

LITERARY YORK

Narrow, shadowy medieval streets and iconic architecture, a colourful history and a rather bohemian, academic atmosphere have always made York a rich source of inspiration for authors over the centuries.

So, are you sitting comfortably? Then we'll begin. Once upon a time, long ago, in the 8th century, a writer and historian named Bede (673-735) lived in the North East of England. Among 40 or so books that he wrote was the *Ecclesiastical History of the People of Britain*, now considered to be the first great Anglo-Saxon work of literature. The Venerable Bede played a vital role in York's history. As tutor to Egbert, then Bishop of York, Bede advised him to apply to the Pope to make York an archbishopric. The application was successful and Egbert became the first Archbishop of York in 734, making York independent from Canterbury and a powerful religious capital in its own right.

To this day, **York Minster** – Northern Europe's largest medieval gothic cathedral – dominates the city of York and influences the daily lives of the people who live and work in its shadow, as well as attracting visitors from all over the world who come to marvel at this architectural masterpiece.

Charles Dickens was one such regular visitor, who wove detail from the Minster into *Nicholas Nickleby*, when he wrote about the "five maiden sisters... all of surpassing beauty" who "dwelt, in the ancient city of York." Four of them were aged between 22 and 19 but "...if the four elder sisters were lovely, how beautiful was the youngest, a fair creature of sixteen!" This story was inspired by the Minster's Five Sisters Window, which has remarkably survived wars and fires to remain the largest area of grisaille glass anywhere in the world. Dickens used to give readings from his novels, the first time in 1858, at the now vanished Festival Concert Rooms, on the corner of Blake Street and Museum Street.

Other famous literary visitors have included Charlotte and Anne Bronte, who stayed at the **George Inn**, Coney Street in 1849. Wilkie Collins – author of *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* – visited York on a number of occasions and set part of his 1862 novel *No Name* in the city in which Captain Wragge even describes his stroll along the city walls.

Daniel Defoe, the author of *Moll Flanders* and *Robinson Crusoe*, was a frequent visitor to York. The first line of *Crusoe* reads: "I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, to a good family..." Defoe also wrote *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* and praised the antiquities of York.

York was a prominent centre of the book publishing business in the 17th century. At number 35 Stonegate, the sign of the Holy Bible, dated 1682, still hangs over the ornately carved doorway of what was once Francis Hildyard's bookshop, which was visited even by Royalty. At that time, booksellers were often publishers as well, and Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy* was published here in 1760. And above number 33, at Stonegate's entrance to Coffee Yard, sits the bright red "Printer's Devil", a carved sign which indicated the

location of the print works up until the 18th century. The apprentices, who carried the hot plates, were known as the printer's devils.

Nearby Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, sits on the corner of Minstergates, leaning on a pile of books, to advertise the bookseller's shop below, where authors and literary readers met as members of one of Britain's earliest book groups.

The Bloomsbury literary group, which included E M Forster and Virginia Woolf, met in York from 1904 up to the Second World War, and York's Bloomsbury Guesthouse is named after the group.

WH Auden, one of the most popular 20th century poets (whose popularity was re-ignited after John Hannah's tear-jerking rendition of *Funeral Blues in Four Weddings and a Funeral*), was born in York in 1907, the son of George Auden, a local GP. Auden swapped old York for New York, where he spent most of his adult life, but enthusiasts still beat a path to the old York family home – at 54 Bootham.

Fans of award-winning novel *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* will feel they almost know York if without visiting, having read vivid accounts of the life of Ruby Lennox, who lived with her family above the pet shop in the shadow of York Minster. Author Kate Atkinson was born in York in 1951 and used her hometown as the setting for the book, which won the prestigious Whitbread Book of the Year prize in 1995 with her. A stage version of the story was premiered at York's **Theatre Royal**.

The sisters Margaret Drabble and A S Byatt were both educated in York's Mount School, and the surrounding Yorkshire countryside has provided a backdrop for some of A S Byatt's novels, including her 1990 Booker Prize winner *Possession*.

York University boasts its share of successful contemporary authors too, including Jung Chang, author of the award-winning book *Wild Swans*, and Graham Swift, who established his career as an author with the novel *Waterland*.

Fiona Shaw is yet another York writer, feted for her novel *The Sweetest Thing* – the story of Harriet, one member of a poor fishing family on the Yorkshire coast, and Samuel, the Quaker philanthropist she meets on her escape to York.

Literary York Today

Today York enjoys a lively literary scene. One of York's most fascinating contemporary literary figures is Jack Mapanje, who lives in exile in the city after being forced to flee his native Malawi, in Africa. He was head of the Department of English at the University of Malawi when arrested in 1987 after his first book of poems, *Chameleons and Gods* (published in 1981), was banned in the country. He was released in 1991, after spending three years, seven months and sixteen days in prison following an international outcry against his treatment. He has since published another collection, *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*, and has co-edited two anthologies, *Oral Poetry from Africa* and *Summer Fires*.

York poet Caroline Bird was born in 1987 but she has won the Poetry Society's Simon Elvin Young Poet of the Year Award two years running (2000, 2001) and she was shortlisted for the Poetry Review magazine's Geoffrey Dearmer Prize in 2001.

Not surprisingly, York is a veritable bookworm's paradise. Bookshops in the city range from the many second-hand and antiquarian bookdealers, including the **Minster Gate Book Shop**, **Ken Spelman's** on Micklegate, run by ex-students of York University, and **Janette Ray Rare Books** on Gillygate, which specialises in architectural, design and garden books.

Minister Gate Book Shop: Tel: 0 1904 621812 website:

www.minstergatebooks.co.uk/html/homepage/hmepgewh.htm

Ken Spelman Books: Tel: 01904 624414, website: www.kenspelman.com

Janette Ray Rare Books: Tel: 01904 623088, website: www.janetteray.co.uk

Yorkwalk has introduced a new Literary Walk to its range of themed walking tours of York, which explores particular sites around the city connected with all these authors and many more besides. Other intriguing walks by Yorkwalk include a Richard III Trail, a range of Inaccessible Tours of places not usually open to the public, and even a Historic Toilet Tour – surely a rich source of inspiration for budding writers! Yorkwalk tours all begin from the Museum Garden Gates and take 1-2 hours.

The full timetable of all walks is on www.yorkwalk.co.uk.

If you want your accommodation in York to have a literary theme, stay at the **Bronte Guesthouse** (no direct literary connection!), five minutes from Bootham Bar. Tel: 01904 653434, website: www.bronte-guesthouse.com or **The Bloomsbury Guesthouse**, Tel: 01904 634031, website: www.bloomsburyhotel.co.uk

Suggested Reading While Staying in York:

Wild Swans

Jung Chang

Behind the Scenes at the Museum

Kate Atkinson

Nicholas Nickleby

Charles Dickens

Robinson Crusoe

Daniel Defoe

Possession

AS Byatt

The Sweetest Thing

Fiona Shaw

For any further information and your free guide to York, please contact: York Visitor Information Centre, Tel: 01904 550099, email: info@visityork.org or visit the website at www.visityork.org.

Press contact: Kay Hyde PR Manager – Visit York, Tel: 01904 554451, email: kh@visityork.org, websites: www.visityork.org, www.goodeveningyork.com.