

what makes Selby special

Selby is a remarkably intact ecclesiastical market town and has an unusual claim to fame that takes its name far across the Atlantic. The town's origins date from the establishment of a Viking settlement on the banks of the River Ouse. Archaeological investigations in Selby have revealed extensive remains, including waterlogged deposits in the core of the town dating from the Roman period onwards. It is believed that Selby originated as a settlement called Seletun which was referred to in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle of AD 779. In the year 1069 the monk Benedict, from Auxerre in France, persuaded William the Conqueror to give him permission to found an Abbey at Selby. His successor, Hugh planned and constructed the great church and the associated domestic buildings and two hundred years later, a new, larger chancel was constructed.



The Abbey Church

The Abbey Church is complete and larger in size than many English cathedrals and has an excellent Norman Nave and decorated Chancel. Selby Abbey is believed to contain the origins of the United States stars and stripes flag and as such is a major feature of the American Heritage Trail. The origins are found in the upper window of the Abbey Church, which has the coat of arms, called the Washington Arms.

Founded on such strong ecclesiastical foundations, the dissolution of the Abbey in 1538 by the commissioners of Henry the VIII was a terrible blow and the town had to develop new interests in order to survive. The river was a major means of communication and transport surrounded by marshy areas and the riverside warehouses built by the Abbots of Selby,

remain to this day with the stone revetment to the Staithe or quay still being visible at low tide.

Navigation for sea-going vessels was more difficult above Selby and there is evidence to suggest that shipbuilding was being carried out in the town as early as the fifteenth century.

By the eighteenth century, Selby had become the major outlet to the sea for the West Riding area and turnpike roads and a canal cut from the river Aire enabled the movement of goods more easily. Around 1800, there were eighteen master mariners living in Selby and upwards of 360,000 tons of shipping used the river between Selby and the sea each year.

As Goole developed as a major port, the construction of the Leeds Selby railway in 1834 helped the town to continue to thrive. The tracks enabled goods trains to go through the station on to jetties at the riverside until the construction of the Selby to Hull railway in 1840 tended to make this advantage redundant.

Another economic support for the town was agriculture, which had been made possible by the gradual draining of the surrounding terrain by the monks. At the end of the eighteenth century flax was a very important crop in the area. In Mountain's history of Selby it is recorded that flax fairs were held every six weeks from October to June. The continued existence of Flaxley Road is a memorial to this industry. The town's regional importance was enhanced by the weekly market, which has taken place for centuries, firstly in the Abbey's Nave and in more recent times in the market place and onto Micklegate.



In 1792 the swing bridge (pictured above) was built across the Ouse to replace the well-used ferry. In order to gain access to the bridge, the Abbey gateway was demolished and what is now called New Street was constructed. A few years later the Middle Row was also removed. A row of houses was built on the western side of New Street. At that time these houses were called Brunswick Row.

A decade or so later, the local merchant and shipping magnate, John Audus, and later his son, James, designed and built a Crescent similar to Lansdown Crescent in Bath. Associated with the Crescent was the row of houses along the turnpike to Thorne opposite the park i.e. Park Street. This was completed by about 1850. Later, Brook Street, Armoury Road and other streets were developed. To the north of the Abbey is the Cholera Burial Ground, which is in turn, bounded by Abbey Place and Church Avenue forming a pleasant precinct at the centre of the town.

In the last part of the nineteenth century more railways were built and Selby became a significant

railway centre with its own goods yard and engine shed. These are now gone but in the heyday Selby was the centre of a communications network which made the town attractive to industry mainly concerned with the processing of agricultural produce.

Although the River Ouse has been so important in the development of Selby, it also has its downside. Great floods have occurred at intervals. There are records of such events in 1794, 1866, 1947, 1983 and 2000 which will naturally have an effect on the development of the waterfront in the future.

Selby still retains much of its heritage, including a Monday market (pictured below). Although the economic fortunes of the town were more recently linked to coal mining and power generation as well as modern manu-facturing, Selby has the indefinable atmosphere of a market town.



The Crescent

