

**Travel: York**

# Full steam ahead to city of memories

**Jenny Woolf returns with son Sid to hotspots old and new in this historic city where you can see famous trains and Vikings**

**S**id hadn't been back to York for half a lifetime. Actually, that's just seven years, because he's only 14 now. But he'd loved everything in 2008 so much that we wondered if he would still like it now.

York is just over two hours from London by train, and, appropriately enough, one of the city's highlights is the National Railway Museum, alongside York station.

Among its most famous locomotives are an original Japanese Bullet Train, the newly restored Flying Scotsman and the fabulous deco-styled "Mallard" locomotive, a streamlined turquoise monster which won, and still holds, the world steam train speed record of 128 mph.

In 2008, "Mallard" had been a highlight for Sid, but this time he was also fascinated by the Warehouse, which contains hundreds of items from the museum's reserve stock.

Here, stained-glass from lost Victorian waiting rooms, platform signs from long-abandoned halts, models of Sealink ferries and early Channel Tunnel projects and more are crammed together like a giant's box of glorious railway jumble.

The museum has a couple of good cafes, including one on a platform flanked with royal trains, but this time we took the set afternoon tea in the recently opened Countess of York. It's a vintage carriage resembling a corner of a grand

hotel, with uniformed waitresses, leaf tea in glittering silver pots, and tiered cake stands of decorative cakes. Although everything seemed rather dinky for a 14-year-old's appetite, the experience brought out Sid's inner young fogey.

"I love this," he cried, unfolding his white linen napkin and starting to eat his way steadily through the cucumber sandwiches.

The verdict? Five stars to the NRM, and an extra star to the Countess of York. In 2008, Sid was too young to appreciate York Minster, but this time he wanted to see it, and climb the 275 spiral steps to the tower, too.

First, we spent half an hour in the undercroft display, which tells the Minster's history from pre-Roman times up to the underpinning which saved the main tower from collapse in the 1960s.

Our favourite exhibit was probably the huge Viking drinking-horn created from an elephant tusk, if only because we had no idea the Vikings even knew about elephants. The stairway up the tower was, like Hogwarts' Divination Staircase, a seemingly endless spiral upwards as the wind buffeted the walls and roared like a distant dragon.

But it was all worth it at the top, with clouds scudded overhead and a low winter sun illuminating the surrounding city out to the countryside beyond.

York is an all-weather destination, which was probably

just as well since this was the last sunshine we'd see on this trip. As night fell, we set out to find a branch of Sid's favourite restaurant – Café Rouge.

It was dark and drizzling as we crossed the bridge over the Ouse, and Sid noticed the river was starting to spill into an adjoining road.

But the glittering light reflections looked harmlessly pretty, and we soon forgot about it in Café Rouge's cheerful surroundings as Sid adventurously downed a bowl of snails to complement his usual steak, frites and garlic bread, and declared he'd had a perfect first day.

Next day, it was wetter. Much wetter. We headed for Jorvik, which explains about Viking York.

Much of the attraction is below ground level, with archaeological remains and costumed guides explaining about everyday Viking life.

We especially liked learning how to mint coins by hand and discovering how the ailments and lifestyles of the long-dead could be revealed by their bones.

We also enjoyed the slightly hokey time-travel "ride through Viking York" which made it clear just how uncomfortable life had



■ Cakes and treats at Countess of York

Museum's quirky Signalbox Theatre.

This is a thousand-seat auditorium with a (disused) railway line running through the middle. It can be a challenge for directors but for the panto it was cleverly transformed into everything from a department store to a Spanish island, Africa and an ocean.

We could only pop in briefly to the Castle Museum, and entirely missed the Museum Gardens, where the young Sid had enjoyed playing amongst the historic ruins.

He was a bit old to play in ruins now, though, and also, it was too wet, since by our last day the rain had well and truly settled in.

Later, we found that York had flooded, although most of the tourist areas were, thankfully, not affected.

We were sorry to get onto the train back to London, but as we rolled through the dark, I asked Sid if he still liked York just as much as he had before.

The answer was a definite yes. It had been a great trip from start to finish, he said. In fact, he'd be up for giving it another go when he hits 21.

■ For more information about short breaks in York, go to [visitYork.org](http://visitYork.org). Jenny Woolf and her family travelled courtesy of Virgin East Coast Trains.

