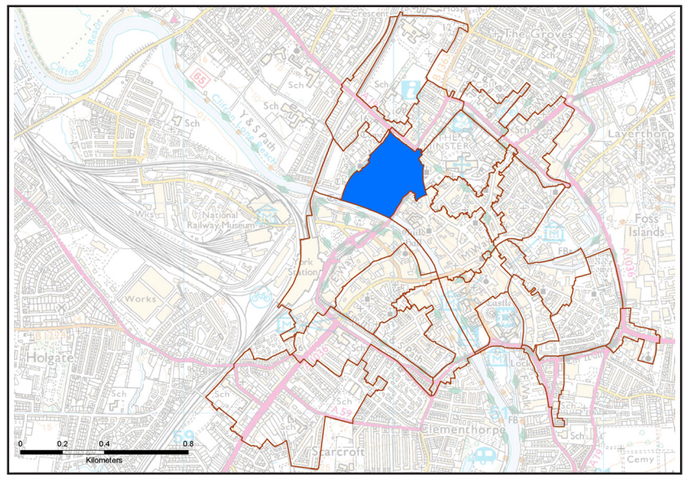
Character area 4: Museum Gardens and Exhibition Square



Description

This area has a very rich history sometimes only hinted at by ruins or fragments of buildings. It did not evolve in the same way as other areas of the city centre as there was not a compact network of ancient streets that became densely built up. Rather, there were several medieval institutions which meant that most land remained in the same ownership until the mid-18th century.

A very important group of ecclesiastical and civic buildings were built over 1000 years in and around what is now Museum Gardens. This open space is the largest and most pleasant in the city providing a quiet refuge away from the traffic noise and pollution of the inner ring road. This area still provides much of York's cultural attractions including the Theatre Royal, City Art Gallery and Yorkshire Museum

Historic Core Conservation Area Appraisal

Archaeological background

Roman

The area has been in use since at least the Roman period. The 1962, Royal Commission on Historical Monuments of England volume on York, identified this location as a possible annexe to Eboracum fortress. This was based on a number of subsurface observations and small scale investigations that located the presence of wall footings, a road surface and buildings. This possibility has been reiterated up to the present (MYO3630) but no further evidence has been uncovered. The west side of the legionary fortress is well evidenced by substantial upstanding Roman remains such as the last surviving wall of the Roman fortress with a 4th century Multangular Tower (MYO1075). Excavations dating to the early 20th century are noted on the Historic Environment Record (HER) but have limited information on location or finds. Several do however mention the preservation of Roman timbers (EYO2646 & EYO2649) and dumps of material against the north-west face of the fortress wall (EYO2645). Ramparts and dumps close to the entrance of Museum Gardens and the foundations of an interval tower (EYO2642) are also recorded on the HER. The ramparts (EYO2636 and EYO2638) are noted as 2.7 and 2m thick respectively. Excavations at the St. Leonard's Hospital site revealed part of the Roman turf rampart and an interval tower standing to height of at least 1m (EYO4117).

Anglian-Anglo-Scandinavian

The presence of a hospital on the site dates to c.937. The original building, dedicated to St. Peter, was constructed a little closer to the Minster than the than the present visible remains. It was destroyed by fire and subsequently rebuilt in 1137, dedicated to St. Leonard (MYO3491). Standing remains of the earliest fabric survive inside the Theatre Royal with later upstanding visible in the Museum Gardens. The Hospital was one of the largest and richest in the country, able to administer to 200 patients of both sexes (Nuttgens 2007:134). The earliest building encountered during a Time Team training excavation in 2001 dated to c.1100 and incorporated the remains of a Roman interval tower. This suggests the Roman defences were in part still standing in the 11th/ 12th centuries. An Anglo-Scandinavian ground surface, 2m thick was recorded on the lower slopes of the ramparts near the Roman fortress wall (EYO2879).

Anglian cremation urns were discovered in 1835 some c.3m below ground level overlying Roman deposits.

There are many historic and contemporary references to a possible Anglian palace known as 'Earlsborough', possibly sited within the putative legionary fortress annex but there is no corroborative archaeological evidence as yet.

Medieval

The former churchyard to the medieval St. Olave's Church falls within this character area.

St. Mary's Abbey, was founded in 1089 within the Roman enclosure and close to the possible Anglian palace of Earlsborough, includes a church and several other buildings including the Abbot's House (now King's Manor), boundary walls and towers (MYO 1078-79, 1080-81). The Abbey was surrendered to the Crown in 1539. Other medieval upstanding monuments include parts of the city's defensive wall containing Lendal Tower built shortly after 1300 as well as medieval re-builds of the legionary fortress walls. Sub-surface remains and medieval activity in general are likely to survive throughout the area. The abbey wall and other structural remains were noted in 1985 during flood defence works (EYO2263-4). Cobbled foundations connected to the cloister walk at St. Mary's were also noted sealed by 0.9m of 19th century levelling deposits (EYO2261). Further walls and floor surfaces have been recorded beneath the topsoil/ground surface at the Hospitium, the Yorkshire Museum and Tempest Anderson Hall (EYO2261, 3417, 3688 and 3453).

Post-medieval – early modern

Evidence for post-medieval industrial activity, small-medium buildings and early modern features such as the open-air swimming pool formerly in the Museum Garden also feature in the archaeological stratigraphy in this area. Demolition evidence of post-medieval buildings near The Lodge was noted by York Archaeological Trust in 2005. The swimming pool was re-discovered in 1985.

Visible character

Buildings and monument within this area range from the late Roman and Anglian through to the 19th century

Location of a group of large public buildings and substantial ruins including the city's most extensive visible section of the Roman legionary fortress defensive wall and remains of substantial medieval monuments

Largest public green space within the city centre

Contains the city library, art gallery and York's earliest museum

Sub surface character

Ove Arup Development & Archaeology Study Research Zones: 1 and 20

Deposit Depth (where known): Ove Arup Archaeology and Development Study suggests deposits at an average depth of 1m within this area

Medieval walls and floor surfaces known to exist near Hospitium and at the Yorkshire Museum immediately beneath the topsoil

Roman deposits and dumps 0.6-2.7m thick against the fortress walls and ramparts, Anglo-Scandinavian ground surface 2m thick and medieval deposits around ramparts 3.6m with thinner deposits elsewhere such as a 1m thick surface encountered at the City Library

Natural levels are relatively close to the modern ground surface across this area

Period Survival: Roman to early-modern deposits in varying degrees of survival. Roman archaeology in this area relates to the legionary fortress and possible annex while the main Medieval deposits relate to St. Mary's Abbey and St. Leonard's Hospital.

Interventions (recorded on HER April 2013): There are approximately 60 interventions, including several of historical date, recorded on the City of York Historic Environment Record (HER). Few of the interventions are recorded in any detail and a brief examination of some grey literature suggests several interventions are yet to be included in the HER. See Appendix 1 for brief summary.

Significance

Overview: The Museum Gardens is situated predominantly on higher ground on the banks of the River Ouse. This area may have once formed part of an annexe to the legionary fortress of Eboracum. Important archaeological remains dating to the Roman and Medieval periods are well known throughout the area. These deposits predominantly relate to the legionary fortress, St. Mary's Abbey and St. Leonard's Hospital.

Where it survives, archaeological evidence is generally very well preserved. Evidence suggests that there are relatively undisturbed patches of stratified deposits surviving at varying depths with deposit thicknesses varying between 0.6m-3.6m+. The impact of post-medieval and later building has been significant but overall, the archaeological potential from Roman to post-medieval is high.

There are many significances within the area, some of which has been identified through the Museum Gardens Conservation Management Plan and the Mint Yard Conservation Management Plan. The whole ensemble of picturesque and romantic ruins, 19th century pleasure ground and key upstanding heritage assets is part of York's unique character.

Designations: The site falls within the Central Area of Archaeological Importance and the Historic Core Conservation Area.

Museum Gardens and Exhibition Square contain a high number of architecturally or historically significant buildings, as well as being a Registered Park and Garden. Sixteen grade I and eighteen grade II* listed buildings as well as 20 Grade II buildings have been identified within the area. The area surrounding St. Mary's Abbey and its precinct walls, St. Leonard's Hospital, and the city walls including Lendal Tower are all Scheduled Ancient Monuments. These heritage assets make a substantial contribution to York's collection of significant landmark monuments, one of the city's key significances.

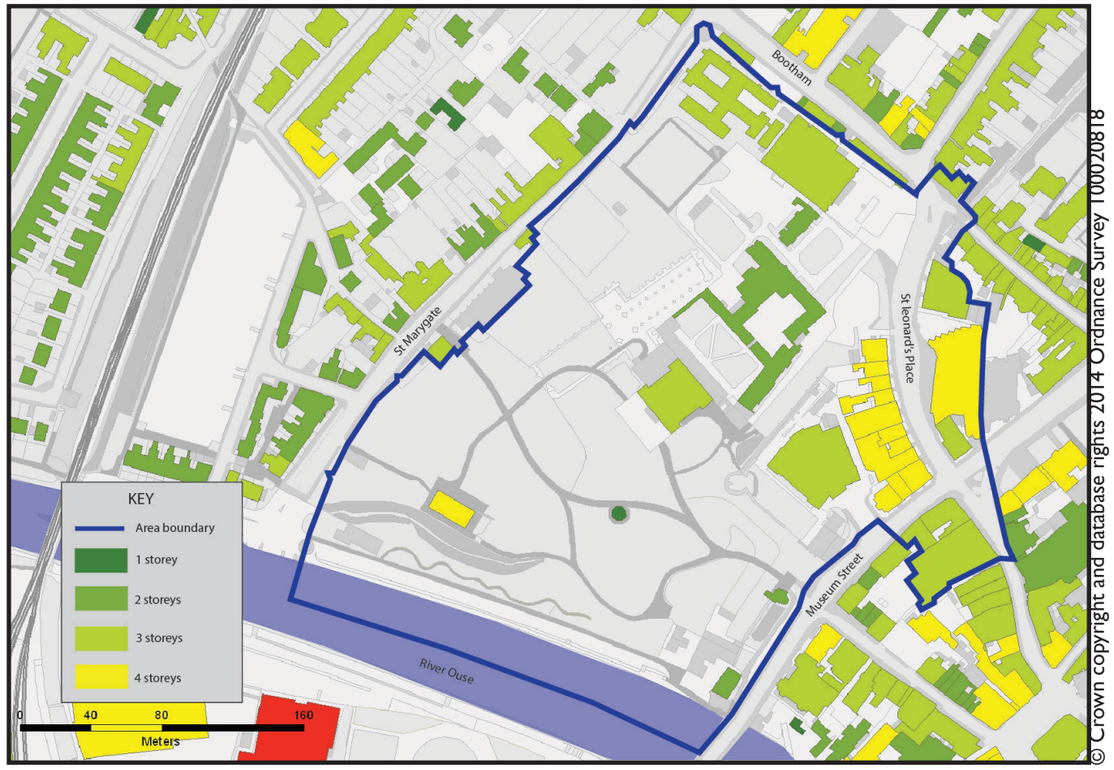
Streetscape Components: Large open, formerly designed, green space within the Museum Gardens interspersed with medieval and Roman monuments. Formal urban space in

Exhibition Square containing late 20th century seating, waste bins, signage, post box, phone boxes and bus stops. Street lighting is provided by modern units throughout. The area is framed by medieval structures such as the city wall, Bootham Bar and the King's Manor as well as large 19th century buildings.

A key view of the Minster can be obtained from Exhibition Square, and there are principle views of the River Ouse and Lendal Bridge from the grounds.

Paving includes a mixture of pre-cast concrete flags (e.g. Museum Street and St. Leonard's Place), Riven and sawn English Pennine Sandstone flags (e.g. Exhibition Square and Blake Street) and cobbled setts including 2012 repaving outside the Central Library. Cycle parking is provided on Blake Street and at the Central Library.

Figure ground map with built environment shown as white on black.



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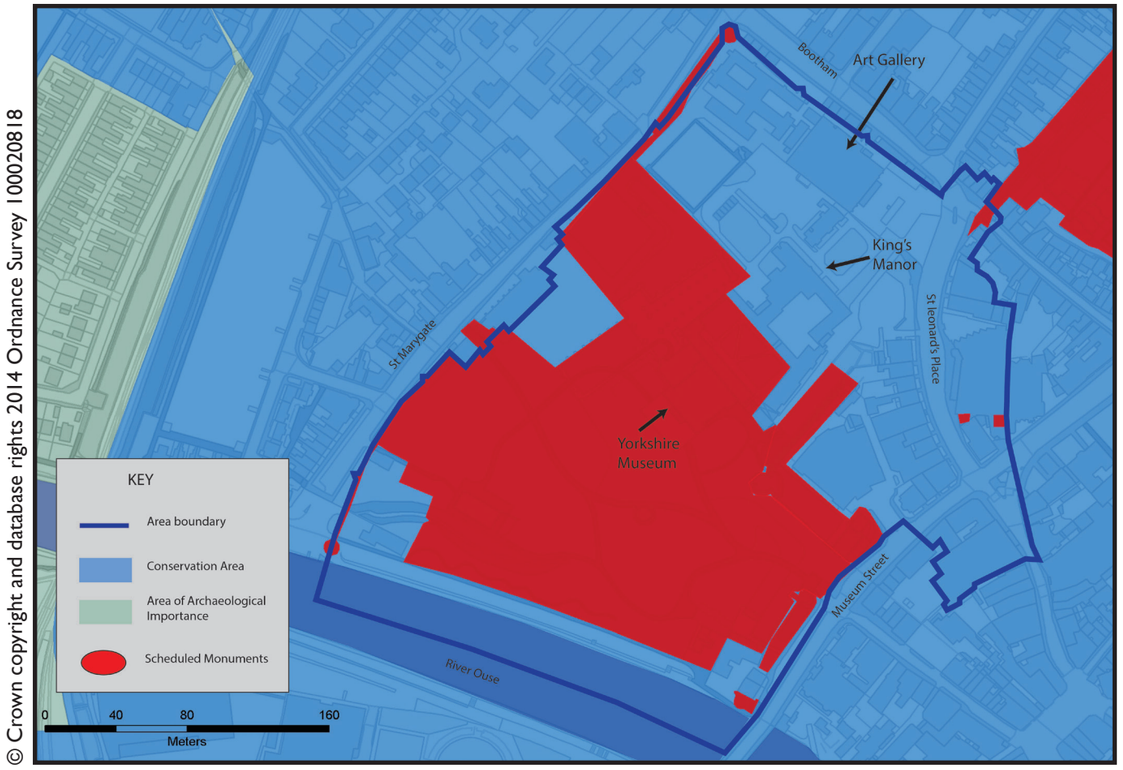
Above: Plan showing the heights of the buildings within this character area.



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Above: Plan showing designated heritage assets within this character area.

Below: Plan showing the construction dates of the buildings within the area.

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Below: Plan showing the Broad Type characterisation of the area.

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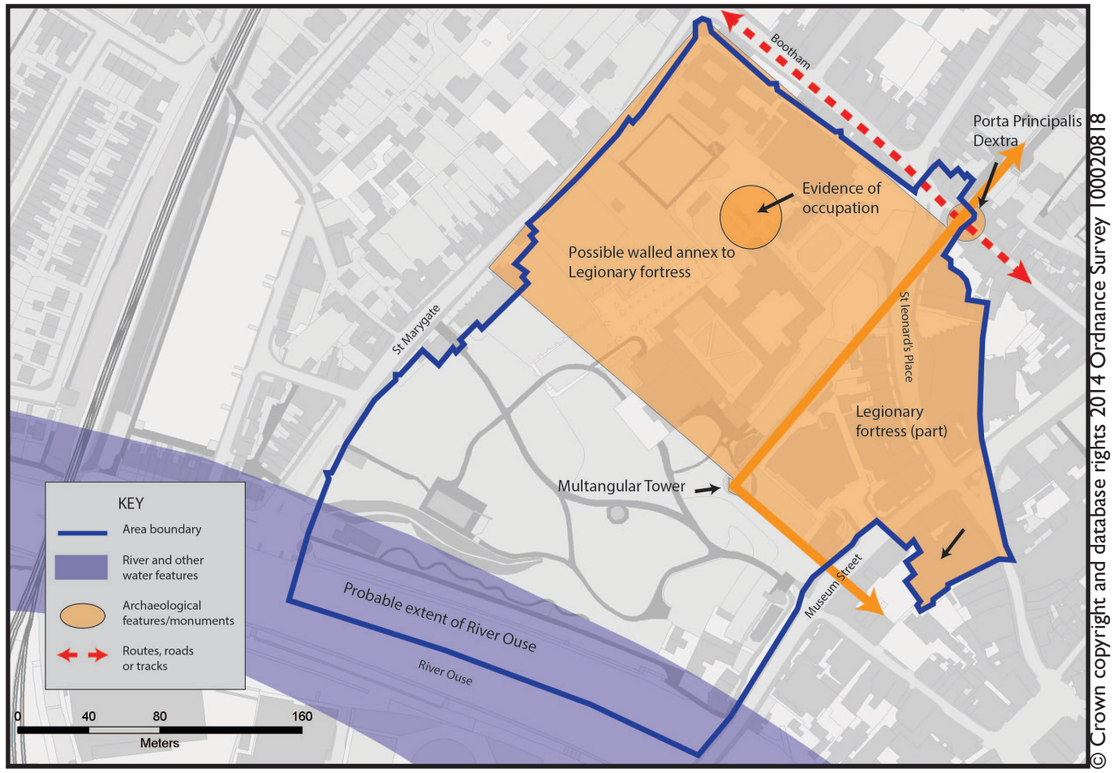

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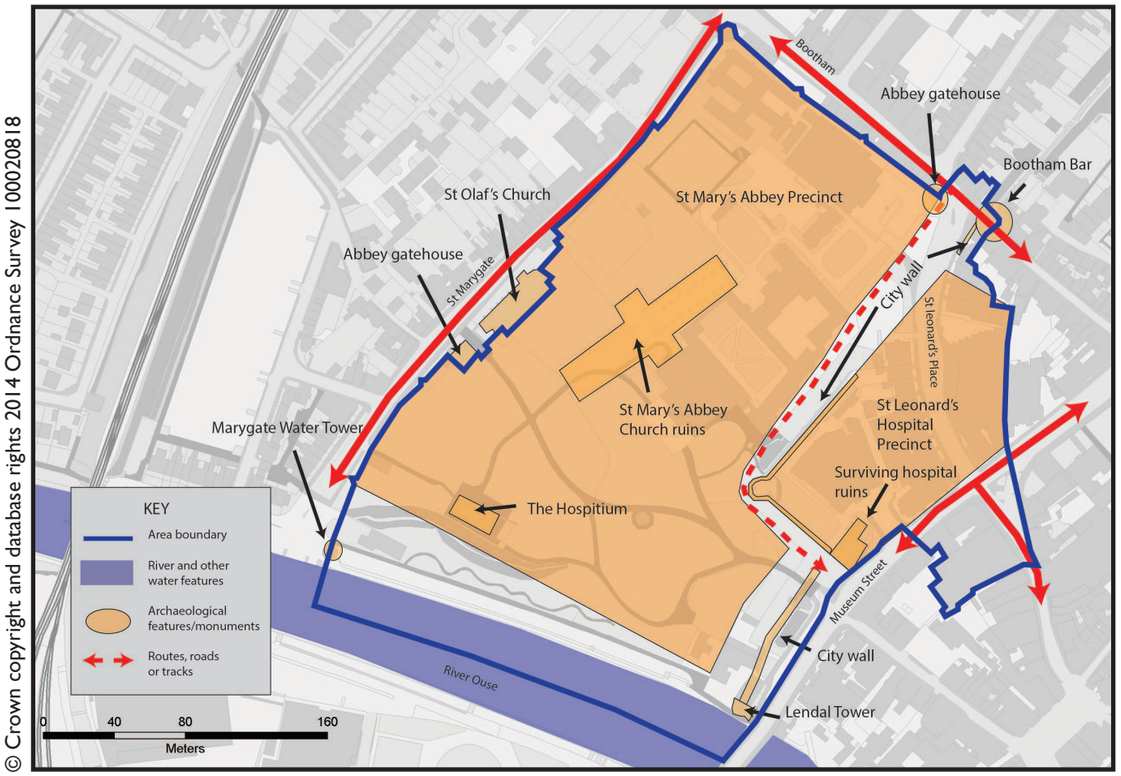
Above: The Roman landscape.



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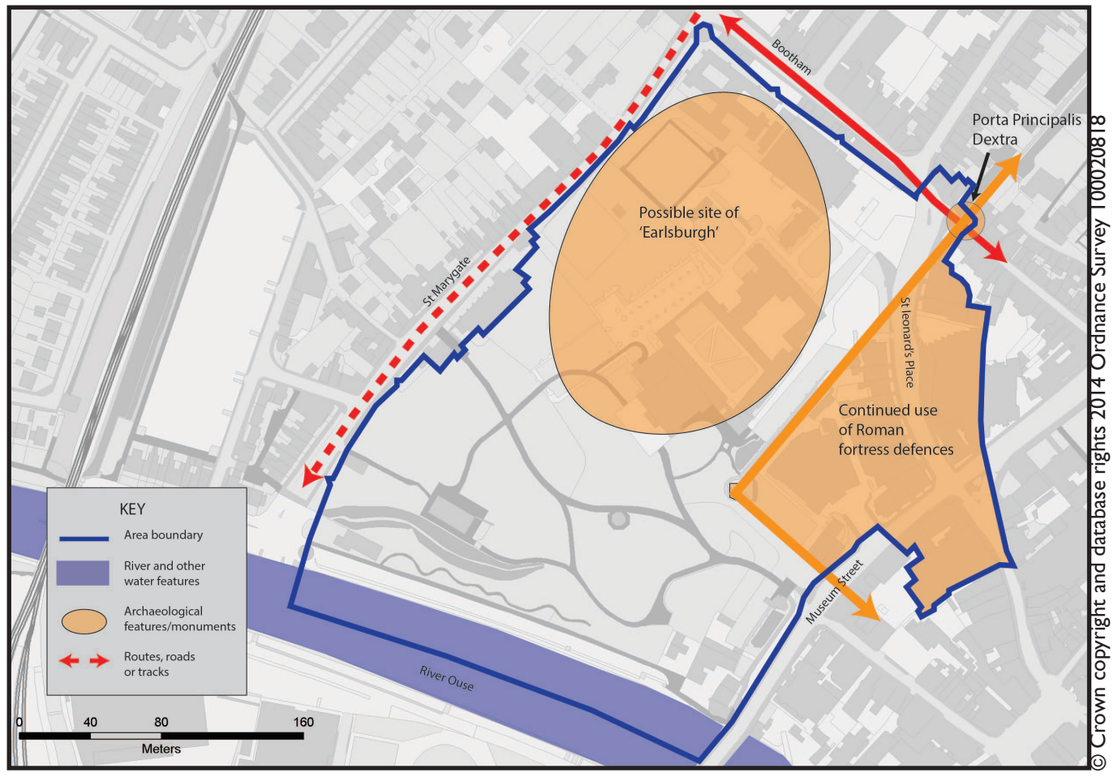
Above: The medieval landscape and main monuments.

Below: The Anglo-Scandinavian landscape.



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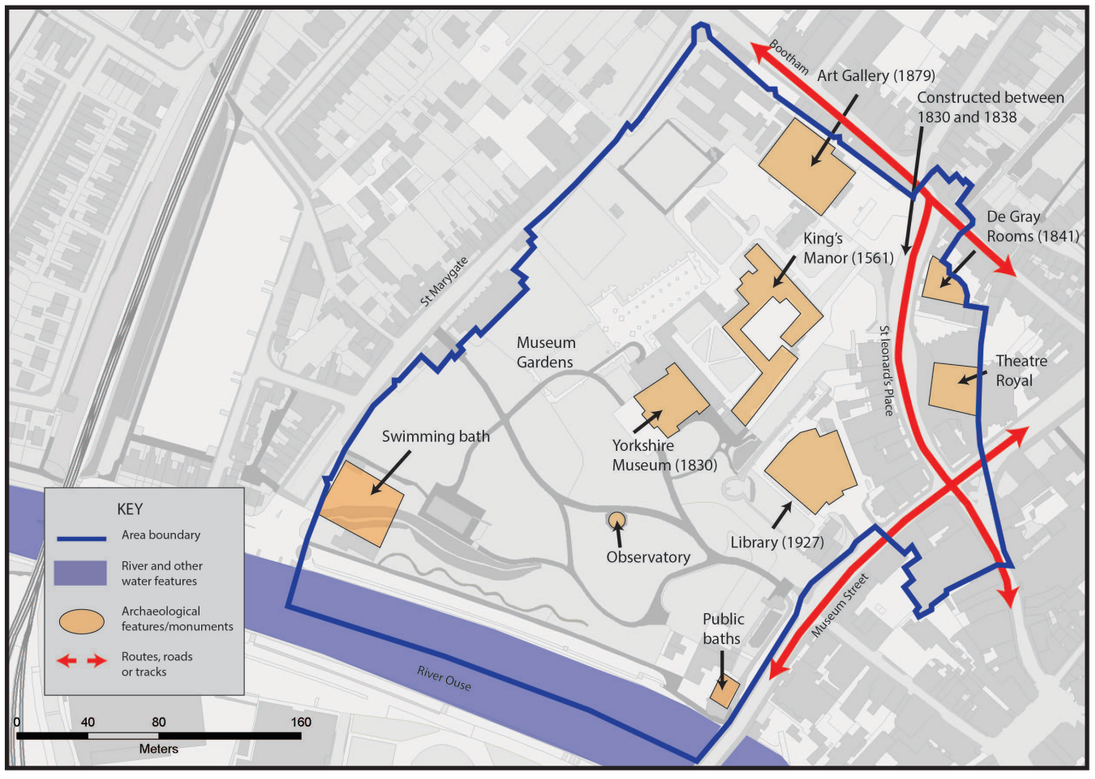
Below: The post-medieval monuments.



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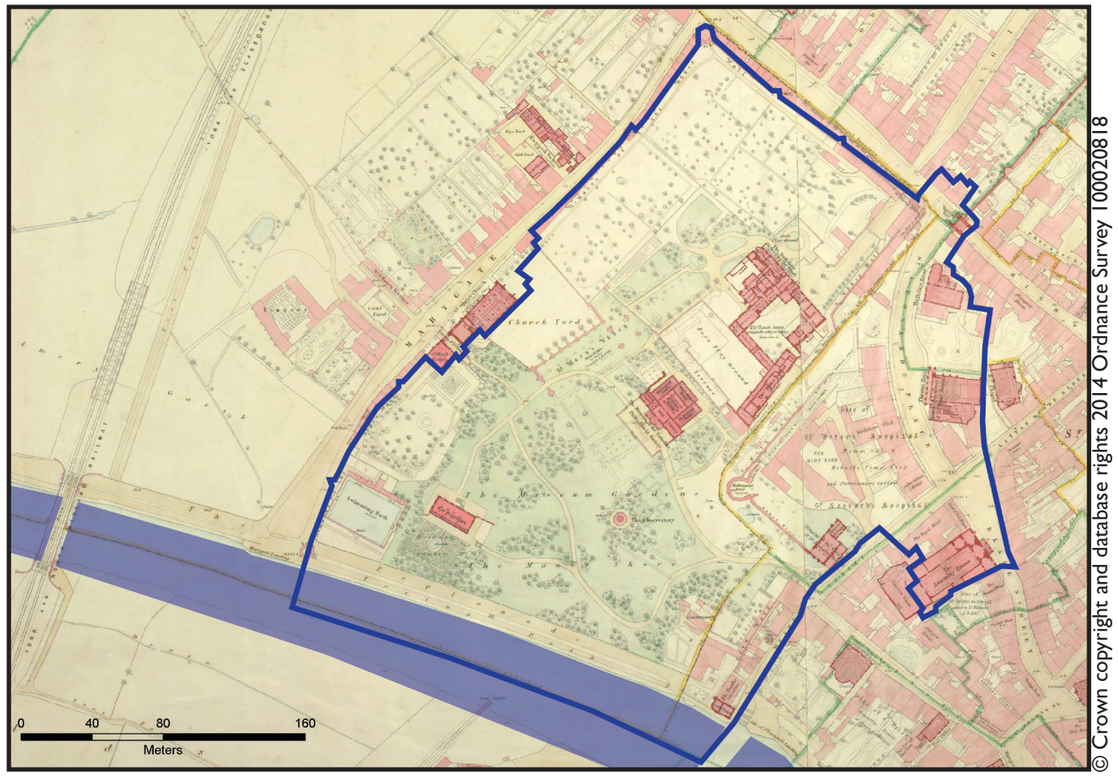

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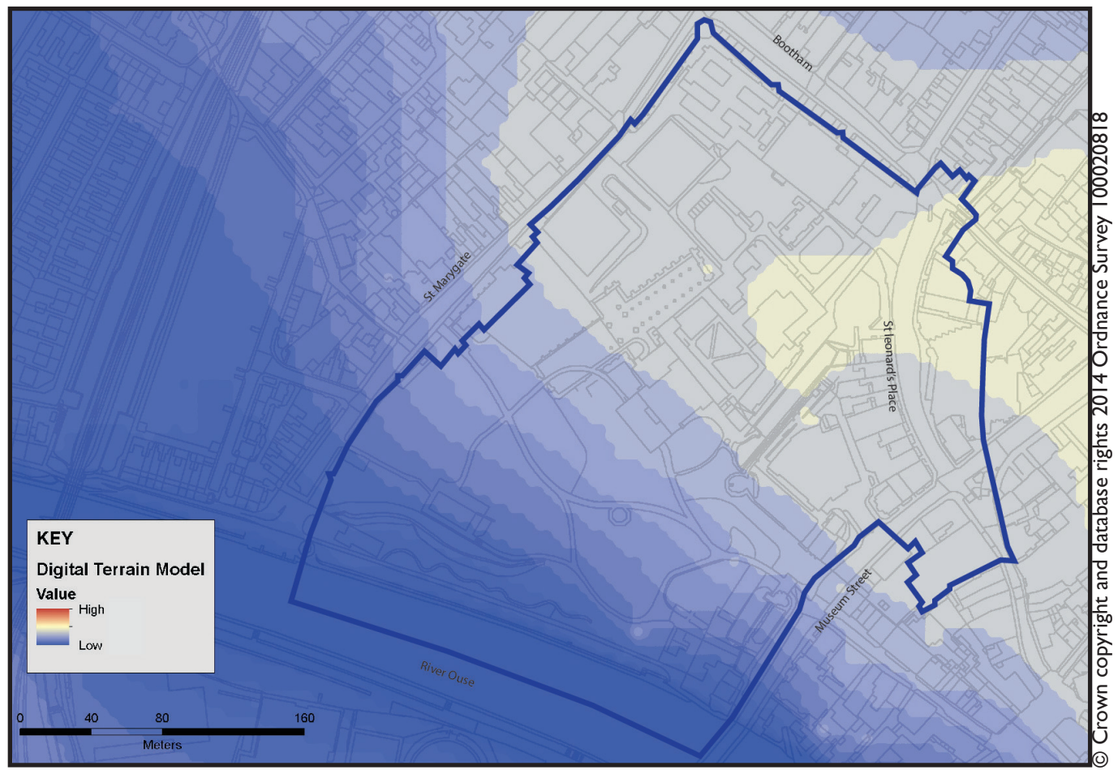
Above: The 1852 landscape.

Below:The general topography showing the higher ground in the vicinity of the Abbey.



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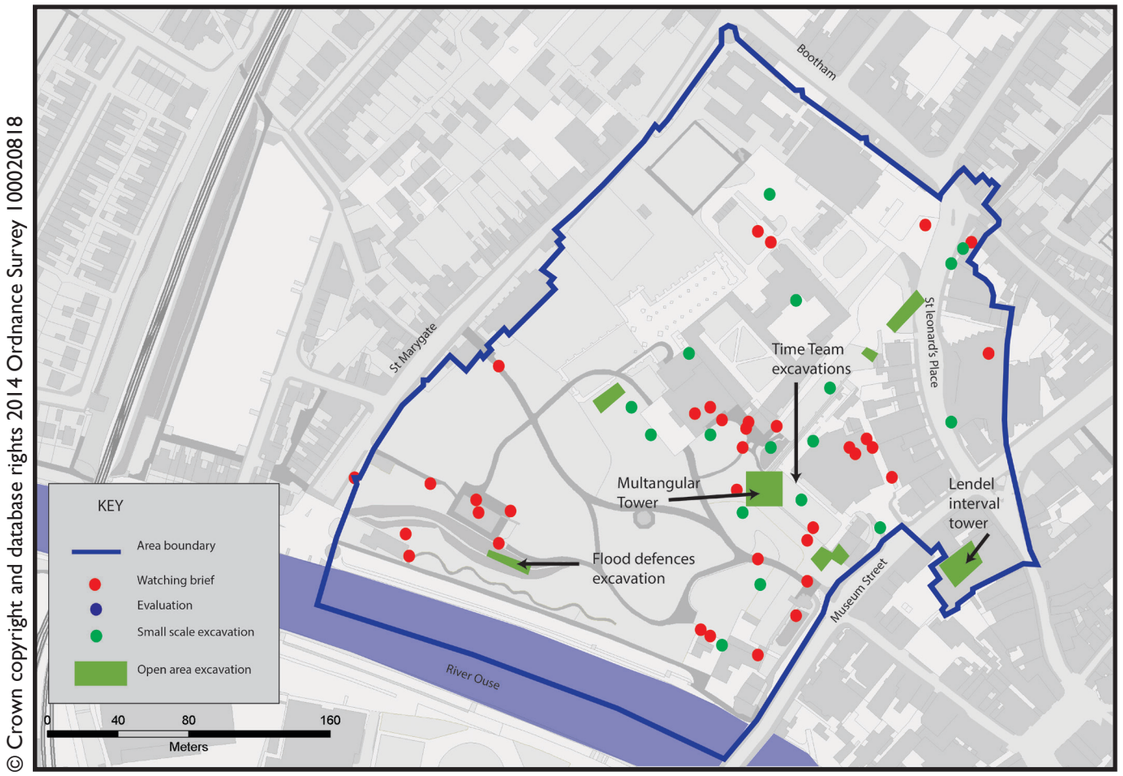

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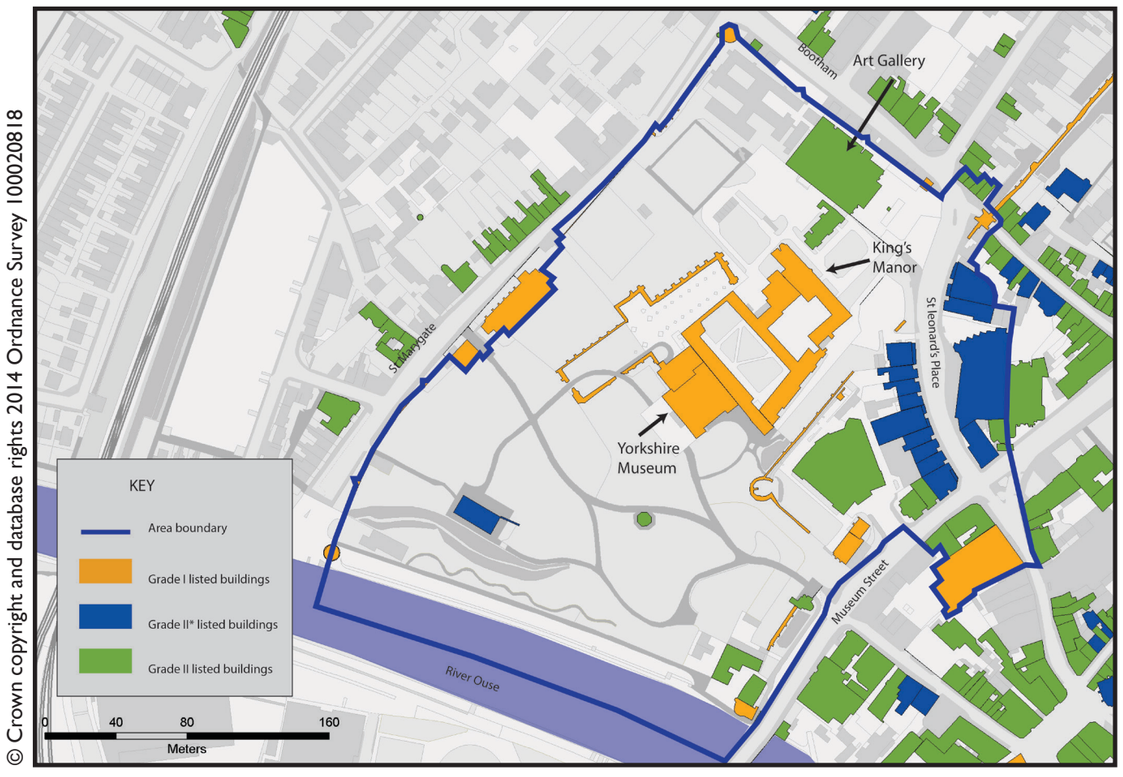
Above: The location of archaeological interventions recorded on the City of York Historic Environment Record.

Below: Location of listed buildings.



Main Sources

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Ove Arup, 1991, York Development and Archaeology Study, York YAT Annual Report 2011-12

York City Council Historic Environment Record (and grey literature report EYO768)

York City Historic Core Conservation Area Appraisal- 4: Museum Gardens & Exhibition Square

Researched and written by: Claire MacRae

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