

## **Excavations in the Former Primitive Methodist Chapel, 3, Little Stonegate, York, 1998**

During the latter half of 1998 a watching brief on a new development on, and behind, the site of the former British Gas showrooms in Little Stonegate/Davygate demonstrated that medieval and post-medieval deposits and structures survived close to the present ground surface. An excavation towards the Little Stonegate frontage had investigated some of these deposits and structures, but it was only during the course of the watching brief that Roman structures and associated deposits were encountered. When a revised version of the planned development took the former Primitive Methodist Chapel at 3, Little Stonegate into the scheme, it became apparent that work in the chapel cellar to strengthen the existing structure was likely to damage or destroy a part of the Roman legionary fortress never before seen by archaeologists using modern techniques of recording. Accordingly some of the work in the chapel cellar was observed and recorded by York Archaeological Trust, while five of the new foundation trenches and a lift pit were hand dug and recorded by YAT.

The first set of trenches dug by the contractors were for temporary supports and although these were relatively small, typically 1.2m by 0.8m and 0.85m deep. Roman walls were almost immediately encountered together with deposits of both Roman and post-Roman date. One of these small trenches produced no less than three walls, all of different date. The small size of the trenches made interpretation difficult, but comparison of the walls observed in the chapel with the suggested layout of the Roman fortress seemed to indicate that the trenches had exposed parts of the north-east ends of two barrack blocks, one of which, the north-western, does not appear to have been seen before. There appeared to be a narrow passage or alley between them similar to that recorded in our excavations at the City Garage, 9 Blake Street, which also ran between two probable barrack blocks. The upper deposits in these trenches were always dark grey loams and are probably post-Roman in date, but below these lay a relatively clear sequence of floor and occupation deposits belonging to the Roman period. In one trench, butting a wall, were a number of horizontal tiles laid in a regular

pattern and associated with ash deposits. This was probably a hearth but it was not possible to establish if it was used for cooking or for other purposes.

The five trenches dug by YAT were c.1.5m square and c.1m deep and their excavation by archaeological techniques greatly amplified the picture presented by the temporary support trenches. The YAT trenches provided a more detailed understanding of the stratigraphic sequence in the area as well as revealing details not observed in the contractor's trenches. It was quickly noticed that our trenches contained large numbers of small circular stakeholes in the later Roman deposits. Often these were no more than c.0.05m in diameter and 0.20m deep and many appeared as voids. Not all were small, however, since one of the largest, more properly considered a post void, was 0.17m across and at least 0.71m deep. Interestingly, some of these stake and post voids could be shown to be stratigraphically earlier than the construction of the latest stone phase encountered. An aspect suspected from the support trenches and confirmed by the YAT trenches was that late re-builds of the stone walls were much more poorly constructed than the earlier walls. These late re-builds used very roughly dressed masonry with little mortar bonding, although there was some evidence for clay being used to bond at least one section of wall

Finds were plentiful from these trenches but it was not always possible to relate them clearly to the stratigraphic sequence. Most of the pottery recovered from the site dated to the 2nd or 3rd century with a tiny amount from the 1st century and a small quantity from the 4th. The scarcity of 1st century pottery can be attributed to the fact that the earlier Roman levels were not reached in the current excavations but the relative lack of 4th century pot is more of a mystery although they may have been truncated by the digging of the chapel cellar. As well as pottery, finds included animal bone, tile, and worked stone, one fragment of which seems to bear part of an inscription. Other finds of interest include a curious semi-circular lead disc and a number of limestone balls up to c.0.10m in diameter. These are probably ballista balls, ammunition for a Roman catapult, and were found in restricted area at the north-east end of the barrack blocks. It would appear possible that parts of the buildings investigated may have been used as a store or armoury.

Further work on the finds is still underway, and they may provide more information about these structures, but at present it is clear that the site has provided useful new evidence for the layout of the Roman fortress and for the dating of the structural sequences observed.

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