

## ***When the Romans Got Shafted***

### **A lift-pit excavation behind 3, Little Stonegate, York, 1998-99**

Between October 1998 and February 1999 a small team from York Archaeological Trust (YAT) excavated the site of a large lift shaft for the new shopping development between Davygate and Little Stonegate. The results support the findings of earlier excavations in Blake Street from 1975-6 (AY 3/4), as well as expanding current theories on the later modifications, renovations and rebuilds to the original 2nd century barrack blocks.

A single large rectangular trench, 7.60m long and 5.00m wide, was initially excavated to 13.00m AOD directly beneath the cellar of a late 18th or early 19th century cottage situated behind the former Primitive Methodist Chapel on Little Stonegate. Recent excavations in the area (INTERIM 23/1) had proved that significant archaeological deposits survived, dateable from the Roman period through to the post-medieval. A reduced area, measuring 5.60m long and 3.80m wide, was then partially excavated before the lift shaft proper was sunk to a specified depth limit of 11.90m AOD. Archaeological deposits were located directly below the cellar floor from as high as 13.38m AOD. These were complex, well stratified and mainly dated from the 1st to the 5th century AD, with several later intrusions dateable from the 9th century onwards. The main findings for each period are described below.

#### ***The prehistoric period (up to c.71 AD)***

The earliest evidence for settlement included a linear ditch or gully aligned northeast to southwest, and a stake-hole fence line orientated NNW to SSE. These may all be of late Iron Age date and if so, they are the first excavated prehistoric features within the area enclosed by the Roman legionary fortress. They probably represent land boundaries or livestock enclosures, which may mean that the area was exploited agriculturally prior to Roman occupation. These were sealed by a thick layer of turf, suggesting that the fields and enclosures were deserted before the Roman legions reached York.

#### ***The first Roman timber barracks (c.70 AD to c.100 AD)***

Two slots aligned southwest to northeast and northwest to southeast had been dug through the Iron Age turf, and formed the foundations for a timber barrack block. The interior of this was believed to have been situated to the east of the foundations. The barracks soon went out of use and were demolished with the timber foundations removed. A thick levelling dump then backfilled the slots and raised the ground surface. This may have created a large open area within the fortress, such as a parade ground, compound or yard. This new surface suffered subsidence in the area of the Iron Age ditch, and was patched. A shallow scoop or pit was excavated to the north for the disposal of rubbish or cess. The patching produced an Iron-Age 'stater' coin, the first to be found by YAT in York.

### ***The second Roman timber barrack block (c.100 AD to c.160 AD)***

A gravel surface was laid down, part of which was consolidated to form a NNE to SSW aligned roadway. Wear and tear of the road surface and further subsidence resulted in more patching, trampling and accumulation deposits being laid down in the south-west corner. Post-dating the road were two new foundation slots for a second timber barrack block. These were both aligned northwest to southeast and contained evidence for post and stake-holes. Two possible floor deposits were located to the northeast of the larger slot. As at the Blake Street excavations, the buildings had probably gone out of use by c.120AD. They were then dismantled but the slots were not completely backfilled until c.160AD, when the first stone barracks were constructed.

### ***The first Roman stone barrack block (c.160AD to c.190 AD)***

A wall of Ashlar limestone on a northeast to southwest alignment containing a doorway was then constructed on a deep, solid foundation of rammed clay, cobbles and limestone fragments. This formed the western wall of a stone barrack block, which is associated with an alignment suggested by Peter Wenham after excavations in Davygate in 1962. The wall was situated directly west of Wenham's block D. During construction a large mortar-mixing pit was excavated east of the wall and several levelling deposits were laid down. A post-hole, possibly part of a scaffolding rig built to complete the upper part of the building, was then inserted. This was then dismantled and burnt nearby; a thick layer of charcoal covered the internal area of the barrack and spreading through the doorway. The pit and the post-hole were then backfilled and the interior of

the new barracks levelled to form an internal surface. To the west of the barrack wall, in the exterior area, two post-holes were dug as part of a veranda. The barrack was then occupied for a short period of time before an internal ashlar partition wall, orientated northwest to southeast, was built on similar foundations to the original wall. Internal clay floors were then laid down. The external veranda was probably dismantled at this point and a long series of exterior surfaces then built up. The internal area appeared to have been kept scrupulously clean and level during this time.

### ***Further internal modifications (c.190 AD to 210AD)***

The external area was then blocked with a fence or gate, and a pit dug through its surfaces. A slot for a timber doorframe was then inserted, but it was soon dismantled, trampling deposits and a clay path being laid down. Clusters of stake-holes may suggest that the interior was roughly subdivided before a further clay path was laid and a post-built doorframe was constructed. In the exterior area a clearance cut was dug north of the doorway before the insertion of a foundation trench and post-holes for a northwest to southeast internal timber partition wall. This ran parallel with the earlier stone partition wall and formed a c.1m wide corridor within the barrack block. A short time later the partition was dismantled before a long sequence of solid, metalled paths were laid through the doorway on the line of the former corridor. This is unusual, as metalled surfaces are normally associated with the exterior of buildings in the Roman period, forming paths or roadways. There is no evidence that the barrack block had been demolished at this point and it is suggested that the area was used for stabling. A stratified sequence of successive post-pads and post-holes was then inserted internally north of the metalled path. These held timber uprights for a roof or partition walls, possibly forming stalls. Once these went out of use a clay floor was laid which may have been enclosed by a further slight timber partition wall.

### ***Rebuilding and the insertion of a latrine (c. 210AD to c.250 AD)***

This part of the barrack block was then burnt down and the original wall was partially demolished. It was reused as the footing for a timber wall and a new doorframe was inserted. The doorframe did not last long, the foundation slot for a new timber partition wall and doorpost being inserted through its backfill. This formed a new c.1m wide corridor southeast of the doorway, the stone partition wall remaining upstanding. To

the north of the timber partition wall a large flat-bottomed latrine pit was excavated, and partially lined with reused large sandstone roofing tiles to form a drain on its southern side. Deposits laid down to the north of it formed a raised area, which was capped with clay, creating a slick surface for waste to slip into the drain. The clay contained a socketed arrow or spearhead, A narrow trench close to the original wall and a lip for timber boards, which truncated it, held the wooden latrine structure: the later latrine was later partially infilled to make it smaller and the timber partition wall was dismantled. Within the latrine a series of use deposits built-up, including thin layers of hearth ash which were probably inserted to purify and soak up excess liquid. Subsequently the latrine was cleaned out and renovated before further use and ash deposits accumulated. To the west of the doorway a post-hole was dug for a new doorframe or porch.

#### ***Rebuilding (c.250 AD to c.280 AD)***

The area was then cleared to ground level, and hollows were filled in and levelled both externally and internally. A new main wall, aligned northeast to southwest, which contained a doorway in the same place, was then constructed directly on top of the original barrack block wall. This was wider, rougher and the latrine was partially infilled with foundation material to support it. Once construction was completed the rest of the latrine pit was infilled and the ground was levelled up to the west of the wall. Through the new doorway a path of sandstone fragments was then laid, aligned northwest to southeast, following the alignment of the earlier corridors. This contained a ballista ball, hinting that an armoury was located close by. The path and new wall were probably external, the wall flanking a possible courtyard or army compound. A linear feature interpreted as a drain, containing a stone kerb or channel in its base, then partially truncated the path and the former stone partition wall. The path was then replaced by a second rough surface through the doorway. The corner of the doorway appears to have been rebuilt, perhaps after frost shattering at this point. The hole was infilled and a flat thin limestone block was laid, perhaps forming a post-pad for a timber doorpost. The post-pad was supported externally by the insertion of a rubble and clay buttress.

#### ***The rebuild of the partition wall and further occupation (c.280 AD to c.320 AD)***

The drain was backfilled with clay, tile and bricks and the stone partition wall was rebuilt at this point. A third rough path was then laid which contained a bronze coin of Claudius II (268–70 AD). To the south of the new partition wall a clay floor was laid whereas to the north, in the area of the former latrine, a very rough linear footing aligned northeast to southwest was built. The latter was interpreted as either an enclosure for animals or a further latrine area. The path through the door fell out of use at this point as a large pit was dug through it directly west of the doorway. A second area in the doorway was dug out, perhaps to rob a threshold. West of the main wall several rough surfaces were laid down before a dump of demolition and domestic rubbish which contained a crucible stand, a coin of mid to late 3rd century date and a sherd of 4th century Crambeck ware mortarium.

#### ***Light occupation (early fourth century)***

In the northeast corner, the rough animal pen or latrine was demolished and the area sealed by a series of very thin occupation deposits. These may have acted as floors within a rough lean-to timber building in the courtyard or compound. A thin layer of charcoal, which sealed these deposits, suggested that the building contained a thatched roof that burnt down. The building was then replaced with a further rough timber framed building, six of its stake-holes being recovered. The dating of this period and those following is only approximate; although there was a considerable depth of stratigraphy uncovered it was not possible to accurately relate the evidence of the Roman pottery to the re-covered sequences.

#### ***Subdivision of the western area (mid fourth century)***

A rough wide wall, built in two stages, was inserted on the western side of the main wall which blocked the doorway. This probably formed a boundary wall or subdivision within a yard situated to the west of the main wall. It was thought that east of the main wall the area was then occupied, the main wall being utilised as the western wall of a new building, but no floor surfaces were located which can be associated with this period. A small circular pit was then excavated directly adjacent to its north side, perhaps to hold a barrel to collect water or for a feeding trough. It was later backfilled with demolition material mixed with domestic rubbish, which included a dog coprolite.

### ***Rebuilding of northeast to southwest wall. (late fourth century)***

The rough blocking material within the doorway was then removed and rebuilt in a much better fashion, perhaps with the insertion of a window. This may indicate the renewed importance of this wall, and the continued occupation of the building which incorporated it and included the area to the east of it.

### ***Final demolition and farmyard deposits (late fourth–early fifth century)***

All of the stone walls were partially demolished and the stone removed. A number of demolition deposits, which contained painted wall plaster, were laid down to the east of the main wall. This further consolidates the theory that this area was part of the interior of a building in the 4th century. A series of mixed demolition and manure deposits then built up over the whole area and through the doorway, perhaps indicating that the area was being used as an animal pen. To the east and west of the main wall, further mixed demolition and manure deposits built up before a rough linear dump of rubble was laid up to the doorway. This was interpreted as a late Roman path across the area. A thick homogenous deposit accumulated over the whole trench, interpreted as a further accumulation of manure, mixed with a small amount of earlier demolition material, cess and domestic rubbish. The area may have been part of a farmyard at this point, perhaps including livestock pens.

### ***Anglian and Anglo-Scandinavian (6th–11th centuries)***

The site would appear to have been abandoned until the late 9th or early 10th centuries when it was incorporated into backyards behind properties on Stonegate or Little Stonegate (Swinegate). Several pits dated as early as the 9th or early 10th century were located in the south-west corner of the excavation area, as well as a large garderobe. Its upper edge was consolidated with two lines of limestone blocks and it was backfilled with cess and manure, which contained Torksey and Stamford ware, dateable to the 10th or 11th century.

### ***Medieval to Post-Medieval (11th–18th centuries)***

The area continued to be used as a backyard area number of pits and dumps being dated to this period. In the early post Medieval period the area was crossed by two fence lines, perhaps erected to divide up the area into properties. A linear brick footing

later consolidated the line of one of the earlier fences. This may represent the foundation for a brick-built building or boundary wall of a property behind Little Stonegate.

### ***Late Post-Medieval and Modern***

A number of deep 18th century walls, the construction cut for a late 18th or early 19th century cellar for the 'Methodist Chapel Cottage', as well as the 19th century construction cut for the Primitive Methodist Chapel then disturbed the area as did a number of 20th century services in the Chapel.

The excavations have revealed important archaeological evidence within the Roman Legionary Fortress from the Iron Age to the present day. Most of the evidence was from the Roman period and this has been vital in developing a picture of life within the Fortress and how the area changed functionally and structurally throughout its occupation from the 1st to the 5th century AD. The Iron Age or native Romano-British evidence is also significant, suggesting settlement and agriculture in the area prior to the construction of the first timber Roman barrack blocks. The evidence for the Roman period has shown the functional changes of the area, buildings, and later structural modifications of this part of the Roman Legionary Fortress. This was a dynamic and constantly changing urban environment, due to the shifting functions, needs and tastes of the army personnel and later family units that occupied the fortress area into the 4th and possibly the 5th centuries AD. The Fortress appeared to have been abandoned from the late 5th century onwards until this part of the Roman fortress was reoccupied in the late 9th or early 10th century. The area was then a backyard behind properties fronting onto Stonegate and Little Stonegate (formerly Swinegate).

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