**Clifford's Tower:  
Massacre at York (1190)**

[](http://ddickerson.igc.org/cliffords-tower.jpg)

The site of Clifford's Tower, the keep of York's medieval castle, still bears witness to the most horrifying event in the history of English Jewry. On the night of 16 March 1190, the feast of *Shabbat ha-Gadol*, the small Jewish community of York was gathered together for protection inside the tower. Rather than perish at the hands of the violent mob that awaited them outside, many of the Jews took their own lives; others died in the flames they had lit, and those who finally surrendered were massacred and murdered.  
  
Understandably, this appalling event has become the most notorious example of antisemitism in medieval England. Yet, it was by no means an isolated incident, but rather the culmination of a tide of violent feeling which swept the country in the early part of 1190.

***Clifford's Tower and the Jews of Medieval York*** (English Heritage, 1995)

**Background**

**ORIGINS OF YORK'S JEWISH COMMUNITY**

According to English Heritage, by the 1170s there were two primary incentives for the establishment of a Jewish community in York:

. . . The first was the existence within the city of an important royal castle, which could be used in times of danger to protect the town's Jewish community. In the late twelfth century, York Castle consisted of the motte (mount) on which the present Clifford's Tower stands, and an outer bailey (courtyard) extending to the south. Instead of the present stone tower, the motte would have been surrounded by a strong timber tower or keep.  
  
A second and even more significant incentive was the emergence amongst the lords, gentry, and religious houses of Yorkshire of a need for financial credit. Jewish money-lenders were well equipped to satisfy this demand and the king himself had set a precedent by using their services from about 1164 onwards. Indeed, the Jews were to become a source of enormous wealth to the Crown -- not only as money-lenders but as the target of relentless taxation. (p. 1-2)

**THE CRUSADES**

*The New Jewish Encyclopedia* defines the Crusades as the:

. . . holy wars waged by the Christian countries of Europe for the purpose of recapturing Palestine from the Mohammedans. These wars started at the end of the 11th century and continued to the beginning of the 13th century. The specific object of these religious wars was to free the sepulcher of Jesus, sacred to Christians, from the hands of the Moslem "unbelievers." There were four such major Crusades in the years 1096, 1146, 1187, and 1203. . . . (p. 101)

The *Encyclopedia* notes that the Crusades were a "bitter and prolonged ordeal" for the Jews of Europe; it was in this context that the massacre at York occurred in 1190:

. . . The ignorant mobs were incited by the leaders of the Crusades to pillage and massacre whole Jewish communities. The cry was: "Before attempting to revenge ourselves upon the Moslem unbelievers, let us first revenge ourselves upon the 'killers of Christ' living in our midst!" Thousands of Jews perished, and entire Jewish communities were wiped out. To this day, the Jewish liturgy contains prayers commemorating the martyrs of that dreadful period. (p. 101)

**CORONATION OF KING RICHARD I**

After the death of Henry II, a protector of England's Jews, in July 1189, Henry II's oldest son, Richard I (*Coeur-de-lion*, 1189-1199), was crowned at Westminster:

. . . When a Jewish deputation appeared at Westminster Abbey with rich gifts on behalf of all the communities in the realm, they were refused admission. The humiliated representatives of Jewry were hooted by the palace guards; the mob without proceeded to throw stones at them. A false rumor spread that the king had ordered the destruction of the Jews. Unable to penetrate into their strongly fortified stone houses, the populace set fire to the straw roofs of the dwellings. Many who essayed to escaped were ruthlessly butchered; others, among them Jacob of Orleans, slew themselves when the alternative was baptism. A few Jews, however, saved themselves by this alternative; one of these [was] the rich Benedict of York . . . . The riot lasted twenty-four hours; the chief justice and some noblemen, whom the king sent to quell the disorder, were forced to withdraw. The king, on learning what had happened, had three of the participants hanged. He let it be understood that the Jews must not be molested and had proclamation made to that effect throughout England and his French dominions. Scarcely, however, had Richard crossed the Channel to join Philip Augustus in the Crusade, when riots broke out afresh; so at Lynn, ostensibly because the Jews attacked a baptized coreligionist who had taken refuge in a church; also at Norwich; at Stamford; at Bury St. Edmunds (1190). The Jews of Lincoln saved themselves betimes by seeking refuge in the royal castle. . . . (Margolis and Marx, pp. 386-387)

(It should be noted that Benedict of York recanted his Christianity before the king the next day; he later died of his wounds in Northampton. Because he was, by law, neither Jew nor Christian, he could not be buried in the Jewish or the Christian cemetery.)

**The Massacre (March 1190)**

In March 1190, a band of men broke into the house of the late Benedict of York, killing his widow and children, setting the house on fire, and carrying away Benedict's treasure (English Heritage, p. 3):

. . . Crusaders preparing to follow their king against the Saracens, burgesses envious of Jewish wealth, barons indebted to the Jews, the fanatical clergy, all conspired to exterminate the Jews. Several dwellings were set on fire [in addition to Benedict's house] . . . . The alarmed Jews, with their leader Joseph [Josce of York], sought shelter in the royal castle. One day the warden happened to be gone; the Jews were apprehensive lest he might hand them over to the besieging mob, and so they denied him admission. The warden called in the aid of the sheriff of the country; Richard Malebys, a noble deeply in debt to the Jews, commanded the siege. The rage of the mob was kept alive by the exhortations of a monk, who celebrated mass every morning in his white robes in front of the tower. A stone falling from the battlements killed the monk; his death infuriated the mob to a still higher degree.  
  
The hapless Jews were short of rations; surrender spelled baptism or death by torture. In obedience to the exhortations of their religious leader, Yom Tob of Joigny, they chose to lay hands on themselves. . . . When, at daybreak, the [burning] citadel was captured, those who were still alive were put to death. . . . The mob then returned to the [cathedral](http://ddickerson.igc.org/york-cathedral.jpg) where the records of debts due to Jews were in safe-keeping. They compelled the guardians to turn these over to them to be burned then and there in the sanctuary. This done, the fury of the mob was spent, and the city was restored to its usual order and quiet. Similarly the mobs raged elsewhere. . . .  
  
It was not to the interest of the Crown that barons and burgesses should rid themselves of payments of moneys owing to the Jews by such forcible measures. On his return to England, Richard, toward whose ransom the Jews of England were made to contribute three times as much as the whole city of London, introduced a system of registering in duplicate all debts held by Jews. Thus, the taxes due to the king were safeguarded, the profit accruing to the Crown as a silent partner in all usurious transactions. Under Richard's successors, the Jews continued to be subjected to all kinds of taxes, in the form of "tallages" on goods, chattels, and debts, of gifts, offerings, ransoms, compositions, licenses, and fines. Payment was exacted through imprisonment, confiscation of property, the seizing of women and children, and even gouging out the eyes and other cruel methods. John Lackland extorted from the Jews sixty-six thousand marks (1210). Abraham of Bristol, who refused to pay his quota of ten thousand marks, had, by the order of the king, seven of this teeth extracted, one a day, till he paid the levied amount. . . . (Margolis and Marx, pp. 387-388)

**Remembering the Massacre**

Professor R.B. Dobson states that:

The massacre of March 1190 has not been forgotten over the centuries. Even at the time it became the subject of several impressive elegies by Hebrew authors, notably Ephraim of Bonn and Joseph of Chartres. They commemorate the refusal of the York Jews to forsake their religion and their subsequent martyrdom. . . .  
  
The timber keep of York Castle was badly damaged in the massacre. Between 1190 and 1194, it was repaired at great expense and the mound was raised to its present height. The stone tower you see today was built in the mid-thirteenth century, but during an excavation in 1902-03 a number of charred timbers were found some 12 feet (3.7m) below the surface of the mound. This may be the most tangible reminder of the flames lit by the York Jews in their darkest hour, and is perhaps the most enduring of all memorials to the tragic night of 16 March 1190. (English Heritage, pp. 7-8)

[](http://ddickerson.igc.org/york-tablet.jpg)  
  
On the night of Friday 16 March 1190 some  
150 Jews and Jewesses of York having sought  
protection in the Royal Castle on this site  
from a mob incited by Richard Malebisse  
and others chose to die at each other's  
hands rather than renounce their faith.  
  
**ISAIAH XLII 12**

**YOUR TASK: Anti-semitism has no place in this country. However it has led in the past to the murder of 150 men, women and children. Imagine you are one of these Jews. Write a short piece describing your experience and your decision.**