

A DAY OF COMMERCIAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN YORK.

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7:57am

I arrive on site at West Offices in York after a 10 minute walk. This is probably the closest site I have ever worked on to my home, and I am enjoying the short commute. It is the exception rather than the rule.

We have just finished a 7 week excavation of a Roman bath-house and parts of the civilian settlement beneath one of the platforms on the site which is a former railway station. A photoblog of the excavation is available [here](#).

A lot of the finds, samples and tools from the excavation are still on site and need moving before the builders appropriate or throw them away. Three of our four barrows have already gone missing. So the first job of the day is loading finds into the car. Then we have to transfer some soil samples from rubble sacks into sample tubs.



Transferring samples.

When the car is as full as it can get, Tim heads off to the office and I descend to the cellar.

08:30am

I go to the room in the cellar that is beneath the hotel that was attached to the railway station. [This is my journey](#). Quite often the builders block access in part of the building, but it is maze-like, so we can always find a way through.



The trench in the cellar.

We are working in the cellar to determine what if any archaeological remains survive beneath the cellar floors in the hotel. The developer needs to reduce the ground level in one of these rooms, and if archaeological deposits survive they will be damaged. In an adjacent room we found what seems to be an archaeological cut feature containing large blocks of stone. We have started excavating in this room to see if there are surviving archaeological deposits here also. I have made a short film explaining this, which has been broken into episodes for the purposes of this blog.

The first of these episodes is available [here](#).

The second episode explaining the archaeology in the adjacent room is explained [here](#).



Archaeology in the adjacent room.

I finish removing a mixed clay and sand deposit that is located beneath the concrete floor and concrete rubble make-up for the floor. I also take the opportunity while Tim is away to make some of the films for this blog. Some groundworkers have been on hand to remove the spoil that we are creating, but they get called away to do other jobs and the spoil heap gets alarmingly large and spills into the trench. Once the deposit is removed I trowel it clean, which entails removing any loose material to produce a uniform flat surface. This helps us identify any potential archaeological features through differences in colour and textural changes.

The film of this process is [here](#).

I get a call from Tim that the work car has broken down, not as feared a result of the weight of the samples and finds, but an unrelated clutch problem thankfully!

A second film of my lonely and boring work is [here](#).

9:55am

Tim makes it back to site after his car-related adventures. Just in time for tea-break!

10:45am

Final cleaning up for photography.

11:15am

Photographing the deposits below the floor.

This is what we reveal. Disappointingly, there seem to be no archaeological features beneath the cellar floor. The stripes of sand and silty clay are typical alluvial glacial deposits laid down when the glaciers melted. This is typical of the geology beneath York.



Geological natural?

A film of this is [here](#).

11:43am

I lay out a sondage along one edge of the trench. This is a trench within the trench, where we will excavate a limited portion of the deposits that we have revealed. Although they look like geological deposits, what we call 'natural', we have to excavate a portion to prove this hypothesis. Some of the deposits contain charcoal which is usually, but not always 'anthropogenic' meaning caused by human activity.

A film of us excavating the sondage is [here](#).

1:00pm

Lunch! The sondage is almost finished and it still all looks geological. It looks like we will wrap this up early, which is nice, but very disappointing as we had high hopes for surviving Roman archaeology in the trench. Worse still, I'm going to be out of a job for the rest of the week.

I eat my lunch at the nearby war memorial. While a canteen hut and facilities are provided by the main contractors it has become over-full of builders. Even though the archaeologists look almost identical to everyone else on the site we are regarded with suspicion by the builders, so most of us have breaks off-site. Luckily, the weather is nice enough for *al-frescodining*.

1:40pm

Back in the cellar we finish the sondage and I clean it.

A film of the revealed deposits is [here](#).



Section through the geological deposits.

We are both certain now that it is glacial geology and not archaeological. Tim goes to notify the clients of this. They will be pleased I imagine.

All that remains for us to do is photograph and record the revealed deposits. Even though Tim and I are certain that there are no archaeological deposits within the trench, we need to prove this. We need to demonstrate this to both the local authority archaeologist who monitors our work, but also to any future archaeologists. While

this particular piece of work isn't that interesting, it does however add a very small piece to the archaeological picture for York. The record we make of this is photographs, descriptive context sheets for each deposit, a scale plan drawing, and a scale section drawing.

A film of me drawing the section is [here](#).

Once the recording is completed we take the opportunity to examine a lovely old safe that is still in the cellar. This was presumably for hotel guest's valuables. I joke to Tim that it would be funny if the key that I found yesterday below the concrete floor fit the safe. eventually we can't resist giving it a go. It doesn't fit. While we are testing it though I find a key on the top of the safe!



I've found the key to the safe!

Amazingly it fits! However, some muppet has ruined the lock by trying to break into it. The treasures within will have to remain undisturbed. This interlude was actually the most interesting part of our day, but it is fairly typical of the things archaeologist will find to entertain themselves on an otherwise dull site.

3:00pm

Well, that's it. All finished. We start moving our tools and equipment up to the tool chest.

A film of my last trip is [here](#).

3:15pm

An early finish to what has been a relatively typical day in commercial archaeology. As often as not we get negative results, in that we haven't found archaeological deposits. After the last seven weeks of excavating amazing Roman archaeology on the same site ([pictures here](#)), this seems about right.