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Places to Hear the Play: The Performance of the Corpus Christi Play at York

The earliest reference for the presentation of some kind of performance on Corpus Christi Day in the city of York (see fig 1) comes from 1376, in a record of rents received on behalf of the Ouse bridgemasters: a payment of two shillings was made for a building 'in which three Corpus Christi pageants are housed' ("Tres pagine Corporis christi").¹ The link of these pageants to the craft guilds can be made through the ordinances governing these crafts. An example can be taken from those of the Tailors in 1386–7, where the searchers were told to collect 'the proper amount from each man of the said guild for the support of their pageant of Corpus Christi'.²

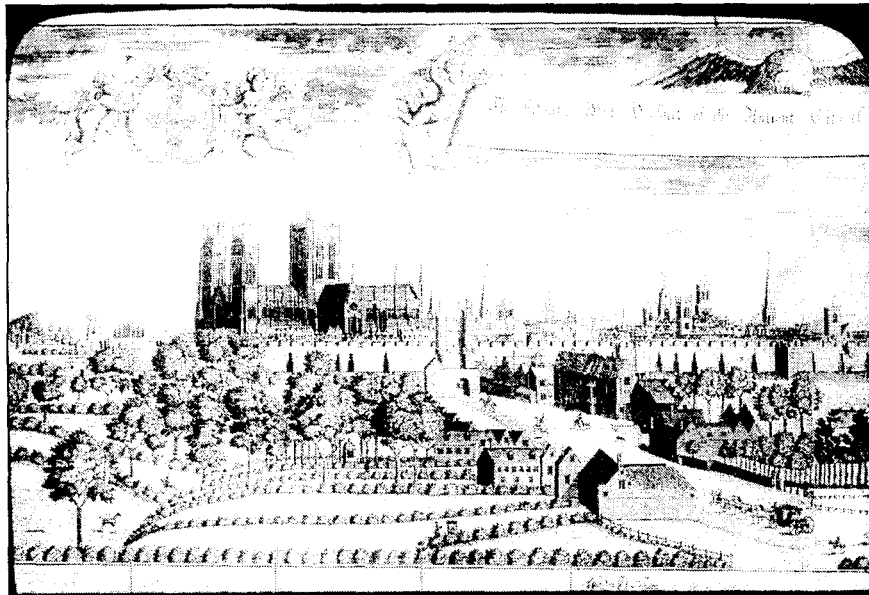


Fig 1. Southeast prospect of York (John Haynes, 1731) (Evelyn Collection)

At the beginning of the tradition, the pageants were linked to the religious procession on Corpus Christi Day. In the city of York this procession was organized by the Corpus Christi Guild as a separate event from the celebration in the Minster.³ It may be that the Play itself evolved from a more simple series of static displays, presented by individual craft guilds on a wagon that was part of the Corpus Christi procession, allocated to make some link between the biblical subject and the craft's trade.⁴ As the Play developed, it kept its links with the crafts but became separated from the Corpus Christi procession itself. The procession was overseen by the parish priests, who were the officials of the Corpus Christi Guild, since the centre of the procession was the carrying of the consecrated host through the streets. The Corpus Christi Play, on the other hand, was organized by the city council, which controlled the craft guilds through a series of ordinances. The council kept a record of the pageants allocated to each craft and eventually compiled a Register of all the separate play texts. It also allocated the places where the Play was to be heard.⁵

The records do not tell us just when or why the Play emerged, but although the Play was distinct from the procession it shared the same day and inherited the idea of procession. The performance of the Play came to dominate Corpus Christi Day so that when, in 1426, Friar Melton complained that the religious observance was being disregarded, the eventual solution was to keep the Play on Corpus Christi Day and move the religious sermon to the next day.⁶

Once the concept of performing a Play of some kind was realized, the form it took may have evolved from the existing procession,⁷ but there were not many other options if the resulting pageants were to be viewed by as many people as possible. Not all the open spaces in the city were available (see fig 2). The area in front of the west end of the Minster, used for a wagon play performance during the York Festivals of the 1950s and 1960s, did not exist then. In any case, the Minster lay beyond a wall and gateways in a Liberty out of the jurisdiction of the city, and the Play was a city occasion, not organized by the ecclesiastical authorities. For the same reason, the monastic property such as Holy Trinity Priory at the top of Micklegate, or the grounds of St Mary's Abbey outside Bootham Bar (in the ruins of which the Play would be revived in 1950) was not at the city's command. The Castle, in the area between the rivers Ouse and Foss, was Crown property. Thursday Market was a sizeable square but it was approached by narrow streets and contained a stone market cross and sheltered arcade designed for a market, not a play. The other main market was on the Pavement, in reality a street, still discernible today but not as wide as has been conjectured. There were some spaces large enough to be used for gathering cit-

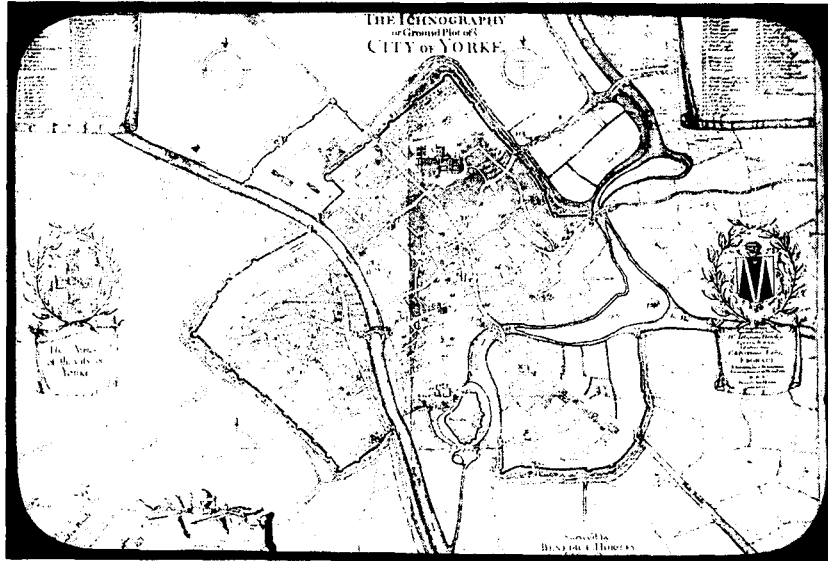


Fig 2. Plan of York (Benedict Horsley, 1694) (Evelyn Collection)

izens at the time of military musters in the sixteenth century, on Toft Green at the top of Micklegate, and at the Old Bailey facing the Castle over the river Ouse; and there was St George's Close in the strip of land between the Ouse and the Foss where archery practice took place and cattle could be grazed.⁸ Outside the city were the grazing pastures open to freemen, including Knavesmire, which became the site of a regular Show of Armour instituted in 1580.⁹ If the city had wanted a static outdoor playing place, it could have organized something in a place like Knavesmire. There is no evidence that internal spaces were considered, despite arguments to the contrary.¹⁰ The city's Common Hall, or Guildhall, was not built until 1449–59, on the site of a smaller building; St Anthony's Hall was begun as a hospital by the Guild of St Martin from 1450, and in 1554 it became a meeting place for the guilds without a home of their own. The only references to dramatic performances in these buildings come after the end of the Play performances, when professional acting groups began to visit the city.¹¹ The Minster, in the jurisdiction of the dean and chapter, was not available for an event organized by the city.

For reasons that remain obscure, the city chose to present the episodes of the Play on pageant wagons that were taken around a fixed route, with a number of playing places appointed by the council for 'hearyng Corpus christi play'.¹² It was also the established method for other dramatic performances that were also part of civic life. The plays occasionally performed in place of the Corpus

Christi Play, the Creed Play and the Pater Noster Play, followed the same route.¹³ After these plays had been suppressed, the city instituted a Show of Armour as a civic display, and in 1584 and 1585 this was accompanied by a dramatic performance organized by a schoolmaster, John Grafton. Some of the old pageant wagons were brought out again, to be used for the new interlude, and taken around the same route.¹⁴

The concept of wagons travelling through the streets, pausing for the performance of individual pageant plays, has not gone uncriticized. Martin Stevens was among those who found the length of the Play argued against the repetition of each pageant sequence at several stations.¹⁵ He also thought the amount of space available in the narrow streets too small to accommodate the physical action required in some pageants. Instead, he suggested that there was simply a procession of wagons, which perhaps stopped for a moment or two at fixed locations 'for the quick enactment of a scene or two' (39), but that the real performance took place as a 'single continuous performance of the cycle in a fixed location' (40). His chosen location was the Pavement 'where the general public gathered' (44). In another study of the method of performance, Alan Nelson argued for a procession of pageants, followed by an indoor performance before the mayor and council of York in the chamber at the Common Hall Gates.¹⁶ Margaret Dorrell (now Rogerson) reiterated the case for processional staging and constructed an elaborate chart with timings for each pageant to show that the whole cycle could in theory have been performed in the course of a long day.¹⁷

The evidence from the York records, as Dorrell argued, does support the idea of a performance at a number of stations through the city, and not at one place only, such as the Pavement, nor at an indoor playing space for a limited audience. For example, in 1399 the commons asked the mayor and aldermen to limit the number of playing places because otherwise the pageants could not be performed all on the same day; the result was the first list of playing places.¹⁸ Towards the end of the Play's history, in 1554, the Girdlers were fined because they were not ready to play in their pageant on Corpus Christi Day and 'taried an whole hower or more', stopping the other pageants from following them.¹⁹ Evidence to bolster the alternate claims is lacking.

One useful study that can be made, and which helps in a consideration of processional performance in York, is an examination of the designated route of the Corpus Christi Play procession through York. This was initiated by Meg Twycross, who first began to identify specific stations along the route,²⁰ and further work has been done since.²¹ Such work helps to locate the wagons in

the streets of York, and by examining in detail the sites at the tenement at the Common Hall Gates and the Pavement, opposing claims can be evaluated.

The Route

There is no problem following in the wake of the pageant wagons because the streets are still there under the same names and the major landmarks and many of the individual houses can be located. The route passed along the widest streets of the city, which were considered in 1622 to be the 'places which are most frequented by strangers and wher ther is the greatest con-course of people, & wherin men of the best sortes and ranck do frequent and dwell'.²² In over 150 years of Play performances the locations of the playing places varied very little because experience must soon have taught the city council how to space them realistically. The surviving city records provide evidence for twenty-seven performances between 1399 and 1572, mostly for the Corpus Christi Play but occasionally for the Pater Noster and Creed Plays. Two productions by the schoolmaster, John Grafton, followed the same route in 1584 and 1585.²³ A comparison of the first example, from 1399, and that from 1569, the last performance of the Corpus Christi Play, indicates how it is possible to chart all the known lists, using the fixed street corners and churches even when the individual houses cannot be located:

1399

(REED *York*, 11)

- I. Gates of Holy Trinity, Micklegate
- II. Robert Harpham's house
- III. John de Gysburn's door
- IV. Skeldergate and North Street
- V. The Castlegate end of Coney Street
- VI. The end of Jubbergate in Coney Street
- VII. Henry Wyman's door in Coney Street
- VIII. The end of Coney Street next to the Common Hall
- IX. Adam del Brigg's door
- X. Minster Gates

1569

(REED *York*, 356-7)

1. Trinity Gate
2. Mr Henrison's house
3. The Cowper in Micklegate
4. about St John's church
5. Mr Paycock's door
6. Ousegate Corner
7. Mr Appleyard's house
8. Mr Fawkes in Coney Street
9. Common Hall Gates
10. about Christopher Willoughby's door
11. Minster Gates
12. Mr Birnand's house

XI. The end of Girdlergate in Petergate

13. Hutton's house
14. John Chamber in
Colliergate

XII. The Pavement

15. William Beckwith's house
On the Pavement:
16. between Mr Herbert's and
Sheriff's house
17. between Mr Paycock's and
Mr Allen's places

What follows is a description of the streets through which the pageants passed. I begin with a description of Toft or Pageant Green and then move on to each station in turn. Each description is keyed to the numbers in the chart above and is, of necessity, brief. The width of each station in feet is noted in each subheading to emphasise how narrow and enclosed the streets were. In most cases, they remain so today, and visitors to York can gain some impression of the spaces through which the wagons passed.

Pageant Green

In the corner of the walls near Micklegate Bar was an area called Toft Green. It was filled with little cottages and gardens leased out by the city but there



Fig 3. Toft Green before 1841 (Evelyn Collection)

was also some free land. The pageant wagons could have assembled here or at the top of Micklegate before beginning their journey. Because of its closeness to the start of the route, several craft guilds rented land on which to construct their pageant houses or sheds where the wagons could be stored (see fig 3). The Skinners had a house on Ratton Row, the lane which led from Micklegate to Toft Green and on Toft Green itself, both adjoining and near to the Blackfriars' priory walls at the lower end, were the houses of the Bakers, Goldsmiths, Carpenters, Cordwainers, Tapiters, Mercers, and Tanners. The Walkers and Coopers had outshots (or lean-tos) and for a brief period in the sixteenth century the Girdlers also had use of a building. The Merchant Tailors owned their own building in nearby Barker or Tanner Row.²⁴ Because this area contained pageant houses and was the starting point for the wagons, it came to be known as Pageant Green.

I and 1. *Trinity Gates* (45 feet) (fig 4)

Toft Green, the length of Tanner Row, and the road by Micklegate Bar would give space for the assembly of the pageant wagons. Here Micklegate is about forty-five feet wide,²⁵ a width not to be found again until the end of the route. It was only a short distance to the first playing place outside Trinity Gates, which provided the main entrance to Holy Trinity Priory on the right-hand side of the road. This gate unfortunately has now gone, replaced by Priory Street. It would be tempting to imagine that the actors in the later pageants had the opportunity – as well as the space – to see their predecessors perform here, and this surmise may be backed up by the fact that from 1500 the common clerk or his deputy 'kept the Register' at this station that was not, as a consequence, rented out. There certainly was a performance here. The deputy in the middle years of the sixteenth century was John Clerk, and his annotations comparing the official text and what he heard are preserved in the Register, the official manuscript of the Play.²⁶

II and 2. *Micklegate 1* (45 feet)

The second place in 1569 went to Mr Henrison and enough is known about him to locate the station. He was Thomas Henrison or Harrison, who became alderman in 1568 and lived on the left side of the road, on the upper corner of Micklegate and Gregory Lane. He was across the road from the former priory church of Holy Trinity, by that time a parish church. At the back of his house, across Tanner Row, was the site of the Blackfriars' house already mentioned in

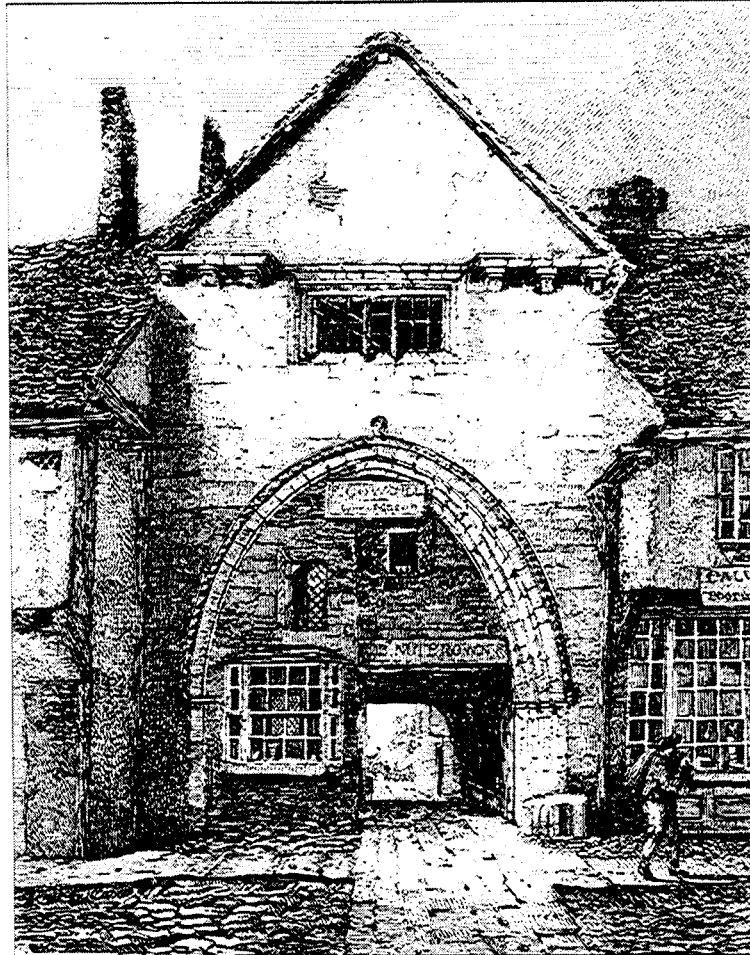


Fig 4. Trinity Gates, Micklegate (Henry Cave, 1813) (York City Archives)

the discussion of Toft Green. Mr Henrison had something in common with other stationholders of the period, being an innholder; it is perhaps not surprising to find that many people taking places were either innkeepers or alehouse keepers.²⁷

III and 3. *Micklegate 2* (35–40 feet) (fig 5)

The distance between the two Micklegate playing places was the greatest of the whole route, for a very good reason: here the street descends the only hill of any



Fig 5. Micklegate by St Martin's Lane (Evelyn Collection)

note in York and there is no practical place to halt a wagon between Gregory Lane and the area below St Martin's church. In the sixteenth century this coincided nicely with an inn on the left-hand side called The Three Kings; 'the Cowper' in 1569 can probably also be connected with this inn.²⁸ A bend in the road also means that Micklegate 1 and 2 were hidden from each other. Most of the other places are visible to those immediately before or after. By this point Micklegate has begun to narrow into a more typical York street.

IV and 4. *St John's Church* (24–9 feet) (fig 6)

The road narrowed further at the junction with North Street and Skeldergate. St John's Church stands on the left side of the route at the end of North Street. Some widening took place in the early nineteenth century but in 1922 the church still retained a narrow churchyard against the street that has now become part of the pavement.

5. *Ouse Bridge and Ousegate* (18.5 feet and 23–37 feet) (fig 7)

The nineteenth-century road widening was part of a scheme to rebuild Ouse Bridge, then still the only crossing of that river in York and consequently

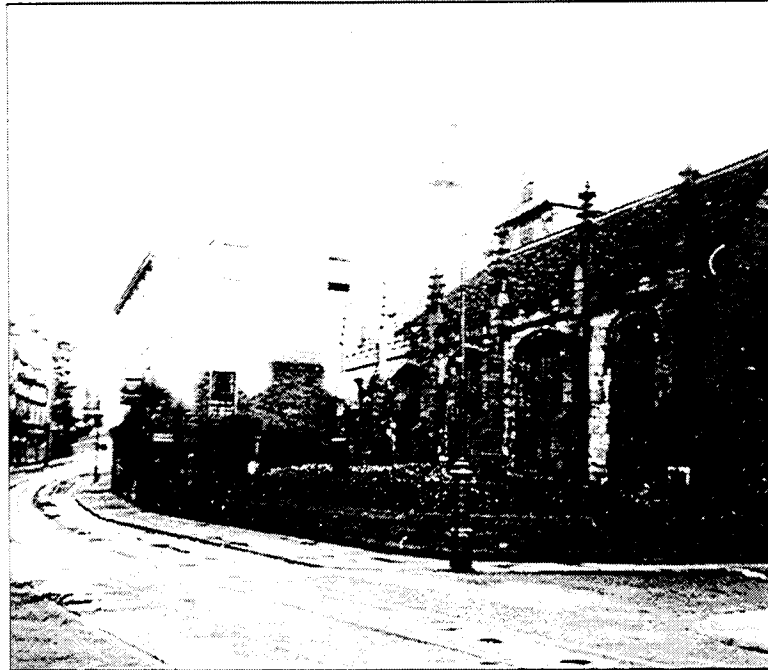


Fig 6. St John's Church, 1922 (Evelyn Collection)

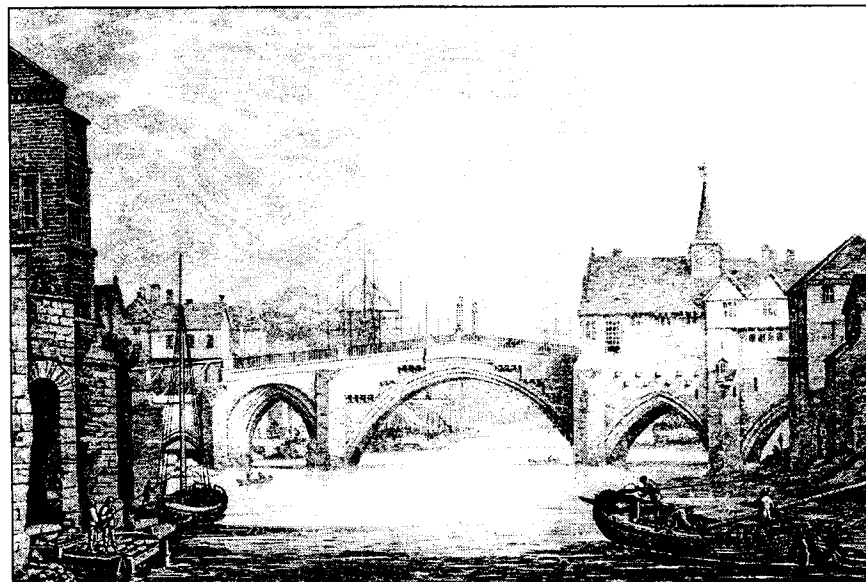


Fig 7. View of Ouse Bridge (Joseph Halfpenny, 1807) (Evelyn Collection)

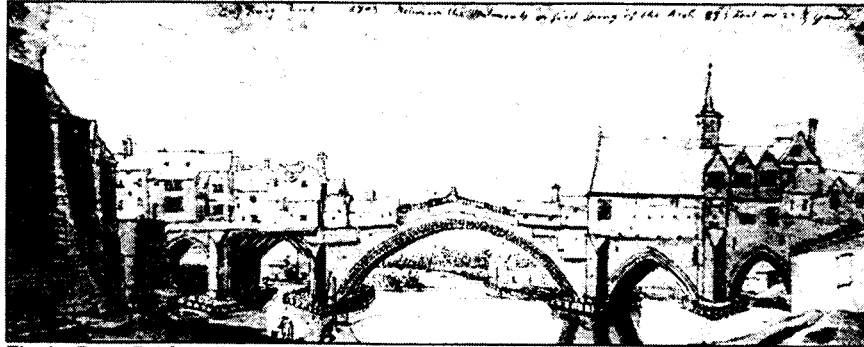


Fig 8. Ouse Bridge (Francis Place (1647–1728)) (Evelyn Collection)

heavily travelled. The medieval bridge had stood on several arches and had small tenements built on each side. On the Micklegate/North Street side was the Chapel of St William with the city council chamber and other ‘offices’ in the same building. Here the decision would be taken to authorize the performance of the Corpus Christi Play and here the records of the city were kept, including the Register or manuscript of the Play.²⁹ The bridge was extremely narrow, only 18 feet, 6 inches wide, and must have presented some difficulty to the men manhandling the pageant wagons.

In the winter of 1564–5, from a combination of the city council putting off some necessary repairs and the river freezing over, the central arches of the bridge collapsed. A temporary wooden bridge, laid over moored boats, and an extra ferry service were hastily substituted. It took two years and a large amount of money and effort to rebuild the stone bridge.³⁰ It is not surprising, then, that there were no performances of the Corpus Christi Play during this period. Even if there had been money to spare for its performance, there was no way of transporting wagons over the river (see fig 8). The new bridge had a single arch in the centre and this is the one for which we have illustrations. St William’s Chapel had escaped damage, as had the arches at each end, but the little shops were rebuilt and these survived into the eighteenth century.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the decision was finally taken to demolish this bridge and build a wider one. This time St William’s Chapel went too. In about 1808 Peter Atkinson, city engineer, drew a plan with the proposed new bridge superimposed over the old (see fig 9). This gives us reliable measurements of the bridge and the approach roads from each side.³¹ All the small tenements along Low Ousegate from the bridge to the junction of

Spurriergate were included in his plan (see fig 10). These old timber-framed houses were luckily illustrated by Henry Cave before they were taken down revealing the side of St Michael's Church to the street.

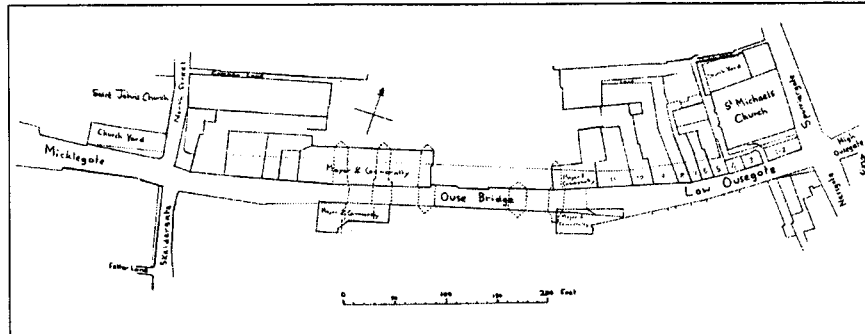


Fig 9. Plan of Ouse Bridge showing line of projected new bridge (Peter Atkinson, c 1808) (Eileen White based on a plan in York City Archives ACC. 191/PH 17/295)

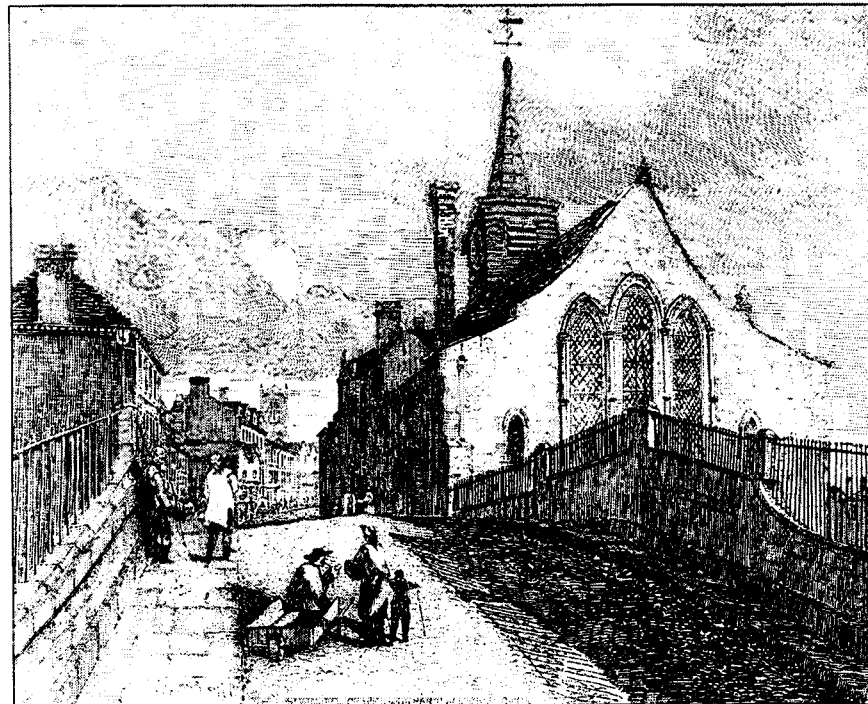


Fig 10. Williams Chapel and Ouse Bridge (Henry Cave, 1813) (York City Archives)

In 1569, although not in 1399, there was a playing place designated along Low Ousegate (see fig 11) by Mr Paycock's house, probably quite close to Ouse Bridge, on the left-hand side of the route. The road here was about 23 to 27 feet wide.

V and 6. *Ousegate Corner* (21 feet)

The crossroads where Coney Street and Castlegate (in the guise of Spurriergate on the left and Nessgate on the right) meet Ousegate today presents a fairly large area, with St Michael's Church at one corner. The etching of Henry Cave (see fig 12), published in 1813 not long after the rebuilding of Ouse Bridge and the demolition of the houses he depicted, however, shows that the turn in to Spurriergate on the left was very narrow. Nevertheless, the junction would provide some room for manoeuvre and probably enable a larger crowd to gather.

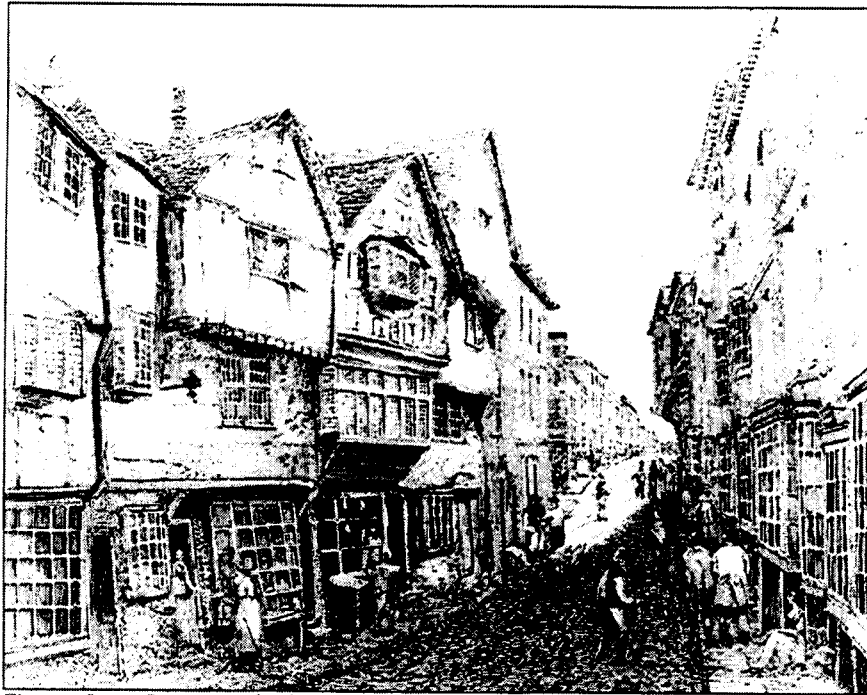


Fig 11. Low Ousegate, looking towards High Ousegate (Henry Cave, 1813). The entrance to Spurriergate can be seen half way up to the left (York City Archives)

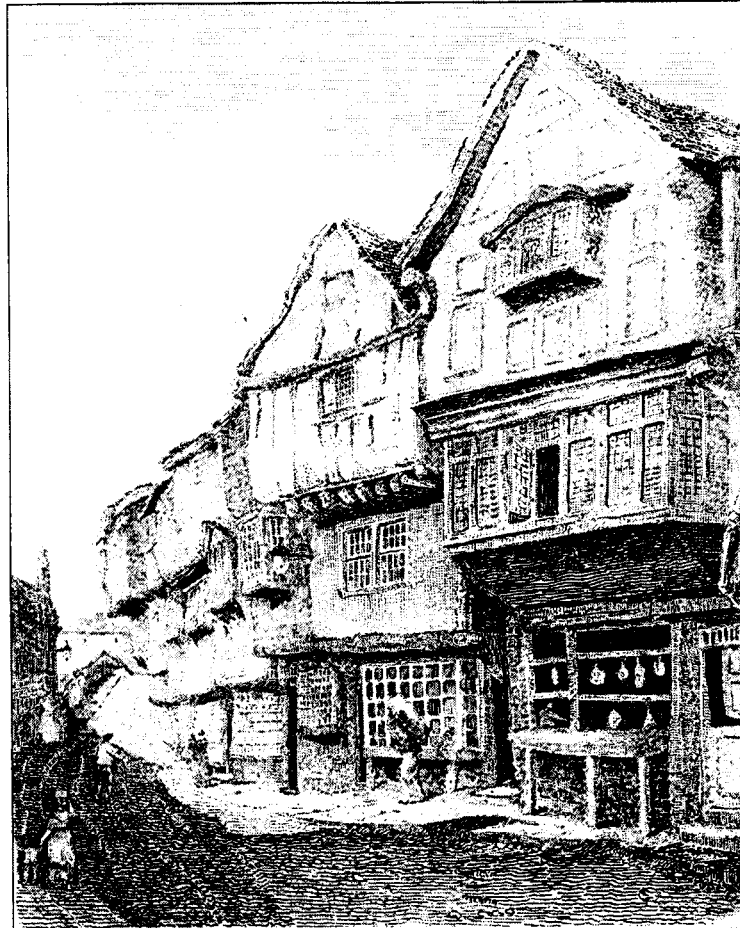


Fig 12. Low Ousegate, looking towards the Bridge (Henry Cave, 1813) (York City Archives)

VI and 7. *Jubbergate Corner* (23 feet)

Spurriergate was first widened on the right side in 1770 and in 1841 the wall of the church itself was moved back,³² so that this section of the street is now wider than Coney Street itself. This was not the case in our period. Spurriergate becomes Coney Street at the point where Jubbergate joins it on the right, and this offered the first feasible playing place along the part of the route. Alderman Thomas Appleyard's house was on the left facing Jubbergate.

VII and 8. *Coney Street* (about 33 feet)

It has not been possible to locate a precise area for the next playing place in Coney Street. It was probably half way between Jubbergate and the Common Hall. The street has now been made a pedestrian precinct and it has a very echoing acoustic, emphasizing the sound of passing feet. The buildings are

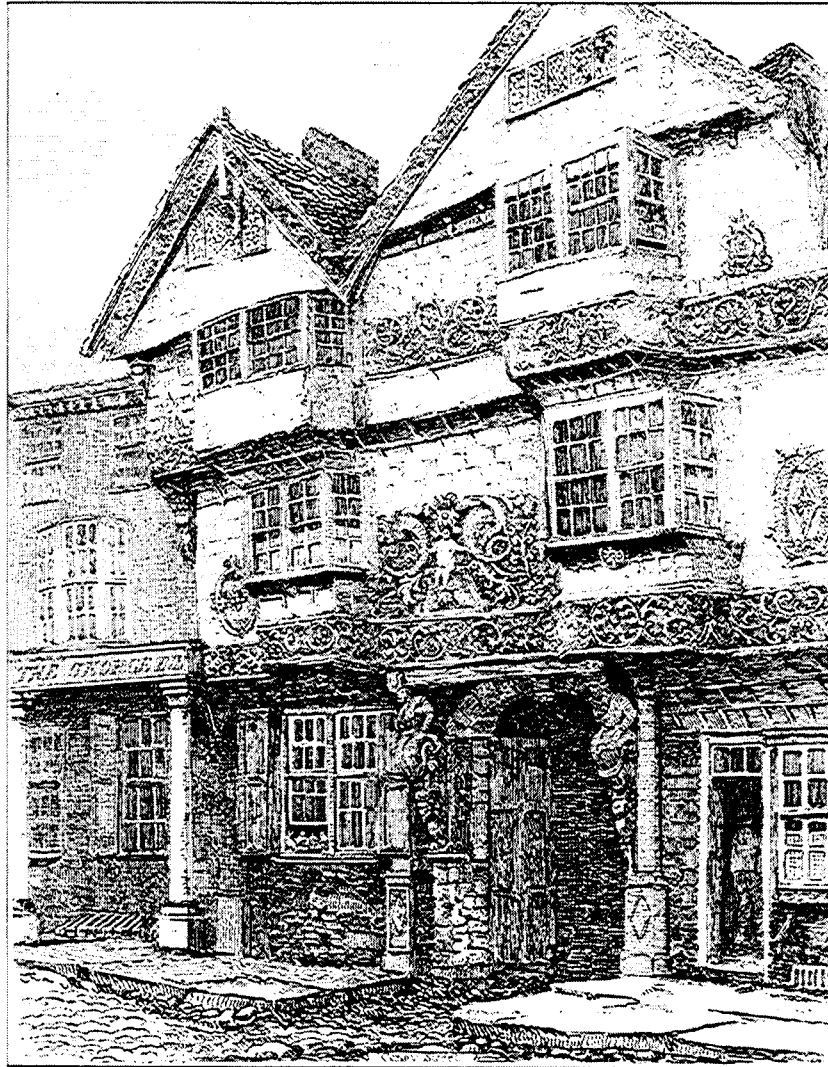


Fig 13. The George Inn, Coney Street (Henry Cave, 1813) (York City Archives)

superficially modern and much higher than they would have been, although the older timber-framed houses occasionally re-emerge when alterations take place. Some imagination is needed to recreate the appearance of the street as it was, but the width of the street is very much as it must have been and the feeling of enclosed space can certainly be experienced here. Henry Cave's etching (see fig 13) of the exuberant George Inn façade (now, alas, gone) helps us to imagine the street.

VIII and 9. *Common Hall Gates* (22–5 feet)

The medieval Guildhall by the Ouse was rebuilt in 1445 with the help of the St Christopher Guild, and in recompense the Guild was given the land fronting Coney Street on which they built two tenements joined by an archway leading to the Hall. Looking at these from Coney Street, on the right of the arch was the Guild's chapel and on the left was a building that, certainly by the mid-sixteenth century, was a tavern. The city acquired the tenements in 1549 at the dissolution of the religious guilds, and from then on the mayor and aldermen could dictate the use of the tavern as their site on Coney Street from which to hear the play and enjoy a meal.³³ Their right to the use of the room at the tavern 'when anie play Interlude or other Geastes of pleasoure shalbe shewed or publisht in the streates of this Cittie to the generall delight of all men' was written into a subsequent lease.³⁴ This lease provides the only recorded evidence that plays did take place in the street and not in the tenement itself for the exclusive viewing by the mayor's party.

The present Mansion House was built on this site between 1725 and 1733. It was found that the buildings on the opposite side of the street, on the corner leading towards Stonegate, made the lower rooms dark and damp, so these buildings were demolished in 1782.³⁵ When contemplating this part of the route, it should be remembered that the mayor and aldermen in 1569 would be looking out into a narrow street and not onto the open space of what is now St Helen's Square. No illustration of the old tenements at the Common Hall Gates has been found.

IX and 10. *Stonegate* (about 25 feet)

With Stonegate and Petergate we reach an area where many of the timber-framed houses of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries survive and the ambience of the original playing places can be recreated. The performance of some of the pageant plays in these two streets in 1988 and 1992 presented a rare chance to



Fig 14a. Stonegate showing the gables of Mulberry Hall on the right (photo: Alexandra F. Johnston)

get some idea of the acoustics, space, and placement of the audience. Some of the houses in Stonegate have been cut back and given brick façades, but many still retain the projecting jetties (see fig 14a). The one known as Mulberry Hall is an attractive example, built long side to the street, a two-storey building in the mid-fifteenth century. A third storey was added about 1574, this time at right angles to the street presenting three gable ends (see fig 14b).³⁶ In recreating the route at the time of the Play performances, this top storey should be mentally removed with the consequent adjustment to the acoustics and sense of enclosure. Mulberry Hall marks a half-way point in Stonegate and stands in the area where Christopher Willoughby lived in 1569.³⁷

X and 11. *Minster Gates* (Stonegate 25 feet; Petergate 28 feet)

Where the pageant wagons turned right from Stonegate into Petergate stood Minster Gates, the entrance to the enclosed Liberty of the Minster where the dean and chapter had jurisdiction. There was a chamber over the gates which



Fig 14b. Stonegate, Mulberry Hall (Henry Cave, 1813) (York City Archives)

the dean and chapter could use on the day of the Corpus Christi Day performance.³⁸ No illustration exists of this gateway although there is one of the gateway near the west end of the cathedral.

12. *Petergate* (about 28 feet) (fig 15)

This street has retained some sense of its original appearance, with some fine timber-framed houses. The main change is in the vista, now open over Kings Square, which was formerly the site of Christ Church, a parish church demolished as late as 1937. Mr Birnand, in 1569, lived on the left-hand side of Petergate.³⁹

XI and 13. *Girdlergate End* (Petergate – about 28 feet) (fig 16)

Petergate ended in front of Christ Church, where Goodramgate came in from the left and Girdlergate from the right. Here was a playing place that offered the audience a chance to spread down the side streets.



Fig 15. Petergate, with Christ Church
(Evelyn Collection)



Fig 16. Christ Church, Goodramgate
Head (E. Brown) (Evelyn Collection)

14. *Colliergate* (22–8 feet)

The wagons continued down the left-hand side of Christ Church to Colliergate. Only a narrow alley led on to the other side to the Shambles, which would not have been wide enough to take the wagons. John Chamber was connected to St Andrewgate, on the left-hand side of Colliergate.⁴⁰ At the bottom end of Colliergate, passing through the section today called Whipmawhopmagate but then called Whitney-whatney Street,⁴¹ the wagons would turn right to enter the final street of their journey.

15. *Hosier Lane* (about 30 feet) (fig 17)

Crux Church stood at the corner of Colliergate and Pavement with a little row of shops down its side. The narrow entry into the Pavement was known as Hosier Lane. The shops were demolished in 1769.⁴² In 1569 Alderman William Beckwith lived in the former Carmelite friary buildings on the left-hand side of Colliergate where it changed into Fossgate,⁴³ and the view from here would have

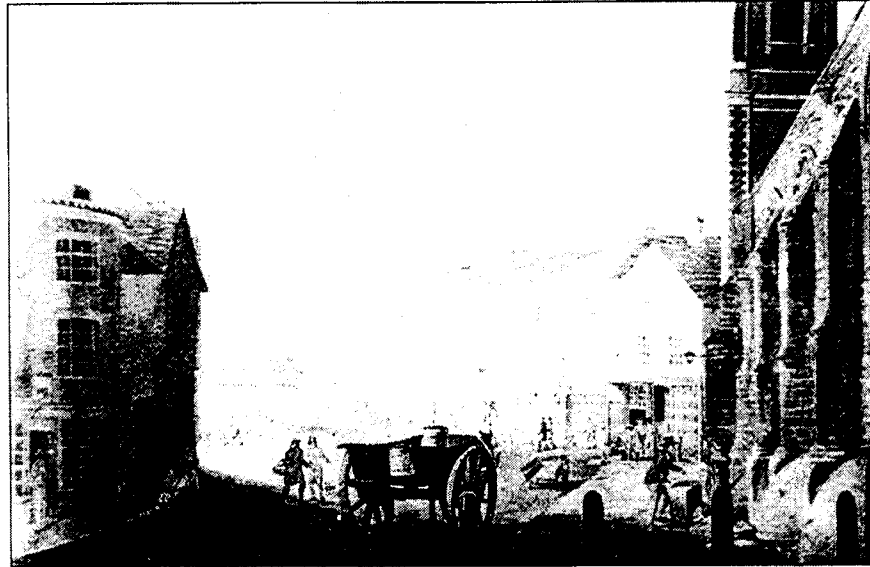


Fig 17. The Pavement from Hosier Lane (Thomas White, 1802) (Evelyn Collection)



Fig 18. The Pavement (Henry Cave, 1813) (York City Archives)

the opposite side to Parliament Street, removing the timber-framed buildings on the lower side.⁴⁴ The area in front of All Saints Church is now a crossroad. However, although all these changes have taken place, it is possible to stand at All Saints Church and see the framework of the old market street, and realize that although it formed the widest part of the route, it was still very narrow: it was never a large square but a short street which could only be considered wide in the context of the streets and alleys of York.

The Play normally ended on the Pavement but the situation in 1569 was unusual, first by giving two playing places, and secondly by appointing that these would be between the houses of two separate people. It should be remembered, however, that the Chamberlains' Book for 1569, which would have listed receipts from the actual playing places, has not survived. We have only the places offered for lease so we do not know how many of the places were actually taken up.

Alderman Harbert's house still survives, known as Herbert House (see fig 20),⁴⁵ standing on the lower side of the Pavement (the left-hand side of the pageant route). The sheriff for 1569, William Robinson, can be placed opposite him, near the end of the Shambles. These two houses would have been where Hosier Lane entered the Pavement and the street became wider. Similarly, Mr Pacock and Mr Allen, two more aldermen, lived opposite each other at the far end of the Pavement, Mr Pacock on the Coppergate side and Mr Allan near High Ousegate.⁴⁶ Most of the playing places along the route would have been



Fig 20. The Pavement before 1887. Parliament Street has been created on the left (Evelyn Collection)

visible to the next one but these two, proposed for what turned out to be the final performance of the pageants in 1569, would have been unusually close to each other. Also, this is the only time in the evidence for stations where a playing place was described as being between houses on each side of the road (see fig 21). The width of the Pavement may have allowed a different alignment of wagon to street than was possible in the narrow streets elsewhere but this was the only time such an arrangement was indicated. It should be emphasized that despite being the widest street, the Pavement was still a narrow space and could not have accommodated a large crowd for such a hypothetical single performance of the Corpus Christi Play as Martin Stevens proposed.⁴⁷



Fig 21. Door of The White Swan, the Pavement (Henry Cave, 1813). 'Such as will have pageants played before their doors' may have boasted such elaborate doorways (York City Archives)

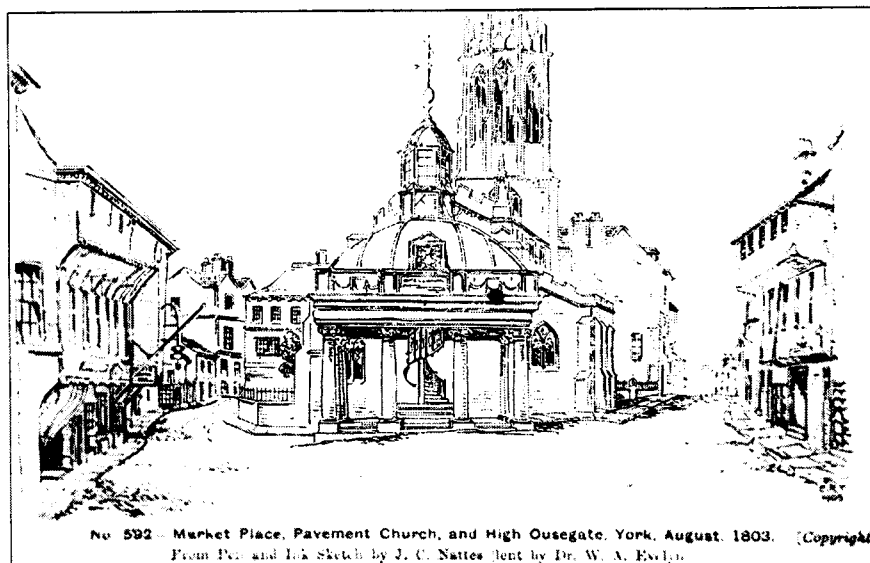


Fig 22. All Saints, the Pavement and Market Cross (based on a sketch by J.C. Nattes, 1803). After completing the performances, pageant wagons could have been moved down Coppergate on the left or High Ousegate on the right (Evelyn Collection)

The end of the route

At All Saints Church (see fig 22), the road split down each side into Coppergate on the south and High Ousegate to the north. These in turn met with Castlegate and Nessgate, close to Low Ousegate and Ouse Bridge. These streets would give parking space for the wagons of the guilds once their pageant had completed the tour. For those craft guilds having the convenient houses on Pageant Green it would not have been too far for them to take them back over the bridge and up Micklegate. No doubt after the excitement of the performance there was great relief in dismantling the wagon and getting it safely stowed.⁴⁸

York Now

The performance of the Corpus Christi Play is a continuing tradition. When the Play was revived in 1951 as part of the York Festival, a new staging method was established, set against the background of the ruins of the nave of St

Mary's Abbey Church just outside the old walls of York. In order to suit the need of a seated audience, confined for the duration of the performance, the individual pageants were cut and compressed to form a single epic, and the actors had to perform in a more epic manner in an open setting. The individual pageants are complete in themselves, often containing explanations that keep the watchers informed in case they had missed an earlier episode – a likely possibility when the performance lasted all day. The text of the new 'tradition' presented a seamless narrative for an audience used to sitting through a modern theatre performance and employed a large cast of extras to fill up the wide playing area. At the same time, during each Festival, one of the original pageant plays was performed on a wagon in the city at sites such as the west front of the Minster, now an open space no longer within the walls of the Liberty of the Minster. One year the pageant was performed at the original site, in Colliergate, to the great disruption of modern motor traffic.⁴⁹

More recently, many streets in York have become pedestrian precincts and the opportunity has been taken to put the wagons back on the original streets. It was to great excitement that the *Mary* and *Last Judgement* pageants were performed at the Minster Gates and in Petergate in 1988, when two-storey pageant wagons were seen again against the old buildings. All these productions chose an end-on alignment, playing down the street. A greater variety of staging was tried for the 1992 performances of *The Crucifixion* and *The Resurrection* pageants in Stonegate and Petergate. Following the end of the York Festival tradition in St Mary's Abbey ruins, some of the pageants were performed by local groups in 1994 and 1998, not, unfortunately, in the old locations but in open spaces that did not exist in medieval York: the Minster gardens, King's Square (on the site of the old Christ Church), a market near the Shambles, St Sampson's Square (old Thursday Market) and Parliament Street. In 1998 the performance had the backing of the York Guilds for the first time since 1569. In the continuing tradition of the performance of the York Corpus Christi Play, knowledge of the old can inform the new.

Recent studies of the evidence for performance in York have not supported the alternate theories to processional staging put forward in the 1970s but they have thrown up new theories. In her initial study of playing places in 1978, Meg Twycross pointed out a fact that has been substantiated by further research: most of the places are defined by property situated on the left-hand side of the route. She reasonably asked, what does this mean for our reconstruction of performance practice? A theory of left-hand facing, side-on pageant wagons was developed, where actors played across the narrow streets to the buildings on the

one (left-hand) side of the street. She more recently renounced this theory with arguments that included the form of floats in Spanish Holy Week processions, and the fact that a pageant wagon with end-on staging looks more dramatic as it comes down the street.⁵⁰ Both the 1988 and 1992 performances were designed to explore the new approach. The first were all end-on wagons, playing down the streets, and satisfied the producers. In 1992 there were end-on wagons, some looking down the street, some looking back; others used open wagons that could be surrounded on all sides by the audience. The one wagon that did play across the street chose to play to the right hand rather than the left (which would not have suited the dean's point of view at Minster Gates).⁵¹

Some of the arguments for these reconstructions relate to evidence of practices outside York. The 'left-hand theory' is based on valid observations about the historic playing places *in* York. It is one of the few pieces of evidence that we have and should not be disregarded when trying to understand pageant staging in York. How far is this observation negated by the few examples of right-hand places and the extremely unusual proposal for the last two places on the Pavement in 1569? If it did not matter which side of the street was designated why were there not more right-hand locations – for example, at the house of Alderman John Bean (d. 1580), who lived just below St Martin's Church in Micklegate,⁵² opposite the site of the Three Kings, and who was (like his contemporary Thomas Henrison) an innkeeper? The other expected result of end-on staging should be more examples of people living opposite each other sharing a place, but this possibility can only be demonstrated on the Pavement in 1569.

Other problems arising from the problem of side-on or end-on performance relate to acting style and audience. Acting across the street towards a house gives a more intimate performance, especially in the narrow streets. Playing down the street allows a larger audience to gather, but the actor must project his voice further to keep the audience's attention. This affects audience reaction as well as actor's style. In the 1988 and 1992 wagon presentations in Petergate and Stonegate, it was found that the audience most distant from the action became distracted, talked to each other more, and also gravitated to the fringes of the next playing area.

A final consideration has no answer: how can we know what attitude the medieval and Tudor citizens brought to their viewing (or *hearing*) of their Play? A modern, often secular mind cannot appreciate the place of religious activity in everyday life and may tend to see the Play as entertainment, using the experience of theatregoing developed since Shakespeare's time. Did the original audience feel, instead, that they were participants in an act of worship

that would have its effect even if they were not watching every moment with good sight lines?

Was the Corpus Christi Play in York an epic or an intimate experience, performed for as large an audience as could cram into the narrow streets or staged as a miniature for contemplation? The citizens' reactions to the plays are not recorded, apart from those occasions when they tried to restore the performance after 1569. In 1572 the Pater Noster Play was substituted but never repeated, probably because of the request from the archbishop for the play books. A performance of the Corpus Christi Play was proposed in 1579, but the archbishop and the dean were first to be asked to look at the script. Nothing more was heard and a request from the commons to the mayor for a performance in 1580 had no official response. Some, at least, of the pageant wagons were kept and were available for Mr Grafton's Interlude in 1585.⁵³ After that, dramatic performances in York were in the hands of visiting professional companies until 1951.

Although the continuity of performance has been lost, it is still possible to walk the streets of York that contained the procession of wagons and by their shape and size dictated the style of performance, and sense a link between the old and the new tradition.

Notes

- 1 Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson (eds), *York*, 2 vols, Records of Early English Drama (Toronto, 1979), 3 (Latin)/ 689 (translation). For ease of consultation, references are made to this publication as REED *York*, which, in its turn, details the original manuscript sources.
- 2 REED *York*, 4–5/690–1. For reference to unidentified craft guilds storing their pageant wagons in outbuildings at the Archbishop's Palace adjoining the Minster in 1388, see Alexandra F. Johnston, 'York Pageant House: New Evidence', *REED Newsletter* (1982.2), 24–5.
- 3 For details on the Corpus Christi Guild in York, see REED *York*, xxii–xxxiv.
- 4 See the introduction to Richard Beadle (ed), *The York Plays* (London, 1982), especially 29–30.
- 5 For the control of the city council over the Play performance see REED *York*, passim. The major source for the pageants allocated to the crafts (apart from the Play text) is the *Ordo Paginarum* of 1415 (see REED *York*, 16–26/702–11). See also the discussion of this document in Richard Beadle and

- Peter Meredith (eds), *The York Play: A Facsimile of British Library ms Additional 35290* (Leeds, 1983), li–lxi.
- 6 REED *York*, 42–4/728–30; 158/793. See also Alexandra F. Johnston, ‘The Procession and Play of Corpus Christi at York in 1426’, *Leeds Studies in English* ns 7 (1973–4) 55–62.
 - 7 See Martin Stevens, ‘The York Cycle: From Procession to Play’, *Leeds Studies in English* ns 6 (1972), 37–61.
 - 8 One of the earliest maps of York is John Speed’s in *The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain* (1611–12) along with the county map of the West Riding of Yorkshire published in 1610. The city map is reproduced as the frontispiece of REED *York*, vol 2.
 - 9 REED *York*, 393.
 - 10 See Alan H. Nelson, *The Medieval English Stage: Corpus Christi Pageants and Plays* (Chicago, 1974).
 - 11 Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (RCHM), *York*, vol 5, *The Central Area* (London, 1981), 76–7, 91; REED *York*, 243, 384–5, 397 and 449.
 - 12 This phrase was used in 1569; REED *York*, 356.
 - 13 For the Creed Play see REED *York*, 236–8; for the Pater Noster Play, REED *York*, 6/693, 366.
 - 14 REED *York*, 405–7, 409–12, 414–27.
 - 15 Stephens, ‘The York Cycle: From Procession to Play’.
 - 16 Nelson, *The Medieval English Stage*, chapter 3, ‘York’.
 - 17 Margaret Dorrell, ‘Two Studies of the York Corpus Christi Play’, *Leeds Studies in English* ns 6 (1972), 63–111.
 - 18 REED *York*, 11/697–8.
 - 19 REED *York*, 312 and 314.
 - 20 Meg Twycross, ‘“Places to hear the play”: Pageant Stations at York, 1398–1572’, *REED Newsletter* (1978.2), 10–33.
 - 21 For discussion of the fifteenth-century evidence, see David Crouch, ‘Paying to See the Play: The Stationholders on the Route of the York Corpus Christi Play in the Fifteenth Century’, *Medieval English Theatre* 13 (1991), 64–111. For the sixteenth century, see Eileen White, ‘People and Places: The Social and Topographical Context of Drama in York 1554–1609’, PhD thesis (University of Leeds, 1984), and ‘Places for Hearing the Corpus Christi Play in York’, *Medieval English Theatre* 9 (1987), 23–63.
 - 22 York City Archives, House Book 34, f 251.
 - 23 REED *York*, 11 (1399), 28 (1417), 84–5 (1454), 93 (1462), 100–1 (1468), 105–6 (1475), 143–4 (1486), 180 (1499), 187 (1501), 202 (1506), 205–6 (1508), 213 (1516), 220 (1520), 224 (1521), 228 (1522), 231 (1523), 233–4

- (1524), 236 (1525), 240 (1526), 242–3 (1527), 246–7 (1528), 263–4 (1538), 278–9 (1542), 298 (1551), 313–14 (1554), 356–7 (1569), 366 (1572), 406 (1584), 414–26 (1585). In looking at the playing places of 1569 it is assumed for the purpose of this study that all the places were used, but this may not have been the case, as the accounts which would have noted income do not survive for this year.
- 24 For a full account of the pageant houses, see White, 'People and Places', 131–55, and Eileen White, 'The Girdlers' Pageant House in York', *REED Newsletter* 8.1 (1983), 1–8.
- 25 It should be noted that these widths are approximate, assessed from large-scale plans of the city such as the 1852 Ordnance Survey map. Even when the old street lines can be located, modern traffic and pedestrians make actual measurement at the sites complicated.
- 26 Peter Meredith, 'John Clerke's Hand in the York Register', *Leeds Studies in English* ns 12 (1981), 245–71. The entry in the Chamberlains' Book for 1538 reads, 'In primis the ffyrst place at Trenytie yaites where as the Comon Clerke kepys the Registre wherefore that place goith free' (*REED York*, 263).
- 27 For Thomas Henrison/Harrison see White, 'People and Places', 167–77.
- 28 For a fuller discussion of the evidence for the identity and location of all stationholders in 1569, see White, 'People and Places', 261–82.
- 29 The reference to the first playing place at Trinity Gates being the one where the clerk kept the Register (see note 26 above) – that is, where the common clerk or his deputy sat to check each pageant play against the master copy – led to the erroneous supposition that the clerk of Holy Trinity looked after the Register. This is stated on a descriptive plaque on the gates of the church. The Register was, in fact, kept with the city records.
- 30 See D.M. Palliser, *Tudor York* (Oxford, 1979), 2, and miscellaneous entries in the House Books from 9 January 1564/5 when extra ferry services were initiated to 7 February 1566 when the temporary wooden bridge was taken up (York City Archives: House Book 23, f 164v to House Book 24, f 57v).
- 31 York City Archives: Acc.191/PH 17/295.
- 32 RCHM, *York*, vol 5, *The Central Area*, 220.
- 33 The evidence for the Common Hall site is presented in Eileen White, *The St Christopher and St George Guild of York*, Borthwick Paper 72 (York, 1987), 204 and 19–21; and her 'The Tenements at the Common Hall Gates 1550–1725', *York Historian* 6 (1985), 32–42.
- 34 Eileen White, 'The Tenements at the Common Hall Gates: The Mayor's Station for the Corpus Christi Play in York', *REED Newsletter* (1982.2),

- 14–24. The lease to Thomas Colthirst is noted in the House Book entry of 22 July 1575 (York City Archives: House Book 26, f 28v).
- 35 RCHM, *York*, vol 5, *The Central Area*, 96–9. An entry on the demolition of the buildings opposite the Mansion House is in Dr White's Diary, York City Archives: Acc 163, entry 12 for 17 May 1782.
- 36 RCHM, *York*, vol 5, *The Central Area*, 228.
- 37 White, 'People and Places', 269–75.
- 38 REED, *York*, 132, 135, 289.
- 39 White, 'People and Places', 275–6.
- 40 White, 'People and Places', 280–1.
- 41 For the origin of the names of York streets, see D.M. Palliser, 'The Medieval Street-Names of York', *York Historian* 2 (1978), 2–16.
- 42 RCHM, *York*, vol 5, *The Central Area*, 174–5.
- 43 Inquisition Post Mortem for William Beckwith, York City Archives: E26, ff 58v–60v.
- 44 RCHM, *York*, vol 5, *The Central Area*, 174–5. For more detailed reference to Mr Beckwith's house and the Pavement, see White, 'People and Places', 241–59 and 297. Peter Atkinson's plan of the Pavement is in York City Archives Acc 191/PH 509/2215.
- 45 RCHM, *York*, vol 5, *The Central Area*, 311–12.
- 46 White, 'People and Places', 282–303.
- 47 Stevens, 'The York Cycle: From Procession to Play'.
- 48 See the payment record in the Bakers' Account Book for 1549, 'Item Spent yat day yat we put in the pagand and mayd ffast the dorys viij d', REED *York*, 294.
- 49 These pageant performances were produced by Stewart Lack, who provided me with information and illustrations. His services to the York Play should be acknowledged.
- 50 Meg Twycross, "Places to Hear the Play", and 'The Left-hand-side Theory: a Retraction' *Medieval English Theatre* 14 (1992), 77–94.
- 51 Twycross, 'The Left-hand-side Theory', 81–5. See also Philip Butterworth, 'The York Crucifixion: Actor/Audience Relationship', *Medieval English Theatre* 14 (1992) 67–76.
- 52 RCHM, *York*, vol 3, *South-West of the Ouse* (London, 1972), 74, 'House 35 and 37 Micklegate'.
- 53 REED *York*, 365–8, 377–8, 390, 392–3, 419–20.