

PROCEEDINGS OF THE WORLD CLASS HERITAGE CONFERENCE, 2011

Sponsored by York Archaeological Forum



Presenting Archaeology

Sarah Maltby

Director of Attractions, York Archaeological Trust

Introduction

The name JORVIK is synonymous with the presentation of archaeology to the general public, and it has, over its twenty-seven year existence, been through many different incarnations to deliver experiences that reflect both the Archaeological Trust's current messages and how the public expect to hear them. Most recently it has created a series of new galleries that aim to refocus on JORVIK's core messages of discovery, investigation and ongoing interpretation. Through its innovative approach to presenting experiences that are both enjoyable and educational JORVIK remains at the forefront of tourism within York and the UK in general, and has used this understanding in recent years to create DIG.

DIG is predominantly a hands-on experience which aims to extend learning and the understanding of archaeology for all. Although it predominantly has a schools and family audience the recent introduction of exhibitions that focus on specific archaeological discoveries or research have widened its appeal and enabled the Trust to engage with a much wider spectrum of public. JORVIK and DIG form just part of the Trust's wider initiative to present the archaeological heritage of York and its environs to the public, and together with other Trust-led museums, attractions, publications, events, festivals and activity, continue to engage a wide range of people of all ages, interests and abilities.

JORVIK

JORVIK Viking Centre was launched in 1984 and after twenty-seven years is still within the top thirty paying attractions in the UK, still attracting over 400,000 visitors a year. Within that twenty-seven years the museums and attractions world has grown and developed seeing a huge expansion in the attraction tourism market and changing the face of how history and archaeology are presented to the general public. It is fair to say that JORVIK was at the forefront of changing people's perception of how archaeology should be presented to the public and today many people can remember their first visit to JORVIK when the queues snaked around Coppergate and the carts on the ride took you back in time. We have maintained this ride element of JORVIK to some degree, but changed the way in which we present other aspects to reflect trends and changes in the attractions and museums world – but the basic principal is still the same – which we believe is at the route of its success – the fact that the whole of JORVIK is based on what was discovered by that team of archaeologists over thirty years ago.

The challenge for JORVIK has always been how to present this real archaeological experience to the widest possible audience without alienating one sector of the public by over simplification, complication or even 'Disneyfication'. We have, over the years, tried to do this in many different ways: through reconstruction, time-travel, straightforward exhibition display, and with interactive interpretation. Some of the changes have been more successful than others, but every redesign has acknowledged what our visitors have said to us by responding with exhibitions and displays that they have asked for.

With this in mind, in 2010 we undertook our most recent major refurbishment that attempted to return to where we started and create a storyline that we felt could better portray what was undertaken at Coppergate over thirty years ago, starting with a greater focus on the archaeology. We did this through recreating an area of the excavation which could be viewed through a glass floor. Some elements of this reconstruction used real archaeological material such as some of the house timbers, other areas were mocked-up to represent the archaeological record.



The 'Discover Coppergate' Gallery

Once we had told the story of what we found we felt that we were in a position to talk about how the Trust reconstructed the past based on the material that we unearthed. This is the ride element of the attraction. As this was a partial refurbishment we retained most of the reconstructed city as it had been created in 2000. This time, however, we added voices to some of our animatronic Viking inhabitants using the skills available in the department of English and Related Literature at the University of York under Matthew Townend, who translated our script into Old Norse and also voiced it with a number of his students.

Maintaining the idea of introducing the ability to change as new research became available to us, the next gallery – entitled ‘Investigate Coppergate’ was installed in early 2011. This gallery allows us not only to present live talks about the most recent work that is happening in the field of archaeology, with specific reference to Viking Age York, but also relook at some of the evidence with new eyes – such as the two almost complete skeletons found at Coppergate. A new pathological study of these two skeletons has allowed us to tell more of the story of these two individuals, telling this story alongside work currently taking place in universities around the country, including York. As such, this is very much an area that utilises new scientific ideas and ongoing discoveries, enabling us to introduce lively debate into the attraction and a sense of momentum.

The ‘Artefacts’ gallery has remained in a similar format since 2000 apart from the addition of some talking animated hosts who were introduced in an attempt to help visitors better understand what they were looking at, and some IT stations that allow the visitors to find out more about the objects. The next stage of JORVIK will be to relook at how all of the material is presented as there is still much more that we could do in this area, and the opportunity to introduce new ways of displaying the objects would continue to move the museum forwards.

The final gallery rounds off the story and talks about the end of the Vikings in York and what or who came afterwards. This allows us to come full circle and also discuss the period before the Viking Age in York. It also starts to allow us to introduce objects from elsewhere in York and widen the picture as people leave JORVIK, on what we hope is a continuous journey through the history of York.



*The ‘End of the Vikings?’
Gallery*

DIG

From the outset we recognised that DIG was going to attract a different audience to JORVIK – predominantly schools and families and we therefore, set out to create a hands-on centre which aimed to enthuse everyone from a very early age about archaeology.

One of the first objectives was to create an excavation area where there was a sense of discovery and which inspired all the other activity in the centre. One problem was that the soil could not be real and neither could all of the objects, although some still are – but the soil is rubber. All of these sessions are led by our trained staff who are there to explain and encourage and, sometimes, to maintain order. In this initial space at DIG we recreated four excavations in miniature, based on four iconic digs from York's past and present – Blake Street, Coppergate, Fishergate and Hungate – and examined four historical periods, which also, most importantly, link to the National Curriculum.



The next stage after 'discovery', is 'explanation' and the opportunity to handle real objects which was such an important part of ARC, the predecessor to DIG. This area, known as 'Ask the Archaeologist', includes a staff-led session where visitors sort through archaeological material to discover what it is, what it was used for and why it remains in the archaeological

record.

We then added further hands-on activity in a series of three rooms which aim to demonstrate other areas of archaeological expertise, not just excavation, so that the story of an object from excavation through to display can be told in its entirety.

A number of IT installations allow us to put together the whole story. 'York Revealed' uses models, peppers ghosts and a narrative to tell the story of York from Roman times through to the early twentieth century. 'York Morph' takes visitors on a journey from the present to the prehistoric period in York.

More recently the Trust has introduced the idea of showing recent advances in archaeology through the display of a series of temporary exhibitions at DIG illustrating either recent discoveries or recent work by the Trust. Over the last year we have had three separate exhibitions: 'Gladiators', 'Grave Matters' and 'Shipwrecks'.

The next exhibition looks back over the last five years of Hungate.

Being able to respond quickly to put new discoveries on display is proving to be a key and very successful part of our business and at all of our four attractions (including Barley Hall and Micklegate Bar) we recognise that these small scale temporary

exhibitions are attracting even greater and diverse audiences who want to learn about, and get involved in, archaeological discoveries at many different levels. It is up to us to help them do that.