

The Wise Man Built His House Upon...??

Excavations at 9, Little Stonegate, York, 1998

Following an archaeological evaluation in October 1997, York Archaeological Trust carried out an excavation at 9, Little Stonegate from March to May 1998, prior to redevelopment. Two trenches were excavated, both focused on the Little Stonegate (formerly Swinegate) street frontage. They revealed a complex development history of timber-framed structures on the street frontage, within which metalworking took place. The structural history of these buildings was unravelled and the character of occupation in the immediate vicinity was investigated. In so doing the development of the site from the 13th to the 20th century was traced.

The site is within the Roman Legionary fortress, but the only evidence for Roman, Anglian and Anglo-Scandinavian occupation came in the form of objects from those era's found in later contexts (what archaeologists call residual finds). This, however, indicates that occupation of these periods is highly likely within the vicinity.

The earliest deposits were tentatively dated to the 10th to the 12th centuries, and consisted of ashy occupation deposits. Horticultural or agricultural soil was then dumped across the whole trench area, possibly to seal the earlier occupation deposits and to raise the ground level. A sequence of pits dated to the mid 13th century and used primarily for the disposal of cess, domestic and industrial waste then partially truncated the area. After this, clay and rubble deposits were laid down in the mid 13th century to level the ground surface, several occupation deposits accumulated, and cutting through them were a number of stake-holes. These deposits and features represent an initial phase of habitation, possibly within a simple timber-framed building on the street frontage.

Between the mid/late 13th and the early 14th century a set of foundations was constructed, parallel to the Little Stonegate street frontage (Building 1). These were very roughly constructed of clay, tile and limestone blocks, and are interpreted as footings to support the horizontal sill beams for several small, probably single-storey, timber-framed cottages, laid out in a planned fashion on the Little Stonegate frontage. Inside the cottages

stratified deposits consisting of clay, sand and mortar floors, several hearths (constructed of tile and clay), hearth ash rake-off deposits and several lines of post and stake-holes which may have represented partition walls or smoke screens, were recovered. The evidence suggests that these cottages were partially used as craft workshops. To the rear of the property the backyard area was used for dumping domestic waste.

In the mid 14th century many of the original stratified internal occupation deposits were cleared out prior to further occupation. This was represented by stratified clay and sand floors, and spreads and levelling dumps of crushed limestone, hearth ash rake-off deposits, crushed slag and broken mould fragments from the casting of copper and copper alloy objects. Three posts in post-holes were inserted as extra support for the corner of one portion of the timber-frame; these were removed and backfilled with mould fragments before the demolition of the building. Behind the building, the backyard was still in use as a dumping ground and an area where pits were excavated for the disposal of domestic rubbish, and later demolition material.

Once Building 1 was demolished, clay and rubble was laid down to level the ground surface before the construction of the foundations for a second building (Building 2), in the late 14th or early 15th century. These foundations consisted of roughly shaped and mortared limestone blocks and were constructed on a similar axis, but on a slightly different plan, to Building 1. The use of limestone as the foundation material may indicate that a more substantial two storey timber-framed building had been erected on the street frontage. Once completed, an internal levelling layer of clay and rubble was sealed by further stratified clay and sand floors, interleaved with several tile hearths and hearth rake-off deposits (some of which were rich in fishbone). Further modification to the structure occurred when an extra post-pad was added to a partition wall. This may indicate that the timber-frame required support, or that an extra storey or an internal partition had been added. Further dumps and spreads within the backyard of this date may indicate that pit digging activity continued in this area.

In the mid to late 15th century an extension was added to the rear of the property encompassing the full backyard area and extending the full width of the site. This involved

the setting out of two lines of limestone post-pads on a north-south and an east-west axis parallel to the existing walls, which would have supported the timber-frame of the extension. Sill beam walls, built of an assortment of materials, linked the post-pads. Levelling deposits of clay and mixed demolition material were then inserted within the extension. The north-south wall may have acted as a property boundary at this point, as deposits to either side of it were markedly different. To the west, clean clay floors were laid down, possibly representing an area utilised for domestic functions. On the east side, very thin laminated floors were laid down interleaved with many lenses of coal ash and charcoal, suggesting that industrial processes may have been carried out in the area. Late in this phase a number of post-pads were added to the north-south property boundary. These were added either to support a decaying and subsiding frame, or during building modification, possibly to support additional storeys within the extension or internal partitions. Dumping activity is perceived to have been mainly carried out to the south of the extension.

Between the late 15th and the early 16th centuries the extension continued to be occupied on the western side of the trench, but within the central and eastern area it appears to have been demolished and the area reverted to backyard. The central portion of the rear wall of Building 2 was then enlarged and rebuilt slightly to the south of the original line, as part of the construction of a chimney stack for a large brick and tile hearth. Once the hearth fell out of use it was sealed by a dump of broken mould fragments from copper and copper alloy-casting. Further domestic occupation continued to the west of the property boundary, and in the north-east corner levelling deposits were laid down prior to the insertion of a brick floor. Within the backyard a tile hearth was constructed over the top of the extension's original southern wall, indicating the wall had been demolished by this point and that craft-working had expanded southwards.

At the beginning of the 16th century the majority of the buildings were radically renovated with the insertion of new brick and tile sleeper-wall infill on top of the existing foundations. This probably indicates that new sill beam walls were inserted at this point in the building's development, and it is likely that the whole timber-frame was rebuilt. The makeshift nature of the infill materials used and the sand bonding material utilised (rather

than mortar) suggests that the renovation was carried out rapidly and as cheaply as possible. In the central street front, stratified clay and mortar floors were laid down prior to the insertion of an east-west line of post- and stake-holes, presumably for a partition wall or smoke screen. A series of further clay and mortar floors then sealed these structures after their removal. In the north-east corner, the building on the street front rapidly fell into disrepair and was demolished, and the area was subsequently used for the disposal of rubbish, as was the backyard. Cess, industrial and domestic waste were disposed of within a complex series of intercutting circular, ovoid and large sub-rectangular pits, some of which may have had industrial functions before being backfilled.

The early 16th century rebuild appears to have deteriorated during the mid 16th to early 17th century and another complete rebuild was undertaken. This did not follow the previous plan but involved the final demolition of the north-south property boundary and extension wall and the partition wall in the north-eastern corner. The original line of the southern wall of Building 2 was re-used in the ground plan of this new rebuild, which continued in use, albeit with further alterations throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. There is evidence for at least a partial rebuild of this building in the late 18th or early 19th centuries; the timber-framed buildings were demolished in the 20th century and the area levelled during the 1960's construction of the British Gas Showrooms.

In conclusion, the investigations have revealed important evidence for the development of the Little Stonegate area from the mid 13th century to the present day. A complex series of timber-framed buildings was built, rebuilt and renovated as the needs of their inhabitants changed. Artefactual evidence suggests that these particular properties were also very important in the medieval and early post-medieval metal-working craft industry, and were utilised for the production of copper and copper alloy objects from at least the 14th to the 17th century. Work carried out here includes the casting of large circular vessels such as cauldrons, bowls and basins and other objects such as brooches and pins.

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