***The 15th Century***

***We have made it to the century that will be our focus for the Creative Arts Festival. In Italy the Renaissance was well under way and educated people were looking back to the Middle Ages. And in Britain? Well, the medieval period lasted a little longer here!***

**Faith and Fears – the 15th century**

Despite the Wars of the Roses, this was an age of church building and expanding. In York the Minster nave was completed in 1440, and York was proud to have the largest gothic cathedral north of the Alps. Pilgrims travelled to York Minster to visit the shrine of St William, and stayed in the city. The church was very important in York. By 1500 one in every three people in York was a church person, such as a monk, or a nun, or a friar, or a priest.

# https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/93/The_15th_Century_Church_of_St_Lawrence_Holwell_-_geograph.org.uk_-_380086.jpg The 15th Century Church of St Lawrence Holwell

The Roman Catholic church taught people that they needed the church to access heaven. Religion was taken very seriously and the church was at the centre of life. People with money gave it to the church and spent money on good works in order to improve their chances of eternal life. In York’s large Merchant Adventurers’ Hall we can still see the signs of this in the large ground floor hospitium with its adjoining chapel.

There are some interesting records from the York church courts. For example, a woman called Margery Spuret claimed to be married to a man called Thomas de Hornby, who denied the marriage. In those days to be married all you had to do was promise yourselves to each other in front of witnesses for the marriage to be legal. Poor old Margery and her family tried to prove that Thomas had married her, but the church courts were not convinced, and he had men from his trade who would speak up for him.

Everyone did not believe the same thing. The Lollards were a group who followed John Wycliffe, an Oxford philosopher and theologian whose unorthodox religious and social doctrines challenged the Roman Catholic church.

**Power and conflict – the 15th century**

Early in the century England was winning in what was to become the 100 Years’ War with France. After succeeding to the throne in 1413, Henry V decided to reunite the kingdom by restarting the wars with France. He claimed the French throne and invaded. After a long siege of Harfleur in Normandy, Henry marched on, but was on the retreat when his small and ill army was brought to battle by the French army. Today academics think that the French army was not as large as once thought. Nevertheless, the English victory at Agincourt was not expected. Henry V’s victory encouraged him to push his campaigning further. He took advantage of the French king’s madness, and the weakness this brought to France. The French king was forced to disinherit his own son, and make Henry V his heir. Henry then married the king’s daughter, Catherine, and they had a small son, called Henry. It is fair to say that Henry V’s reputation has been helped by dying young and having Shakespeare write a play about him at the end of the 1500s.

However, England had overstretched itself. The lands Henry had gained were lost, baby Henry VI was king of France only in name, and once he became an adult, England entered a period of civil war, known as the Wars of the Roses. The Wars of the Roses can be seen as three sets of wars. The first between 1455-1461 was a fight between nobles about who should be Lord Protector of England, when it became clear that Henry VI was incapable. From 1469-71 the Yorkist king Edward IV was overthrown and Henry VII restored by Edward’s own brother and the ambitious Earl of Warwick. When King Edward IV won his throne back he made sure that there was no opposition, including the murder of the hapless King Henry VI in the Tower of London. All seemed to have settled and the king had two sons, but he died young in 1483 and in a few months his brother Richard usurped the throne from his nephew, 12-year old Edward V. Within two years Richard himself was killed at the Battle of Bosworth by Henry Tudor. He had very little claim to the throne, and it was not until 1499 that his position as King Henry VII was more secure.

**Home and health – the 15th century**

While the poorest people continued to live in houses that people in the 12th century would have found familiar, a person did not have to be very, very rich to have more comfort. Barley Hall in York is an example of a town house that was rented from a priory by a merchant and his family. William Snawsell was a goldsmith who became Lord Mayor of York.

***Barley Hall***

Nobles lived in even more luxury, of course. King Edward IV extended Windsor Castle and his brother, Richard, made his home both at Sheriff Hutton and Middleham castles in Yorkshire. Richard was the leading noble of the North. Meanwhile, the abbot of St Mary’s abbey lived in what is now King’s Manor.

About 1% of the population were recent migrants to England. Some of them did very well. For example, Henry Wyman who seems to have been born in Hamburg or Gdansk, was a Hanse merchant who became a naturalised Englishman and Lord Mayor of York three times. You could call him York’s very own Dick Whittington!

The largest hospital in York was run by monks and was St Leonard’s, whose remains are still under the theatre. Hospitals in those days were not able to treat people with infectious diseases, or to perform major operations, but they did care for the poor and old and infirm. A vital service that was to be lost when the Reformation happened at the start of the 16th century.



**The King’s Manor, York – formerly the house of the abbot of St Mary’s**

**Art and Architecture – the 15th century**

World renowned art from this period is to be found in York. The church of All Saints North Street has precious stained glass remaining from the 15th century. The skills of the medieval glassmakers of York were greater than their Victorian counterparts 400 years later. York is one of two great centres of medieval stained glass in the world.

**Medieval glass from All Saints North Street, York**

However, while in York the medieval styles were at their height, in Italy perspective in art was developed by Masaccio.



**Fresco from the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence**



Also in Italy, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and other great masters were taking art and architecture to new heights.

**Pieta, Michelangelo**

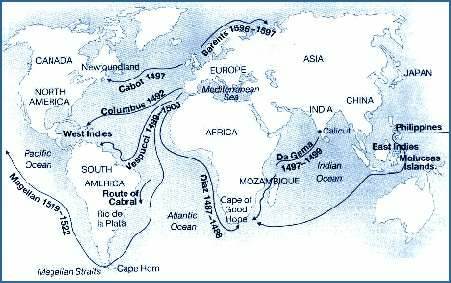
Meanwhile, in England the gothic was still in vogue, but a specific English style developed.

**English gothic in the cloister at Gloucester Cathedral**



**The 15th century - news and views**

Europe was on the move. The first voyages of exploration in more modern times from this continent were taking place and were to shake the world. Portuguese explorers went down Africa and east. In 1492 a Genoese sailor, funded by the monarchs of Spain, thought he had found a route west to India. Instead, Christopher Columbus had discovered what was for Europeans a ‘New World’.



**Wider world**

Of course that is a very European perspective. There was nothing new about the New World for the people who already lived there. What they did experience was exposure to new diseases for which they had no resistance, and a mostly hostile people convinced that they were superior and that their God gave them the right of conquest.

The 15th century income of the Crown of England was worth just one third that of the city of Venice. By the end of the century, England had declined in power relative to France and the Habsburg Empire. At the same time, the discovery sea routes east and of the ‘New World’ was to spell the end of the power and wealth of Venice herself. China etc….



**Map of Ming dynasty China from this period**

**Medieval remains**

There are so many 15th century remains in York. As well as Barley Hall, the Merchant Adventurers’ Hall, large parts of the Minster and the glass in All Saints’ North Street, there are the Guildhall, the Red Tower, houses in the old streets and other guilds’ halls.



Further afield, there are so many churches and houses from the 15th century to be found across England. The picture is an example from Colchester.

We also have remains from the 15th century that are not buildings or other artefacts, including skeletons. For example, there are many wills, legal records and government documents that survive. We also have diaries and private letters. Some of the most famous are those of the Paston family. Through good luck their letters to each other were preserved and are now a very important source of information about the period.

