

Skeletons in the Cupboard

Excavations at the Former Female Prison, York Castle Car Park, 1998

The proposed redevelopment of the Castle Car-Park/Piccadilly area has been a topic for discussion for some time now. The archaeology of the area has been investigated on a number of occasions since the demolition of York Prison in the 1930's, demonstrating that although a considerable amount of destruction has been caused by the 19th century construction of the prison and basement of the 1930's civic centre adjacent to the River Foss, islands of archaeology remained intact in some areas. An evaluation excavation undertaken during April 1998 adjacent to the north end of the former Female Prison (now part of the Castle Museum) aimed to locate and determine the condition of the curtain wall of York Castle at a point where a proposed access road for the new development crossed the River Foss from Piccadilly to the car park. This appeared to be a quite straightforward task since the wall was clearly indicated on a number of old maps of York such as James Archer's drawing of c. 1692.

The evaluation consisted of a single 10m by 2m trench aligned roughly east-west and centred on the presumed line of the curtain wall. Machine clearance of modern deposits revealed, at the west end of the trench, a widespread deposit of firm orange-brown clay. Excavation of a modern drain trench crossing this clay showed it be at least 0.80m thick. The eastern limit of this clay appeared to be defined by a large number of postholes forming a band aligned approximately north-south. Some of these had voids at their top, and indeed were found by one of the excavation team having the ground crumble beneath him. Many were quite substantial, some of the larger postholes being c. 0.40m in diameter. Clearly the postholes and the clay were closely associated although it was by no means apparent what they formed part of. The postholes were roughly on the predicted line of the castle wall but there was no stone or mortar present and no sign of any robber trench. In short, where was the wall?

The decision was made to extend the trench some 7m to the west after examination of the north wall of the former Female Prison revealed vertical parallel cracks, which may have

been caused by the building sinking into a robber trench where a wall had been removed. Machine clearance of the extended trench revealed more of the clay layer, which was found all the way across the extended area. Some of this was removed by machine, and it soon became obvious that running down the centre of the trench extension was a line of roughly rectangular features, each around 2m long and 0.5m wide, and cut through the clay. These features appeared to be graves and upon excavation they proved indeed to be just that! At first it was not certain what date these burials were, but it soon became apparent that the westernmost grave had been cut by a now demolished wall linking the Female Prison, as it was then, with the 1826 prison demolished in the 1930's.

So our burials belonged to the early 19th century or earlier. Some of them displayed signs of having undergone post-mortems. One of them had the top of its skull sawn off, possibly for removal of the brain, and then put back in the appropriate position when the body was buried. It began to look as if we had found part of the prison cemetery, long thought to be located some distance to the south of our trench. All these burials were in wooden coffins which, however, were very badly decayed and were often no more than a soft dark stain along the edges of the grave. Few finds, as one might expect, came from these graves, although a number of bone and copper alloy buttons from the chest area of at least two of the burials suggested that they had been wearing some form of tunic or jacket at the time of burial.

The excavation of these graves revealed further articulated human remains at a lower level although the presence of human bones, including complete skulls, in the upper graves showed that the lower burials had been disturbed. Just two of the lower graves were excavated after which excavation in the western half of the trench ceased and further work was concentrated in the central portion of the trench. When the time came to backfill we had a good number of burials, the enigmatic clay and postholes, but no castle wall.

Post-excavation analysis is normally done well away from the site and can be fairly routine. On occasion, however, it can be as interesting as the actual excavation. Having compiled a matrix for the trench the pottery spot dates were added and at once some questions were answered but others were raised. The upper graves cut deposits of the 18th century or slightly later, which was what was expected; but pottery from the extensive clay layer was

of the 10th/11th century. Four of the postholes along the east extend of the clay also produced pottery of this date. There was practically no pottery datable to the period c. 1100–1700 which, since there is ample documentary evidence that the castle was occupied throughout the period, suggests that something has removed all evidence of the medieval occupation in the area. The most likely event causing this massive truncation could be the erection of the Female Prison in the late 18th century when extensive levelling and landscaping of the area is documented. The interpretation of the clay and postholes, dated by pottery to the 11th century now becomes clearer and it would now appear that they are most likely to be part of the early Norman defences, dating possibly to c. 1068/9.

This clay bank could be shown to seal the earlier burials that were cut into deposits datable to the 10th/11th century. So we were dealing with two groups of graves separated by nearly a thousand years. But this is not the end of the story. The earlier burials were laid out neatly east-west with the head to the west, suggesting that they belonged to a formal cemetery. The nearest known pre-conquest church, however, is that of St Mary, Castlegate, which lies over 200m to the north and whose graveyard lies adjacent to the church. The implication is that the cemetery below the clay bank belongs to an unknown pre-conquest church lying very close to our trench. Topographic and archaeological evidence suggests that it may lie to the west or south of the present excavation, possibly under the Eye of York where it may have been reused in the post-conquest period as the castle chapel. This is speculation, but it does raise some interesting questions about the last Anglo-Scandinavian city in this area and its fate at the hands of the Norman conquerors.

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