

Excavations at 41-49 Walmgate, York, 2000

Excavations on this part of the Walmgate street frontage were carried out by York Archaeological Trust from the 31st of July to the 25th of October 2000, following the Time Team television broadcast of work on the site in September 1999. This exciting modern excavation had its own live web-diary and facilities to digitize plans and context cards across the Internet to the Trust's offices at Ogleforth. The site has many fascinating puzzles and unanswered questions but it is hoped that as the post-excavation analysis phase continues some of these will be answered.

The weather was dreadful throughout the excavations, which spanned the wettest September in 20 years and the wettest October we have had since records began in the 1940's. Thankfully it missed the highest floods recorded in York since the 17th century in November.

The site is situated on Walmgate, fronting onto its southern side, just to the south-east of St. Deny's church. This part of the City is thought to have been fairly prosperous in the early medieval period, containing six churches. It also contained a large house belonging to the de Percy family. Excavations in the vicinity have proved that archaeology along the Walmgate Street frontage is generally close to the surface and is very well preserved resulting from the lack of Georgian, or Victorian cellars. The area appears to have become increasingly industrial from the 14th century through to the 17th centuries, with metal-working, tanning, sheepskin processing and pottery manufacture being carried out.

Geographically this part of the City was cut-off from the City centre by the Foss river, the crossing point being situated at Foss Bridge to the north-west. The river dominated the area encircling it to the north, and west, the south and east being protected by the medieval city walls. Property boundaries appear to conform with this simple topographical model curving towards the river to the north and to the west from Walmgate. These property boundaries may have been laid out in the Anglo-Scandinavian period, and it has been postulated that an early rampart of this date follows the line of the Parish of St. Deny's.

The site covered an area of approximately 250 square metres, ensuring that archaeology on the Walmgate street frontage and also its associated backyard area were excavated. This is rare in the current archaeological climate and consequently the site has important spatial characteristics in terms of understanding the relationship between the building's on the frontage and their associated backyards. We also unearthed evidence to suggest the development of a property fronting on to a precursor of St. Deny's Road, from as early as the 15th century, and the consequent hiving off of part of the backyards belonging originally to the Walmgate properties, to it.

Prior to the current excavation, six small trenches had been excavated within the development area. The first of these was an evaluation trench carried out in 1990 by York Archaeological Trust, which proved the existence of intact well preserved medieval archaeology within 0.2m of the present ground surface. It also provided information confirming that there was a long sequence of complex medieval stratigraphy, which directly sealed Anglo-Scandinavian occupation deposits. This self same evaluation trench was re-opened to expose the Anglo-Scandinavian archaeology during the Time team and York Archaeological Trust collaboration in York in August / September 1999.

A second small trench was machine excavated down to the Anglo-Scandinavian deposits during filming of the programme . Four small test-pits were hand excavated by York Archaeological Trust in May 2000 for the developer to elucidate the nature of the current building foundations on the site. The latter revealed further how well the medieval occupation deposits were preserved.

After the initial machine clearance of the site, hand excavation began with a cleaning up operation and the excavation of all modern intrusions.

The development brief had stipulated a depth limit for the excavation - situated at 11.10m AOD. As the highest point of surviving archaeology on site was approximately 12.00m AOD this gave us a maximum depth of 0.9m of archaeology to excavated and record. In one area on the eastern side of the excavation however a small trench was excavated to 10.50m AOD to facilitate the construction of a lift shaft. In this particular area we recorded the

build-up of archaeological deposits dating from the 10th Century through to the modern era.

The earliest archaeological deposits, of Anglo-Scandinavian date, were located within the lift shaft and the two evaluation trenches. These dated from the 10th century through to the mid 11th century and included initially stake and wattle built building's with associated clay floors, and organic build-ups. These buildings appear to be aligned at right-angles to Walmgate, with possible small access paths or alleys running back from Walmgate between the plots. Some of the buildings may have been replaced in the late 10th century by more substantial structures with rubble foundations.

The earliest archaeological deposits in the main open area excavation in the north-east corner consisted of a building with its timber beam slots and post-holes dug into a considerable build-up of dumped material. The latter may have formed a raised bank or platform along the eastern edge of the site, perhaps interpretable as the lost Anglo-Scandinavian rampart. The dumps consisted of layers of clay and daub perhaps from the demolition of buildings close-by. The dumps contained 10th and 11th century pottery and may have been deposited during the disturbed times in the mid to late 11th century. The building that was erected on top of this platform was demolished and its construction slots and post-holes backfilled by the early 12th century. Further west dumped material of a backyard type nature built up along the frontage and dated to the 11th century. A possible double oven, perhaps for baking bread was then constructed in the north-western corner of the excavation area. This oven structure was pottery dated to the 11th century and due to their excellent preservation were left in situ.

The area along the frontage appears to have then returned to its function as a dumping ground until the mid to late 12th century when it appears that the frontage in the north-western corner of the site was reoccupied by a substantial post-built structure. This may have been replaced by a post-pad/stylobate structure in the 13th century. The function of these buildings is thought to have been domestic at the present time although full analysis of the deposits may prove otherwise.

In the late 14th or early 15th centuries the area appears to have been completely reorganised. Stone dwarf walls appear which would have supported the sill beams for timber-framed buildings along the Walmgate Street frontage. Two buildings occupied this frontage. A large hall parallel to the street with a central edge set tile hearth, and a possible cross wing at its western end . The other was situated in the north-west corner of the excavation area and was positioned at right angles to Walmgate. This may have either been a separate property or a kitchen annex for the hall to the east. Again post-excavation analysis may reveal the answer to this question. A narrow passage may have also run between the two buildings.

The 14th century hall had an exterior staircase to the second floor the base of which was positioned at the south-eastern corner of the building.

Several large roughly timber-lined pits located at the southern end of the site, may suggest some industrial activity in the early occupation of the new Walmgate street frontage properties. Environmental analysis of the pit fills as well as the animal bone assemblages may reveal the pits function, although tanning is a strong possibility.

During the reorganisation described earlier part of the backyard was divided off to create a backyard space for a new property fronting onto St. Deny's Road, although in real terms this may have just fronted onto an alley courtyard running back from the Walmgate Street frontage. The new boundary wall was utilised on both sides as the backwall for several outbuildings. On the Walmgate side of the boundary these outbuilding's appear to have surrounded a courtyard.

The north-western building or kitchen annex, quickly was converted to a smithy, with a workshop on the Walmgate street frontage, a domestic area behind this and behind that a further industrial area. It also appears that the outbuilding's surrounding the courtyard area to the rear of the 14th century Hall and perhaps even part of the ground floor of the crosswing, may have also been used in this industry, smithing waste being found as use and floor deposits within these buildings and out-buildings. The combined spatial arrangement

suggests a strong connection between the smithy and the adjacent Hall suggesting that the two may have been owned by one family.

In the later 15th century and perhaps into the early 16th century the smithy appears to have expanded, possibly including a large furnace in the heavy industrial out-building to the rear of the smithy shop. In this period, the smithy may have diversified, many copper alloy mould fragments being found as leveling and floor deposits. An unusual twist to this theory though is that only two crucible fragments have been found. It is therefore possible, that the copper alloy debris was imported from an adjacent property rather than actively being carried out within the excavation area. The metal working activity also expanded to include the property fronting onto St. Deny's Road at this time. The outbuilding's associated with this property containing much copper alloy working debris and use deposits, but no definite metal-working hearths or furnaces. The copper alloy mould fragments suggest that large circular vessels were being cast in the vicinity. The St. Deny's road property also contained a rubble lined pit which may have functioned as a garderobe, within one of its out-building's .

The intense heat generated by the Smithy may have damaged the roof between the Hall and the Smithy. A substantial structure was inserted to compensate for the damage done in the late 15th century. (SLIDES 25, 26, 27, 28) In the 16th century the smithy was partially demolished and rebuilt with a substantial brick footing. This actually reduced the size of the property - giving it a very small backyard area. The new building contained a substantial brick built chimney stack. It was not until the 17th century that the adjacent Hall was redeveloped, although this was only partially done (parts of the 14th century structure surviving right up to the 1960's). A large stone lined well was inserted in the former Yard area re-using architectural fragments perhaps from a demolished church or stone building in the vicinity. A stone foundation was then constructed across the backfill of the well construction cut, to form a new backwall for the property, and infilling the area from the crosswing to the eastern side of the hall. This expanded the size of the building by about a third.

In the 18th century a new brick building was built in the north-eastern corner of the site, and a narrow alleyway was inserted between the building's to gain access to the backyard area. Sometime in this century the 14th century Hall with its 17th century alterations was sub-divided into two tenements. This spatial arrangement of the properties, that is, four tenements, along the street frontage and perhaps one on the St. Deny's road frontage continued into the 19th century. The building's on the Walmgate Street frontage and perhaps the St. Deny's Road property survived until the 1960's when they were demolished.

The site did not produce vast quantities of finds, although a large amount of metal working debris was collected. It is thought that this is because the property ownership of the plots fronting onto Walmgate extended as far as the River Foss and the King's Fishpool. The majority of household waste and demolition materials, therefore would have been transported to the river bank as reclamation materials certainly by the 14th century, and continued to be dumped here into the 18th century.

The site has tremendous potential for research especially in terms of spatial organisation and its changing patterns through 900 years of urban occupation. As post-excavation analysis continues on the excavations at 41-9 Walmgate it is hoped to look further at the spatial changes, property boundary developments, functional changes and to compare the developments on this site to others on Walmgate, in York, and in other urban centres. My thanks go to the team of excavators, who worked so hard, under trying weather conditions to get the excavation completed.

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