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KELDHOLME PRIORY, KELDHOLME.
REPORT ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF.

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INTRODUCTION

This report details the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out in the grounds of Keldholme Priory, Keldholme, North Yorkshire, (SE 7080 8625), between 13th–17th August 1991, Fig. 1. Location plan. The archaeological work was conducted pursuant to conditions laid down by the Archaeology Section, Planning Department, North Yorkshire County Council, following proposals to convert a disused bam (formerly a mill and a smithy) into holiday homes. The site is for the most part occupied by grassed areas, overgrown gardens and orchards and lays on fairly level ground in a bend of the river Dove.

A small Cistercian nunnery, (St Mary's of Keldholme), in the parish of Kirkbymoorside founded circa 1200 in the reign of king Henry I, is recorded as occupying land in the near vicinity, (HYRH). The few historical sources pertaining to the Priory relate almost entirely to internal disorders, virtually no reference is made to structural descriptions or to the precise location of the buildings. It is likely however that the remains of the nunnery lay somewhere within the area of land surrounded by the river's curve (providing there have been no major shifts in the river), as this curve would have provided a natural vallum monasteri on three of its sides. Additionally, landscaping work in the house gardens in the mid 19th century revealed a number of decorated stone grave covers, (documents in custody of landowner), that are likely to be derived from the nunnery burial ground. The watching brief itself consisted of the observing and recording of four narrow trenches that were cut to provide services to the converted bam, these are lettered A–D in Fig. 2. Location of trenches.

METHODS

The service trenches were all mechanically excavated by a small JCB using a back acter fitted with a toothed bucket approximately 0.5 metre wide; no trench with the exception of C was more than one bucket width wide. All machining was observed and the recovered finds from this process were kept according to the distance of their find spot along a given trench's length. Only those finds that could be reliably attributed to a specific context were kept by context; these for the most part consist of finds recovered from the sides of trenches during section cleaning. After cleaning, all those stretches of section containing deposits that were considered to be of any archaeological significance, were drawn and recorded. All contexts in each trench were recorded independently to those in other trenches. Colour print and colour slide photographs were taken at several points in each trench. A small amount of recording, umelated to the watching brief, was carried out in the grounds of the Priory with the kind permission of and at no expense to, the developer. This work is detailed in Appendix 5.

The watching brief was funded by Mr Hopkinson of Keldholme Priory.

RESULTS

TRENCH A, Figs. 2,3,4,5.

Trench A measuring 115 metres in length, approximately 1 metre in depth and 0.5–0.6 metre in width, ran from the main village road to the converted barn and was cut in order to carry mains electricity, gas and water services to the barn.

The northern 3/4 of the trench was cut through a grassed paddock that at its northern end has a pronounced dip. The southern quarter of trench A is cut through a disused tennis court and yard area to the rear of the converted barn. Several areas of some interest were encountered, namely those parts that did not follow a simple topsoil–subsoil sequence. These areas are illustrated in the re-produced sections, lengths : 8–28m, 41–54m, 73–80m and 100–105m.

A: 8–28 metres, Fig.3.

Natural deposits in the form of a clayey silt subsoil, 6, exist only in the southern part of this area. The section illustrates quite clearly that, 6, dips down quite sharply to the north. Context, 5, a sandstone rubble deposit of mostly angular stone and containing some limestone roofing slate was the earliest man derived deposit encountered in this area although its precise relationship with, 6, is uncertain. Given the presence of large amounts of stone roofing slate, 5, is not likely to relate to a wall robbed of its facing stone. Sealing, 5, was context, 4, a sandy silt loam containing a small amount of stone together with several pieces of pottery of medieval date. A small thin lense of silty sand was noted as laying directly over, 4, and also lapping up over the rubble deposit, 5. Context, 3, also lay directly over, 4, and consisted of approximately 60% mostly angular sandstone < 33cm in a sandy silt matrix. The well defined and highly jumbled nature of, 3, which also contained some limestone roofing slate but which lacked any facing stone, militates against the likelihood of it representing in-situ demolished structural remains, although this point is only likely to be absolutely confirmed or denied by excavation in the horizontal plane. Context, 2, overlying, 3, was a sandy silt that contained large amounts of brick and tile and pottery of post medieval origin. Sealing, 2, was the modern topsoil, 1, a sandy silt loam.

Given the absence of firm evidence for either, 5, or, 3, as representing in-situ structural remains, the entire 8–28m sequence is best seen as representing an infilling of a natural hollow in the northern part of the paddock, either as a conscious decision to fill in the hollow, or merely as it represented a convenient dumping area. The material within both, 3, and, 5, is likely to have originated from unwanted rubble from buildings located somewhere in the near vicinity.

A: 41–54 metres, Fig.4.

The section 41–54m lies at the southern brow of the hollow in the northern part of the grassed paddock. The earliest deposit observed above the subsoil, 6, was, 7, a sandstone rubble deposit within a sandy silt loam matrix quite similar to, 3, but containing a lower percentage of stone. Although, 7, contained virtually nothing that is likely to have been used for facing stone, a large amount of limestone roofing slate together with two fragments of dressed masonry including a segment of small diameter column were recovered. As with, 3, the section did not provide any firm evidence to suggest that, 7, forms the demolished remains of an in-situ building, indeed the considerable soil content in relation to that of the stone argues for, 7, to represent a dump of unwanted building debris. Context, 4, (see above, 8–28m) lay over, 7, and was itself sealed by the present topsoil, 1.

A: 73–80 metres, Fig.5.

Section 73–80m lies in the area of the entrance to the grassed paddock.

Context, 13, was the earliest of the layers in the sequence and consisted of a sandy silt loam with occasional stones. The origin of, 13, is uncertain though it is possible that it may represent an earlier topsoil? Sealing, 13, context, 12, a sandy silt containing several fine lenses and amounts of broken brick and tile, was itself sealed by, 10, and, 11, with a fine gravelly lense between. Contexts, 10, and, 11, were both sandy silt loams containing brick and tile and post medieval pottery, the major

difference between the two being the greater preponderance of stone in, 10, and the presence of lime mortar in, 11. Contexts, 8, and, 9, above, 10-11, were both small gravelly deposits containing amounts of lime mortar; both were sealed by the topsoil, 1. The deposits, 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, all provided evidence for a post medieval date and almost certainly represent a series of many small dumpings in the entranceway to the paddock intended to in-fill mts and hollows caused by the movement of wheeled vehicles.

A: 100-105 metres, Fig.5.

The section 100-105m covers a small portion to the rear of the former bam. The subsoil, 6, was visible in the lower part of the profile and was sealed by, 16, a heavily disturbed sandy clay silt containing brick and tile and post medieval finds. Sealing, 16, was, 15, a mbbly layer forming the foundation for the stone chippings, 14, that until recently formed the surfacing for a tennis court and its surrounds.

TRENCH B, Figs. 2, 6.

Trench B measured approximately 30 metres in length, 1-1.4 metres in depth and 0.5-0.6 metres in width. This trench ran from the southern end of the converted bam in a southwesterly direction to a newly installed septic tank (trench C). The fall at the base of this trench was from west-north-west to east-south-east, the difference in height at either end amounting to approximately 40cm. Only post medieval finds were recovered from the trench and the only apparent features (see below) were of 19th-20th century date. Two segments of the trench B section are detailed.

B: 7-13 metres, Fig.6.

Context, 22, represents the undisturbed clayey silt subsoil. Cutting into the subsoil was context, 21, a sandy silt loam containing a substantial amount of both rounded and angular stone <12cm. In terms of soil type, 21, was very similar to the overlaying topsoil, 20, , so much so that the distinction between the two layers was made possible only by the greater amount of stone in, 21. Pottery from, 21, suggests a 19th-20th century date and its origins are perhaps most likely to lay in ornamental landscaping of the grounds.

B: 24-30 metres, Fig.6.

The section 24-30m shows the topsoil, 20, and subsoil, 22, sequence cut by, 19, a shallow steep sided flat based cut that forms the initial element of a pathway still partially extant on the ground surface. Context, 18, a mbbly sandy silt forms a firm bedding for, 17, a cobble and sandstone slab paved surface. This pathway is of 19th-20th century date.

TRENCH C, Figs. 2,7.

Trench C measuring 3.6 metres X 2.6 metres X < 2.6 metres deep was cut so as to form the seating for a large septic tank. The sequence revealed in the south west facing section was as follows : Natural sands and gravels, 29, sealed by a sandy clay silt sub soil approximately 1m in depth, 28. The subsoil itself was sealed by, 25, a sandy silt loam that was formerly a topsoil and as such had been cut by a drain pipe trench, 27, and its sandy silt and mbble fill, 26. Context, 24, a thin layer of small stone chippings sealed the drain trench and represents a relict footpath that was laid out over the former topsoil, 25. The footpath itself is sealed by the latest thin topsoil, 23.

TRENCH D, Figs. 2,7.

Trench D measured 23 metres in length, 0.5–0.6 metres in width and from 1.4–1.75 metres in depth. The trench ran in a southeasterly direction from the septic tank at C to the river Dove. Evidence for post medieval constructional works was found, these are displayed in Fig.7, sections 2–8m and 15–23m.

D : 2–8 metres, Fig. 7.

A natural silty sand subsoil, 35, was seen to be truncated by a large cut, 39. Some 4 metres to the south east of the edge of this cut, a stone and concrete wall, 33, was also seen to penetrate the subsoil. Taken together, 39, and, 33, form a purpose built hollow space of some considerable proportions, the base of which was not even reached. The lowest observed fill of this feature, 32, was a silty sand containing large amounts of lime mortar together with fragments of brick. The upper fill, 31, a loose silty sand also contained small amounts of clay. The entirety of this feature and its fills was sealed by the topsoil, 30, a sandy silt loam. It is not at all clear what the precise function of this large, deep feature was but suggestions could include: a former slurry pit ?, part of an air raid shelter? It is clear however that the concrete which is employed in the wall, 33, that contains no lime is of a comparatively recent date, ie: late 19th century onwards.

D : 15–23 metres, Fig. 7.

Section 15–23m, the most southeasterly part of trench D, revealed evidence for the construction of the present river retaining wall. The initial element in this was the wide gently sloping cut, 38. Within this cut and fronting on to the river Dove the dry stone wall, 36, was erected. The void behind the wall was subsequently filled with a silty loam material that contained substantial amounts of stone and 19th century debris including several complete wine bottles and stoneware jars. The entirety of this sequence is sealed beneath the present topsoil, 30.

An unsubstantiated and perhaps less likely alternative to the interpretation of, 38, being a man made cut is that it may represent the line of a former river bank that was encroached upon in a river narrowing process. Unfortunately no conclusive evidence (in the form for example of a former turf line along the edge of, 38,) was seen in section, and given that there is likely to have been little advantage, or land, to be gained by narrowing the river on such a comparatively small scale in a rural setting, the former suggestion is considered more likely.

CONCLUSIONS

The watching brief has above all demonstrated the high degree of post medieval activity in the area, in particular in the form of decorative landscaping, river revetment and general dumping within low lying areas. With regard to the medieval nunnery no evidence has been found to give a precise location as to its whereabouts. The presence of medieval pottery however, most evident in trench A, is indicative of medieval activity in the area. The stone concentrations in the northern part of trench A are not thought to represent in-situ structural remains, but rather to be indicative of dumping subsequent to clearance or levelling, at an unknown date. These remains are however likely to be derived from demolished and robbed stone roofed stone buildings. The original date of such buildings may well be medieval, certainly the round section small stone column found in trench A, 41-54m would appear on stylistic grounds (Romanesque or Early English) to be pre 14th century, and most likely to have originated from an ecclesiastic building, though possibly from a high status secular structure.

Reference

(HYRH) A History of Yorkshire, Religious Houses.