wakefield Prison in West Yorkshire. After this time, it became a military prison, until it was finally demolished in 1935.

In 1890, the prison commissioners had declared Clifford's Tower a national monument to be conserved as a historic site. In 1902, it was given to the York Corporation with a suitable grant for repairs and conservation. These included a partial reconstruction of the mound in order to underpin the tower's south-east lobe with buried concrete flying buttresses.

During the works, an archaeological investigation of the internal mound was undertaken. It's considered very likely that the earth motte was formed by historical addition since the 11th century, meaning that material from the earlier castles must still be buried. More archaeological research would be beneficial!

In 1915, Clifford's Tower was taken into state guardianship. The Assize Courts building now houses York Crown Court, while the Debtors' Prison and Female Prison form the Castle Museum. Public access to Clifford's Tower was improved with a straight line of steps leading up, replacing a former spiral path.



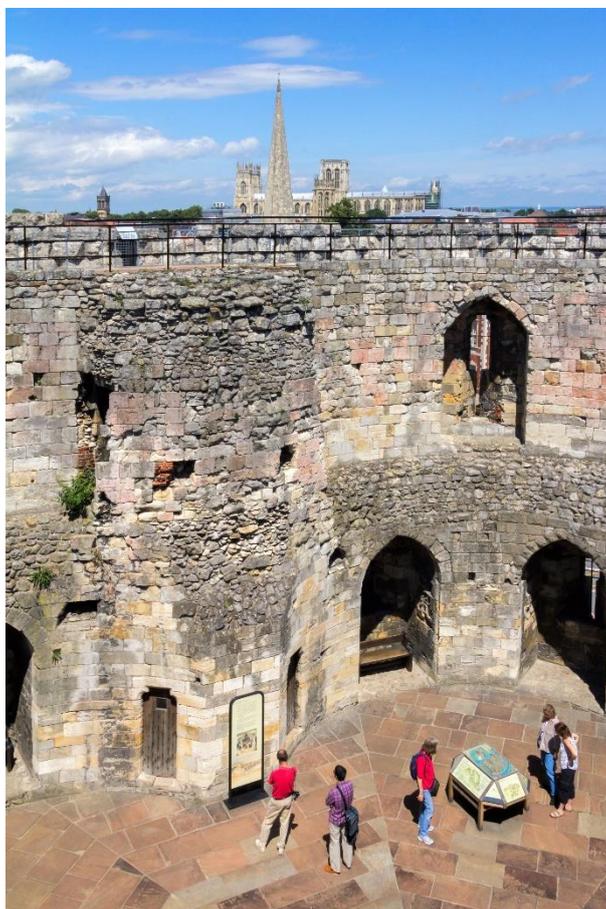
Steps up to Clifford's Tower

When we climbed up to the tower, we found the 55 steps were quite narrow and very steep, so there was a small amount of waiting for people to descend. While waiting at the bottom, I read a plaque that had been placed at the base of the mound in 1978, to commemorate the Jewish massacre, complete with a Hebrew inscription from Isaiah (which, of course, I couldn't understand).

The description seemed somewhat brief and clinical, although I did feel the horror could be sensed beneath the cold words. A more fitting memorial happens every year, when daffodils planted on the mound flower around the anniversary of the sad event, with their six-pointed shape evoking the Star of David.

Once we were inside the two-storey tower, there were information notice boards to read. The quatrefoil design was definitely pleasing with its four circular lobes. Each lobe measures 22 feet/6.5 metres across, with walls that are 9.5 feet/3 metres thick. At its widest, the tower measures 79 feet/24 metres across. Between two of the southern lobes, a square gatehouse 21 feet/6.5 metres wide protected the entrance, with defensive turrets between the other lobes.

After looking around the ground floor, it was time to climb a spiral staircase that led to the chapel and thereafter to the battlements on the top. The chapel itself, measuring 15 feet/4.5 metres by 14 feet/4.2 metres, was built over the entrance and designed to double as a portcullis chamber. Once we were at the top, the view was well worth the climb, because as well as the city of York to look at, the vista stretched as far as the North York Moors.



Visitors to give some scale (photo by Alan Santillo)

Although Clifford's Tower is basically the ruined keep of what was once part of the complex known as York Castle, it has a notable history that needs to be remembered. Coming now under the care of English Heritage, it stands proudly as the significant building it is, a worthy witness to York's past. This must be particularly true when the daffodils on the mound are in full bloom.