

York Friargate Community Archaeology: 2013 Interim Report

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York's Friargate Community Archaeology Project (FCAP) came into existence at the end of 2012. At that time, planning permission had been granted for a new extension to the Quaker Meeting House located on Friargate in the city. The property stands in an Area of Archaeological Importance and the proposed development necessitated recording and demolition of a garden wall and investigation of any deposits threatened by the building work.

FCAP is a group consisting of members of the York Meeting, the University of the Third Age and other interested volunteers. The group, led by Dr Andrew Jones, is working under the guidance of York Archaeological Trust (YAT).

Site history

Today's Quaker Meeting House is the latest in a series of buildings which have stood on this site since early York Quakers first met there in the mid-17th century. Friargate itself is one of the few remaining medieval 'water lanes' running from Castlegate downhill to the River Ouse.

The name Friargate refers to the important Franciscan Friary established c. 1243 on land granted by Henry II. Before that, the site formed the western bailey of York Castle which was itself built on land cleared of Anglo-Saxon occupation by William the Conqueror. The only remaining trace of the Friary, which was dissolved in 1538, is part of a precinct wall which is today within the basement area of the Meeting House.

Over the years there have been many changes to the Meeting House buildings, including when Clifford Street was created in 1883 and in 1979 when the then larger of two Meeting Houses was demolished. In 1983 building work revealed two human skeletons of unknown age which were re-interred in a small coffin; a notice on the meeting house wall close by indicated the site of the reburial. Recovery of the coffin, from the area due to be disturbed, was a priority for FCAP.

The Meeting House has also gained and lost areas of garden land between Friargate and Tower Street. Part of the garden was possibly associated with Castlegate House, built by York's John Carr in 1763. Another FCAP priority was to shed light on the history of local land ownership through exploration of the wall which divides the current garden area, and related historical research.

Preparing the Archaeological site at Friargate

FCAP volunteers cleared shrubs, removed two small trees and collected artefacts from the surface. Over 60 FCAP volunteers attended a health and safety training session run by YAT Community Archaeologist, Jon Kenny. Site security fencing was installed.

Wall recording and demolition by FCAP volunteers

A photographic survey of the site was completed by FCAP volunteer Keith Knight, a conservation architect and member of Friargate Quaker Meeting. Drawings (1:20 scale) were made of north, east and south surfaces of the garden wall to be demolished; all limestone blocks and tiles were recorded individually, areas of plaster noted and samples of bricks were measured (Fig. 1). The wall clearly predates the meeting house wall it abuts, a short section having been rebuilt. It also lines

up with a butt joint in the precinct boundary wall inside the building. The wall can be seen on Nathaniel Whittock's and John Storey's prospects of York, as well as on the 1852 Ordnance Survey map of the city and is probably indicated on earlier maps (Fig. 2).

The wall, which contained a large number of limestone ashlar, presumed to be reused stone from the Franciscan Friary, was demolished brick by brick, stone by stone, by FCAP volunteers using hand tools. Many hours were spent removing mortar so that the bricks could be reused (Fig. 3). Samples of mortar and finds (mollusc shells, animal bone, *etc.*) were recovered during demolition.

Test pit excavations

Three test pits, roughly 50cm x 50cm and 2m deep, were dug by workmen on the site to assess local soil conditions related to construction. These pits were observed by Kurt Hunter-Mann, YAT Field Officer, who produced photographs and notes on the stratigraphy. FCAP's recording of archaeological deposits on the site follows a similar format.

Area excavation and sondages

Excavation was limited to within the footprint of the proposed building. FCAP was informed that piling and a concrete raft would be used and that wall foundations would be shallow. All earth excavated by the group was sieved using garden sieves (4mm or 8mm aperture) to ensure thorough collection of finds. In addition, 20 litre-samples from all major deposits, including garden soils and earth from the engineers' test pits, were wet-sieved on 1mm mesh. Unprocessed 2kg samples of selected deposits were retained for further laboratory analysis as necessary.

Much digging activity focussed on the recovery of re-interred human remains (Fig. 4). The coffin was discovered by FCAP volunteers; YAT conservator, Mags Felter, supervised its lifting and opening. The bones are now being studied by students under the guidance of Dr Malin Holst of the Department of Archaeology, University of York. FCAP volunteer Dr David Klinge made a preliminary assessment of the human bones, identifying the remains of one adult male with dental problems, and a second immature individual. Associated publicity led to local builders from 1983 coming forward. Peter Shaw recalled the skeletons being found under a corridor and during building of a new flight of steps to the garden from the terrace. Jim Collier, a carpenter, confirmed that he had made the small plywood coffin.

Sondages were excavated to investigate the depth of the wall across the site and the foundations of the meeting house. The garden wall was found to have been built on a foundation of broken tile and sand. A beautifully constructed, steeply-pitching brick drain was found towards the bottom of trench, with a disarticulated human humerus nearby. Miscellaneous finds, including some fragments of pottery, are now being assessed.

Plans of the excavations were made by FCAP volunteer Ruth Soames with help from YAT Community Archaeologist, Jon Kenny. Local artist Brenda Tyler, a member of Friargate Meeting and a stalwart FCAP volunteer, produced a series of watercolour paintings showing progress of the project.

Two open days were held during the excavation, with a session of archaeological activities for children being run by FCAP volunteers Victoria Crapper and Chloe Brown. Children and young people from Friargate Quaker Meeting visited on several occasions and helped with finds-washing and other tasks. We were also assisted by a group of Kenyan dancers visiting York.



Figure 1 A member of the FCAP excavation team works on the careful demolition of the garden wall.



Figure 2 (Above left) The 1852 OS map shows the Meeting House site in detail (encircled).

Figure 3 (Left) Bricks of varying sizes and ages were cleaned of mortar.

Figure 4 (Above) Examining one of the re-interred skeletons excavated by the team.

Watching brief work by YAT

By early September 2013 the site was handed over to building contractors and YAT staff carried out a watching brief while foundation piles and wall foundations were built. This work was overseen by Toby Kendall, YAT Field Officer.

Conclusion

FCAP's work continues. Investigation of finds and soil samples taken from the site is underway, as is historical research. A final report will be prepared which will of course include a more detailed history of the site as well as full archaeological observations.

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