Welcome to Pontefract

Pontefract Townscape Heritage Initiative

Information for visitors and information about Pontefract Townscape Heritage Initiative and the grants available for property owners.
Welcome to Pontefract, we hope that the following information will help you understand some of the town’s rich heritage, and how this in turn has allowed us to successfully secure funding to help protect and renovate key buildings in the town centre to ensure that future generations can enjoy this amazing link to the past.

Extract from:
The Present State of Great Britain and Ireland. Published, London 1716.
Pontefract, or Pomfret, is a neat Town, that had formerly a strong and stately Castle, which fell by the Civil Wars in the Reign of King Charles I. ‘Twas in this Castle Richard II was barbarously murdered, after his Resignation of the Crown to Henry IV his Cousin.
Pontefract Town Centre is a real gem, a great mix of buildings all within a very small area, dating from medieval times through to the late 20th Century. Some buildings sit harmoniously with their neighbours whilst others show the real contrast of building materials and styles. It is indeed a neat town in a pleasant situation.

Pontefract (or Broken Bridge) a Town remarkable:
1. For its very pleasant situation
2. Neatness of Buildings
3. A Stately Castle [and]
4. For plenty of Liquorish

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Pontefract Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI)

Introduction

Pontefract Townscape Initiative (THI) is a project to support heritage led regeneration in the Pontefract Market Place Conservation Area. The project is supported by the local community with funding from The Heritage Lottery Fund and Wakefield Council. The funding will help to protect key buildings in the town centre to preserve the town's heritage.

What is Pontefract Townscape Initiative?

The local community and Wakefield Council aim to develop Pontefract as a thriving historic market town for the benefit of local businesses, the community and visitors.

The THI will help restore key properties which are important to the heritage and character of the town for future generations. The THI will help to achieve some of the objectives set out in the Pontefract Masterplan which was developed with the local community. You can find a copy of the plan online at www.wakefield.gov.uk/Planning/Regeneration

The aims of the THI are:

- Preserve and enhance the character of the Market Place Conservation Area and its historic buildings and medieval ginnels.
- Promote sustainable development through the repair and restoration of key historic buildings in the town and provide training in traditional building skills making use of original, local materials.
- Create a high quality, attractive town centre to encourage investment, new enterprise and employment opportunities.
- Engage the community and raise awareness of Pontefract's historic environment.
How will it work?

The THI is a grant-giving programme. A THI Grants Board will assess grant applications seeking funding for projects within the Market Place Conservation Area to undertake:

- Structural and external repairs;
- Restoration and reinstatement of architectural features;
- Repair and restoration of the town's medieval ginnels.

Over 20 buildings have been identified as eligible for large grants, with a small grant available for all buildings in the conservation area that have a historic or architectural value.

If you own a property within the conservation area and would like to know if you are eligible for funding, please contact Wakefield Council on 01924 304950.

You will be advised if your property is included within the scheme and what steps to take to access the grant.
Who is funding this?

The money to fund this project has been granted by the National Lottery Heritage Lottery Fund with match funding from Wakefield Council.

The Heritage Lottery Fund is the largest dedicated funder of the UK’s heritage, with around £255 million a year to invest in new projects from museums and parks, historic places to archaeology, the natural environment and cultural traditions.
History

Pontefract's heyday was the Middle Ages, though there had been prehistoric and Roman settlement of the area. It was also seen as an important site during the Saxon period, with Edwin the Anglo-Saxon King of Northumbria establishing Tanshelf in about 600 AD.

Soon after the Conquest in 1066, a castle was built by the occupying Norman armies on a spur of rock to the east of the present town centre.

The Priory of Pontefract was founded in 1090 and the Norman Ilbert de Lacy chose Pontefract for the site of his Castle and headquarters. The original wooden fortification was a motte and bailey castle on a man-made hill on top of the ridge. It would have looked similar to Clifford's Tower at York.

The Castle held sway over extensive lands, including Leeds, Bradford and over towards Huddersfield. The Castle passed into royal ownership in the 12th century, attracting the King's Court and the founding of many religious establishments. All this activity naturally stimulated the growth of the existing settlements of Kirby and Tanshelf on either side of the Castle.

It is around this time that 'Pomfret', describing the large town we see today began formal use. The Castle was used to hold political prisoners, becoming notorious as "Bloody Pomfret" in Shakespeare's play, Richard II. Charles, Duke of Orleans, Thomas of Lancaster and Richard II were all held (and the last two died) at Pontefract. To the north of the Castle, the site of Thomas of Lancaster's execution became a place of pilgrimage.

It is likely that around the 12th Century liquorice was brought to the town from the Middle East by monks returning from the Crusades. At first it was grown as a medicinal plant. The first sweets date from the seventeenth century (Liquorice plantations only died out during the 20th century).
It is difficult to imagine from the present size of the town and its remaining buildings, the important part Pontefract played in the political and religious life of Britain in the Middle Ages. As well as the King's Court, Pontefract attracted many religious houses, including a Cluniac Priory (the size and appearance of Selby Abbey) and a Dominican Friary dedicated to St Richard, Bishop of Chichester which was established in 1256. Recent excavations on the site of the Pontefract General Infirmary have confirmed the location and significance of this Friary, adjacent to the Friary a hermitage was dug 51 feet into the rock.

Not strictly speaking a ‘building’ the Pontefract Hermitage is one of the more unusual structures in the town. Located below the General Infirmary’s Southgate entrance this little known monument has been described as ‘surprising and remarkable’. Discovered in October 1854 by workmen laying a new sewer in Southgate the Hermitage consists of two chambers: a well, reached by a spiral staircase of 63 steps, and an oratory, both excavated by hand from the solid rock. The oratory, with an altar including a cross, a fireplace and a seat has a domed ceiling (almost 8 feet at its highest point) and measures 14 feet by 8 feet. The first hermit recorded in Pontefract was Peter of Pomfret who was executed by King John in 1213 for predicting his downfall. In 1386 there are records of a Robert de Laythorpe granting the hermit, Brother Adam, the hermitage and accompanying land for life.

Henry VIII's dispute with Rome resulted in the dissolution of the monasteries in 1538-9 and Pontefract's priory and other monastic houses were demolished. Pontefract Castle was a focal point for the Pilgrimage of Grace, the revolt of the northern counties against Henry VIII's religious changes and economic impositions.

By the seventeenth century, Pontefract Castle had grown into the imposing structure depicted by Kierincx in the painting which now hangs in Pontefract Museum. When the Civil War broke out, Pontefract Castle remained a royalist stronghold and was reputed to have been the last to fall to Cromwell's armies.

During the sieges of Pontefract Castle, rough coins were struck to pay the troops. Following the execution of Charles I, the royalist motto became "After the death of the father, we are for the son" and this can be seen on the Pontefract siege coins. It remains the motto of the town today. Though the Castle was damaged during the fighting, it was a petition from the townspeople to Parliament which resulted in its demolition - Sieges were very bad for business and the town didn't want that kind of disruption again! The ancient church of All Saints was ruined by the Civil War but it is still in use as a church today, an interesting building with a rare double helix staircase in the tower.

In the Middle Ages Pontefract was the main centre of West Yorkshire. By the eighteenth century its regional economic significance had declined but it was still a prosperous town.
The Great North Road (later the A1) bypassed Pontefract as the Roman roads had done before. Ferrybridge, the crossing point for the River Aire, became important for stage coaches and postal services as Castleford must have been in Roman times. The advent of the railway companies failed to improve Pontefract's position on the communication network as two lines and three stations were built instead of a single linking point.

In 1872 Pontefract was in the national limelight when the Pontefract by-election used the secret ballot system for the first time in Britain.

In the later nineteenth century the town expanded with the growth of liquorice sweet-making, the coming of coal and the stationing of two army regiments in permanent barracks. Between 1871 and 1931 the population of Pontefract tripled as a result of these developments, together with growth in sand quarrying, cast-iron making, malting and skinyards.

Since 1945 all these industries have declined. So too have those in the neighbouring centres of Castleford and Knottingley, which had also benefitted Pontefract - glassmaking, potteries, shipbuilding, stone and lime quarrying. New industries such as plastics and chemicals are now important in the Pontefract area.

Racing at Pontefract was first recorded in the 1720s and regular races were organised by the turn of the century. The grandstand was erected in 1802. In 1983 Pontefract Racecourse became the longest continuous flat racing course in Europe.

The construction of the M62 and its link to the A1 has finally put Pontefract on two main routes. Retail and light engineering development have followed, as well as the construction of new houses advertised to appeal to people commuting to Leeds or further afield.

The population of Pontefract is now about 35,000. The attraction of this historic town continues to draw visitors from the surrounding area especially on market days.
Architectural Value

The Market Place is the commercial centre of the medieval market town of Pontefract. A number of the town's buildings date from the mid-14th century, and many fine Georgian buildings also dominate the street scene. There are a number of Nationally Listed Buildings and also Buildings of Local Interest within the conservation/THI boundary area.

The qualities and features of the Market Place Conservation Area include:

Burgage plot development, medieval yards and densely built-up street patterns.

The burgage plots substantially remain, revealing the urban grain of the town from the 12th century onwards when land was divided into long, narrow rental plots. Burgage is a medieval land term, well established by the 13th century. A burgage was a town (“borough”) rental property (to use modern terms), owned by a king or lord. The property usually, and distinctly, consisted of a house on a long and narrow plot of land, with the narrow end facing the street. The basic unit of measurement was the perch which was 5.5 yards (5 m) and the plots can be identified today because they are in multiples of perches: 2 by 12 perches (10m by 60m) or 4 by 20 perches long (20m by 100m), giving a typical plot size of half an acre (2,000 m²).
Many of the yards leading off from the main streets are still present, showing the densely built-up character and layout of the medieval town. These contrast with wide open spaces of Cornmarket, Beastfair and the Market Place, developed as open public trading areas.

**A bustling and thriving market and retail centre**

In 1484 Pontefract was granted a charter by Richard III for the right to a Saturday market every week forever and two town annual fairs for six days. The businesses within the Market Place continue this longstanding trading tradition of trade - so you can argue that by shopping in Pontefract you are in fact upholding a longstanding tradition and ensuring the shopping does indeed take place in Pontefract - forever!

**Predominance of two and three storey development and the dominance of historic buildings within key views.**

St Giles's Church tower is a key element of the skyline of the town and features in a number of key views around the conservation area. Pontefract Town Hall pleasingly terminates the view down Market Place, and the Market Hall stands out as a dominant building.

**Georgian architecture**

A large number of buildings and facades in Pontefract are Georgian including St Giles Church. Georgian architecture is the name given to the set of architectural styles current between 1720 and 1840. Late Georgian architecture is characterised by its proportion and balance; simple mathematical ratios were used to determine the height of a window in relation to its width or the shape of a room as a double cube. "Regular" was a term of approval, implying symmetry and adherence to classical rules: the lack of symmetry, where Georgian additions were added to earlier structures, was deeply felt as a flaw. Regularity of house fronts along a street was a desirable feature of Georgian town planning. Georgian designs usually lay within the Classical orders of architecture and employed a decorative vocabulary derived from ancient Rome or Greece. The most common building materials used are brick or stone. Commonly used colors were red, tan, or white.
Looking around......

This section will enable the visitor to Pontefract to guide themselves around the town taking account of the historical buildings denoted by the blue plaques. A more detailed leaflet published by the Pontefract Civic Society is available for a small charge from Pontefract Library.

1. This wide street was the centre of Pontefract up to the 12th century. The lower end is still called Micklegate which means Great Street. The top end became known as Horsefair because of the market held there. The clump of trees downhill marks where the castle ruins can still be visited. The town expanded uphill; Finkle Street and Baxtergate mark the boundaries of the early town.

2. The market square developed by 1200. It was a vast open space, about six football pitches in size, which ran from here to Ropergate, then to Cornmarket and back to Woolmarket via Salter Row. St Giles' Church and St Oswald's Cross stood in the middle. Gradually streets of permanent shops filled in the open space. The Georgian Town Hall was built on the site of an earlier Moot Hall.

3. From this point you can see the jettied merchant houses which bordered the square with long burgage plots behind them. Ginnels ran between each plot. Many ginnels remain but some buildings expanded across the gaps. This adding on can be seen, for example, in the facades of WH Smith's and Barclay's Bank buildings.

4. The Buttercross was built in 1734, originally it had a flat roof with a balustrade which was replaced by the present roof at a cost of £46 in 1763. Covered market crosses were common during the eighteenth century. Its function was a shelter for traders of dairy produce. It is recorded that in 1776 John Nutt brought his wife to the market cross and sold her to a Mr. Ryder for five shillings and “all persons seemed perfectly satisfied.”

5. The extension to the medieval market square, originally called West Chepe is now the setting for the town's war memorial. One surviving Elizabethan timber-framed house, belonging to a wealthy merchant, can be seen in Swale's Yard.

6. The north side of the square was the poorer end of the medieval town. The old street names witness this: Ratten Row means poor and Pudding Middens was the dump for the offal from the butchers in the Shambles (now the Market Hall). Woolmarket, called in the seventeenth century Hemp Cross, was probably the site of public hangings.
How to get to Pontefract:

Road - Off junction 32 of the M62 and the A645 from the A1.

Rail - Metro stations at Tanshelf, Monkhill and Baghill.

Bus - Bus Station on Horsefair.
Tel: 0113 245 7676 for Metro services.

Shopping:

All stores open 6 days a week (some closed Thursday afternoon).

Open market on Wednesday and Saturday, small fruit vegetable market Friday. Indoor market open 5½ days a week.

Attractions nearby:

Pontefract Castle - The remains of an important medieval castle demolished after the Civil War. The castle is the site of the death of Richard II. For castle opening times and details of events, including magazine tours, visit the website or call 01977 723440.

Pontefract Museum - Pontefract Museum tells the story of the history of the town from the Normans to the present time. There is a programme of changing exhibitions throughout the year. For more information on events please visit the website or contact 01977 722740.

Where to Stay - To find hotels and other places to stay nearby visit the official tourism website for the Wakefield district.

www.experiencewakefield.co.uk or contact Wakefield District Tourist Information Centre for a Visitor Guide on 0845 601 8353.

Further information can be obtained on the Council website: www.wakefield.gov.uk and www.wakefield.gov.uk/thi