

The True Origins of The York Archer's Society (1833)

Research has shown that the true date of formation of the York Archers Society is 1833. This document gives a very brief overview of the History of Archery in the City of York in general, and the evidence for the True Origins of the York Archers Society in particular.

The City of York and its locality have connections with Archery which go back far beyond the Roman Invasion of 71 C.E.. Bows and arrows were used by local people in hunting for food, the Romans brought with them archers from across the Empire, together with new equipment and techniques which lasted well beyond the Roman Era, and indeed through the Dark Ages and into the Medieval period.

The Battle of Hastings, where King Harold was allegedly killed by an arrow in the eye may have been the 'main event' of 1066, but the Battle of Stamford Bridge, the precursor to Hastings, is one of the first major local battles in which Archery played a crucial role.

After the Norman Invasion, Archery took its place centre-stage in Medieval warfare, and after the emergence of the Legend of Robin Hood (who was undoubtedly a Yorkshireman) in the thirteenth Century, became firmly lodged in both English folklore and the English way of life.

The fourteenth Century saw the growth of the English Longbow, the 'crooked billet' of Yew, fashioned by skilled artisans throughout England, and a major industry in the fair City of York, recorded in the Bowyers Indentures of Apprenticeship of 1371 and the later Bowyers Ordinances of 30th December 1395. The Fletchers too had a thriving local industry, for a bow is useless without arrows, and their Ordinances of 3rd April 1476 outline their craft practices. The York House and Memorandum books paint a vivid picture of life in the City in the medieval period, a place which was very different to our City today, darker, dirtier, although just as cosmopolitan, and firmly set at the heart of both government and the kingdom.

Bows and arrows served a serious purpose in those days – they were weapons of war, and their effectiveness in carrying out their bloody work is evidenced by the battles of the Hundred Years War (1337 – 1453) Crecy, Poitiers, La Rochelle and Sluys amongst them, but the name which lives in legend is Agincourt, where the prowess of the English Longbowman led to his legend being writ large in world history in the blood of the French nobility.

The Battle of Towton, the largest battle ever fought on English soil, which began in a blinding snowstorm on Palm Sunday, 29th March, 1461 is a testament to the effectiveness of archers as an artillery weapon. A newsletter circulated a week after the battle reported that 28,000 died on the battlefield, a staggering 1% of the entire population of England at that time.

The engagement brought about a monarchical change in England. **Edward IV** displaced **Henry VI** as King of England, driving the head of the Lancastrians and his key supporters out of the country.

The prowess of the English Longbowman continued throughout the engagements of the Scottish wars, and well into the 17th Century, when it was sadly superseded by the gun.

For almost 600 years, the bow had served England as our primary weapon of defence. Each household had, by law, to own bows and arrows, and various pieces of legislation were enacted to ensure that weekly archery practice took place after church on Sundays. The grooves from arrows being sharpened which still exist on many country churches stand as testament to this practice! All other forms of sport and gaming were banned (without much success!) so as not to disturb Archery practice, and from the age of 7 years, boys were trained in the skills of the bow.

Archers of and from York fought in all the wars of the medieval period, details of the support that they were given by the City and the names of some of their commanders are recorded in the York House Books.

Although Archery had largely vanished from the mainstream of English life, it was not forgotten, and the desire which grew up amongst the gentry in the late 18th century for a return to the days of knightly chivalry and tales of Robin Hood led to a revival amongst them. No longer the weapon of the common man, the Bow became a plaything of the leisured classes.

Societies of Archers were formed in the latter half of the 18th century, although some, such as the Scorton Archers, and the Archers of the Finsbury Mark can lay claim to a much earlier antecedence

This revival of Archery for peaceful purposes was sadly interrupted by the Napoleonic wars, and it was not until the first half of the Nineteenth century that it once again gained momentum.

For many years, the badge of The York Archers Society has borne the date 1789, a date which would have placed the Society in the forefront of the original revival movement. Research has however shown that this date is in fact erroneous, and that the society was not in fact formed until over 40 years later.

The earliest book recording Societies of Archers in the UK, "Anecdotes of Archery" was written in 1791 by a local historian and publisher Eli Hargrove, who records the existence of the 'Yorkshire Archers' in Chapelton, Leeds in 1789. This society held meetings in a number of locations in Yorkshire, including York's Knavesmire, which had hosted Archery meetings from at least 1584. It was in this year that the Earls of Essex and Cumberland staged a match for "£20 a bowe" and a certain Alderman Maltbie took part, along with two Russian ambassadors. There was much wagering and "galloping up and down with nagges", all recorded in "The Yorkshire Anthology – a new Yorkshyre Song" by William Elderton.

There is, however no mention of the York Archers Society in this book, and it is not until a second edition of "Anecdotes" emerged in 1845, written and updated by A.E.Hargrove, that York Archers Society is mentioned. The entry reads;

IN the year 1833, the Society of the York Archers was established, and during the period, between that time and the present, they have increased and prospered. At the shooting for the ancient silver arrow, which was held at Darlington, on the 26th of August, 1841, Mr. Thomas Lambert, who is a member of this society, obtained the first gold, and, consequently, won the arrow, the possession of which confers the title of Captain. At the meeting held at Thirsk, for the same purpose, on the 9th of August, 1843, the silver bugle and Lieutenancy were won by Mr. H. Steward (also a member), who obtained the first red. Last year (1844), the bugle was again won by Mr. H. Steward, who is an excellent marksman. **Costume..**Single-breasted green frock coat, with club buttons, embossed with the city arms, and crossed by a quiver and arrow, having the year 1833, beneath ; buff waistcoat, with similar button, of a smaller size ; white trousers, for shooting, and black, for dress ; green silk velvet cap, with massive gold tassel, and lace."

Local newspaper articles also confirm the date of formation.

The Yorkshire Herald Saturday of April 5th 1834 column 5, Page 3 carries the following article

“Archery.

We understand that a Society has been formed for the encouragement of the Noble Science of Archery under the title of the “York Archers Society.

The operations of this society commenced for the season on Tuesday afternoon an Knavesmire, and, the afternoon being fine, there were numbers of Ladies, and others, on the ground, to witness the feats of the merry bowmen.

Archery is a Noble Science, and the use of the bow is associated with some of our most gallant National achievements. We are glad, therefore to announce the existence of a society in York, whose object is the cultivation of Archery, and we heartily wish it success.”

The Yorkshire Gazette April 18th 1846 in Col 6 on page 4 carries the following article;

“Archery

York Archers.

The 13th anniversary of this Society was celebrated on Tuesday last. The shooting took place on the Knavesmire, when the Challenge Cup was won by Mr Wilson.”

The Captain’s Cup, a Victorian Silver Trophy still in the possession of the Society is clearly engraved “York Archers Society, 1833”

York Archers Society members shot at the first Grand National Archery meeting in York in 1844, as did members of the Archers of the White Rose (York). Members subsequently travelled to regional and National tournaments, and continued to shoot on Knavesmire until the early part of the 20th Century. They held regular meetings and encouraged the practice of juvenile archery, offering significant and valuable prizes at some shoots. Members of YAS served on the committee formed in York to pursue the formation of the Grand National Archery Society, which finally came into being at the GNAM held at Liverpool in 1861.

The Grand National Meeting returned to York in 1888, in 1893 for the 50th (Jubilee) Meeting, and again in 1907, when the competition was held on the “Gentleman’s Cricket Ground, Wiggington Road”, now the site of the York District Hospital.

York Archers Society also held social meetings at the Elephant and Castle in Skeldergate, a public house which once stood on the site now occupied by the Queen’s Hotel, opposite a private house often visited by Charles Dickens. The owner of this building gave Dickens the basis for the character of Mr Micawber, for whom “something will (always) turn up”.

During and after the First World War, archery in York fell into a decline, and it was not until after the 2nd World War that it began once again to provide healthy recreation to the Citizens of York, York Archers remained under the wing of Rowntree Archers until the early 1950’s, when they emerged once again in their own right. An article in British Archer, Vol 6 no. 4 April/May 1953 records the return of York Archers to the Northern Counties Archery Society (NCAS)

“York Archers

We welcome the return of the York Archers to the NCAS. This club was first formed in 1833. Captain Mr. H. Steward.”

Housed first at Clifton Park, and now on Hopgrove Playing Fields, Malton Road. They were central in bringing the World Archery Championships to York in 1971 as part of York’s 900th anniversary celebrations, and have since hosted many tournaments, the last one being Leg 5 of the Archery GB tour in August 2011. Current members include Yorkshire Champions, past and present Yorkshire Team members and County and National record holders, together with a number of fine and well– established Coaches

In 2011, YAS received a communication from Mr Dixon Pickup, an Archer, Archer-Historian and collector of Archery Regalia. He had recently acquired a Victorian YAS waistcoat button, and has kindly consented to allow me to use an image of it in this publication. It is reproduced on the front cover.

Close to one thousand years of history and tradition have made Archery in York what it is today. Many people have toiled over the years to keep it alive in a form that will withstand the test of time., and are justly proud of their heritage in the sport that they love. We now know that the date on the Society’s badge is incorrect, and that this has been the case for less than 60 years. By correcting the date, we will both honour our founders and preserve the heritage of our Society in its correct form for those who will follow in our footsteps. It will also allow us to properly celebrate the 180th year of the Society’s foundation in 2013. I am sure that those who began the journey in which we are all engaged as friends and fellow archers would be proud of their modern counterparts.

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The York Archers Society
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