

## EXCAVATION AT ST MARY'S ABBEY, YORK

The opportunity for excavation arose as the result of an application by IBM Ltd to hold an exhibition of information technology in St Mary's Abbey, Museum Gardens, York from 1st-28th July 1985. The whole of the gardens constitute a Scheduled Monument and Scheduled Monument Consent was given by the Department of the Environment on 3rd April 1985, subject to a prior geophysical survey being undertaken and on condition that the minimal below-ground disturbance arising from the exhibition be undertaken as an archaeological excavation by York Archaeological Trust.

On 8th May 1985, following the completion of a resistivity survey by the Undergraduate School of Studies in Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford (a report on the results is included) and an aerial infra-red scan by Thermoscan (DBM) Ltd of Shaftesbury, Dorset, a team from York Archaeological Trust began the excavation of a trench 2.00m by 2.00m to house the air conditioning plant and computer terminal system for the pavilion housing the exhibition. The trench was located (Fig 1) on the terraced lawn in front of the entrance to the Yorkshire Museum, and the excavation was directed by Niall Oakey, Area Supervisor with the York Archaeological Trust, with the assistance of Michael Burley and Graham Coates, excavation assistants. The trench was excavated to a depth of 1.20m and its base protected by tarpaulin prior to the deposition of limestone hardcore necessary to support the IBM installations.

Finds from the excavation, numbered 1985.6, are stored by York Archaeological Trust pending detailed examination.

### Description of contexts (Fig 2)

The earliest context recovered was 1017, a truncated structure formed of fragments of limestone ashlar and tiles covered on its surface with compact white mortar. At the northern corner of the trench an intrusion 0.08m in depth had cut this context, while deeper disturbances had been made to the south and east. No original edge or facing to the masonry was recovered in the area excavated.

Above 1017 in the eastern half of the trench (and also cutting it) was 1016, a thick (0.43m maximum) layer of loose greyish-white mortar containing many medium and large fragments of limestone masonry, occasional fragments of tile and moderate inclusions of medium brown loam. Animal bones and a small number of medieval sherds were recovered from this context. Sealing both 1016 and 1017 was a brown sandy loam (1015) including lenses of mortar, moderate flecking by mortar fragments and occasional small pieces of limestone. Sherds recovered from 1015 represented both the Roman period (including a sherd of Samian carrying a spout in the form of a lion's head) and the Medieval period, and oyster shells and animal bones were also found.

A small area of dark brown sandy loam (1012) including occasional flecks of charcoal and mortar overlay 1015 at the southern corner of the trench and included sherds of medieval date, while at the northern side of the trench 1015 was overlain by 1013, a medium brown sandy loam containing frequent flecks of mortar and occasional large pieces of limestone masonry and fragments of tile and brick. During excavation it was thought that 1013 filled an irregular cut, 1014. Three architectural fragments were observed and retained from among the pieces of limestone masonry in context 1013. One bore a mason's mark in the form of an isosceles triangle containing crossed lines which was similar to a type already noted at St Mary's Abbey (RCHMY 4, 22). Other finds recovered from this context included animal bone, oyster shells, glass and sherds of medieval pottery.

1010, a thick (0.35m maximum) layer of clean medium orange-brown clay containing lenses of orange sand covered the eastern half of the trench, thickening towards the east. It yielded oyster shell, occasional bone and sherds of Roman and medieval pottery in addition to a drum-headed bone pin of a Roman type. A sample of this anomalous context was taken in the hope that later examination may disclose its source. A shallow lens of brown silty loam (1011) overlay 1010 in the extreme eastern corner of the trench, while to the west a thick (maximum thickness 0.30m) layer of dark brown silty loam (1008) containing occasional large fragments of limestone masonry, moderate flecks of white mortar and occasional fragments of tile seemed to fill an irregular cut, 1009. Animal bone and some sherds of medieval fabrics were recovered from 1008, as was a

large piece of limestone chamfered on two edges.

Overlying 1010, 1011 and 1008 was 1007, formed of loose white mortar including frequent small pieces and occasional larger fragments of limestone with moderate amounts of brick and tile fragments. This context varied greatly in thickness, reaching a maximum of 0.40m in places, while only surviving as a thin lens elsewhere. Some of the larger limestone fragments showed signs of having been dressed, but they had been broken into small pieces. Pieces of wall-plaster were also found in this context in some abundance, the majority being white with only one coloured (red) fragment. Other material recovered included animal bone, oyster shells and pottery of both medieval and post-medieval types. Similar material was recovered from the succeeding context 1006, which, like its predecessor, varied in thickness and covered the whole area of the trench. It comprised dark brown friable sandy loam, including occasional medium fragments of tile and limestone, and was overlain by 1005, a dirty orange-brown compacted clay including some fragments of tile and some dark brown loam; the latter representing root disturbance. The mixture of finds was much the same as for 1006 and 1007.

The succeeding context (1004) comprised friable medium brown silty loam including frequent small fragments of white mortar, occasional medium-sized fragments of limestone and occasional tile fragments and produced animal bone and sherds of post-medieval pottery. It was sealed by a layer of medium brown sandy loam (1003) which included some medium brown clay, moderate amounts of large and medium fragments of brick and tile and moderate small pieces of limestone. In addition to animal bone, oyster shell and sherds of medieval and post-medieval fabrics, some pieces of clay pipe were found. Clay pipe fragments were also found in layer 1002, a very dark brown friable loam which formed bedding for the turf 1001.

#### Interpretation

The small area of 1017 uncovered meant that it was very difficult to reach any conclusions as to the original use of this feature, but it was located either within the buildings of the west range of the cloister or in the passage at the end of this range.

Apart from 1017 no evidence was found for structures or floors. It

is probable that all the succeeding contexts represent layers of deliberate dumping and that features which were interpreted as cuts during excavation are just as likely to represent tip-lines. However, it is more difficult to give a date to the dumping or even to ascertain whether all the dumping took place at one time (i.e. as backfill to the excavations of the 1820s prior to the laying out of the gardens around the museum of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society) or over a number of years.

The small size of the trench and the paucity of the finds make it hazardous to reach any conclusions on these points and it should be noted that many of the layers contain a mixture of datable material from widely different periods.

1016, by the nature of its position relative to structure 1017 and by its composition, gave the appearance of a layer of demolition-derived material perhaps resulting from the initial destruction or robbing of the structure associated with 1017. The interim assignment of all material recovered from this context to the medieval period may support this idea, but excavation of a larger area would be necessary to confirm or deny this hypothesis. If 1016 does represent an undisturbed demolition layer above part of the medieval structures it would have interesting repercussions for the trust placed on the reliability of the plans produced as a result of the excavations of the 1820's (Wellbeloved, 1829), for the amount of disturbance these excavations were thought to have caused and for the survival of undisturbed occupation layers within the buildings of the Abbey precinct.

The remaining layers are consistent with interpretation as dumping in order to create a level terrace for the lawn in front of the building now used as the Yorkshire Museum, but context 1010 is anomalous. It was much cleaner than succeeding or preceding contexts and also contained no fragments of tile, brick or limestone masonry, suggesting that it originated in a different source than other contexts excavated. Future environmental examination may determine this source.

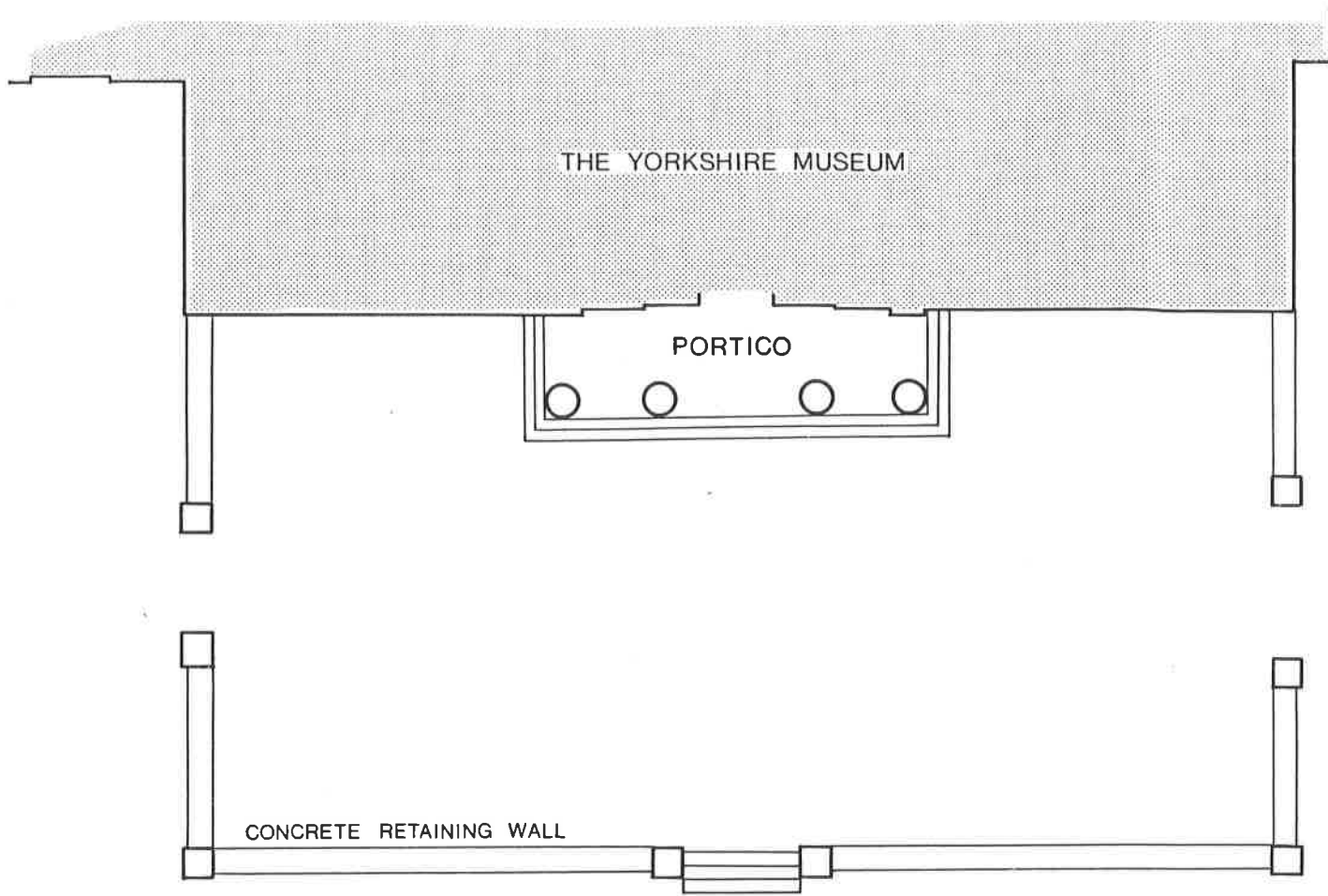
### Conclusion

A small excavation in the grounds of St Mary's Abbey, York has confirmed the conclusion resulting from a resistivity survey; namely that the surviving remains of the west range and cloister walk of the Abbey are buried below c.1.00m of overburden and no disturbance was caused by the IBM pavilion. The discovery of undisturbed demolition debris sealing these remains raises the possibility that undisturbed occupation layers remain in the Abbey buildings.

### Bibliography

RCHMY 4, 1975. Royal Commission of Historical Monuments, England, An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the City of York. 4. Outside the City Walls East of the Ouse (HMSO)  
Wellbeloved, Rev. C.1829 'Account of the ancient and present state of the Abbey of St Mary, York, and of the discoveries made in the recent excavations'. Vetusta Monumenta, V

Niall Oakey  
Area Supervisor  
York Archaeological Trust



 Excavation

