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YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST



THE BUNKER SHELLEY HOUSE ACOMB, YORK

Report on an Archaeological
Watching Brief

by Gareth Dean

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SHELLEY HOUSE,
ACOMB,
YORK**

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ABSTRACT

In October 2003 the York Archaeological Trust monitored the excavation of trenches and an area for the construction of a disabled access ramp at the former ROC Bunker, Acomb, York. The trenches exposed the foundations of the brick structure that formed the main entrance into the bunker at the eastern end and the former emergency exit at the western end. The disabled ramp exposed details of the construction of the mound which covers the whole structure.

1. INTRODUCTION

In October 2003 York Archaeological Trust maintained an archaeological watching brief during the hand and machine digging of trenches, at the former ROC Bunker, Shelley House, Acomb, York (NGR SE580515; Figure 1). The bunker at Acomb is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (No.32702). It is located on the north side of Acomb Road and was located behind a building called Shelley House that has subsequently been demolished as part of the redevelopment of the site by Barratt homes. The watching brief was commissioned by English Heritage and the work on site was carried out by Wiles and Maguire.

All site records are currently stored by York Archaeological Trust .

Abbreviations.

NGR	National Grid Reference
YORYM	York Archaeological Trust and Yorkshire Museum
BGL	Below Ground Level
YAT	York Archaeological Trust
ROC	Royal Observer Corps

2. METHODOLOGY

The watching brief entailed recording any deposits, features, or structures encountered in the works. The notes, including measured sketches, were entered into a site notebook and processed into a form where they could be used for the preparation of this report during October 2003. The trenches to assess the foundations of the buildings were excavated by hand and were approximately 0.6m wide and up to 0.6m deep. The trench for the disabled ramp, excavated mechanically ran along the western end of the mound covering the whole structure starting from outside the doorway to the emergency exit and then ran across its southern edge. The area for the ramp along the eastern edge of the mound was 3m wide and was excavated in a series of broad steps approximately 2m wide, with each step lower than the previous one. The ramp was excavated to a depth ranging from 1.05m to 1.6m. The locations of all drawn sections and areas of interest were measured in and subsequently transferred to a large scale Ordnance Survey digital map. The work was monitored by an archaeologist until the completion of the work.

3. BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The watching brief on the bunker was carried out as it had the potential to add to our understanding of its construction. The Royal Observer Corps had its origins in the First World War with visual observation posts constructed as part of the defence of London. From 1925 these posts were manned by the Observer, later Royal Observer Corps, whose main function was to track aircraft movements through a network of observation posts across the country. In the inter-war period there were a number of technical advances to aid visual observations, first by sound



detection and later by Radio Detection Finding (RDF), tracking aircraft from coastal Chain Home Stations (Lowry 1996, 52). In York, a Second World War ROC post was constructed on the Knavesmire in 1943 and part of this structure also still exists and is used by a local sports club (<http://www.subbrit.org.uk/rsg/sites/a/acomb/>).

After the Second World War the ROC was stood down in 1945, but it was soon realised that Britain's security was still under threat. The partition of Europe, the Berlin blockade in 1948-9, the testing by the Soviet Union in September 1949 of its first nuclear fission bomb and the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, all contributed to rising international tension that led to a reappraisal and renewal of Britain's defences. The ROC was reformed in 1947 and initially maintained its role of the observation of aircraft, but by 1955 it became apparent that it was of little use in reporting high speed jet aircraft and its role was modified to the monitoring of nuclear bomb explosions and the monitoring of nuclear fall-out (Lowry 1996, 126-7). A programme of constructing a network of underground posts was begun and was largely complete by 1965 (Cocroft 2001).

The bunker at Acomb, opened in 1961, was built to replace the World War II surface structure at the Knavesmire as part of the revision of the role of the Royal Observer Corps in reporting nuclear explosions and monitor radioactive fallout (www.coldwarbunker.org.uk). The bunker acted as the headquarters for 20 Group that was an amalgamation of the two Second World War groups, 9 and 10, that covered the Yorkshire area in 1953. South Yorkshire was controlled from Leeds and designated 18 Group. In 1968 a further reorganisation saw 18 Group disbanded and the areas it covered in the East and West Riding were transferred to 20 Group in York. Areas within the northern part of 20 Group were transferred to Durham, and those in Lincolnshire were transferred to 15 Group in Lincoln (<http://www.subbrit.org.uk/rsg/sites/a/acomb/>).

The bunker at Acomb consists of a two-storey brick and reinforced concrete structure with a basement. Internal dividing walls are of concrete block-work; most of the structure is protected with an outer brick shell and three layers of asphalt. Apart from the 1st floor entrance block, commonly known as an 'Aztec Temple', the whole structure was covered with an earthen mound to a minimum of 0.9m thick to provide some protection against blast and radiation (www.coldwarbunker.org.uk). The original emergency hatch at the eastern end of the mound was replaced with a doorway above ground (<http://www.subbrit.org.uk/rsg/sites/a/acomb/>).

The end of the Cold War in 1989 resulted in the closure and disposal of around 150 major defence installations; most of the emergency government facilities maintained by the Home Office were also released (Cocroft 2001). The bunker at Acomb was fully active until September 1991. The former RCHME began a programme of recording of these sites through the 1990s. In 2001 a review of the sites identified was undertaken by English Heritage's Monuments Protection Programme (*ibid.*). In this report the Bunker at Acomb was considered to be the best surviving example of either surface or semi-sunken ROC Group Headquarters in the country as it retained much of its original equipment. As a result of this it was decided that the site should be restored and opened as a museum. It was as part of the restoration project that the watching brief was undertaken.

4. THE WATCHING BRIEF

4.1 Foundation evaluation trenches

The exploratory trench excavated against the foundations of the main entrance structure and the emergency exit exposed their brick foundations. Abutting these foundations was the material

from which the mound of the bunker was constructed; it consisted of a firm-compact, mid orange brown clay silt at 0.6m BGL. This was overlain by 0.6m of firm, dark grey silt sand topsoil. A trench was also excavated along the side of the concrete wall that ran adjacent to the stairs leading up to the main entrance of the structure which exposed the same sequence of deposits.

4.2 Disabled Access Ramp

The disabled access ramp gave a good profile of the material used to construct the mound of the bunker. The earliest deposit exposed was on the south side of the mound where a possible buried soil level was visible in the south-facing section of the mound. This consisted of a firm, brown silty clay which was overlain by the initial layer of material for the mound, a 0.6m thick layer of firm-compact mid grey clay silt that had occasional fragments of brick rubble and clinker within it. Overlying this was the firm-compact, mid orange brown clay silt that was between 0.75m and 1.6m thick and appeared to form the main material used in the construction of the mound.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The watching brief showed that the mound for the bunker was constructed from layers of silty sand clays sealed by a layer of turfed top soil. A layer of dark grey silt sand at the base of the southern section cut for the disabled ramp may have represented the ground level prior to the construction of the bunker.

6. LIST OF SOURCES

6.1 Printed Works

Cocroft, W.D. 2001. *Cold War Monuments: an assessment by the Monuments Protection Programme English Heritage*, English Heritage

Lowry, B. (ed.), 1995. *20th Century Defences in Britain an Introductory Guide*, CBA York

6.2 Web Sites

<http://www.coldwarbunker.org.uk>

<http://www.subbrit.org.uk/rsg/sites/a/acomb/>

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Watching brief	Gareth Dean MA
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Plate 1: SW corner of main entrance block showing foundation trench

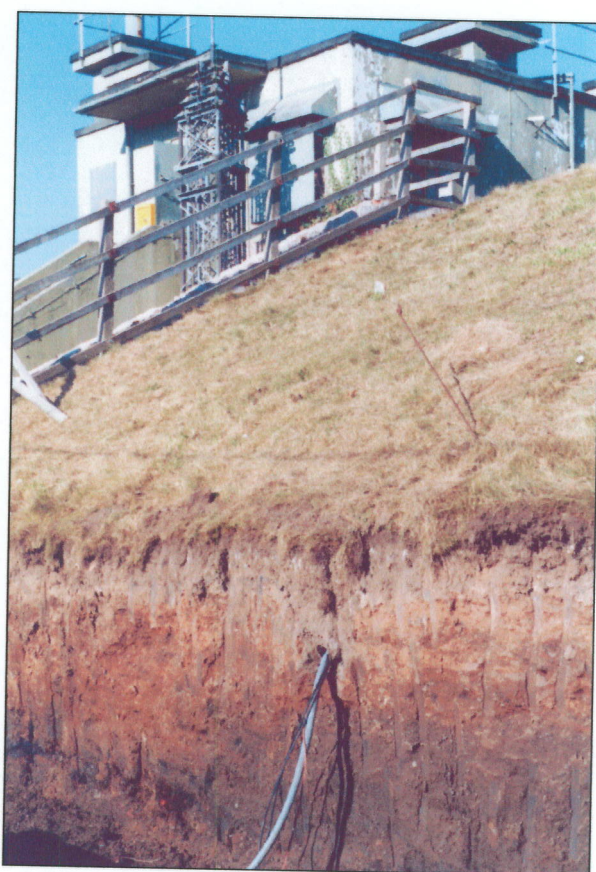


Plate 2: SW aspect of disabled access ramp trench showing profile of mound



Plate 3: SE view of the rear of the main entrance structure



Plate 4: General view of the bunker looking north



Plate 5: View of the upper gallery of the main control room



Plate 6: General view of the plant equipment room for the ventilation system

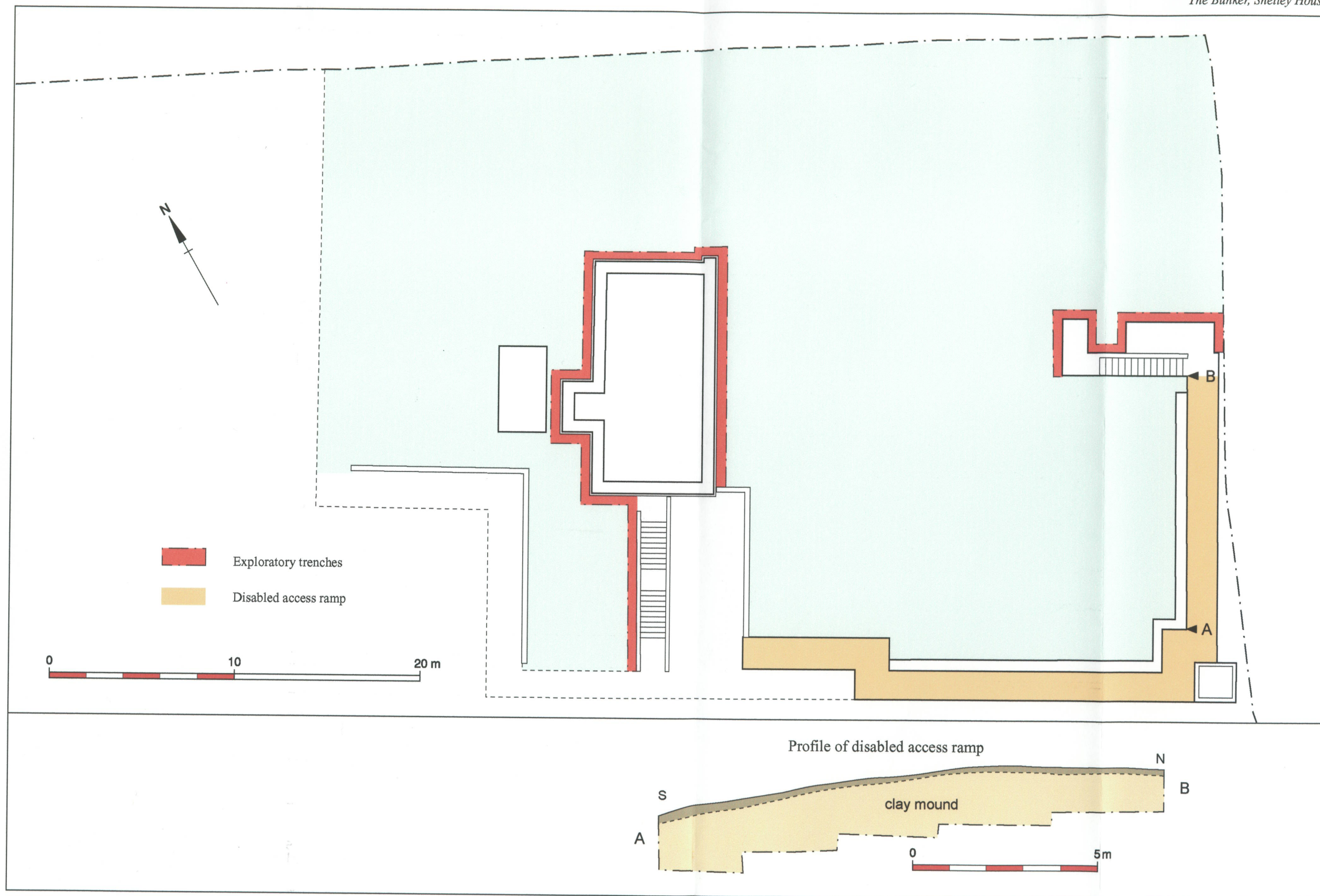


Fig. 2 Plan of exploratory trenches and profile of disabled access ramp