

YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST
for Excavation and Research Ltd.

SUMMARY REPORT

OBSERVATIONS IN MUSEUM GARDENS, YORK

1972 - 1989

Work undertaken by York Archaeological Trust in Museum Gardens,
York, 1972--March 1989 by David Brinklow, Niall Oakey and Martin
Stockwell.

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 1972, and particularly within the last seven years, York Archaeological Trust has carried out a number of excavations and watching briefs within the Scheduled Ancient Monument of St. Mary's Abbey, York. In every case the earliest deposits encountered were medieval in date, usually sealed by 19th century levelling material. The following notes and accompanying plans represent a provisional digest of the information recovered.

The sites are listed chronologically and are identified by Trust site codes which are also the Yorkshire Museum accession numbers. Codes with numbers in the thousands refer to sites without finds.

1976.1010

SE 59975199

A.B. Sumpter observed the digging of foundation trenches 0.55 - 0.70m deep for the new public toilet block in the south-east corner of Museum Gardens. Over the southern part of the site 0.30m of dark brown topsoil above medium/red-brown sandy silt was revealed.

The northern part of the site contained a compact spread of limestone rubble and mortar at a depth of 0.30m below ground level. This was bounded on the riverward side by the foundations of a NW/SE aligned wall. The foundations were formed of large, roughly-dressed limestone blocks and the feature was thought to be of medieval date. There was no previous record of buildings in this part of the abbey precinct and no function can be attributed to a building here from these observations.

1982.1018

SE 60005211--59995213

David Brinklow observed the digging of a sewer trench 1.75m deep in the north-east corner of Museum Gardens, running from the gateway into King's Manor Lane across the front of the Curator's House.

The remains of two stone walls were cut by the trench at a depth of only 0.10--0.15m beneath the tarmac path surface. The more easterly of these was formed of two courses of well-cut, well-mortared gritstone and limestone blocks set on foundations of cobble and rough limestone rubble. Its total height was 1.60m and it was 0.70--0.80m thick. It aligned well with the known position of the precinct wall of St. Mary's Abbey and is likely to be part of this feature.

The north-westerly wall, represented by foundations only, was of rough limestone rubble and cobbles and was 0.75--0.80m thick. No dating evidence was recovered for either wall.

1984.6

SE 59995210--60005204

A complex arrangement of interlinked medieval drains was observed by David Brinklow for Y.A.T. and Robert White and Dick Welbourn for N.Y.C.C.

Three separate trenches were dug by workmen attempting to clear blockages to the foul drainage from the Yorkshire Museum and the King's Manor. In Trench A the remains of an external corner of a building constructed in magnesian limestone ashlar were recorded, together with the junction of three medieval drains. The major of these ran from the buildings of St. Mary's Abbey and had been greatly disturbed during the insertion of a brick drain of early 19th century date. A second drain of similar proportions ran into the first from the north-east (i.e. from the direction of the Multangular Tower). A third drain of much smaller size and square in section was cut into the northern wall of the first drain and served the Abbot's Lodging (later the King's Manor).

In Trench B, in the grassed area in front of the Multangular Tower, some capping stones of the sewer were removed to reveal that it was complete and in a sound structural condition only 0.34m beneath the turf.

Trench C, at the edge of the tarmac path leading into Museum Gardens from Museum Street, revealed what appeared to be a properly finished end to the stone-built drain, the outflow of which discharged into a circular brick-built 19th century continuation. The upper surface of the stone drain was 1.50m beneath the tarmac here with the base of the drain a further 1.03m below.

1984.1011

A total of eight boreholes sunk in advance of Yorkshire Water Authority Flood Defence construction were observed by David Brinklow. Three were within the area of former swimming pool and were ceased when the pool base was encountered at a depth of 1.75m. The remaining boreholes located possible archaeological layers to a depth of c.3.25m but with no dating evidence.

1985.2

SE 60005210--59975211

Machine-dug trenches to lay a new sewer to the Yorkshire Museum were observed by David Brinklow. A trench (1) ran north-eastwards from the most northerly manhole of 1984.6, turned at right-angles (2) to run towards the Yorkshire Museum and turned again (3) to run parallel to the Museum. Trenches 1 and 2 obliquely cut a medieval limestone wall, running south-west / north-east and faced with roughly-cut limestone ashlar. The wall was exposed for a length of c.11m, was c.1.20m wide and the core comprised angular limestone fragments in mortar. It was based on

a mortar skin which sealed a foundation deposit of cobbles and limestone fragments in silty mortar. An unfinished limestone capital found among the spoil was assumed to have formed part of the wall core.

Traces of cobbles found at a lower level may indicate an earlier surface but no features associated with the wall were seen. Trench 3 contained only material redeposited in the 19th century.

1985.6 Museum Gardens (IBM)

SE 59925211

A trench was excavated under the supervision of Niall Oakey in advance of the erection of a pavilion for an IBM exhibiton on the lawn in front of the Yorkshire Museum. Beneath 0.90m of 19th century dumped material was found the robbed cobble and mortar foundation of a structure connected with the cloister walk or the western range of cloister buildings. This was sealed by undisturbed demolition material.

1985.10 Museum Gardens (Flood Defences)

A number of trenches were observed and excavated under the supervision of Niall Oakey in advance of Yorkshire Water Authority Flood Defence construction.

a)SE 59765207 Removal of a tree against the western precinct wall revealed its original foundations at a depth of 8.80m OD. They were overlain by a crude post-medieval rebuild at 9.80m OD (possibly associated with the Civil War siege of 1644) and topped with Victorian and modern rebuilds.

b)SE 59775207--59845205 Observation of a machine-cut trench showed features representing the construction of the swimming-baths in the south-west of Museum Gardens and the creation of an ornamental garden between the Hospitium and the Esplanade in the 19th century, but no structures associated with the abbey were found.

c)SE 59845204--59855203 Observation of a machine cut trench revealed a wall of dressed limestone aligned NNE/SSW. This is interpreted as the eastern wall of a passage down to a gateway through the southern precinct wall giving access to the river. Two further limestone walls on a parallel alignment and at right angles to the southern precinct wall were recorded further eastwards. A well shaft of 19th century date, re-using medieval limestone and gritstone masonry, was also observed within this trench.

d)SE 59845204--59865203 Limited excavation revealed the heavily robbed remains of the southern precinct wall, bonded at the western end of the trench to a continuation of the NNE/SSW wall seen in Trench c. Evidence of medieval activity north of the precinct wall was recorded.

e)SE 59855203--59865203 Observation and limited excavation revealed the remains of medieval walls of limestone and tile parallel to the southern precinct wall, presumably belonging to buildings abutting the inside of the wall. These remains were not

disturbed by subsequent construction work and have been reburied.

f)SE 59825205 Observation of a machine-cut trench to remove a modern drain showed that it had disturbed the southern precinct wall of the abbey.

g)SE 59795206 Observation of a machine-cut trench revealed the robbed remains of the southern precinct wall.

h)SE 59835207--59855205 Excavation of a narrow trench to a depth of c0.50m disturbed only deposits associated with the use of the gardens in the 19th and 20th centuries.

1986.19. Museum Gardens (Tempest Anderson Hall) SE 59955216

An area was excavated under the supervision of Niall Oakey to facilitate the construction of a viewing platform outside a Museum Gallery and the elimination of rising damp within the Museum. After the removal of soil cast up from the Wellbeloved excavations of the 1820s, part of the southern and eastern walls of the south transept of the late 13th century abbey church were exposed. Investigation showed that the foundations of the eastern wall reused masonry from the earlier church. The mortared cobble and limestone raft of the apsed south transept of the earlier 11th abbey church was also exposed and recorded.

1986.1010 SE 59965212

Construction work associated with new toilets for the Yorkshire Museum which was observed by David Brinklow revealed structural fragments of an abbey building immediately beneath the floor slabs of the Museum basement. These were as recorded on the Wellbeloved and RCHM plans of the abbey and were undisturbed by the works.

1987.12 SE 60005202

A trench dug to release a trapped video camera was observed by David Brinklow. 2.20m of dumped material, probably of 19th century date but incorporating debris from St. Mary's Abbey, was noted. This may have been used deliberately to fill the City Ditch following the excavations of the abbey ruins in the late 1820s.

1987.16 Museum Gardens (Esplanade Gate) SE 59805205

An area dug away by gardeners to insert a ramp entrance to Museum Gardens from the Esplanade was observed by David Brinklow. Re-used medieval stonework was recorded c.0.10m beneath the steps which were to be replaced. It had almost certainly been used in the construction of the 19th century swimming bath boundary wall.

1987.17 Museum Gardens (Flood Defences)

SE 59855205

A trench dug by machine to construct a pumping station for the Yorkshire Water Authority was observed by David Brinklow and Niall Oakey. A surface of limestone, brick and tile was noted sloping down towards the river and is interpreted as the floor of the passage down to the river, the east wall of which was recorded in 1985.10, trenches c) and d).

1987.23 Museum Gardens (Access Road)

SE 59835208--59795209

The machine removal of material from the roadway into Museum Gardens past the gardeners' accommodation undertaken to improve the gradient was observed by Keith Emerick. Re-used medieval masonry incorporated in the external walls of the 19th century swimming-bath complex was noted.

1987.1002 Museum Gardens (sewer manhole)

SE 60005204

A new manhole cover was inserted above a manhole constructed at the south end of the medieval sewer in 1984. No further archaeological evidence was forthcoming.

1989.2 Museum Gardens (ice cream kiosk drainage)

SE 59955201

During the cutting of one of a series of three circular drainage sumps close to the ice-cream kiosk a length of limestone ashlar wall was recorded, aligned north-east/south-west. Only the internal face of the wall was seen surviving to 8.76m OD with a brick-faced offset 0.62m beneath the surviving top. A series of mortar floors abutting the offset were removed by the contractors. The base of foundation was located 0.53m beneath the offset. The wall is believed to relate to a medieval building which has not previously been recorded.

1988/89.19 Yorkshire Museum, Lift Building

SE 59985211

A complex sequence of structures forming part of St. Mary's Abbey was recorded and partially removed during the construction of a lift building to allow access to the upper floor of the Yorkshire Museum. The site, immediately adjacent to the basement entrance to the Yorkshire Museum, was partially covered by a large earth mound thought to represent the spoil from Wellbeloved's excavations of 1827--8.

The upper 2m of the mound appeared to be re-deposited material but beneath this, at 16.36m OD, upstanding walls of Abbey buildings were found. Some of these remains had been exposed and planned during the 19th century excavations and belonged to the school and dormitory building assigned to the period of building undertaken by Abbot John de Gilling in the early 14th century. Contemporary with these features was a stone-built drain which ran diagonally beneath the building to join the drainage system previously recorded in 1984 (1984.6 Trench A).

The foundations of earlier, probably 12th century, walls were recorded beneath the floor of the school. These incorporated two re-used stones which had fragments of painted plaster on their surfaces.

1988.1046 Museum Gardens (Hospitium path-edging) SE 59855207

A surface of limestone and cobbles at 8.17m OD was recorded by Martin Stockwell in a trench 0.45m deep dug to insert path edging on the eastern side of the Hospitium. Its position is consistent with interpretation as a roadway aligned through the archway adjacent to the Hospitium to the gate in the precinct wall beyond.

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York Archaeological Trust, June 1989.