

St Leonard's at the Theatre

Excavations at St Leonard's Hospital, The Theatre Royal Site, York, 1998

It is commonly held that a measure of the status of a town or city lies largely in the range and significance of the institutions it houses. As England's second city, medieval York was richly endowed with many great institutions. One of the foremost but lesser known of these was the Hospital of St Leonard's. The medieval city actually boasted many hospitals, some of which were specialised particular categories of people and illnesses; for example, four were leper hospitals (see Interim 19/1). All of these, however, with the exception of St Leonard's, were relatively small. The role of a medieval hospital was not one that can be directly equated with modern views of a 'hospital'. Whilst St Leonard's cared for both the curable and incurable sick, it also housed orphans and the infirm, provided food for the prisoners of York Castle, and gave alms and food at the gate for numbers of customary dependants and itinerant beggars. There were also numbers of 'corrodies' living within the hospital who were not necessarily poor or sick, rather, they were residents in sheltered retirement, whose residency had been purchased.

Known as St Peter's until the late 12th–early 13th century, St Leonard's has some historical claim to pre-Norman conquest origins, though possibly not as an independent body. This status was achieved by at least the early 12th century, however, and upstanding remains of this period, in the form of part of an undercroft, survive at the Theatre Royal, York. Like all great medieval hospitals, St Leonard's was integrated within the ecclesiastical network, and followed the Augustinian rule. The status of the hospital was such that in the 13th and 14th centuries it was the largest such establishment in England, at least in terms of numbers of staff and inmates, as well as being the wealthiest.

St Leonard's was located in the north-west corner of the old Roman legionary fortress and possessed its own walled precinct with two gateways. Much of the course of the precinct walls is known. Remnants of these walls can still be seen behind the City Library and in parts of the eastern wall of the theatre. Where they do not survive in this latter area their

course can be followed in the alignment of property boundaries. Documentary sources provide us with some information about the range of buildings that once existed at the hospital; they included a church, workshops, ranges of infirmaries and so on. Unfortunately the layout and positions of these buildings are not known. The only other free-standing structures of this great hospital still with us today are parts of a second undercroft with an adjacent chapel and vaulted passageway, immediately to the south of the City Library.

The only previous archaeological work that has encountered remains of St Leonard's have been certain of the Trust's watching briefs maintained on service works in Museum Street in 1979 and 1990 that uncovered parts of a number of walls. It was therefore with enthusiasm that in September 1998 the Trust accepted a commission to carry out a watching brief, together with limited excavation works, during a programme of internal alterations within the undercroft at the Theatre Royal. This undercroft was more extensive until 1901 when most of it was destroyed during an earlier programme of theatre alterations. Today it consists of two vaulted compartments supported by squat piers adorned with scalloped capitals and chamfered bases. The groined vaulting is of rubble construction and has slightly pointed transverse arches. A projection in the north-west corner of the undercroft, which is believed to be a later insertion, may have supported a stair turret.

The archaeological and construction works were carried out to different depths in two conjoined areas of the undercroft and several phases of activity were discerned. The earliest of these, Phase I, included 11th-12th century deposits through which a very large, steep-sided feature of unknown purpose had been cut. Large quantities of residual Roman brick and tile from this feature were probably derived from old Roman buildings. All of this activity predated the construction of the undercroft in the 12th century, an operation which is assigned to Phase II. Phase III was represented by a series of three large postholes together with a number of deposits including construction debris and dated to the 14th century. The postholes may relate to a scaffolding system, presumably for the purposes of building repair or alterations. An important point to note here is that although pre-undercroft and 14th century (post-undercroft) deposits were found, the expected 12th –

14th century floor layers that must have been associated with the undercroft were absent and had been lost to later truncation.

Phase IV was characterised by a re-ordering of internal arrangements within the undercroft. Major elements of this included two new bay dividing walls and the laying down of an extensive, though patchily surviving, mortar floor. Dating evidence for this activity was limited, though a 16th century date seems probable. Whether this was prior to the closure of the hospital in 1540 during the reformation, or after, is not certain; in light of subsequent activity at the site the former is perhaps the more likely option. It is clear that the successor Phase V deposits relate primarily to the discard of debris largely consisting of building rubble. Interpretation of the broader picture represented by this activity is not straightforward. It may be that the Phase V deposits are indicative of post-reformation abandonment and even partial demolition of the undercroft. On the other hand, in a post-reformation change of function, keeping the building in a clean and tidy order may not have been necessary or important and any demolition works may relate solely to new requirements engendered by a change in function. Significantly, the construction of what may have been a buttress appears to relate to Phase V. This strengthens the case for a change of function within an adapted building.

Later developments at the site relate to the period after the incorporation of the undercroft within the Theatre Royal, which is believed to have taken place in 1744. During Phase VI of the later 18th (possibly early 19th) century those areas of the undercroft investigated were seen to have had all earlier deposits capped with a thick layer of rubble. In the south area at least, this was then sealed by an extensive mortar floor. Further raising of floor levels took place in Phase VII during the 19th century. This was accompanied by the narrowing of the south-eastern arch of the undercroft. Phase VIII embraces all modern 20th century works in the examined areas. This includes use of part of the area for toilet facilities with subsequent conversion in the 1960s to a theatre club bar.

Whilst these works were being carried out the opportunity was taken to inspect other parts of the theatre that are known to contain upstanding medieval fabric. These include a gateway, with cruciform arrow-slit openings above it, in the east wall of the theatre, a

barrel vaulted chamber, a former window opening and various other pieces of walling. It seems likely that further fabric survives in addition to this, though for the most part is covered with more recent rendering. Clearly, there is much still to be learnt about the surviving parts of England's largest medieval hospital.

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