



### Grays Court Historical Facts

Commissioned circa 1080 by the first Norman Archbishop, Thomas of Bayeux, Grays Court is probably the oldest continuously occupied house in Britain.

*“The House inspires love, admiration, respect. It breathes harmony and quiet, and speaks to those who know how to hear, of goodness, of duty, and of discipline... the Long Gallery lined with oak speaks with no uncertain voice of the past, of the many different people who have worked, played and suffered there.....”*

#### **Mrs Edwin Gray (née Almyra Vickers) 1927 – Previous owner of Grays Court**

- 1) Originally built to entertain visitors on royal, state and church business, it became the official residence of the Treasurers of York Minster, with the first taking up the position in 1091 in the earliest parts of the building.
- 2) The building itself stands on a site of historic interest, as it lies just inside the north-east defences of what was the Roman Legionary Fortress. The Lower Gallery has several stone pillars, which are believed to have been reused from elsewhere and possibly Roman. They were installed in the 11<sup>th</sup> century to form a cloister.
- 3) Between 1285 and 1839 York Minster had its own Liberty, the ‘Liberty of Saint Peter and Peter Prison’. It was the walled area which surrounded the Minster Close, including Grays Court. Within the Liberty the Dean and Chapter of York Minster held jurisdiction and were able to appoint constables. So called the ‘city within a city’ it had its own laws and thus needed its own court, prison and even gallows, which stood until 1837. York Minster still has its own police force today, one of only a few cathedrals in the world to do so.
- 4) The last Treasurer at Grays Court was William Clyff, who took the role in 1538, until he resigned and the building was surrendered to the Crown on the 26<sup>th</sup> May 1547.
- 5) The first post-reformation resident of the building was Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset and brother to Jane Seymour, famously the third wife of King Henry VIII. He was given the house by their son, King Edward VI.
- 6) George Young, son of the Archbishop of York, lived at Grays Court between 1588-1620 and built the Jacobean Long Gallery above the Lower Gallery during this time.
- 7) The mediaeval wall of the original Treasurers House can still be seen behind the oak panelling of the Long Gallery.



- 8)** In 1617, King James I spent a few days in York during his journey to Scotland. On April 12<sup>th</sup> he was entertained to dinner in the Long Gallery by Edmond, Lord Sheffield, the then President of the Council of the North, and George Young. After dinner King James knighted 8 noblemen in the Long Gallery.
- 9)** Sir Thomas Fairfax owned Grays Court between 1649 and 1663. Sir Thomas preceded Oliver Cromwell as Commander-In-Chief of the new model army in the Civil War. He won the battle of Naseby in 1645 and, a year earlier, played a prominent part in the siege of York and in the battle of Marston Moor, which was on the 2<sup>nd</sup> July some seven miles west of the city. He was arguably the most important General during the British Civil Wars.
- 10)** In 1663 the house was sold by Fairfax to George Aislable, an attorney and Registrar of the Ecclesiastical Court in York. He married Mary, the daughter and co-heiress of Sir John Mallorie of Studley Royal near Ripon.
- 11)** On the 10<sup>th</sup> January 1674 Aislable and his wife, Mary, attended at the Duke of Buckingham's mansion in Bishophill, York, along with Mary's elder sister, Miss Mallorie, and her fiancé, Jonathon Jennings. The Aislables returned home early, ordering a manservant to stay up for Miss Mallorie and Jennings return. Due to a misunderstanding the manservant left to collect the couple from Bishophill. The couple returned to locked gates and resorted to spending the night elsewhere. The following day Jennings and Aislable fought, with Jennings calling Aislable "the scum of the country". Aislable challenged Jennings to a duel.
- 12)** The duel took place on the 12<sup>th</sup> January, with the first stroke of the Minster bell for matins being the signal for the duel to begin. Jennings pierced Aislable in the arm, most likely severing an artery. Aislable was carried home to Grays Court, where he soon died. Jennings was afterwards tried for manslaughter but was pardoned by Charles II. Aislable was buried in York Minster. Miss Mallorie never married Jennings or indeed anyone else.
- 13)** John Aislable, the son of George, succeeded his father after his death in 1674 and lived at Grays Court until 1698. John Aislable was MP. for Ripon and perhaps the most notorious Chancellor of the Exchequer ever to hold office (1718-1721). In 1720 the South Sea Bubble burst, and as one who had approved the South Sea Company's taking over the National Debt he must bear a very large part of the responsibility. For a time he was imprisoned in the Tower of London.
- 14)** On 6<sup>th</sup> November 1679 James Duke of York and his wife, Maria Beatrix of Modena, afterwards King and Queen, lodged at Grays Court.



- 15)** Robert Squire bought the house from John Aislabie in 1698. He died in 1709 and his daughter, Jane, divided the house between two tenants in 1721, a divide that remains to this day. The present Grays Court and part of the Treasurer's House was known as "The Great House" whilst the remainder of the present Treasurer's House was known as "The Little House".
- 16)** Located in the Long Gallery is one of only two surviving sundials created by Henry Gyles (1645-1709), a renowned glass painter from Micklegate. He belonged to a group named the York *virtuosi*, which was made up of artists and intellectuals who gathered to discuss varied topics. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century he was the last glass painter left in York and was credited with 'the revival of the art of pictorial glass painting'.
- 17)** In 1721 the house was bought by Matthew Robinson. He maintained the two separate leases until eventually selling the divided property to two separate owners, thus making the decision to divide the buildings virtually irrevocable.
- 18)** Elizabeth Robinson, daughter of Matthew, was born at Grays Court in 1718, three years before he bought the property. She married Edward Montagu, a grandson of the Earl of Sandwich, in 1742. Two years later, after the death of her only child, she founded the celebrated Blue-stocking Club 'where literary topics were to be discussed, but politics, gossip and card-playing were barred'.
- 19)** In 1742 Grays Court came into possession of Dr. Jaques Sterne, Precentor and Canon Residentiary of the Minster and Arch Deacon of Cleveland. He was the uncle of Laurence Sterne, author of *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*. When he owned the house he built the Sterne Room above the original medieval magnesian limestone wall. The marble plaque on the fireplace is of Augusta, wife of Frederick Prince of Wales, and mother of George III.
- 20)** On the evening of 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1746 William, Duke of Cumberland, arrived unannounced in York at around 10pm after the Battle of Culloden. Hasty preparations were made to entertain him at Grays Court. He was received by the Archbishop in the Long Gallery, after which they went on to dine in the Sterne Room. After the meal the Lord Mayor presented His Royal Highness with a gold box containing the freedom of the city.
- 21)** William Gray, member of the illustrious Gray family after whom the building takes its current name, bought the house in 1788. His family would go on to inhabit the building until 1962.
- 22)** William Wilberforce was a close friend of William Gray, and a frequent visitor to Grays Court. Gray eventually became almoner of the many charities organised by Wilberforce in Yorkshire.



- 23)** The 300m stretch of City Walls which bounds Grays Court was donated to the city in 1878 by Edwin Gray, the Lord Mayor of York at the time. This makes Grays Court the only building to retain private access to York's City walls.
- 24)** In 1860 William Grays' grandson, also named William, carried out an excavation and found part of a Roman store building. In this he found five ballista balls, a stamped tile of Ligio VI, some pottery, glass and two fourth century coins. In the Yorkshire Museum is a Roman sculptured stone described as having been found 'in the City Wall near Mr. E Gray's garden'. It shows a male figure, naked except for a short cloak and leading a horse by a bridle. It has been suggested it might be one of the Dioscures, who are associated with the Greek cult of Castor and Pollux.
- 25)** In 1900 the architect Temple Moore was commissioned to carry out a campaign of work at Grays Court, the Treasurers House and St. Williams College. The Lower Gallery was transformed into it's current state as an entrance hall. Until then it has been treated as a vault.
- 26)** Edwin Gray along with Temple Moore significantly altered the area to the front of the building. By taking down what were a decrepit looking block of stables and outhouses they were able to transform the Courtyard into what it is today. In 1924 Edwin Gray planted the London Plane trees, which are now instantly recognisable as the entrance to Grays Court.
- 27)** Almyra Vickers, the wife of Edwin Gray, was a remarkable woman in her own right. She became associated with many philanthropic and feminist movements in York and joined the National Union for Women Workers in 1902, an unusual move for a woman of her wealth and social standing. Six years later she became the national president, saying "*My great idea, is to take away anything which may hinder women to live a full life.*" In 1920 she became one of the first women J.P.s in York. She and her husband were both magistrates at the same time.



GRAYS COURT  
YORK

- 28)** The iron railings fronting the lectern in the nave of York Minster were once the garden steps of Grays Court. They were presented to the Minster Helen Faith Gardner (daughter of Mr & Mrs Edwin Gray) and her husband, Col. Gardner.
- 29)** In 1945 Mrs Gardner sold Grays Court to the Dean and Chapter of York, who then leased part of the building to St. John's College as the department of History. After Col. Gardner, who still lived in the house, passed in 1962 the entire building was taken over by the College to house the English and Theology departments also.
- 30)** Unsurprisingly there have been numerous sightings of ghosts in the building.

