

York still possesses its old world charm

The bell rang out, calling worshipers to imposing York Minster, acknowledged as one of the world's most magnificent cathedrals. Since the 7th century, the highly-impressive building, has been at the center of Christianity in the north of England.

Today, it remains a church offering worship and prayer, and it has a switched-on website, offering a myriad of exclusive products, including a wooden church mouse, an Archbishop of York (Stephen Cottrell) Christmas tree decoration and a jigsaw puzzle, wooden pens, jewellery and mugs, and even chapter house heads and carvings, to name but a few, and a number of events.

Modern technology is in a big way by the switched-on church staff, and you can even watch Sunday services live, but the Minster, which has attracted visitors from across the globe for more than 1,000 years, need cash to ensure the survival of this iconic building.

York, however, is not just about the Minster, there is so much more, but the building is a focal point and free daily tours – they run rain or shine – start there. The first one is at 11am.

The atmospheric Shambles, a number of intriguing small streets, lies in the shadow of the cathedral, featuring medieval buildings, some dating back to the 14th-century.

Timber-framed buildings, some overhanging the cobbled pavement, are prominent and this is one of the best preserved shopping streets in Europe. Some shop-fronts retain exterior wooden shelves, reminders of when cuts of meat were served from open windows. Incidentally, the street was narrow by design to keep the meat out of direct sunlight.

Quirky cafes, chocolate shops, clothes and accessory stores and even gift shops have taken over. It is no wonder it is busy, and not just from shoppers.

York promotes a number of tours. Cats have played a part in York's history, they were originally placed on building to frighten rats and mice which carried plague and illness, and you can celebrate the link in a free and historic walk around York.

Of course, you have the option of a sightseeing, hop-on, hop-off bus with 21 stops and commentary in nine languages. It operates seven days a week and drives past all leading attractions including York Racecourse and the former Terry's chocolate factory plus Clifford's Tower and Castle Museum, the city walls and the grave of Dick Turpin – Richard Turpin on the headstone – which is tucked away on a quiet lane opposite St George's Roman Catholic Church.

Turpin was England's most famous highwayman was hanged at York Tyburn after a criminal career which involved poaching, house-breaking, armed robbery and murder and you can visit the cells where he was held.

Guy Fawkes, famous for the Gunpowder Plot, a conspiracy to assassinate King James VI and members of the Houses of Parliament, was born in York. and was later hanged, drawn and quartered.

Attractions include the York Dungeon. It takes visitors on a 70-minute, immersive, underground journey through the city's darkest history, and you can discover the Vikings at the Jorvic where you travel around 10th-century York on state-of-the-art time capsules, visiting houses, workshops and backyards. The museum also boasts artefacts dating back 1,000 years.

Of course, York's history is said to begin with The Romans. The city was founded around AD71 when the 5,000 men of the North Legion marched from Lincoln and set-up camp. The Romans called York Eboracum and the site had huge advantages.

It was ideal to launch attacks in the North York Moors and Pennines. The Foss and Ouse rivers also join in York providing a strategic appeal as men and supplies could be transported from the North Sea.

It also offered transport advantages and York enjoys them today as it sits almost halfway between Edinburgh and London and is served by the busy rail link between the two cities. Two hours to London.

York also offers an ideal base for discovering Yorkshire, like North York Moors and Whitby, on the coast, Yorkshire Dales, Castle Howard and Fountains Abbey.

Don't forget museums like Murton Park, home of the Yorkshire farming museum, the Bar Convent, the oldest living convent in the UK whose story began in 1686 when it was illegal to be Catholic. A group opened a secret convent which housed a hidden chapel.

There is also York's chocolate story where you discover the stories behind the best-selling brands of chocolate, discover the origin of chocolate and indulge by tasting some, or you can learn about flying from the first planes to supersonic jets and nuclear bombers at the Yorkshire Air Museum.

Award-winning sightseeing includes boat trips depart from near the city center and The Minster and in the city center there are plenty of cafes, pubs. We enjoyed a thirst-quenching pint in the King's Arms (pictured), sitting outside by the banks of the Ouse. Friendly staff and good beer but, a word of warning, you may be pestered by hungry ducks but they are harmless, so we were told.

Later, we dined in Ate O'Clock, an extremely busy but good Italian recommended by our guest house host. Set menu £22 for two-courses.

We stayed overnight at Barbican House. It has free parking just yards from the city wall, appealing in the extreme. It was described as luxury, but that was a tad OTT. It was clean, quiet and the breakfast was good. We slept well and it was convenient for the motorway to London.

Yes, we liked York, even if we have been there before, but that was many years ago. It has not lost its charm.