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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION AT  
1-3 LEADING POST STREET, SCARBOROUGH

by TREVOR PEARSON



Frontispiece; The site in 1978,  
before demolition of the buildings

SCARBOROUGH ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
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## AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION AT 1-3 LEADING POST STREET, SCARBOROUGH

### INTRODUCTION

Leading Post Street is one of the more unusual street names in the Old Town and defies easy explanation. The name is thought to be a description of a series of tethering posts which used to stand at the top of Merchant's Row which, until the creation of Eastborough in the 1850s, was the principal route down to the sands<sup>1</sup>. Here at busy times, horses laden with goods for the harbour could be tethered waiting their turn to pass down the congested Merchant's Row.

Whatever its precise meaning, the name Leading Post Street does not appear in any of the medieval deeds preserved in the Corporation's White Vellum Book and published by Jeayes in 1914<sup>2</sup>. However the fact that Leading Post Street is not mentioned in the White Vellum Book does not mean the street did not exist in the middle ages, only that it had a different name.

Since the alignment of Leading Post Street continues northwards as Friargate, known in the middle ages as Duple Street, the simplest explanation is that Leading Post Street and Friargate together were called Duple Street in medieval times.

When the Society were approached in 1989 to monitor the development of the site at 1-3 Leading Post Street, it was hoped some evidence for the street's medieval past would come to light. The site, at the junction of Leading Post and St. Sepulchre streets (Fig 1), had been open ground for about ten years; its last use an outdoor cafe known as the Strawberry Tea Gardens. With the encouragement of the owner, Mr N. Murphy, and the advice of the County Archaeology Office, the Society monitored the site during building in July and August 1989 and in so doing found extensive remains of the town's first defences.

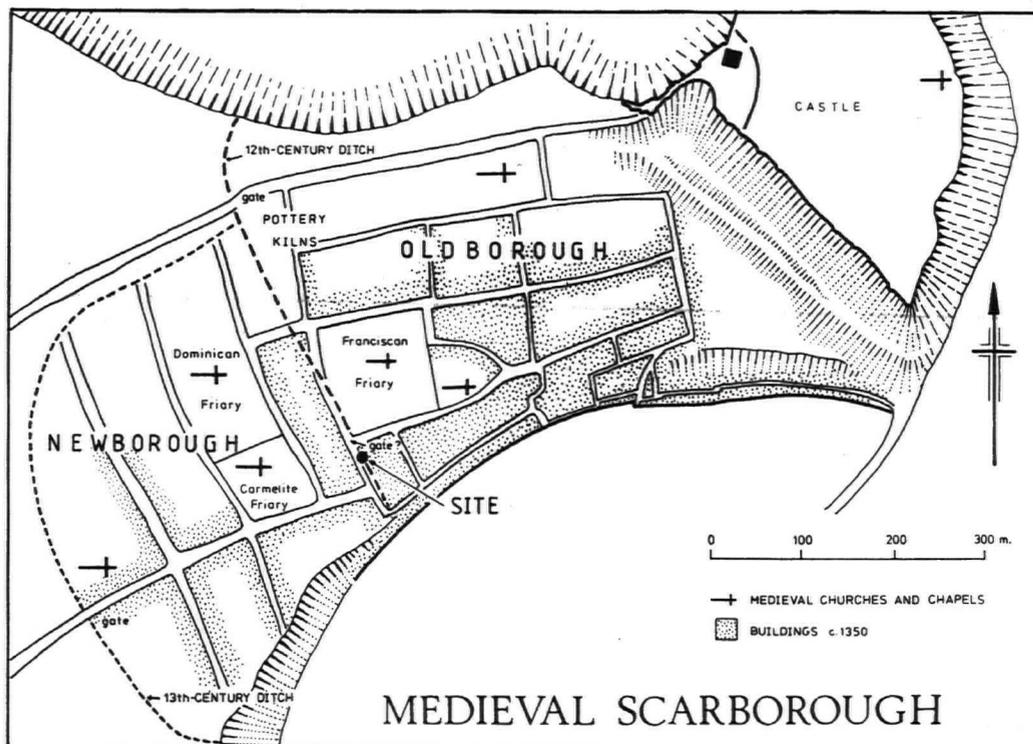


Fig 1 Medieval Scarborough showing location of site

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## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is not known for sure how many English towns possessed defences in the middle ages, though the latest estimate puts the figure at around 200<sup>3</sup>. At the top of the scale were places such as York and Canterbury boasting massive stone walls and gates designed to impress as well as protect whilst at the other extreme were towns relying on a solitary entrance gate for their security.

That Scarborough enjoyed the protection of a wall in the 12th century is evident from a description of the town written by William of Newburgh towards the end of that century. In the *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* he describes Scarborough as "carrying its front westward, whence it is fortified with a wall, but on the east it is fenced by that rock where the castle stands, and lastly on both sides by the sea"<sup>4</sup>. As he clearly appreciated, the town enjoyed several natural advantages when it came to matters of defence. With the sea to north and south and a royal fortress on the headland guarding the east, only the western, landward facing side of the town needed the protection of a stone wall and ditch. As additional security, there is some evidence that a wall was also constructed facing south along the cliff top overlooking the South Bay<sup>5</sup>.

Although William of Newburgh is sadly silent on the point, these defences probably date from the reign of King Henry II who lavished considerable sums of money on the castle in the latter half of the 12th century and at the same time is credited with fostering the growth of a town at Scarborough<sup>6</sup>. Whatever their precise date, the western line of defences underwent a radical change around the time William of Newburgh was writing his history. The establishment of the "New Borough" on fields outside the

town wall in the late 12th or early 13th century meant the existing defences no longer protected the town since Scarborough was now almost twice its former size. As a result a new defensive perimeter was established further inland to include the Newborough and this was destined to mark the western boundary of the town for the next 600 years (Fig 1). Maps dating from the 18th and 19th century show that the Newborough defences ran to the west of modern Bar St and North St, then curved eastwards across the top of North St, St Thomas St and Queen St before meeting the North Cliff about at the junction of Marlborough St and Queens Parade.

In contrast the earlier defences, often referred to as the Old Borough or Aurborough defences, disappeared during the middle ages as the wall was progressively quarried for stone and the ditch filled with rubbish. As a result when Thomas Hinderwell published the first History of Scarborough in 1798 there was no firm evidence as to exactly where the Old Borough defences had run. He speculated that "houses in Aurborough Street and Cross Street have some of them been built upon the foundations of the western wall which pursued a southern direction from Aurborough gate, until it terminated at the cliff, now called Bland's Cliff, a little to the south of the market cross. Thus has the old town been bounded and defended on the west."<sup>7</sup>

Despite the fact that in 1847 a ditch reportedly 35 feet broad and 18 feet deep was exposed near the Market Hall when making a sewer<sup>8</sup>, Hinderwell's assertion that the defences ran between Bland's Cliff and Aurborough Street was accepted without question until 25 years ago. In 1966 a large ditch came to light during trial excavations at the rear of Wilson's Mariners' Asylum on Castle Road<sup>9</sup> and again during extensive excavations on the opposite side of the road in the

grounds of St Mary's Parish House in 1967-8<sup>10</sup> (Fig 7). These discoveries proved to be the Old Borough defences running further east than had hitherto been suspected. Even so it was to be another twenty years before the ditch was observed again, this time on the south of the town close to the point where Leading Post Street turns the corner into Merchant's Row. Builders underpinning house foundations underneath No7 Leading Post Street in February 1988 exposed the western side of the ditch filled with waterlogged medieval deposits<sup>11</sup>. This find confirmed the results of the 1960s excavations by proving that the town's first defences were indeed further east than had previously been suggested. It was also a very timely discovery because it showed that a site due to be developed the following year barely 60 metres to the north at 1-3 Leading Post Street almost certainly straddled the defences. Indeed it had long been thought that settlement in the last building to occupy the site had been caused by subsidence into an infilled ditch. Happily for the archaeological society these predictions proved correct. Although the society's work at 1-3 Leading Post Street occupied no more than a day and two evenings, a substantial body of new information was gathered from what proved to be the most extensive portion of the Old Borough defences ever to be revealed.

### THE EXCAVATION

The area available for investigation at 1-3 Leading Post Street was initially limited by an infilled cellar which covered over half the site and was filled to street level with demolition rubble. To begin with the archaeological investigations therefore concentrated on two areas to the north and east of the site which were untouched by the cellar (Fig 2). Here three machine-dug trenches were

excavated on July 20th 1989, one to the east to locate the back wall of the demolished building (Trench 1) and two on the north to look for traces of the defences, (Trenches 2 and 3). Subsequent emptying and refurbishment of the 2.8m deep cellar gave the opportunity on the evenings of August 2nd and 15th to excavate one trench through the cellar floor (Trench 4) to find the depth at which natural occurred and to record archaeological remains exposed elsewhere in the base and sides of the cellar (Areas 5 and 6).

### THE DITCH (Fig 3)

The discovery of a thick deposit of dark grey-black silt containing medieval pottery in Trenches 2 and 3 was the first indication that the infilled medieval town ditch crossed the site. However details such as the width, depth and alignment of the ditch only became clear after the cellar was emptied of its rubble infill (Plate 1) and the old floor was

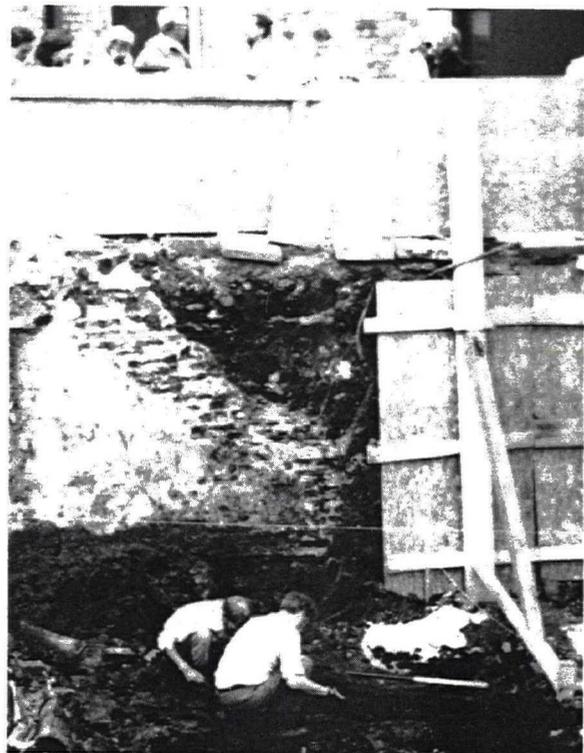
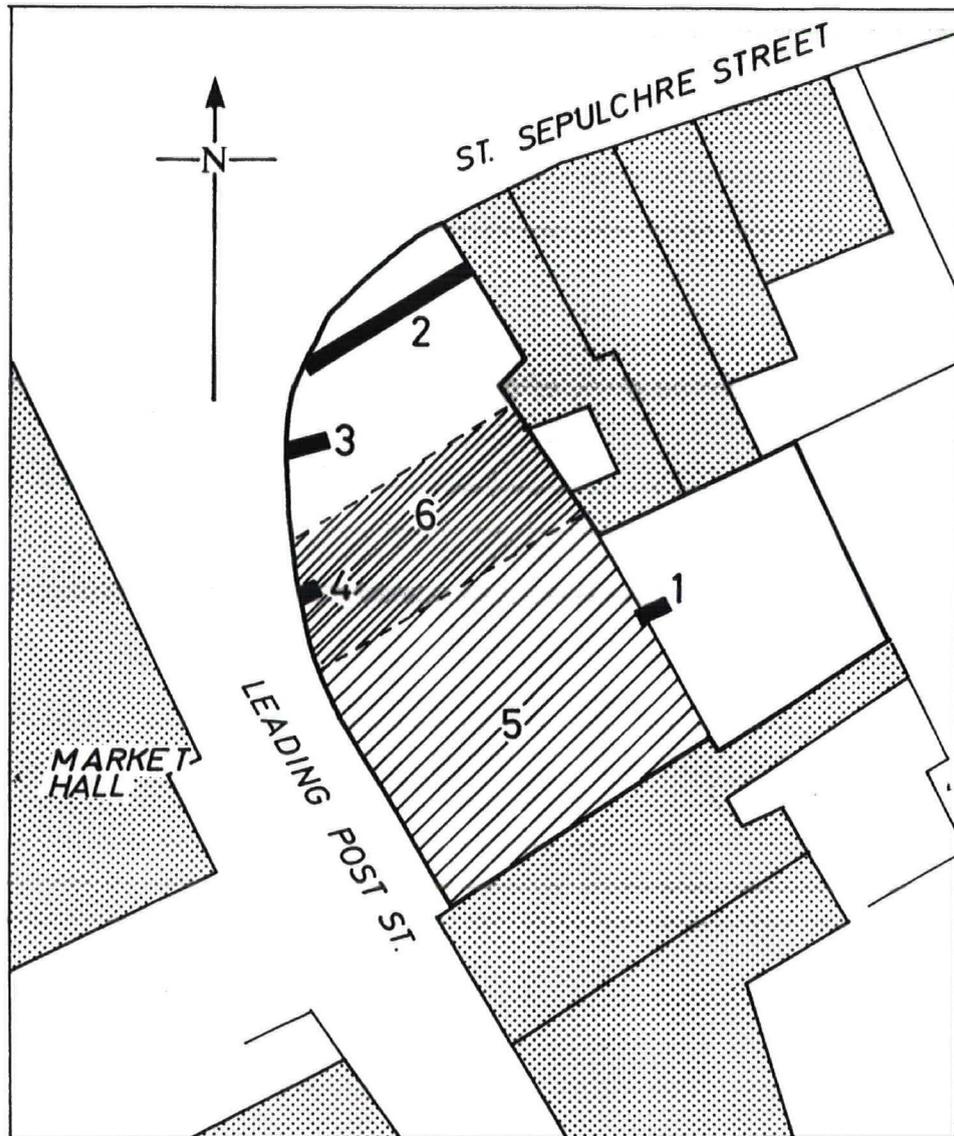


Plate 1 Cellar after removal of rubble infill



- 1-4 Machine trenches
- ▨ 5-6 Watching briefs
- Limit of development site

0 5 10 METRES

**Fig 2 Plan of site showing Trenches 1-4 and Areas 5-6**

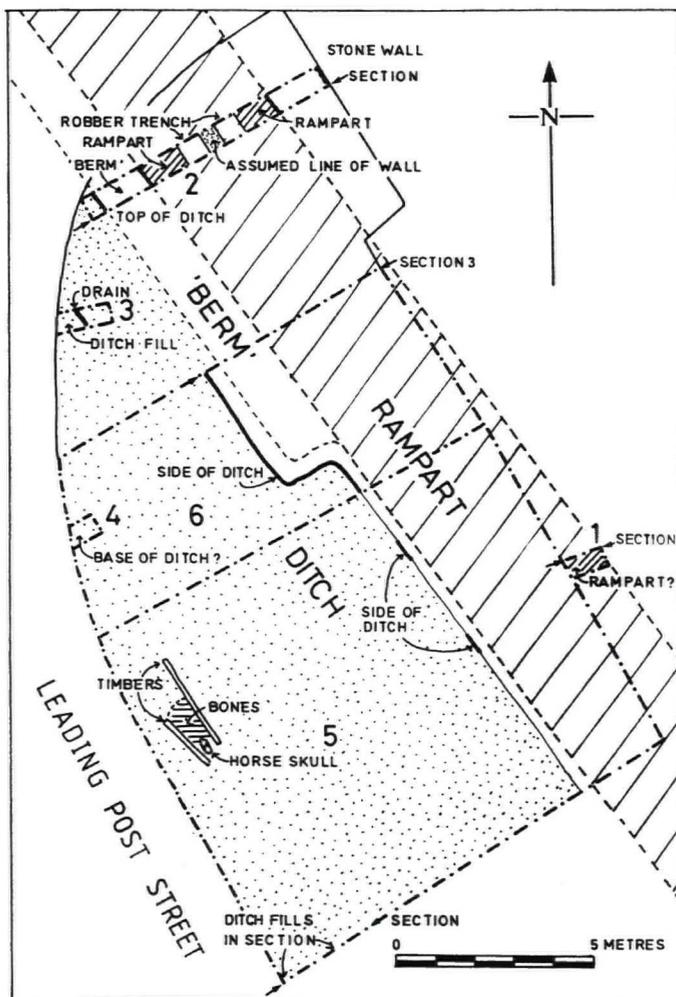


Fig 3 Plan of excavated features

ripped up (Areas 5 and 6). This brought to light a 14m long section of the ditch filled with a sticky black silt, running approximately north-south underneath the cellar floor. The inner, eastern side of the ditch was clearly visible cutting natural clay but no trace was found of the outer edge which must therefore lie beyond the western boundary of the site, somewhere below Leading Post Street. As a result it is impossible to be sure of the overall width of the ditch except that it must be more than the 8 metre distance which separated the exposed eastern side of the ditch from Leading Post Street. This bears comparison with the 9 metre width of

ditch uncovered at St Mary's Parish House in 1967-8<sup>12</sup>, but falls short of the 35 feet (10.6m) width supposedly exposed near the Market Hall in 1847<sup>13</sup>. To try and establish the depth of the ditch, Trench 4 measuring 0.75m x 0.75m was excavated, partially by machine, through the black ditch silts in Area 6 until natural clay was reached at a depth of 1.0m below the cellar floor. The surface thus exposed appeared neither to slope to the east or the west suggesting Trench 4 was positioned over the bottom of the ditch as opposed to either of its sloping sides. Measured from the surface of Leading Post Street, the ditch must therefore be at least 3.8m

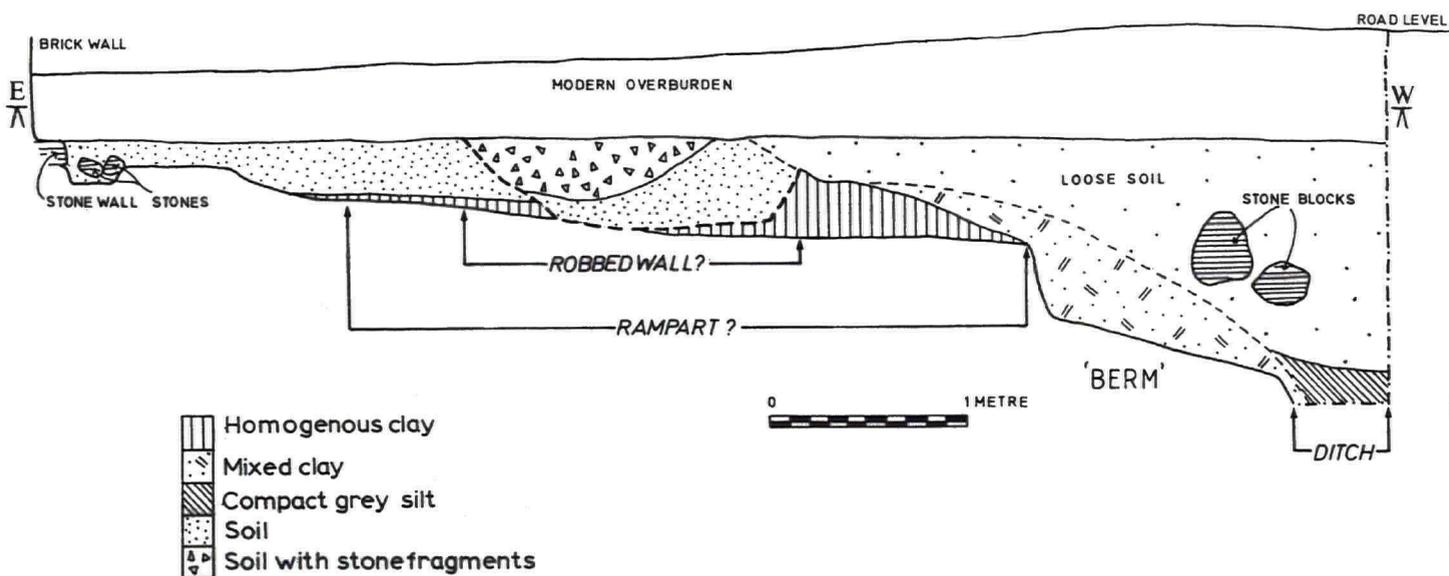


Fig 4 North facing section of Trench 2

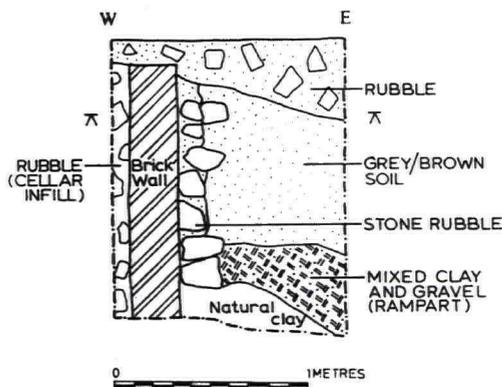
deep. The section excavated at St Mary's Parish House in 1967-8 is stated to have been a maximum of 4.4 metres deep<sup>14</sup> compared with the 18 feet (5.4m) depth of the ditch seen near the market hall in 1847<sup>15</sup>.

Although one might have wished for clearer evidence about the width and depth of the ditch, its alignment could not have been more plain. As was noted above, the eastern side of the ditch was traced for 14m across the bottom of the cellar floor and was also revealed further north in Trench 2 just 50cms below the existing ground level (Fig 4). One unexpected feature of the ditch was that in Area 6 the edge makes a sharp right-angled turn to run east-west for 1.5m before turning again to resume its previous north-south alignment. The intention must have been to make the ditch narrower as it approached St Sepulchre St explaining the 1.5m wide berm which stepped out into the ditch in trench 2.

#### THE RAMPART AND WALL

Although the ditch survived across the entire site, all be it truncated by the deep cellar, the same could not be said of the rampart which not surprisingly only came to light in Trench 2, north of the cellar (Fig 4) and possibly in Trench 1 to the east (Fig 2). The rampart was made of an orangey-brown clay mixed with soil, most likely material upcast from digging the adjacent ditch, which at some later time had been levelled so that it only survived to a maximum height of 40cms in Trench 2. Because of this damage to the rampart, it must also be doubtful if its surviving width of 3.6 metres was its original dimension. The rampart excavated at St Mary's Parish House was much better preserved, approaching a metre in height and 4.5 metres in width with a 1m wide stone defensive wall set into its front edge<sup>16</sup>. In contrast, at the present site the rampart uncovered in Trench 2 was cut by a shallow sided gully filled with loose soil and stones. As no trace of the town wall was discovered, the gully could well be its robber trench

The rampart rested directly on natural clay with no sign of any intermediate soil horizon that might have represented the original ground surface suggesting it was spaded off prior to the construction of the rampart. This was also the case in Trench 1 (Fig 5) where a 0.4m thick layer of mixed gravelly clay, which could well be a portion of rampart, rested directly on natural.



**Fig 5 South facing section of Trench 1**

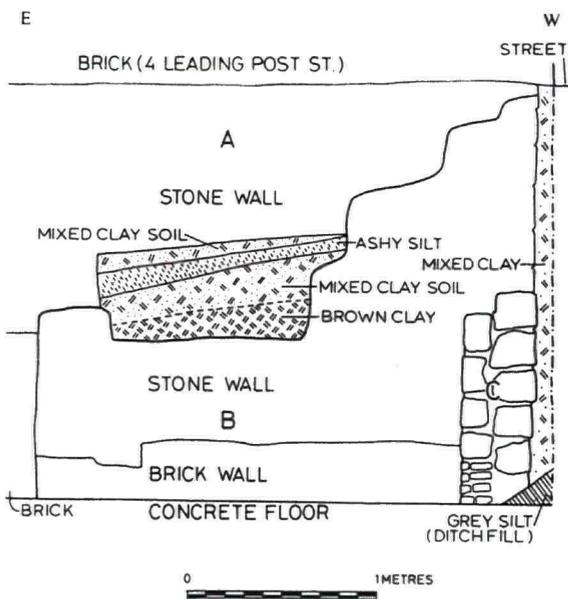
**THE DITCH SEDIMENTS**

Since no opportunity arose to examine one continuous section through the ditch from top to bottom, the sequence of deposits it contained has to be reconstructed by reference to several different parts of the site. The bulk of the sticky black silt uncovered beneath the floor of the cellar was probably the sort of primary weathered material which accumulates in the bottom of any ditch open for a winter or two. The sparsity of artefacts in this deposit, (just 6 pieces of leather and 15 pottery sherds were recovered) suggest it was not initially common practice to use the ditch as a rubbish dump despite the fact that it contained the disarticulated skeleton of a horse and several timbers (Plate 2). A gash in the front of the animal's skull could indicate it met with a sudden end; perhaps it was put out of its misery after becoming inexorably stuck in the mirey ditch.



**Plate 2 Excavating the horse skeleton**

Whatever the case, the carcass would have quickly disappeared beneath further layers of silt, though these were largely destroyed by the construction of the cellar. That the upper fills of the ditch gradually became greyer in colour and more loose in texture is evident from the deposits found in Trenches 2 and 3 and from a small pocket of stratigraphy preserved at the junction of the south and west walls of the cellar (Fig 6). Also behind the south wall several layers of clayey soil and ashy silt were recorded dipping to the east which were unlike any of the grey and black silts recorded elsewhere in the ditch at this depth. They may be part of a localised dump of material into the ditch or alternatively could be layers filling the foundation trench for No 4 Leading Post St and therefore nothing to do with sedimentary history of the ditch proper. Towards the very top of the ditch as recorded in Trench 2, the grey silts gave way to much looser soil marking the final phase of



**Fig 6 Stratigraphy exposed in south cellar wall**

infilling after which all surface traces of the ditch would have vanished.

**LATER HISTORY OF THE SITE**

Little was discovered to shed light on the history of the site between the disappearance of the defences and the construction of the cellar, although one can confidently assume that an area so close to the principal route to the harbour would have been occupied by dwellings and shops of one sort or another. Of the structural remains which were uncovered, none were obviously earlier than the cellar and probably all belonged to the last building to occupy the site. A substantial stone foundation wall 2.5 metres deep was unearthed in Trench 3, testimony to the all too apparent threat of subsidence posed by the soft ditch sediments. About 600 mm below the wall a Victorian drain was discovered cutting into the grey ditch silts which established that the overlying stone foundation wall can be of no great antiquity and probably belonged

to the last building to occupy the site. Stone foundations were also recorded at the eastern end of Trench 2 below No 3 St Sepulchre St and a combination of brick and stonework underpinned the outer wall of No 4 Leading Post St exposed in the southern face of the cellar. The other three sides of the cellar were constructed of Victorian bricks although the discovery of rough stonework behind the east wall in Trench 1 could mean there was originally a stone-walled cellar below 1-3 Leading Post St.

**DISCUSSION**

The excavation at 1-3 Leading Post St has clearly added significantly to the sparse body of information about the town's first defences, despite the fact that over half the site was taken up with cellars. The disappointment is perhaps that so few artefacts were recovered from the site bearing in mind the rich assemblage of bone, leather, pottery and metalwork that came from the far more limited investigation of the ditch the previous year at 7 Leading Post Street<sup>17</sup>. The 28 pottery sherds that were recovered from 1-3 Leading Post Street are too few in number to reliably date the site but it seems likely, as was noted in the introduction, that the ditch was filled in during the 13th century. The wall may have survived longer because in the closing decades of the same century an inquisition found that the wall continued to contribute to the security of the town<sup>18</sup>. Further documents of 1303 and 1312 imply that substantial stretches of the wall were still standing even then, although constantly threatened by householders wanting to quarry it for stone or incorporate its fabric in new buildings<sup>19</sup>.

Although little was found at 1-3 Leading Post Street to illuminate the

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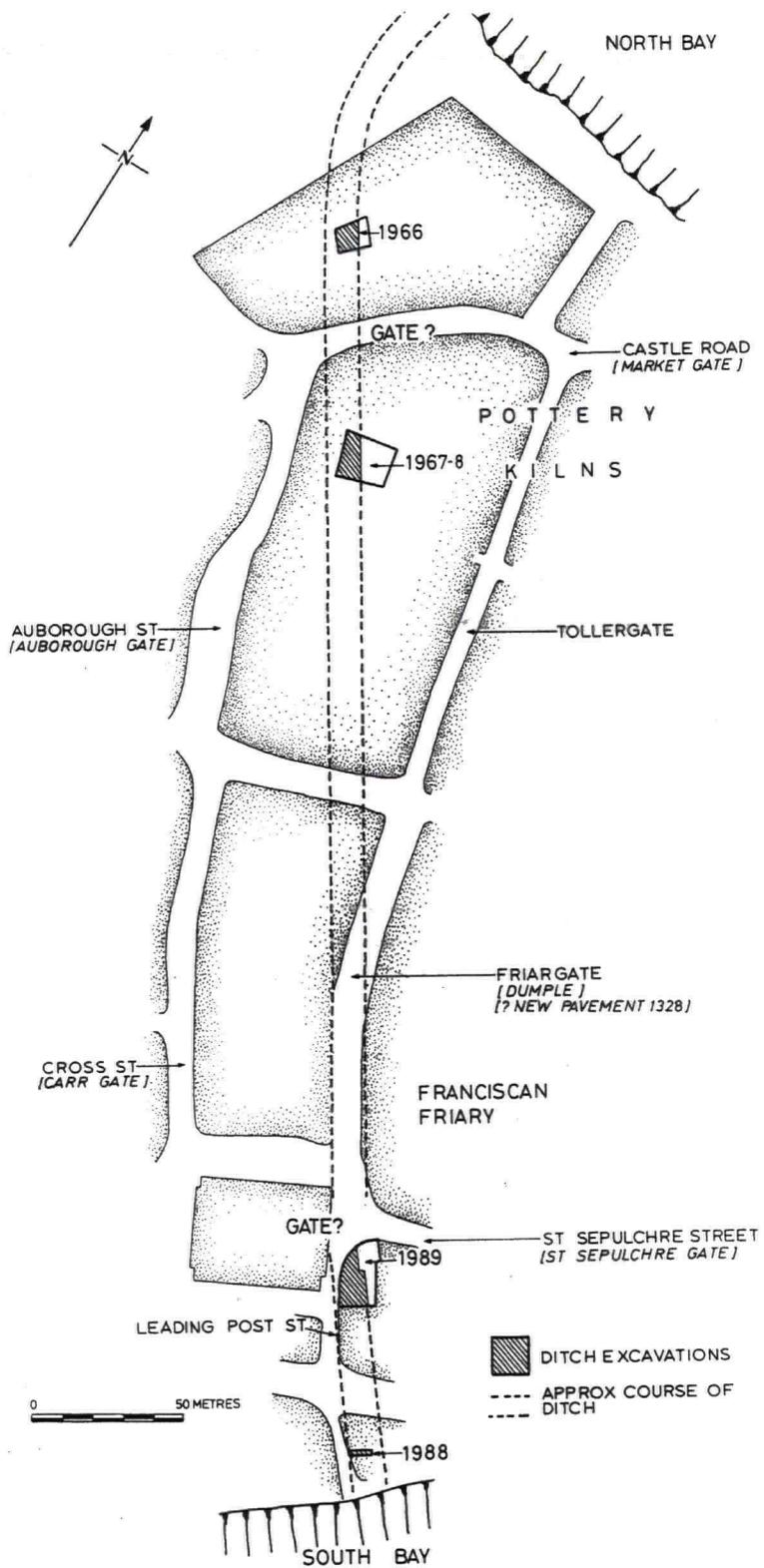
history of the defences, a sufficiently large stretch of ditch was uncovered to enable its route between the two bays to be projected with greater accuracy. This reveals that the defences must change direction slightly since the eastern edge of the ditch uncovered at 1-3 Leading Post St is on a different alignment to the ditch recorded in excavations on the north of the town between 1966-68. Even allowing for localised deviations from an imaginary straight line, the discrepancy is of an order which must mean the ditch changed direction at least once, most probably at the western end of St Sepulchre Street as shown on Fig 7. Here there could well have been a gateway giving access to the lower town and harbour, complemented by a second entrance through the defences further north controlling the principal route to the castle. The existence of an entrance could well explain the abrupt narrowing of the ditch seen at 1-3 Leading Post Street immediately south of St Sepulchre Street. It would make sense to narrow the ditch in front of a gateway to make the task of bridging it proportionally easier.

In addition to suggesting a gate at the western end of St Sepulchre St, the excavation at 1-3 Leading Post St also allowed the chronological relationship of several streets adjacent to the defences to be more clearly understood. As shown on Fig 7, Leading Post St for the most part respects the alignment of the Old Borough ditch, running parallel to it and only partially overlying its outer, western edge, suggesting the two are broadly contemporary. On the other hand Friargate, (medieval Dumble St) mostly overlies the infilled ditch and must clearly post-date it, though by how much is impossible to say on topographical evidence alone. For once

Scarborough's somewhat sparse archive of medieval documents comes to our aid. In 1328 mention is made of a "New Pavement" between the New and Old Boroughs in connection with the provision of a water supply to the town by the Franciscans, whose Friary stood on the north side of St Sepulchre Street<sup>20</sup>. What better candidate for a "New Pavement" in 1328 than Dumble St, freshly established on part of the former defences? Credit for building this "New Pavement" probably rests with the expansionist Franciscans who six years previously were granted permission to enlarge their precinct by enclosing a public street on condition they replace it with one equally commodious elsewhere<sup>21</sup>. Curiously enough the street they petitioned to enclose was called the Dumble suggesting the friars moved both the street and the name to a new location over the infilled Old Borough ditch.

#### SUMMARY

This report has described the various strands of evidence for the Old Borough defences revealed at 1-3 Leading Post St in the summer of 1989 and has attempted to set them in their wider context by suggesting the probable alignment of the town defences: the existence of a gate at the western end of St Sepulchre St and the chronology of adjacent streets. A clearer understanding of the town's first defences can only come from the kind of archaeological project described in this report. Not only will we learn more about the early topography of Scarborough but will be better able to appreciate how it influenced the growth of the modern town. The distinction between the "Old Town" or Aurborough and the Newborough is, for example, something that persists even today.



**Fig 7 Course of the Old Borough Ditch with observations 1966-1989 (medieval street names in brackets)**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Bill Broadmore, Ron Davies, Chris and Frances Hall, Tunnis Oosterhoff and the site owner, Mr N. Murphy who also generously funded the cost of the work

The machine trenches were dug by Gibson's Plant Hire whilst Graham Lee of the North Yorkshire County Council Archaeology Section liaised over the archaeological implications of the development.

The illustrations in this report are the work of Chris Hall and the author.

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