

The Quest for the Minster Precinct

Excavations in the Minster Precinct, York, 1999

The part of the former Roman fortress north-west of Goodramgate has formed the Minster precinct since before the Norman Conquest. A thoroughfare might have connected Petergate and Chapter House Street as early as the 7th century, but it was closed by the 14th century as access to the precinct became increasingly restricted. The main street within the precinct was known as Minster Yard. During the medieval period it became densely populated with buildings including the Deanery, the Archbishop's residence and numerous prebendal residences. Indeed, houses once actually stood against the Minster, and were only demolished during the later 16th century. It is thought that the church of St. Mary-ad-Valvas, demolished c.1365, stood a little to the east of the Minster; what was probably part of its foundations were exposed during building work in 1967. However, the precise layout of the precinct is little understood.

While the street system in the Chapter House Street part of the precinct has changed little since medieval times, that immediately south and east of York Minster has been completely transformed. An Act for clearance of the buildings cluttering the Minster Yard on the south side of the Minster was passed in 1825, and it was enforced soon after. St. Peter's School, now the Minster Song School, was subsequently constructed on this open ground, but it was set back from the Minster. The buildings on the south-west side of Vicar Lane were also cleared, forming the College Green in front of St. William's College. Only The Residence (6 Minster Yard) survives of the buildings shown on Baines's 1822 map of York between St. William's College and Minster Gates. Then, in 1903, Deangate was constructed to ease the flow of traffic, further opening up the former precinct. Another part of Minster Yard, now the footpath between Deangate and College Street, was renamed The Queen's Path. The only part of Minster Yard that retains the name is the lane between College Street and Minster Court.

Recently, an opportunity to investigate the precinct arose because the Dean and Chapter of York Minster decided to create a computer link between the Minster, St. William's College and the Minster School. This would require cable trenches to be dug between the three buildings. Although these trenches would be very shallow, at around 0.4m (little more than 1') deep, York Archaeological Trust was asked to monitor this work, which took place during January and February 1999, just in case archaeological features were unearthed.

The most notable building that might be encountered during the excavations was a predecessor of the existing deanery, known as the Old Deanery, which stood close to the south doorway of the Minster. There are numerous references to a Deanery from the 12th century onwards; it probably had a separate kitchen, and Dean Hamilton was given permission to fortify it in 1302. However, the architecture of the Old Deanery building, as shown in later, contemporary drawings, suggests it was constructed in the 16th/early 17th centuries. Furthermore, a report of 1538 states that the Council of the North decided not to meet at the deanery because there was no garden or open air for them. This description does not accord with the Old Deanery, which is mentioned in the 18th century by Francis Drake as having 'large gardens', an assertion supported by contemporary drawings. It is therefore likely that the Old Deanery was the early post-medieval successor to a medieval deanery. It contained 50 rooms, and housed Council of Peers of Charles I in 1640. The Old Deanery is possibly depicted on Speed's 1610 map of York, and appears to have formed part of a group of buildings on Baines's 1822 map. Benson's 1917 reconstruction of the Minster Yard concurs with the evidence from contemporary drawings, whereas more recent reconstructions show the Old Deanery as a smaller building situated a little further south-west. The buildings south of the Minster also included prebendal houses, such as that of Strensall, which were turned into private residences in the 16th century.

As expected, the cable trenches between St William's College and the Minster, which were laid in streets that had been established in the medieval period if not earlier, did not encounter medieval structures. The archaeological evidence was confined to the construction history of

some of the more recent, standing buildings along the route, notably the modern entrance to the Treasurer's House on Chapter House Street.

However, the cable trenches between the Minster and the Minster School produced several archaeological features of interest. There was evidence for several buildings south of the Minster. The occurrence of several, separate medieval demolition deposits, incorporating architectural fragments, brick and tile (1001, 1003, 1005, 1007, 1025 and 1030), indicates that the built up character of Minster Yard (prior to the early 19th century clearance) had developed by the 14th/15th centuries.

In addition, three possible medieval walls were found. Two of the walls (1011 and 1004) appear to correspond to features shown on Benson's plan of Minster Yard, the Old Deanery and the Old Deanery boundary wall respectively. However, drawings of the Old Deanery show it as a 16th/17th-century building. The evidence therefore suggests that this was a post-medieval structure that incorporated re-used medieval building material. The mortar/stone surface 1009 could have been a floor within the Deanery. North-east of the boundary wall lay a brick surface, which was probably a yard in the Strensall prebendary property.

The third wall foundation (1016), found south-east of the site of the Old Deanery, does not appear to coincide with any structures on Benson's plan, and no buildings are depicted in this position on early 19th century drawings or Baines's 1822 map. The presence of a mortar floor (1017) to its north-east, and a pit (1015) to its south-west, suggests that 1016 formed the south-west wall of a substantial medieval building. This structure was evidently demolished when the properties depicted on Baines's plan were established; the boundary wall 1004 was built over its position. Bearing in mind the indications that the Old Deanery was constructed no earlier than the 16th century, it is possible that this medieval building was the predecessor of the Old Deanery. This would be the fourth and earliest position of the deanery identified to date; the latest two (modern) versions were constructed to the north of the Minster.

It therefore seems that the remains of important medieval and post-medieval buildings that stood within the Minster precinct lie less than 0.4m below the present ground surface. This is particularly remarkable when one remembers that medieval buildings elsewhere in York can be 3m or more below the present ground level. The reason for this is probably the presence of York Minster itself. In many other parts of York, it was possible to allow the ground level to rise through the accumulation of rubbish and the construction of successive buildings on top of the remains of their predecessors. This was especially the case along the riversides, where raising the ground level reduced the threat from flooding. The area around York Minster, however, was different. When the Minster was constructed, the ground level in its vicinity became fixed because the ground surface could not rise without submerging the bottom of the building including the doorways. Strange as it may seem, the archaeological impact of York Minster on the surrounding land has been as great as its architectural contribution to the townscape.

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