

# Character Area Fifteen: Fossgate & Walmgate



## Overview

Fossgate and Walmgate are part of the historic Roman road from the east and continued to serve as a principal route during the Middle Ages. The 20<sup>th</sup> century decline in river trade and the creation of Piccadilly, meant Fossgate became a quiet backwater in contrast to the busy commercial centre.

Today Fossgate and Walmgate possesses a picturesque and varied historic character as a result of piece-meal development over centuries. Buildings are generally three to four storeys, built from brick with tiled roofs. The area has a good mix of uses including independent shops, restaurants, pubs, offices, residential and light industry. Activity in the area is likely to increase in the future as a result of planned developments at nearby Castle-Piccadilly and Hungate.

### Boundaries

This area consists of Fossgate and the western half of Walmgate up to the junction with Hurst's Yard. The compact medieval plots and historic buildings distinguish this area from its neighbouring areas along the southern and eastern boundaries. The River Foss bisects the area and defines its northern edge.

### Historical Development

Fossgate and Walmgate are part of the main Roman road which approached the city from the east and entered the legionary fortress at the gate Porta Principalis Sinistra, now the site of King's Square. The route remained important throughout the Anglo-Scandinavian period and Middle Ages, although the area east of Foss was not seen as part of the City nor enclosed by the city walls until 1345-80 (for more details see character area 16 Outer Walmgate).

The area had a substantial number of houses and significant buildings including guildhalls and churches such as St Denys. The timber-framed Merchant Adventurer's Hall, built in 1357-61, is one of the finest surviving examples of a guildhall – a 'merchant adventurer' was someone who risked their own money in overseas trade. The Hall also contained a hospital in the undercroft, which remarkably housed the sick and the poor until 1900. The undercroft contains the earliest known bricks in York.

The medieval houses occupied 'burghage' plots, long narrow strips of land with a house fronting the street and a garden and orchard behind, often terminating with stables or other outbuildings. These plots still define the width of some frontages and the form of development behind. Some late 16th and early 17th buildings have survived but were much altered over the next three hundred years <sup>1</sup>.

In 1793, the River Foss was canalised in order to improve transport of goods. Wormald's Cut was built to serve Samuel Wormald's brewing, shipping and timber business, just one of the warehouses built in the backyards of Walmgate properties <sup>2</sup>. The industrial uses in the area meant that it was a less desirable residential suburb.

Unfortunately, the Foss navigation project did not deliver significant profits initially due to over-expenditure and then competition from the railways. By the mid-19th century the Foss was silted up and had to be cleaned up but was still used for commercial barges until 1997.

The decline of the Foss meant many warehouses became redundant and industrial uses were pushed out of the city. Although some of the historic buildings were converted to new uses, many in back yards and along the Foss were demolished in favour of new apartment blocks and offices ③. The York Press is one of the few businesses with a connection to the area that has stayed and expanded.

#### **Ambience and use**

Fossgate is a quiet street of small independent shops and restaurants in contrast to the busy central shopping area nearby. During the day, traffic and pedestrian activity is limited but there is a vibrant restaurant scene at night.

Crossing Foss Bridge the character subtly changes - Walmgate is generally noisier than Fossgate due to a higher level of traffic partly generated by its bus routes, connection to Piccadilly and its residential developments and offices.



*The Merchant Adventurers' Hall, a 14th century guildhall surrounded by a garden*



*Historic photograph of the Eagle Tea Warehouse by Foss Bridge*

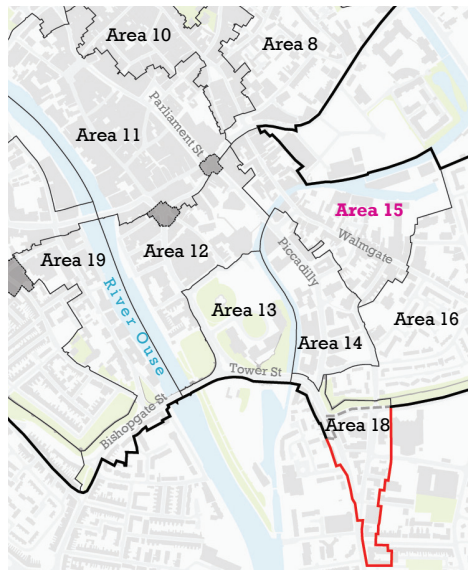
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- 1 18th and 19th century buildings now containing small shops and offices
- 2 Large 19th century warehouse
- 3 Backland development of modern residential and offices blocks
-  Landmark
-  Historic warehouses
-  Conservation Area boundary
-  Character area boundary



Area 15 Location plan



Introductory Plan

## Designations

There are a high number of listed buildings in this area, the majority being Grade II and dating from the 17th to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Two significant medieval buildings are Grade I listed - the Merchant Adventurers' Hall and St Denys' Church.

The picturesque townscape is enhanced by a number of buildings of merit interspersed between the listed buildings. Specific examples include houses on George Street, a historic warehouse on Hurst's Yard (Ward's of York) and No. 86 Walmgate (York Press).









Most modern development is hidden in backyards and there is one detracting building.



*Ward's of York, a former warehouse now an antiques centre*



*St Denys' Church is Grade I listed*

-  Scheduled Ancient Monument
-  Grade I Listed Building
-  Grade II\* Listed Building
-  Grade II Listed Building
-  Building of merit
-  Detractor
-  Conservation Area boundary
-  Character Area boundary



*Designations*

## Streets & Spaces

Fossgate and Walmgate are both well enclosed streets with a high number of historic buildings surviving, generally of two and three storeys with a varied roof line but on the same building line at the back of the pavement. The majority of the narrow medieval plots are intact and very few have been combined. Access to the back of properties remains via alleyways through and between buildings. Some of the yards behind have been used for car parking and there are some parking bays on both streets.

Although most of the plots lead off Fossgate/Walmgate it should be remembered that the River Foss was once busy route as well. This historically influenced the arrangement of buildings along its banks and although it is now redundant, new buildings have been designed to have a relationship with it. The planned Hungate development will create a frontage to the river on the northern bank.



*Fossgate is a well enclosed street with narrow plots*



*An alleyway off Walmgate*

### Green spaces

There are two green spaces within the area – St Denys’ small churchyard and the garden of the Merchant Adventurers’ Hall. The latter is one of the prettiest gardens in the city and although entered from Fossgate, it is completely hidden from the street. The best view is actually from the raised level of Piccadilly from where there is a set of steps to access the garden.

### Views

Several glimpsed views of the Castle area and Minster are possible from Foss Bridge; unfortunately Clifford’s Tower is partially blocked by the Coppergate Centre.

One of the most prominent landmarks in the area, Rowntree Wharf, can be seen from many points. The best view is that from the walkway on the northern side of the Foss, just outside the Conservation Area boundary.

*View of Rowntree Wharf, a magnificent late 19th century warehouse*



*View from Foss Bridge to Clifford's Tower*



## Buildings

### 17th to 19th century houses

Plots along Fossgate and the western half of Walmgate have been continuously re-built from the 17th to the 19th centuries. Buildings to the rear of a plot are often dated much later than those facing the street, which might retain an early timber-frame hidden behind a brick facade. Other buildings were built in brick from the outset. Whilst there are a lot of buildings from the Georgian period, in contrast to streets like Micklegate, the buildings are not grand and there was never wholesale 'gentrification' of the area. In addition, there are few examples of good historic shop fronts as most have been replaced; the best group is either side of the entrance to the Merchant Adventurers' Hall.

### 19<sup>th</sup> century warehouses

Many historic warehouses and industrial buildings were demolished during the 20th century but a few survivors have been converted to new uses.



*A group of houses converted to shops on Walmgate*

The largest remaining warehouse is Rowntree Wharf, built in 1895-6 originally as a flour warehouse for Leetham's Mill (which burnt down 1931). Considered to be one of the finest industrial buildings in York, it is brick, of five storeys with battlements and tower. It is now used as offices and flats.

Nos. 1-3 Walmgate (Foss Bridge House) was a warehouse and shop built in 1878 by linen and woollen traders W.G. Whitehead and Co. It is located in a very prominent position next to Foss Bridge. The design is quite elaborate 'Italianate' (classical) style with round-headed windows and carved panels. The building is now used as a restaurant and office.

Ward's of York is a small plain warehouse on Hurst's Yard. It is a four storey brick building with a timber covered gantry and now used as an antiques centre.



*The warehouse of linen and woollen traders W.G. Whitehead and Co*

### 20<sup>th</sup> century

One of the most interesting early buildings from this period is the Electric Cinema. It was built in 1911 as York's first cinema and has an ornate glazed tiled and ceramic facade. It is now occupied by a furniture shop.

Dixon's Yard is the largest residential development situated alongside the Foss; four and five storey blocks are arranged around a courtyard. Their warehouse inspired design refers back to the history of the area and incorporates modern elements such as metal balconies and ventilation shafts.

The York Press building (Nos. 76-84) stretches from Walmgate back to the Foss. The front building is used as an office block with print works buildings to the rear. The facade is 'neo-vernacular', utilising traditional elements such as red brick and pitched roof; buildings to the rear are largely windowless.



*Dixon's Yard is a new residential development partially facing the River Foss*



*The Electric Cinema, built in 1911*

## Traffic & Movement

Traffic is restricted in the streets to the north of Fossgate therefore few cars use it as a through route during the day. Some congestion does occur during delivery times when vans and cars park on street or pavement. As the pavements are very narrow, pedestrian movement can be impeded by this and occasionally, restaurant and shop rubbish awaiting collection. However, delivery to the front of buildings is the only option since there is no route around the back of plots.

Walmgate has more traffic than Fossgate since cars leaving the Coppergate Centre can take this partly one-way route towards the inner ring road. Traffic calming measures are in place to prevent speeding and parking bays narrow the carriageway at points.



*Fossgate can become congested in the morning with vans and rubbish*

## Issues & Opportunities

### Strengths

- Fossgate is a picturesque street of strong historic character. Its ambience is quiet and not blighted by traffic
- Foss Bridge provides a number of good views along the river and glimpses of the Castle and Minster
- Fossgate and Walmgate have a good mix of uses which serve local people. 'Branding' of Fossgate as a shopping and restaurant destination seems to have already begun by local traders.

### Weaknesses and opportunities

There are a couple of short term development opportunities:

- No. 37 Walmgate is a listed building which is at risk due to vacancy and poor condition. A new use needs to be found urgently.
- There are two small gap sites on Walmgate currently used for car parking which could be developed in future to improve the townscape.

Fossgate and Walmgate are sandwiched between the planned development areas of Hungate and Castle-Piccadilly. These will incorporate a new residential community and retail centre, generating new pedestrian 'desire lines'. Fossgate and Walmgate play a key connecting role in enabling this movement between the two developments. The issues and opportunities plan illustrates these potential desire lines. Increased pedestrian activity on Fossgate would logically lead to it being considered for designation as a footstreet.

*Fossgate is being branded as a unique destination*



*The Hungate development site*



*A gap site on Walmgate currently used for parking*



**Strengths**



Landmark



Well enclosed street

**Opportunities**



Potential pedestrian routes



Public space improvements



Building at risk



Development opportunities

**Views**



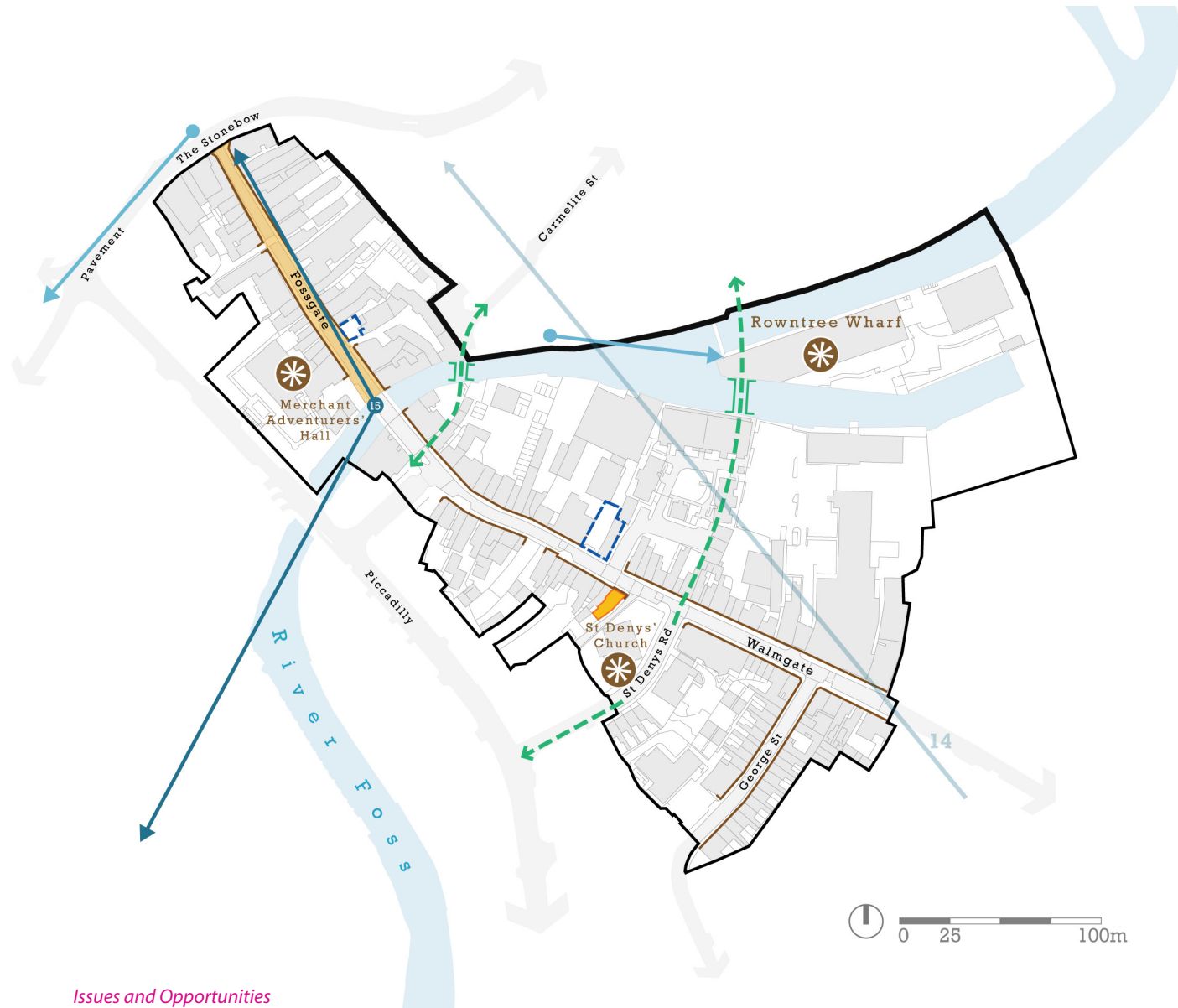
Strategic fixed with focal point



Local fixed with focal point



Key view from outside the character area - refer to section 3.5



*Issues and Opportunities*