

INACCESSIBLE YORK – GUILDHALLS & SECRET PASSAGES

June 2003

**A unique opportunity to enter parts of York never open to the public.
Climb turrets, descend into Roman excavations, explore secret passages and visit hidden mediaeval interiors.**

GUILDHALL

The Guildhall was built in 1447/8 for the Guild of St. Christopher and St. George. These were suppressed at Reformation. It was also used as a Common Hall for various trade guilds and by City Council. In 1483 Richard III was entertained here on his first visit as King-look for the plaque on the north wall. The hall was bombed out by incendiary bombs in the 'Baedeker' raid of 29th April 1942 and rebuilt. The Queen Mother reopened it in 1960. The roof timbers of oak, the windows and upper parts of the walls are all replacements. The stained glass window of history of York is noteworthy-see the leaflet available free at Reception for details of what it depicts. There are numerous displays around the hall about its history. Margaret Clitherow tried here 1586.

Committee Room 1 is the prosaic name given to the inner chamber called Room 1 (door in far left-hand corner of hall). This was where the inner council of the Guild and later the City Council met. The room is mediaeval, though re-panelled in 1679 (see the date above the fireplace). Look for **2 secret passages**. One is to the left of the fireplace, and may have led down into dungeons below. The other is just inside the door on the left as you go in and is quite hard to find. It leads up to the roof, but it is too dark, steep and dusty to allow the public too far in. The ceiling is original, and includes some mediaeval roof bosses, such as The Virgin & Child and some modern replacements, such as the man with a forked tongue!

In 1579 the City Council was concerned at the filthy state of the water in the River Ouse, the source of much of the city's water, and they issued orders for the citizens to stop discharging filth into the river. But at the same time the city councillors were in the habit of nipping out of the Guildhall and peeing in the river in full public view on the jetty just below Room 1! To conceal this spectacle the Councillors voted 5 shillings "to erect a wainscot around the pissing place"! The councillors' toilets are still in the same place, though thankfully inside the Guildhall!

In 1647 during the Civil War the Scots held King Charles I prisoner and refused to surrender him up to Parliament until they were paid £200,000 in arrears owing to the Scots army. The money was exchanged in this room and the Scots commissioners sat in this room till they had counted that the money was right!

The Council Chamber was built in 1889 to replace an inadequate hall near the Guildhall, which had in turn replaced a previous Council Chamber on old Ouse Bridge demolished in 1820 (see a picture of it in one of the tiles in the fireplace). It is very much modelled on the Houses of Parliament, with the Lord Mayor's throne, and councillors' seats arranged on either side. The Public Gallery at the back has the sign "No manifestation of feeling on the part of the general public is permitted" or more briefly 'Silence'! The public address system is noteworthy (do not touch!) – it is possible for councillors to indicate that they want to speak and be cut off if they speak too long! The anteroom is where the councillors used to divest themselves of outdoor coats and umbrellas and don ceremonial robes.

BEDERN HALL

It is necessary to obtain keys in advance from Burns Solicitors on Lendal. To arrange entry contact Roger Lee on 653698.

Bedern means 'House of Prayer'. It was founded in 1349 to control activities of the Vicars Choral of York Minster who had reputation for 'colourful nocturnal habits'! They used to go out at night with swords and daggers, fighting and duelling in the street (often over women) and getting drunk. So the Dean of York compelled them to live in this Bedern College (College= community) and they even had a bridge across road to prevent them getting in street at all on their way to and from the Minster to sing the services. But even after this some of them were caught breaking their vows of celibacy. The Chapel survives on the left inside the gatehouse of the College as you leave Goodramgate – it is now a stone store for the Minster. The former Dining Hall is now a guildhall, but was formerly a warehouse for Wrights Pork Pie Factory, until the whole Bedern area was redeveloped about 15 years ago.

EAST ANGLE TURRET

The Roman Walls here were excavated c. 1900 and the bank removed. They are thought to date to c. 200 AD and the time of Septimius Severus. They are built of 'Saxa Quadrata' or squared stone like the Multangular Tower. The first square tower is an interval tower. The next one is the East Angle Turret, which is diagonally across the Roman fort from the Multangular Tower. The dark stone wall behind and retaining walls are modern. The East Angle Turret and stone wall replaced an earthen bank, which survives in the bottom of the East Angle Turret, beneath what was a floor-it is the oldest thing visible in York, dating back to 71 AD! In the angle between turret outer wall and retaining wall is a carved stone with the inscription 'COH X'- the tenth cohort which built and guarded this part of the fort (as in Via Decumana-street of the Tenth). A cohort was 6 Centuries i.e. 480x 80 men (a century was 80 men) and there were 10 cohorts in a legion.

You can also climb up the stairs to see the back of the 14thC Merchant Taylors Hall. They were originally the Guild of St John the Baptist and the Drapers, Hosiers and Tailors Guilds. Became Merchant Taylors in 1662 and the brick facing of the hall dates from c.1700.

There is a good view of HARLOT HILL TOWER here.

It is the Tower with 'Pepper-Pot' Turrets was rebuilt in the 19thC. There may once have been a postern here leading out to 'Love Lane' (Now Cloisters Walk). There is much debate about what the arches under the walls were used for but these names may give a clue!