

Minster Detectives

De-coding the signs and
symbols for your group



*Welcome to
York Minster, one of
the most beautiful
Christian buildings
in the country where
people come to pray,
learn and experience
the presence of God.*

As you enter the building,
encourage your group to face east
with their backs to the large west
doors. Give them a few minutes to
fully explore with their eyes and
take feedback on their reactions
and thoughts.

Pupils are encouraged to be
detectives and find symbols at
various points on their journey.
They can draw these on their guides
and then use them to design their
own Minster floor tile.

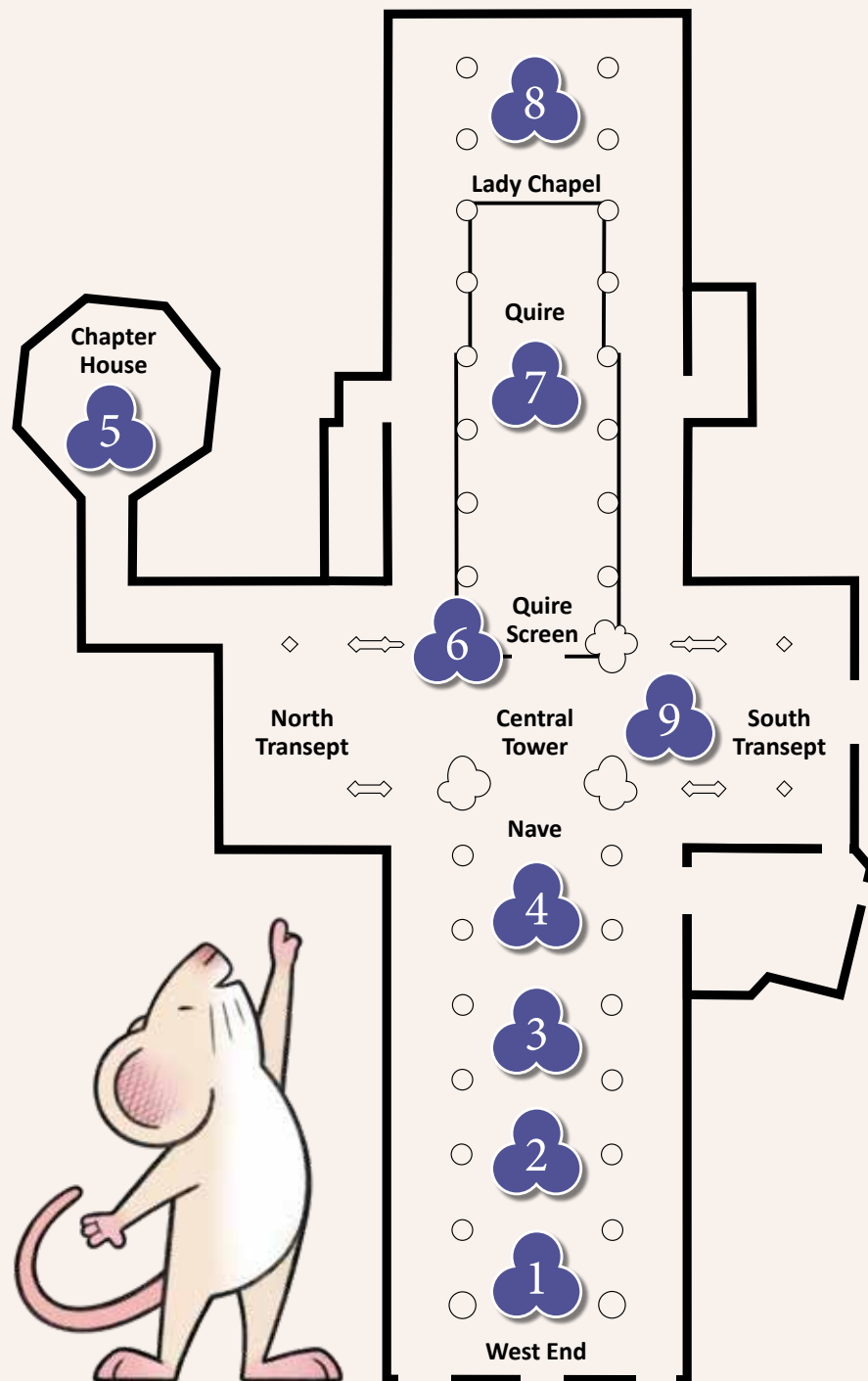
**Use this guide with
your group to introduce and
explain the symbols around
York Minster. The historical and
religious knowledge, combined
with suggested questions,
will enable you to support
a fascinating trail
of enquiry.**

In 71 AD there was a Roman settlement on this site, and some of these remains can be seen in our Undercroft Museum. It was King Edwin of Northumbria, however, who built our first wooden, Anglo Saxon Minster in 627 AD. He had become a Christian after marrying Princess Ethelburga of Kent and he needed a church to house the font for his baptism. King Edwin and then King Oswald re-built the Church in stone, and it survived fires and Viking attacks until the Norman Conquest when it was eventually destroyed by fire. William the Conqueror sent a man called Thomas of Bayeux to become the Archbishop of York and in 1080 he built a huge Norman cathedral on this spot. This was finished around 1100 AD but was expanded and developed over the next two centuries. Around 1225 Archbishop Walter de Grey began to transform the Minster into the Gothic building you can see today (pointed arches, high ceilings, large windows) and the building was finally consecrated in 1472.

York Minster is a cathedral and a minster. The word minster goes back to Anglo-Saxon times and has now come to mean a large or important church. It is also a cathedral because it has the cathedra, the seat of the bishop, or archbishop in our case. There are two cathedra's in York Minster, one in the Nave and one in the Quire.

When the Minster was built it was believed that God was literally 'up there' in Heaven, and so the higher the building, the closer they could be to God. Similarly, with the Gothic style of building using pointed arches, buildings could be taller with larger windows that flooded the space with light. Many people in the medieval times associated light with the presence of God, and so the lighter the building, the more God's presence could be known.

A brief history of York Minster



1 St Peter's Statue

Turn and face the Great West Doors behind you and you will see the statue of St Peter to whom the Minster is dedicated. He was a fisherman who became the first follower of Jesus and led the Christian Church after Jesus died. Peter's key represents the key to heaven and is a symbol of the authority that Jesus gave to Peter. Keys can be found throughout the Minster in the stained-glass windows, heraldic shields and the Chapter House floor and ceiling for example. Do encourage your pupils to keep a look out for them on your tour.

Hiding in the robe of St Peter are small gold fish. The fish was used as an early Christian symbol when Christians were persecuted by the Romans. Christians sometimes drew a simple fish in the dust to identify themselves as a Christian to any other Christians around. The fish also relates back to Peter's first occupation. The other symbol on his robe is the Chi-Rho, the first two Greek letters in the word 'Christ'.



The Semaphore Saints Additional Activity

Walk forward a few paces and then turn round. Draw attention to the statues along the west doors called the Semaphore Saints. They spell out 'Christ is here' in semaphore - a way of communicating using arm positions and flags. They were made in 2004 by an artist called Terence Hammill. The fact they are headless is interesting and a good talking point. It might be to show that the message is more important than the messenger. It might also be a reminder of the Reformation when statues of saints were destroyed or their heads were removed, and there are some such statues high up in the Nave. You will find a key to the semaphore below the statues.

Suggested Questions

- Why are the statues headless?
- How modern/old do they look?
- Do they like them?
- Why do you think Terence Hammill chose the message 'Christ is here'?
- What would you have made the statues say if you were Terence?

2 The Dragon

If you walk forward to the second big pillar and look up, you will see the red and gold dragon. Dragons sometimes represent evil and medieval knights were thought to fight dragons. The Minster has a stone carving of a knight high up opposite the dragon which could well be St George. There is also an image of St George killing the dragon in the window to the far left of the South doors.

Dragons were also thought to guard treasure. There is a hole in the neck of the dragon that might have had a chain or rope hanging down so that the dragon could move up and down like a lever. This dragon might have been used to raise the lid of an ornate box called a reliquary containing relics of the saints for example on a Saint's Day. But we don't actually know for sure!

On your journey through the Minster, pupils can see how many dragons they can spot and think about whether they are an evil dragon or a guardian dragon. There are dragon heads on the lights as you enter the vestibule to the Chapter House. You will also see Mary standing on a dragon at the entrance to the Chapter House and iron-work dragons on the Chapter House doors. There is also a dragon on the tomb of Walter de Grey in the South Transept.



Suggested Questions

- What do you think this dragon is for?
- What might dragons represent?
- Why might dragons represent evil?
- Who was St George?
- Why might it have been painted red and gold?

3 The Pilgrim Window

To the left of the dragon in the north aisle there is the Pilgrim Window (the fifth large window on the left). You can see St Peter standing in the middle wearing a green robe and holding his key. Pilgrims can also be seen on either side with their horses. Pilgrimage was important in medieval times; it was a spiritual journey to the shrine of a saint or to a holy place. Pilgrims used to come to the Minster to see the huge shrine of St William of York which would have been situated at the top of the Nave. The tomb of St William is now in the crypt.



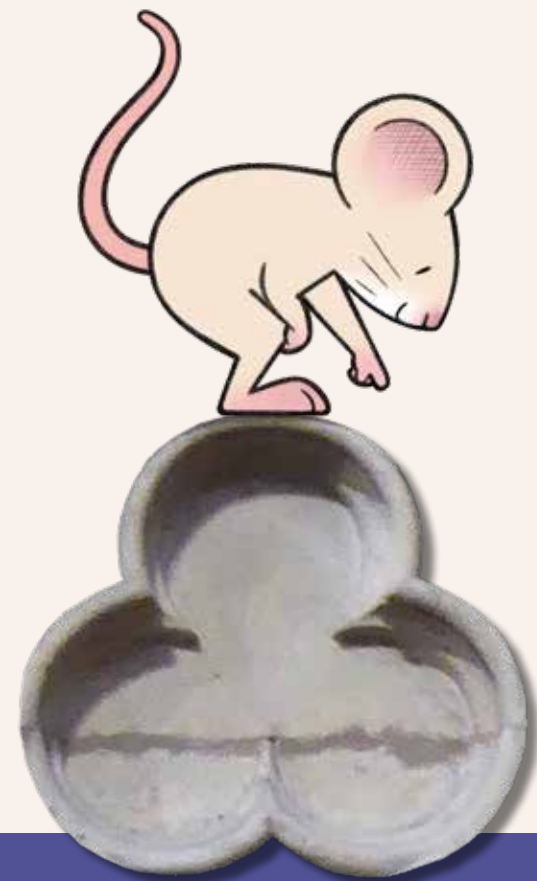
Pupils can find these animals in the borders of the window. There are many monkeys acting as humans. One is mimicking a doctor by holding up a urine flask. Medieval doctors were thought to diagnose illness in this way, so maybe the designer of the window is making fun of them because only God was the true doctor. It was also believed that praying at the shrine of St William could heal you rather than trusting the doctors of the time. We don't know for sure what these images represent but they would have had a meaning to the medieval viewer. There were also monkeys around at the time the window was created because York was a port.

Suggested Questions

- Which character in the window is St Peter? How do you know?
- Can you remember what the keys represent?
- What is a pilgrim? Can you see the pilgrims?
- Can you find the animals?
- Why do you think there are animals in the window?
- Which is your favourite?

Trefoils

Trefoils are carvings or shapes with three overlapping circles. They are a feature of Gothic architecture and you will see them all over the Minster. The number three is very important in Christianity and often represents the Holy Trinity, the Christian belief that God is made up of three equal parts, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. If there are four circle shapes, they are called a quatrefoil. Pupils can count trefoils here and draw one in their box and you can point out the variety of trefoils on the wall in front of them. As you continue your journey around the Minster, pupils can look out for trefoils and other similar shapes.



Suggested Questions

- What does Trinity mean?
- What other words can you think of with tri in that link to the number three?
- How many trefoils can you spot around you?
- What might a similar shape with four circles be called?

4 The Nave

Make your way back to the centre of the Nave and face east. Pupils can use the images and clues to find these three items of church furniture and learn what they symbolise.

On your right is the lectern, the stand that holds the Bible on a carved eagle. The eagle is associated with St John the Evangelist and represents sending the words of God throughout the world. If you look carefully, you can find a small carved mouse at the bottom of the lectern steps on the left. This was carved by Robert Thompson, a man famous for carving mice in church furniture. There are also mice on some of the wooden seats at the back of the Lady Chapel.



On your left, the pulpit is a raised platform where the priest speaks God's message to the congregation. The word pulpit means platform and the congregation symbolically look up to hear the word of God being preached. The image here is from one of the legs of the pulpit.



Walk up the aisle on your left towards the central crossing and you will find the cathedra on your left. This is the large wooden throne containing the seat of the bishop or in York Minster, the seat of the archbishop. The cathedra is what makes York Minster a cathedral as well as a minster. The throne has wheels and can be moved into different positions. This image can be found in the fabric at the top of the throne.



The symbol for pupils to find and draw here is the cross on top of the cathedra representing the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Suggested Questions

- How is the Minster similar or different to other churches you have been to?
- Why is the pulpit so high up?
- What might the eagle represent?
- What does the cathedra say about the status of the archbishop?

5 Chapter House

The corridor to the Chapter House is called the Vestibule. As pupils walk through here you can point out the green men/foliate faces carved in circles on the walls. These possibly represent new life or rebirth and there are over 60 in the Minster, many of which are found here or in the Chapter House. You can see some on the bottom of the 'pendants', the carvings that hang down around the edge of the Chapter House.

The Chapter House is where the business meetings of the cathedral would take place with the Dean, who is responsible for running the cathedral and his Chapter, or committee of priests. It is still used on occasions today. The building is octagonal and you can ask pupils to identify this as well as many of the other mathematical shapes all around them.

The distance from the floor to the ceiling is around 20m and is the same height again from the ceiling to the top of the roof. The middle ceiling boss is the Lamb of God and is one of the images seen around the Minster. Jesus was called 'The Lamb of God' by St John the Evangelist and the lamb was an early symbol used to represent Jesus before he was depicted in human form.

You can find this floor tile with St Peter's keys at the centre of the Chapter House and more keys can be found on the floor and on the ceiling. Pupils can draw the keys in their box.



There are many stone carvings of people and animals around the edge of the room. You will see birds, bishops, queens, pigs and many more intriguing characters. You can encourage your group to hunt for the funniest or strangest creatures they can find.

Suggested Questions

- What words could you use to describe this space?
- What shape is this room? What other mathematical shapes can you see all around you?
- Can you find keys on the floor and on the ceiling?
- What animal is on the middle roof boss?
- What animal carvings can you find?

6 Quire Screen

The Quire Screen separates the Nave from the Quire. It is also called a 'pulpitum' which means platform. Ours is decorated with the kings who were on the throne during the time the Minster was built. From the left of the screen are William the Conqueror, William Rufus, Henry I, Stephen, Henry II, Richard I, John. On the right are Henry III, Edward I, Edward II, Edward III, Richard, Henry IV, Henry V, Henry VI. Their names and the length of time they reigned are inscribed at their feet. If you introduce the first inscriptions to your pupils, you can then encourage them to read the rest.

King Stephen on the left of the screen was widely regarded as a usurper of the throne from Matilda and his lack of a long robe might indicate disrespect from the stone masons. The Henry VI statue on the far right is different to all the others as it was created some centuries later. The original one was removed after Henry VI's death when he was becoming a 'cult' figure and venerated as a saint. A new statue was later carved in a different style and replaced back on the screen in 1810.

In the gold border at the feet of the kings you can see a variety of creatures. There is a cat and mouse on the right of the screen under the third king from the right. Above the kings there are also many angels playing instruments. You can even see an angel playing bagpipes, at the top of the screen, eighth angel from the left. Pupils can choose an angel to sketch in their box.



Suggested questions

- What creatures can you find in the gold borders?
- Which king might be an odd one out?
- Which kings are similar to or different from the others?
- How many different types of angels are there?
- What instruments can you see?

7 The Quire

The Quire is where the choir sing and some of the services take place. Members of the public could attend services here from the Reformation period onwards (services didn't occur in the Nave until the mid-19th century).

This is a good place to consolidate pupil knowledge by asking them what they can remember about the lectern, pulpit and cathedra because they can all be found here. The pulpit is on the left facing east and the cathedra is on the right. The brass lectern survived a big fire in 1829, but all the carvings were destroyed along with the organ and music manuscripts. What you can see today dates from after 1829.

Pupils can also identify the altar table where the priest blesses the bread and wine for the Communion service to remember when Jesus died. The colour of the altar cloth represents the time of the church year. If it is green, it is ordinary time, if it is blue or purple, it might be Lent. If it was red or gold, it might be Easter or another important festival.

The organ pipes are worth pointing out. York Minster has over 5,000 pipes; some on the Quire Screen where the organ is situated, others around the sides of the Quire.

All around the Minster you will see heraldic shields. These generally represent important people in the history of the Church or those who have helped with building or restoring the Minster. The shield with yellow diamonds represents St William of York. You will also see St Peter's keys and St Paul has two crossed swords. Pupils can choose their favourite shield and draw it in the box.



Suggested Questions

- What can you see?
- What do you recognise here that you have seen in the Nave?
- Which shields do you like?
- Can you find a shield of St Peter?
- What can you see in the roof bosses above you?

8 Great East Window

This area is called The Lady Chapel and is dedicated to Mary, the mother of Jesus and some services take place here. The Great East Window is one of the marvels of the Minster. It was created in 1405 and took three years to complete and the artist was a man from Coventry called John Thornton. It represents the beginning and end of all time. It shows God at the top, surrounded by the company of Heaven, followed by the creation story from the first book of the Bible (Genesis). The two large sections lower down depict stories from the last book of the Bible, Revelation (or the Apocalypse).

This window has recently been restored and the images can be seen clearly. Pupils can spot this red dragon with the 7 headed beast and can think about whether it is an evil dragon or a guardian. They can also find angels and the figure of Christ often identified by a halo. There are also fish, birds, trees, fruit and Adam and Eve in the square panels towards the top of the window.



Suggested Questions

- What can you see in the window?
- Can you see some fish and birds towards the top?
- Can you spot the dragon lower down on the left?
- What colours are mostly used in the window?
- Can you see fruit growing on a tree?

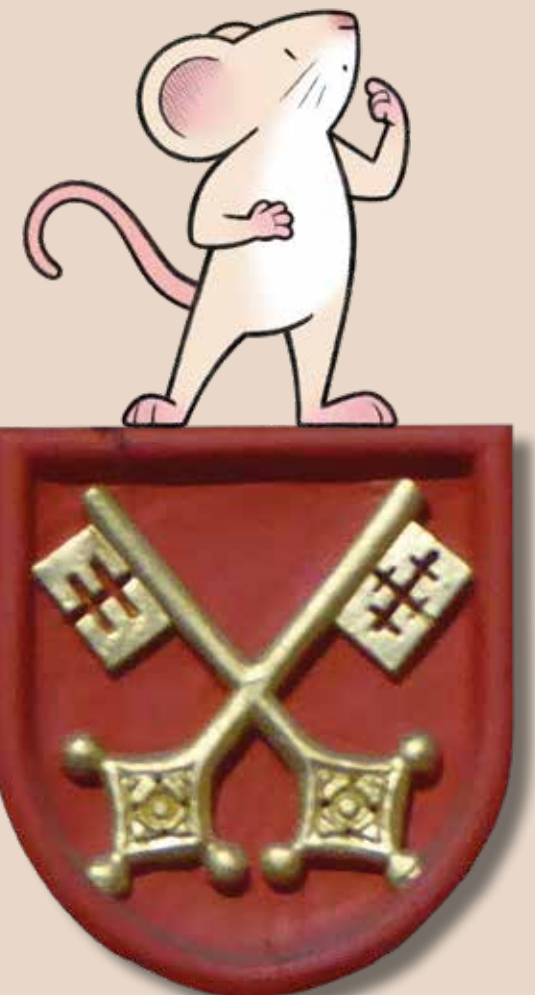
9 South Transept

This shield with St Peter's keys can be seen on the right-hand wall of the South Transept as you face the doors, below a cross. Pupils have already drawn the cross symbol and so this is a good opportunity for them to learn that a cross with Christ on it is called a crucifix.

The letters at the foot of the cross, IHS represent the name of Jesus in Latin as well as a phrase that means Jesus, Saviour of Humans (Iesus Hominum Salvator).

The letters INRI at the top of the cross are the Latin initials for 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews' (Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum) and this was written by the Romans and placed at the top of the cross of Jesus when he was crucified.

At this final stop, pupils have the opportunity of consolidating their knowledge of symbols. They can recap what the symbols mean and then select the ones they have collected to design a York Minster floor tile. They can focus on the symbols they think have been the most important in their journey through the Minster.



Discover More!

Book a facilitated session with our Learning Team to get more out of your visit to York Minster. Two-hour visits are led by expert guides and pupils will explore the historical, spiritual and architectural wonders of York Minster as they discover its unique story. Thought-provoking workshops will engage pupils in creativity, discussion and debate.

For more information
and to book a workshop,
scan the QR code below.



We hope your group have enjoyed learning more about the symbols and history of the Minster and that they will be able to apply their knowledge to other places they might visit. We look forward to welcoming you back in the future.

