

A Pint of Old Body

Excavations at The Fox Public House, Tadcaster Road, Dringhouses, York 1997

Another pub conversion, another village. A team from York Archaeological Trust battled its way through the deep suburban jungle to get to the bar of the Fox Public House, Tadcaster Road, Dringhouses, only to find themselves manhandled out the backdoor (not for the first time) and told to get on with the excavation! It was a hot July and August in 1997, and the Trust was contracted to carry out an archaeological field investigation in the grounds of the pub. What more could any respectable archaeologist ask for! Unfortunately the pub had been closed for renovation and the drinking would have to be done later! The site lay c. 2 miles south-west of York, just to the west of the present A1036.

Dringhouses has produced a mass of archaeological evidence in recent years dating from the prehistoric to the post-medieval periods, indicating early settlement and exploitation of the glacial ridge on which the A1036 is situated. It has long been suggested that from the Bronze Age this ridgeway running from York through Dringhouses to Copmanthorpe was used as part of a well defined east-west trade route across the vale of York. This routeway was eventually fossilised with the construction of a Roman Road, during the 1st century AD, between York (Eboracum) and Tadcaster (Calcaria), which has subsequently become the A1036.

In the 1st century AD, it would appear that a Roman civilian community developed at Dringhouses along the roadside (*Interim Vol 22 No.1 pp 33-39*). Archaeological evaluations have revealed evidence for timber-framed buildings, dateable to the 1st or 2nd century AD, to either side of the Roman road, and Roman settlement and land exploitation has been discovered as far as the Chaloners Whin Drain to the west. A small Roman cemetery has also been discovered in the vicinity and it is thought that this would have been attached to the settlement, rather than being associated with York.

Little post-Roman archaeology has been found to date, although the name Dringhouses is thought to have pre-conquest origins. It was predominantly an agricultural village, containing a manor, with a linear street with strip holdings extending to the east and west, even though it was on the main London road. This medieval landscape has been preserved in the modern village street plan and plot boundaries.

The investigations aims were to gather further evidence for the Roman settlement and to try and pinpoint more substantial evidence for settlement of other periods. The initial evaluation involved a single trench, 3m x 3m, directly to the rear of 60, Tadcaster Road. From its results further excavation was recommended and three further trenches were excavated in areas where the development was likely to disturb archaeological deposits. The first (trench 2), measured 3m x 2m, and was positioned in line with the foundation trenches for the kitchen extension. The other two (trench 3 and 4), measured 4m x 3.8m and 5m x 2.2m respectively, and were aligned with the access road for a new car park. In total 41.2 sq. metres was excavated, and a watching brief was placed on the foundation trenches for the kitchen extension.

Upon the machine excavation of the overburden in trench 1, a series of well stratified deposits was revealed. Truncating the natural clay at the base of the trench a Roman ditch (1024) and a gully (1023) were discovered, running on different alignments to each other. Both seemed to have been rapidly backfilled, including frequent large cobbles and were thought to be contemporary with each other. Sherds of Samian pottery indicative of 1st or early 2nd century AD occupation were recovered from the backfill of the gully (1023). In the north-west corner of the trench a cobbled surface (1017) was then located, consisting of small to medium sized cobbles, compacted into the natural surface. Small quantities of animal bone within the metalled surface may indicate that the path was used for the transport of domestic refuse or butchering debris, but the path showed little sign of wear and tear. The presence of two sherds of pottery of 2nd/3rd century date suggests that the surface was not contemporary with the gully. Directly overlying the cobbled surface, and the other features was a thin deposit of soft silty sand (1018). This was interpreted as an occupation layer, containing 4 sherds of 2nd century pottery, and may have resulted from the trampling of earlier

deposits over the area. The cobbled surface must therefore have gone quickly out of use during the 2nd or early 3rd century.

Truncating the backfill of the gully (1023) and the occupation layer (1018) was a shallow rectangular grave cut (1020). The grave, measured 1.38 m long, 0.58 m wide and 0.10 m deep, and was aligned north-east to south-west. An inhumation burial (1014) was discovered within it which, although fragile, was in relatively good condition, although the upper torso was truncated by a modern pipe trench. The body, was laid on its side, with its legs flexed and its right arm extended to the north. Upon the index finger of the right hand, a copper alloy ring was located. An almost complete, smashed, black burnished ware jar, of mid/late 3rd century date (AD225-300) was located below the burial. Although the shallow nature of the burial suggested that the body was buried rapidly, it does appear to have been treated with considerable respect. The body was laid out in a stylised position and a jar was smashed suggesting a degree of ceremony to the act of burial. The perceived shallowness may have been caused by the truncation of overlying deposits by ploughing. The whole trench was then sealed by a late Roman ploughsoil, which was reworked in the Anglo-Scandinavian and Medieval periods, containing 23 sherds of Roman pottery including some of late 3rd/early 4th century date, a sherd of 9th century York ware, 2 sherds of 12th century gritty ware and a sherd of 13th/14th century date. Incorporated into the base of this layer in the north-eastern corner was a thin lens of metal working slag (1016), suggesting that there was a late Roman metal working area close by. All of the above deposits were then truncated by modern service trenches, which were sealed by a 0.40m thick layer of modern garden soil.

Within trench 2, the earliest deposits reached were (2009) and (2008), the latter containing nine sherds of Roman pottery, four sherds of which were of Calcite Gritted Ware, dateable to the 3rd/ early 4th century AD. These would appear to have been the lower backfills of a large Roman ditch aligned east to west across the site, and running adjacent and parallel to the cobbled track located in trenches 1, 3, and 4. Above this a small shallow sub-rectangular pit (2007) aligned north-east to south-west, was found truncating (2008) This was interpreted as a refuse pit cut into the ditches lower fills while it was silting up. The backfill of the pit was then sealed by a further layer (2005)

interpreted as the upper fill of the ditch, dating to the mid/late 4th century by a sherd of Crambeck grey ware. At the south-west corner of the trench, the earlier deposits were then truncated by a shallow 18th or 19th century circular brick lined well (2002) and the trench was then sealed by modern garden soil.

The earliest activity revealed in trench 3, was a small circular or oval pit (3016), itself heavily truncated. The backfill (3015) contained two sherds of Roman and one sherd of Iron Age or native Romano-British pottery. This was sealed by a layer of compact silty clay (3014), interpreted as an early Roman ploughsoil which also contained a mixture of pottery of early Roman (5 sherds) and Iron Age or native Romano-British wares (11 sherds). The large quantity of Iron Age or native Romano-British pottery, is very significant not only for this area, but for the whole of York. A cobbled surface (3010), similar to (1017) and containing animal bones, overlay the natural in the north corner of the trench on an east-west orientation. South-east of the surface, but parallel to it, two shallow linear features (3011) and (3012) were located and probably functioned as shallow drainage gullies for it. A large rectangular pit (3013), measuring over 2.82m in length, and 1.30m in width, of possible Roman date, then truncated the gullies. Unfortunately no artefactual material was recovered that could suggest its function. The whole area was then sealed by a layer of silty clay which was spitted down (3005) and (3002), and thought to be best interpreted as a late 2nd/3rd century Roman ploughsoil, that formed when the cobbled path went out of use. These layers were then truncated by another rectangular pit (3007), measuring 1.84 m long and 0.80 m wide, which contained a large quantity of semi-articulated cattle remains. A sherd of post-medieval pottery and a fragment of clay pipe point to a post-medieval date for the feature. Several modern features then truncated the earlier deposits which were sealed by a thick layer of modern garden soil.

Trench 4, produced material that linked trenches 2 and 3. Natural clay was located at the south end of the trench, which was overlain by a well preserved cobbled surface (4004), seen in trenches 1 and 3, and now defined as a c. 1.8m wide path or track on an east-west alignment, leading west of the main Roman road. Sherds of pottery suggest that it was laid in the early 3rd century AD. Sealing the cobbled surface was a thin deposit of sandy silt (4001) similar in origin to (1018), and interpreted as an occupation

layer, perhaps building up after the path went in the mid 3rd century. Overlying this deposit was a layer of silty loam (4000) interpreted as the upper most fill of a large east to west ditch, similar to (2005). This ran along the north side of the cobbled track and is believed to have been contemporary with this structure. The ditch was thought to have still been functional when the path went out of use, pottery dates the final backfill to the late 3rd or early 4th century AD. Several modern features then truncated the earlier deposits which were sealed by a modern gardensoil.

Evidence from the Watching Brief supported the general findings of the excavation, verifying the positions and alignments of the two large Roman ditches and the cobbled path. The ditch closest to the present standing building, and the main Roman road measured 2.8 m wide and 0.85 m deep, with steep sides, and a rounded base. It was backfilled with a dark orangy grey sandy clay, containing frequent cobbles in the lower portion of the fill. The second ditch measured 2.15 m wide, and 1.20 m deep, and contained a similar profile to the first. A primary fill of light grey silty clay was overlain by a secondary fill of tenacious dark greyish brown clay silt. Flanking the southern side of the second ditch was the remains of the cobbled path, measuring c. 1.8m wide. A possible former cobbled surface, of uncertain date or extent, was also revealed overlying the second ditch. This was thought to relate to a former yard of medieval or post-medieval date. The ditches were sealed by medieval and post-medieval garden soils, and disturbed in part by modern service trenches and concrete footings.

The excavations have been extremely productive in terms of extending our knowledge of the Roman settlement in the vicinity, and unearthing important evidence for occupation in other periods. The earliest occupational evidence was retrieved from trench 3 where sherds of Iron Age or Romano-British pottery were recovered from a very truncated early Roman pit and an early Roman ploughsoil. This suggests that prehistoric or local Romano-British settlement was truncated by subsequent Roman occupation. This is extremely rare for York as little evidence for prehistoric occupation has been isolated to date within the city boundary.

The majority of the archaeology was from the Roman period. This proved to be moderately complex and produced a long sequence of stratified activity ranging from

the 1st to the early 4th centuries AD. From the study of the stratigraphy in each of the trenches and the results of the watching brief, it was possible to break the sequence down into five broad phases.

The initial phase of activity dated to the 1st or early 2nd century AD, involved the excavation of a large north-east to south-west aligned ditch across the site, seen in Trench 1, parallel to the Roman road. This is suggested not to be the Roman roadside ditch, as no evidence for the Roman road was discovered between this and the present standing building during the watching brief. A narrow gully, on a slightly different alignment, was also excavated. The purpose of this second feature was unclear, perhaps indicating further subdivision of land to the west of the Roman road. Within trench 3 a pit was excavated, possibly for cess or refuse, indicating occupation close by. This was backfilled rapidly, and included sherds of 2nd century date, as well as a residual sherds of Iron Age or Romano-British pottery.

Phase two involved the formation of a ploughsoil dated to the mid/late 2nd century AD, over the phase one pit in trench 3, and may indicate the cultivation of the soil to the west of the Roman road. Again Roman pottery indicated a 2nd century date, with a considerable quantity of residual Iron Age or Romano-British pottery. The gully and ditch in trench 1 probably also silted up during this period.

During the early 3rd century, phase 3, a cobbled path aligned east to west, c. 1.8 m wide, was constructed. Parallel to it a large ditch was excavated flanking the northern side of the path in trenches 2 and 4, and two gullies flanked its southern side in trench 3. This was interpreted as a small track or path leading off from the main road to either some out-buildings, or a driveway into some nearby animal pens and enclosures. The large ditch to the north would certainly ensure that animals would not stray from the path, and the small quantity of bones incorporated into the construction of the path and recovered from the top of it may indicate a slaughter or refuse area close by. The path however, does not seem to have seen much wear and tear, and seems to have quickly fallen out of use. Overlying the cobbled trackway in trenches 1 and 4, was a mixed sandy occupation deposit, possibly deriving from dumps of sand and mixed by later trampling. This deposit was dated to the 2nd century but is more likely to be early 3rd century in

date, incorporating residual material from the top of the trackway. Prior to the deposition of this sandy deposit the two parallel gullies located in trench 3 appeared to have silted up, before being truncated by a large pit. The large ditch to the north of the track however was thought to still have been in use into this new phase of the sites activity.

In phase 4 a burial was inserted into the sandy occupation deposits accumulated in trench 1. This was laid on its side, with its legs slightly flexed and its left arm stretched out to the north. Only the right arm survived the modern truncation which removed most of the upper torso, and preserved a copper alloy ring on its index finger. Within the grave cut, a black burnished ware jar had been smashed prior to the internment of the body and this dated the burial from 225-300 AD.

A study of the rites associated with this burial has not revealed a more accurate date. Inhumation burial practices were introduced from the continent in the mid 2nd century. At Trentholme Drive, c. 1 mile north-east of the site, just off the Tadcaster Road, a cremation and inhumation cemetery was excavated in the 1960's and contained inhumation burials dated from the mid 2nd century AD, eventually replacing the cremation rite by the late 3rd century. Pottery vessels were also found as grave furnishings at this site, the peak of furnishing with these grave goods being in the mid 2nd to early 3rd century. This rite then declined towards the end of the 3rd century with a complete absence of vessels of 4th-century date. The act of placing a pottery vessel within the grave has been interpreted by some as indicative of the presence of a food offering, but in this instance the vessel appears to have been broken, or possibly ritually 'killed', a practice which is attested at numerous sites in Roman Britain. This may imply that the pot itself rather than the contents was offered as a gift to the deceased. The ring is also not thought to be unusual within the context of Roman inhumation practice, and is thought simply to perform the same function of personal adornment as in life. At Trentholme Drive the provision of pottery together with other types of grave furniture, such as personal ornaments or jewellery, was found to be very unusual, but this may be due in part to the status of the burials within this particular cemetery. Certainly no high status tombs or stone sarcophagi were recovered, as have been located on the Mount or at the junction between Tadcaster Road and St. Helen's Rd., Dringhouses. High status

burials often contained personal ornaments as well as other offerings within the grave. Although the burial found during the evaluation is not perceived as being of particularly high status, being buried without a coffin or sarcophagus, it is thought to have belonged to a social stratum higher than those buried at Trentholme Drive. A remarkable number of fragments of Romano-Saxon head-pots distinctive of late 3rd century Roman cemeteries, were located in contexts (4000) and (4001), may indicate the disturbance of further burials close by. Whether these form isolated outliers of the cemetery at St. Helen's Road, or are part of a separate cemetery to the south-west of the settlement at the Starting Gate was not made clear by the evaluation.

Overlying the sandy occupation deposit at the north-east corner of trench 1, was a dump of metal slag of late 3rd to early 4th century date. This formed part of the fifth phase of Roman occupation involving the production and manufacture of metal objects. A thick layer of late Roman ploughsoil then formed over all the deposits in trenches 1 and 3, and the large ditch in trenches 2 and 4 finally silted up.

A sherd of 9th century York ware pottery was retrieved from the late Roman ploughsoil in trench 1, and three fragments of Torksey ware, dateable to the 10th century, were recovered from modern features within the same trench. This indicates the possible presence of Anglo-Scandinavian settlement in the vicinity as suggested by the place name evidence and is the first evidence of activity of this date in Dringhouses. Medieval and post-medieval finds and features suggest a continued use of the area for agricultural purposes. Modern features were related to the use of the site for a public house, farm and stables.

The investigations have revealed important evidence for settlement in the area from the Iron age to the present day. Most of the evidence has been from the Roman period and this has been vital in developing further the picture of a settlement at Dringhouses, similar to those identified near many legionary fortresses on the continent (known as *zivilen Dorf* settlements), and in Britain, such as at Heronbridge near Chester. Many questions however still remain to be answered. What was the nature and extent of the late Iron Age or local Romano-British settlement on the ridge? What was the full extent of the *zivilen dorf* at Dringhouses and how do the 1st to 3rd century ditches, gullies,

paths and pits recovered from recent excavations, evaluations and watching briefs fit in to an overall plan of the settlement? How did this settlement develop and function? What is the significance of the remarkable quantity of Romano-Saxon head pot and the mid/late 3rd century inhumation found during the investigation, and was it part of a larger cemetery to the south-west of the timber buildings found at the Starting Gate Motel in 1996? What is the nature and extent of the late 3rd or early 4th century settlement, and the significance of the evidence for the production and manufacture of metal objects? What is the nature and extent of post-Roman occupation and how did the Anglo-Scandinavian and Medieval agricultural village develop? Lastly when was the renamed 'Fox and Roman' pub going to open for a good pint of beer and a look at the display case containing the finds from the excavations? A Pint of Old Half Body, and a packet of crisps please, barman. Corrrrr, look at that photograph of that skeleton, isn't he gorgeous!!!!

Acknowledgements

The work was funded by the pub owners Bass Charrington Plc. Thanks are due to Kurt Hunter-Mann for references to his work at the Starting Gate (*Interim 22/1*) and for the 'zivilen dorf' theory for Dringhouses. Finally thanks are due to the rest of the site team, Roo and Paddy, for their hard work and enthusiasm.

Neil Macnab.