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35 FOSSGATE

YORK

**REPORT ON A WATCHING BRIEF DURING
REFURBISHMENT OF THE HISTORIC
BUILDING**

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JUNE 1998

1. Introduction

Number 35 Fossgate is a substantial structure of brick with stone dressings under slate roofs. It lies on the SW side of Fossgate on the NW side of the River Foss adjoining Atkinson's bridge of 1811 on its NW side (Fig. 1). The property currently consists of a ground-floor shop with two stories of accommodation over: there are basements to the SW end only. There is a yard to the S, enclosed on three sides by brick outbuildings, which is open to Fossgate on the NE side.

In the Spring of 1998 refurbishment was undertaken by GB Developments with a view to converting the upper floors to residential accommodation; the ground floor was to be refitted as a shop. This short report describes work undertaken at the request of Mr Graham Butt who was concerned that no archaeological information should be lost during the refurbishment works. A complete investigation of the building was coupled with a watching brief on excavations in the basement for drains and other services.

A limited amount of documentary research was carried out to put the findings in context. Under the circumstances only historic map evidence (in the Local Studies Collection at York Central Library) could be consulted although it is likely – given the position of the building close to a noted bridge – that pictorial sources would also be helpful. None of the C16, C17, or C18 maps examined showed anything other than a conventional street frontage on this site although interestingly Speed in 1610 appears to show an open yard in approximately the same place as the existing area.

Horsley's map of 1694 depicts the old Foss Bridge – a structure of three round-headed arches – but not, in any detail, the buildings adjoining it. In fact the first information on the use of No. 35 is to be found in Sunter's map of 1848 where the building is shown as the King's Arms Hotel; an identification confirmed on the 1852 OS map. The very large number of heated rooms, some still with doors carrying painted numbers on original finishes (see below) strongly suggests that the property was remodelled as an inn in the early C19. As will be seen there has been very little external alteration since the early years of the last century although one feature which has been lost is a quadrant of four steps up to the main door which has since been replaced with a concrete ramp.

2. The Basement

The basement rooms are in an irregular L-shaped plan with an external stair in the re-entrant angle (Fig. 2). An internal stair formerly occupied the NW end of the narrow passage which divides the two NE rooms from the range of three rooms to the SW.

All the walls are of brick on rubble stone footings. The bricks throughout are deep red in colour and approximately 2" in thickness: they are characteristic of late C17 and early C18 work in the City. The rubble is chiefly limestone and almost certainly derives from demolished mediaeval and post-mediaeval structures since it incorporates some ashlar fragments. No worked or moulded stone was seen. The footings were about 300-400mm deep and projected up to 100mm from the face of the wall.

Excavations for drains in the floors of the basement rooms revealed a homogenous deposit of brown sandy loam with numerous brick and tile fragments which had itself been extensively disturbed by later drain-digging. No pottery was found in this material but the character of the brick and tile suggested that it immediately predated the erection of the C17/C18 house itself and may even represent a grading of the site before work commenced. Rather surprisingly levels indicate that the south-west range of rooms is not a basement at all: their floor level is almost precisely the same as ground level in the narrow external passage which lies between this building and the Merchant Adventurers' Hall to the SW.

The increasing depth of the material to the NE, into which the basement rooms in that direction have been dug, is related to the bridge: it has probably resulted from the construction of a ramp to the earlier three-arched earlier bridge over the Foss shown on C18 maps. The rebuilding of this area of the upper floors of the property in the early C19 (described below) is almost certainly linked to the construction of the present Foss Bridge in c.1811. In the C18 its predecessor may have influenced levels in No. 35 in much the same way: the basements have been dug into the bridge ramp giving cellar accommodation for very little cost.

Some early arrangements have survived in the basements. The NW room retains two vaulted bays (expressed externally as a small single-storey range under a pentice roof) and a stone-flagged floor. There is a comparatively modern air-raid shelter of engineering brick under a concrete ceiling in the SE corner of this room. Each of the rooms on the NW side retains a laid brick floor: that to the north also has C18 and C19 brick and stone benches on three sides. From beneath it can be seen that the ground floor structure has been extensively renewed except in the area over the passage to the former internal stair: here a few wide boards of early C19 date are visible. Principal and secondary joists are usually of re-used timber incorporating a wide range of mediaeval and post-mediaeval joints but particularly mortises for close studding of probable C16 or C17 date. Some of the principal joists have seen two earlier uses before they reached their present position in the early C18. Other joinery work includes fitted shelves in alcoves between piers supporting ground-floor fireplaces: these, from their construction, must have been built with the house.

3. The Upper Floors

There is a clearly-marked distinction between the fine brickwork, in neatly-jointed Flemish bond, of the NW range of the building and the darker, less regular, brickwork of the rear range. This difference marks a difference in date. The rear range is early C18 to a point about 12 courses above first-floor window head height; thereafter it is rough work of the early C19. The remainder of the building appears to be much finer work, also of the early C19, although the internal walls are at least a century older from which it would appear that this is little more than a re-fronting made about the time of the construction of the new Foss Bridge in c.1811. Thus the building preserves the floor-plans of the early C18 while externally appearing to date from about a century later. The building was also refenestrated in the early C19: the windows have flat or slightly cambered brick arches to the rear range and stuccoed wedge lintels with fanned keyblocks to the main range. Only the basement level of the rear range has retained C18 segmental arches in brick to the windows and door. The building now has hipped roofs of early C19 character but with considerable evidence for modern renewal.

Internally no features earlier than the early C19 were seen. These chiefly comprise cast-iron hob grates in plain surrounds, doors of four moulded panels in moulded architraves, and two closed string stairs with stick balusters, turned newels, and slender ramped handrails. Some wide floor boards have survived at second floor level. The doors to the principal rooms along the street frontage are of six moulded panels.

Early paint finishes were of particular interest. They chiefly survived at second floor level where the white plastered walls had received coats of pale blue, or red ochre, or yellow ochre distemper. Skirting boards had been painted chocolate brown while doors and their architraves had been woodgrained. All of these finishes seem to be in primary positions and since they are typical of the late C18 and early C19 – when woodgraining in particular was regaining some of the popularity it had lost around the middle of the C18 – there seems no reason to doubt that they are original.

4. The Outbuildings

In general the outbuildings are of early C19 brick although the walls on the boundary with the garden of the Merchant Adventurers' Hall to the south appear to include the remains of much-altered C18 sheds and buildings. On the river frontage the outbuildings make use, as a footing, of an earlier stone structure at a lower level. This building is of reasonably good masonry and has been enveloped by the bridge ramp: it may be the remains of a late mediaeval or post-mediaeval riverside warehouse.

5. Conclusions

This building, though not in any way outstanding, has several features of interest; in particular the unaltered basement and the surviving paint finishes to the second floor rooms. The programme of refurbishment which led to this investigation is likely to leave most of these details intact: the basement is to be returned to use for storage, while dry-lining of the wall surfaces throughout will preserve original finishes. Stairs and fireplaces, where they survive, are to remain. 35 Fossgate is a good example of a purpose-built rooming-house or inn of the C18/C19 century, complete with contemporary outbuildings.

Colin Briden

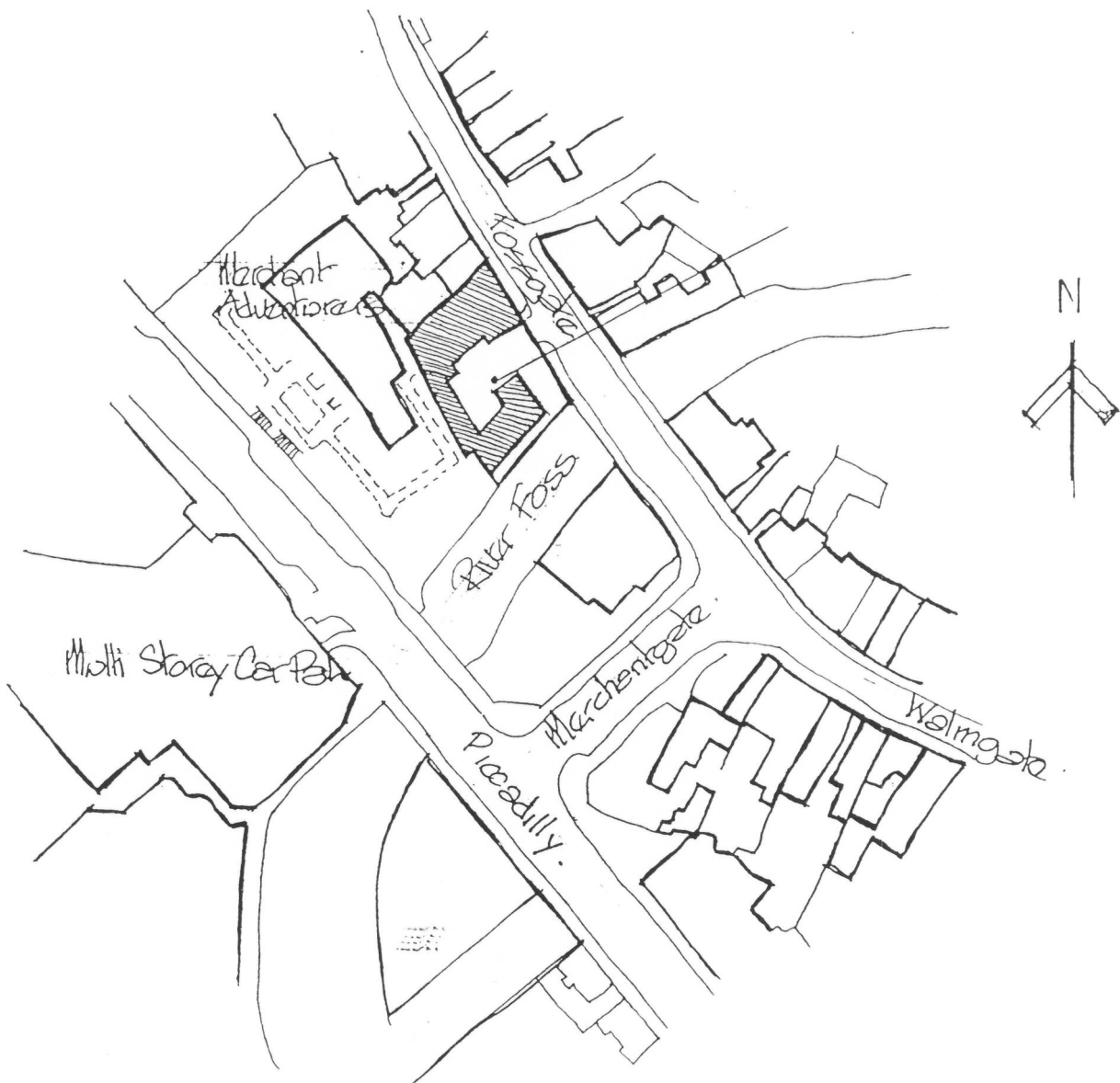
June 1998

Figures

1. Location Plan
2. Basement Plan

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LOCATION PLAN

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BASEMENT PLAN

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