# Creating heritage
## Vikings, Jorvik and public interest archaeology

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Dr Peter V. Addyman was the Director of York Archaeological Trust from its foundation in 1972 to 2002, and instigator of the Jorvik Viking Centre. In 2015 he was awarded a British Academy President's Medal in recognition of his significant efforts in making archaeology and historic heritage publicly accessible. Here he reviews the role of urban archaeology in York in stimulating the growth of a new heritage industry.[1]

Archaeological excavation as a method of establishing the origins and development of British towns and cities is very much a growth of the last 50 years. Nowadays, prior excavation is almost mandatory when modern re-development schemes threaten to destroy or disturb buried archaeological remains in and around urban centres, but it was not always so. Despite massive post-war re-development in many town centres, prior excavation and recording was then the exception not the rule. When it took place at all – excavation of the Temple of Mithras at Walbrook in London is a famous example – it was usually directed to the study of the Roman past. By contrast post-war reconstruction in continental towns, especially in Germany, had been seen as an opportunity for a more comprehensive approach, demonstrating, in a number of astonishingly productive excavations, the power of archaeology to write a new kind of urban history. Belatedly, therefore, the Council for British Archaeology, then largely financed through the British Academy, set up an Urban Research Committee in 1969 under the chairmanship of Professor Maurice Barley FBA, which identified towns and cities in Britain with archaeological potential, period by period, and began to evaluate the threats posed to them by modern development. Meanwhile comprehensive excavations in certain towns, notably those carried out in the 1960s by Professor Martin Biddle FBA at Winchester, demonstrated the power of new techniques of open-area stratigraphic excavation to address major problems of urban origins, development, topography, land use and culture.

1. This article is based on the first Raymond and Beverly Sackler Distinguished Lecture in Archaeology (given in honour of Professor Norman Hammond FBA), delivered by Dr Peter Addyman at Cambridge on 4 November 2015.

Dr Peter Addyman – pictured here (right), together with Lord Stern, the President of the British Academy – received his British Academy President's Medal in a ceremony held at the Academy on 29 September 2015. A full list of the Prizes and Medals awarded by the British Academy can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/2015prizes/

### York Archaeological Trust

By 1970, the nation had become aware, through the strident campaigns of Rescue, the Trust for British Archaeology, of the general threats to Britain's archaeological heritage from development. At this juncture, major schemes for an inner and outer ring road were proposed for York, arguably the most important ancient town in the North of England, together with four major development schemes, five multi-storey car parks and various ancillary developments all within the city walls (Figure 1). This seemed to threaten catastrophic destruction of York's archaeology at just the moment when the potential of archaeological research in towns was becoming apparent to scholars. A comprehensive campaign of excavations seemed to be demanded, and in 1972 the York Archaeological Trust was founded, as

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**Figure 1**
York: the Jorvik excavation preceded the construction of the red-roofed buildings right centre. Photo: English Heritage

**Figure 2**
Coppergate, York. Visitors view the 'Viking Dig'. Photos in Figures 2–8: courtesy York Archaeological Trust.

an independent charity, to carry it out. Barley was the chairman of the new Trust, and I left my lectureship in the University of Southampton to become its director, assemble funds, premises, a staff and resources, and set out a coherent programme of research. In persuading York city authorities to countenance such a campaign, the Trust promised a vastly enhanced understanding of the history of the city, greatly-enriched archaeological collections in its museums and considerable educational, recreational and tourism benefits. Forty-three years on, it has comprehensively delivered all those things, and in addition developed a heritage industry that has changed the character of York and significantly benefited its economy.

York's significance in the past is well known. It was founded in or about AD 71 as *Eburacum*, a legionary fortress first for the Roman IXth legion and later for the VIth legion. By the early 3rd century it was also a civil town with the status of colonia, and it had become capital of the province of Lower Britain. By the early 4th century it saw the proclamation of Constantine as emperor on the death of his father Constantius; apparently it already had a bishop; and later it may have been the seat of the Dux Brittaniarum, the functionary charged with the defence of all the provinces of Britain. By 627 it had received the mission of Paulinus that re-established the church in Northumbria, and by the 8th century it was *Eoforwic*, a metropolitan city, focus for the church in the North, and centre of culture and trade for Northumbria. Captured by a Viking army in 867-8, it became *Jorvik*, a Viking capital city for much of the late 9th and part of the 10th century. With the establishment of two castles at the Norman conquest, it gained strategic importance, developed in the 12th and 13th centuries to become the second largest city in England, and even after late medieval population decline remained pre-eminent in the North. Buried archaeological deposits pertaining to all these periods are well preserved in York, which had hitherto largely avoided disruptive modern development, and the deposits, because of York's water-retaining clay substrate, often generate anaerobic conditions that lead to exceptional preservation of organic material, metals and a wide range of artefacts that normally perish.

In 1972, therefore, the archaeological potential of York seemed great. But to realise it, funds were needed, and access to development sites had to be gained. The solution to both challenges seemed to be in education. The Trust's charitable remit was to educate the public in archaeology. Archaeological research was not itself a charitable activity at law, but education was, and it was argued that to educate people about York's archaeology it was first necessary to establish the story – by research. For that, the charity could therefore seek and receive resources. Access to sites was not mandatory in the 1970s, but had to be achieved by persuasion. Here a hearts-and-minds campaign was necessary, to persuade city authorities of the value and importance of archaeology, to persuade developers of the wisdom and indeed public duty of allowing access to their sites prior to development, and to persuade a doubtful and dour northern public that archaeology before development was not an expensive, time-wasting and disruptive irrelevance, but an exciting and important opportunity to discover York's history, avoid its loss, and pass evidence for it on to posterity.

From the very first, therefore, arrangements were made on city-centre excavations for the public to be allowed access while the work was in progress, the first step in educating people in archaeology (Figure 2). Visitors were give visual and audio interpretations, explanations by voluntary guides, leaflets and, where possible, fuller publications. Schools around the city were encouraged to send classes to visit under the care of the Trust's schools officer, or if not, to allow her to present the story in schools. City councillors and officers were given on-site briefings on the significance of what was being revealed, of its potential for enriching city history and collections, and for tourism. Happily some of the earliest excavations produced important discoveries that could become the subject of press and television reports and soon the York Trust developed a strong media presence. This included several visits from the influential children's BBC television programme *Blue Peter*, memorably once with one of its presenters clambering along a deeply-buried, but still excrement-rich, Roman sewer.

**Figure 3**
The 'Viking Dig' at Coppergate, York.

## Excavations

Early excavations by the York Archaeological Trust included work on the defences of the Roman legionary fortress, the excavation of the college of the Vicars Choral of York Minster and the saving of its medieval common hall, still miraculously standing in the heart of later industrial development. The excavation of long-demolished churches added an excavated component to knowledge of a type of building previously only known from documentary or architectural evidence. Demographic data was obtained from the excavation of cemeteries threatened by development, including medieval parish cemeteries, a monastic cemetery, a Jewish medieval cemetery and various Roman burial grounds, adding a new dimension to York's history. This study of urban demographic history through archaeology eventually led, through the Trust's co-operation with the School of Archaeology at the University of Bradford, to the development there of new disciplines of palaeopathology and forensic archaeology. The anaerobic ground conditions in York were found to preserve macroscopic and microscopic botanical remains and insect fauna, stimulating the establishment of an environmental archaeology unit in the University of York to develop the discipline of palaeoecology and establish

**Figure 4**
Coppergate, York: a well-preserved 10th century timber building.

urban environmental conditions in the past. Some 1500 excavations eventually took place in York between 1972 and 2002, providing new data on most periods of York's past. The York Archaeological Trust firmly believed the dictum of a former Secretary of the British Academy, Sir Mortimer Wheeler FBA, that the date of a discovery is the date of its publication, and has so far produced over 70 volumes – and much further digital material – detailing its discoveries. New data on long-lost York buildings and topographical features have also enriched the content of the York volume of the *British Historic Towns Atlas*, jointly produced recently with the British Historic Towns Trust.[2]

Most of the York Trust's excavations were development-led, occasioned by threats of destruction by new construction schemes. Even amongst these, however, there had to be choices, and a review of priorities for future archaeological research was suggested by the then Ancient Monuments Inspectorate of the Department of the Environment. This identified as a particular priority the excavation of a part of the commercial centre of the 9th-11th century town, Viking age Jorvik (Figure 3). At the time there was simply no evidence from England as to what such a place looked like. Fortuitously a development site became available in Coppergate, in the heart of the area where waterlogged conditions – and thus excellent preservation – was known to prevail. Exploratory excavations at Coppergate began in 1976. These immediately revealed, just below the cellar floors of recently demolished buildings, well-preserved timber buildings of the Viking Age, some still standing two metres high (Figure 4). The associated artefacts were prolific, rich and, because of the anaerobic conditions, superbly well preserved. The site therefore presented an exceptional opportunity and exceptional measures were needed to raise the funds to pay for a large excavation – and the deep steel shuttering needed to make it safe.

Magnus Magnusson, then a familiar and much loved face as question master of the BBC programme *Mastermind*, agreed to chair a Special Development Campaign that had as its patrons the Prince of Wales, Queen Margrethe of Denmark (both themselves archaeology

2. Peter Addyman (ed.), *British Historic Towns Atlas*, Volume V, *York* (2015).

**Figure 5**
The Jorvik Viking Centre: modern shops above, Viking age street below.

graduates from Cambridge), the King of Sweden, the Crown Prince of Norway, and the President of Iceland. Funds arrived from Britain, from all parts of Scandinavia, and from Scandinavian expatriates in the United States. This enabled the excavation to continue for over five years. New discoveries, which poured out of the ground continuously, were used to generate local, national and international publicity. The site, in Trust tradition, was open to the public and, heavily promoted, often generated long queues and an eventual attendance of well over half a million people, who themselves contributed handsomely to the work through their entrance fees and purchases. Meanwhile the nation and the world took a new interest in the Viking phenomenon, as press cuttings from Britain, the Continent, America, the Antipodes, and of course especially Scandinavia itself, clearly showed, and Jorvik at York became an international tourist destination.

## The Jorvik Viking Centre

In the face of development, even important and prolific excavations have to come to an end, and construction of a new shopping centre and multi-storey car park loomed in the early 1980s. Ian Skipper, an entrepreneur supporter of the York Archaeological Trust, who had done much to invigorate and inspire Magnusson's fund-raising campaign, was incensed that so important a site would have to go, and insisted that the Trust should find some way of 'saving' it.

To cut a very long story very short, a scheme was devised to create a huge underground gallery below the new Coppergate Centre in which Jorvik's remarkable timber buildings, having in the meantime been through a long laboratory conservation process, could be re-assembled where they had been found (Figure 5). To aid comprehension of these remains, which the public often found difficult to understand, a reconstruction of the whole neighbourhood, as it might have been in the Viking age, was to be made, based in every detail on data from the excavation (Figure 6). Large numbers of visitors were hoped for. To provide security and give an optimal experience, people were to visit seated in comfortable time cars (Figure 7). These would regress through a millennium to the Viking Age, then move forward through Jorvik. Their occupants would experience Jorvik as does a new visitor to any foreign place (the past is,

**Figure 6**
The 1984 version of Jorvik.

**Figure 7**
Jorvik Viking Centre: visiting Jorvik in a Time Car.

after all, a foreign country), seeing the sights, smelling the smells, feeling the breezes and hearing the sounds, with Magnus Magnusson's familiar and seductive tones quietly drawing attention to particularly interesting details. Having seen the interpretation, visitors then needed to see the evidence, so the time cars were to move forward in time again, to the 1970s, and into the Viking dig, to see the ancient buildings – the actual remains – in the state the excavators found them. Time travel over, visitors could then examine the huge number of artefacts found at Coppergate, theme by theme, in more conventional museum displays.

The Jorvik Viking Centre opened in April 1984, welcomed 4,800 people on its first day, over 900,000 in its first year, and by 2015 had indelibly imprinted the York Archaeological Trust's view of life in Viking age Coppergate in the minds of over 18 million visitors. Finding winter a relatively slack period for visitors the York Archaeological Trust instituted an annual Jorvik Viking Festival in February, an extravaganza of academic lectures, cultural events, re-enactments, Viking boat regattas, simulated battles and a boat burning. Now in its 30th year, it is credited with attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors to York at a formerly quiet period. In the year Jorvik opened, the government introduced a new national educational curriculum in which for

**Figure 8**
Jorvik Viking Centre: the perennial queue.

the first time the Viking phenomenon was included, specifying the Jorvik Viking Centre as the one relevant place to visit. As a result, and to avoid hopeless congestion, Jorvik had at popular visiting seasons to restrict school visits to one every 14 minutes (Figure 8). York, moreover, acquired another tourist visitor component.

With problems like this, and queues that could reach two hours in duration, evidently the Jorvik Viking Centre was too small. Equally, if it was to fulfil its educational role properly, it clearly lacked dedicated teaching areas for children. The Trust rapidly addressed the latter problem by developing an Archaeological Resource Centre (an 'ARC'), in a nearby redundant medieval church, where children could study the processes of archaeological research through hands-on experience of real archaeological material, sorting and classifying artefacts, examining trays full of real organic remains of Viking, or Roman, or medieval date, sorting them into different categories – bones, seeds, charcoal, insect remains and so on, then working out what each category tells us about the past. The ARC, now re-designed and re-named DIG, has over the years provided over one million children with another unforgettable introduction to archaeology, working on the Confucian principle that if you hear you forget, if you see you remember, but if you do you understand.

The Jorvik Viking Centre, ARC/DIG and several other heritage-related attractions in York now administered by the York Archaeological Trust, together with the Trust's primary work of archaeology, have between them provided a firm financial foundation for the organisation over the 30 years since Jorvik opened, the Trust's annual turnover now exceeding £6.5 million. These resources, and the institutions that produce them, enable it effectively to satisfy its charitable remit of educating the public in archaeology while at the same time providing, without any public grants, the first rate archaeological service that a city like York needs. More generally, however, York has benefited from the Jorvik Viking Centre's stimulus to heritage-based tourism in York. Recently-published figures show that tourist numbers in York have increased from *c.*1 million in 1970 to *c.*7 million in 2014. The city had 560 hotel and guest house rooms in 1970; it now boasts over 7,000. In 1970 tourism spend in York was £60,000,000; by 2014 it was *c.*£600,000,000. In 1971 confectionary manufacture and rolling stock construction employed *c.*20,000 people and tourism *c.*2,500; by 2014 confectionary and rail construction had shrunk to *c.*5,000, while tourism jobs had jumped to 20,000. It would be presumptuous to suggest that these changes are a direct result of the advent of Jorvik and the work of the York Archaeological Trust. In this period York has, for example, also gained the National Railway Museum and an extremely efficient visitor promotion organisation has marketed the city vigorously: but the Trust's contribution has not been negligible.

## Continuum

Much of the credit for the creation of the Jorvik Viking Centre, and the heritage industry which has grown from it, must go to the foresight, drive and energy of Ian Skipper and the skills of the Centre's project manager Colonel Anthony Gaynor. As the success of Jorvik became apparent, Skipper invited the York Archaeological Trust to deploy its new-found expertise in heritage interpretation and public presentation elsewhere. The Trust, dedicated to working in its York home, felt it could not do this, though aware that it was receiving local, national and indeed global requests for advice on the Jorvik style of presentation, and was hosting a stream of fact-finding distinguished professionals from cultural institutions and visitor attractions around the world. Skipper therefore established his own company, Heritage Projects Ltd, later re-named Continuum, which, with Colonel Gaynor initially as its Chief Executive, began to develop its own heritage-based attractions in various centres around Britain, including Canterbury, Oxford and Edinburgh, and to provide a consultancy, design and construction service to those who wished to develop a Jorvik-style approach to the presentation and interpretation of their own heritage assets. Continuum, now a leader in its field, runs numerous heritage attractions, including such 21st century cultural phenomena as the original set for Granada Television's Coronation Street, attracting huge numbers, pending its forthcoming demolition. The construction and design side of the operation is now a separate York-based company *Paragon Creative* with a world-wide client list and countless highly successful heritage-based attractions to its credit. Meanwhile, for better or for worse (the maintenance of academic integrity is a constant worry), the powerful methods of interpretation and subliminal persuasion developed for Jorvik are discernible throughout the burgeoning world-wide heritage industry.