

Excavations at 32 – 34 Skeldergate, York, 1990

It is a rare occurrence for an archaeological unit to have an opportunity to re-excavate one of their own trenches. Even rarer is the chance for the same Field Officer to go back and shovel out the earth he put back eighteen months before. Such was the opportunity presented to the author in mid-January when he led a team of excavators on another evaluation of 32-4, Skeldergate. The previous visit in July 1989 ('Filling the Gap', INTERIM 14/2) had been designed to assess the survival of archaeological deposits less than 1-50m below the modern ground surface and had uncovered a hitherto-unsuspected cobbled water-lane running down to the river. Since then planning proposals had become clearer and the new brief involved investigation of archaeological deposits down to specified depths over a wider area.

Three trenches (Fig.1), each measuring 3 x 3m and c.2m deep, were positioned so that deposits could be examined near the river (Trench 1), below the cobbled water-lane (Trench 2) and near the street frontage (Trench 3). In addition, seven boreholes (4-10) were drilled to a depth of 9m below the ground surface and the soil cores recovered were recorded.

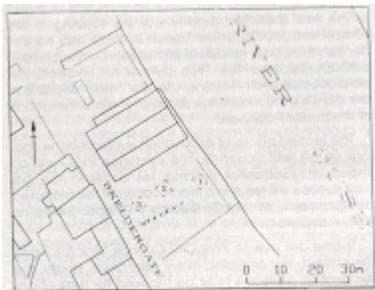
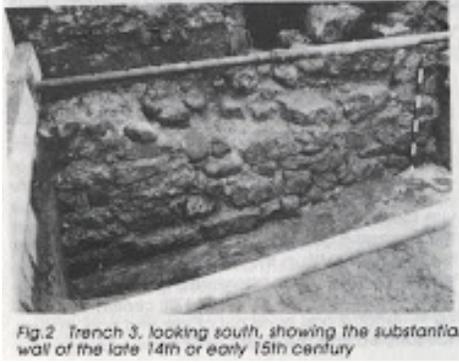


Fig. 1 31-4, Skeldergate: location plan of trenches

The earliest activity recorded during hand excavation was in Trench 3 where, in the late 14th or early 15th century, a substantial limestone and cobble wall (Fig.2) was constructed at right-angles to the street. Against this was piled 0-75m depth of sand and silt, which appeared to derive from the river and may have been the product of dredging. Upon this material was constructed a wall of limestones, cobbles and tiles, running parallel to the major wall noted above. A number of post-holes and a patch of mortar floor were associated with this wall and



showed that occupation took place in a building in the 15th century. These deposits had been badly disturbed by later activity and the wall had been largely obliterated by a later wall constructed of substantial blocks of limestone and architectural fragments reused from elsewhere. The date of this wall is unknown and 19m/20th century disturbances had removed most later

deposits, including any trace of the cobble water-lane which we expected to continue through this area.

Trench 2 was excavated to a similar depth to Trench 3, but the deposits recovered were later in date and produced a very different range of pottery. In the later 15th century material (some of it the product of demolition of buildings) was dumped to produce a level surface. A limestone wall was constructed at right-angles to the street and divided the trench into two halves. In the southeastern half material was dumped, presumably in the open air. Northwest of the wall, however, was a room with a clay floor. Early in the 16th century a new wall was constructed at right-angles to the first and a new mortar floor laid down in the room created (Fig. 3). Little pottery was found within the building, but the dumps outside and the



levelling which proceeded it produced a remarkable range of pottery imported from the Low Countries and the area around the Rhine. The proportion of imported wares to English pottery is very high, in contrast to Trench 3 where no imported material was found. The reasons for this difference would only be explained if a larger area became available for excavation.

Little pottery of the second half of the 16th century was found during these excavations. This may support the impression gained from excavations on the adjoining site of City Mills in the early 1980s; namely that the waterfront in this area underwent a dramatic decline in the post-medieval period. By the 17th century the building in Trench 2 had gone out of use and both its walls

had suffered from the attention of stone-robbers. In the second half of the 17th century material was dumped to provide a base for the sloping cobbled water-lane, which is where we came in. The lane had a relatively short life, as the 1989 excavation suggested that it had gone out of use midway through the 18th century. In 1989 black plastic sheeting had been laid on the cobbled surface before the trench was backfilled.

Machine excavation of Trench 1 confirmed a theory that the area close to the river had been cellared in the 19th century and that earlier deposits had been destroyed to a depth of at least 2m. Much more information resulted from the careful monitoring of the boreholes. In borehole 7 the drill hit an impenetrable obstruction 5.80m below the ground surface. Judging by the nature and date of deposits found in other boreholes at the same depth or deeper, the obstruction may be a stone river wall of Roman date. By plotting the results from the boreholes it was possible to follow the build-up of the ground surface through the Anglo-Scandinavian and medieval periods and to predict the position of waterfronts.