

Excavations at 47-51 Skeldergate, York, 1996

A proposed redevelopment of the site at 47-51 Skeldergate has led to the York Archaeological Trust undertaking work at the site. The first part, in July 1995, was the observation and recording of 6 boreholes each driven to a depth of between 15 and 17.5 metres below modern ground level. Part two, in February 1996, was the excavation of two trenches each measuring 3 by 3 metres and intended to reach a depth of 1.5 metres below the modern surface. Two very small test pits were machine dug principally for the site engineers but were also recorded by YAT.

The site lies to the south of Skeldergate away from the medieval waterfront and close to Baile Hill, site of one of two Norman castles in York. This location, and the lack of any substantial modern disturbance in the immediate area, suggested that there could be well preserved archaeological remains of considerable interest within the site limits.

The boreholes indicated up to 6 metres of deposits close to Skeldergate with some 2 metres of deposits away from the street frontage. Four of the boreholes yielded well preserved waterlogged organic deposits at between 2 and 4.5 metres below the modern surface and all boreholes provided evidence for intact stratified archaeology although unfortunately no dating evidence of any kind was recovered from any of the boreholes.

The topsoil and other modern deposits were removed from the two evaluation trenches after which hand excavation began. Trench 1, closest to Skeldergate, immediately produced walls and deposits of medieval and Post-Medieval date. The limited remains within the area of the trench made wider interpretation difficult but it is possible that they represent domestic occupation fronting onto Skeldergate. Below these was a 0.60 metre thick layer of clean dark grey loam which produced pottery of the 11th and 12th century and appeared to be agricultural in origin. This layer stopped at 1.5 metres below modern ground level where excavation ceased but at this level was an apparently widespread horizon of pale yellow mortar and limestone rubble from which no dating evidence was

recovered. Also at this level ground water began seeping into the trench quite quickly.

In Trench 2 Post-Medieval activity appeared to be restricted to dumping to raise the ground level but below this at around 0.90 metres below the modern surface was a mortared limestone wall running across the trench in the direction of Baile Hill. Associated with this wall was a hearth built of edge-set tiles and clearly having at two phases. Several features of uncertain function cut into this horizon as did a trench robbing part of the stone wall. Pottery from deposits sealing the foundation trench of the wall was of the 11th to late 13th century. The date of the robbing is uncertain but may be broadly placed in the early post-medieval period. Earlier than the wall, hearth, and cuts was the south-east edge of a ditch running parallel to the limestone wall. Much of this lay beyond the edge of the trench but the edge recorded sloped down at roughly 45 degrees and traces of very decayed wood suggested that it may have had a wooden lining. This also produced pot of the 13th century. The ditch was cut into a clean deposit of dark grey sandy clayey silt which extended from 1.20 metres below ground level to at least 1.60 metres below the modern surface but at this point excavation ceased.

The engineers test pits were a little disappointing as the first one, away from Skeldergate, encountered apparently natural orange-brown boulder clay just 0.55 metres below the modern car park surface with no intervening deposits of an archaeological nature. The second test pit, also 0.80 metres deep but closer to Skeldergate, revealed only mostly purely modern remains although a dark grey loam in the base of it may be an archaeological deposit of medieval or post-medieval date.

A moderate number of small finds were recovered during the course of this investigation. The most interesting find, unfortunately from machine excavated deposits, was a forked spacer type of strap-end with a moulded acorn knob believed to be of 14th century date.

Taken as a whole the archaeological evidence is very interesting; apart from the proven medieval and post-medieval activity on site there are hints of Roman remains, possibly

structural in nature, lower down which could be very significant in defining the extent of the Roman colonia in this direction. Comparison of the nature of the deposits from trenches and boreholes and the depth from which they came also suggest that the waterlogged organic material noted from some of the boreholes may be Roman in date similar to those encountered at the General Accident site, 24-30 Tanner Row. The proximity of the natural sub-soil to the modern ground surface in the first of the test pits may be partly due to Roman terracing similar to that known to the north-west in Bishophill raising the possibility that much if not all of the Roman colonia close to the River Ouse was terraced. Certainly the area is rich in archaeological potential and would justify further work should the opportunity arise.

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