

Watching brief during the excavation of six trial holes within High Town, Hereford.



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Contents:-

Summary
Introduction
Aims and Objectives
Background History
Fieldwork in 2015
Conclusions
Site Archive
Acknowledgements
List of Illustrations
Bibliography

Herefordshire Archaeology is Herefordshire Council's county archaeology service. It advises upon the conservation of archaeological and historic landscapes, maintains the county Sites and Monument Record, and carries out conservation and investigative field projects.

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Summary:

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken during the excavation of six exploratory trenches dug by Balfour Beatty in order to assess the nature and depth of deposits within High Town, Hereford.

The trenches were excavated by hand under archaeological supervision. All six trenches were excavated to a maximum depth of 0.7m. It was clear that significant disturbance had occurred to a depth of 0.7m due to previous re-surfacing works and the quantity of services which run through parts of High Town. No archaeologically significant deposits were identified within the trenches.

Disclaimer: It should not be assumed that land referred to in this document is accessible to the public. Location plans are indicative only. NGRs are accurate to approximately 10m. Measured dimensions are accurate to within 1m at a scale of 1:500, 0.1m at 1:50, and 0.02m at 1:20.

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Introduction

This report (EHE 80152), provides an account of small scale watching brief carried out by Herefordshire Archaeology. The watching brief was required in order to provide both archaeological and structural information regarding the possibility of the survival of significant archaeological deposits within the eastern portion of High Town, Hereford. High Town is located within the Hereford Area of Archaeological Importance as designated by the 1979 Scheduled Ancient Monuments Act.

The fieldwork comprised the excavation of six hand dug Test Trenches approximately 0.7m square and 0.7m deep at locations within the pedestrianised zone of High Town.

The aim of the archaeological fieldwork was to provide information regarding the depth, nature and survival of significant archaeological deposits associated with the post-conquest market area as well as earlier deposits / structures. The surviving archaeological deposits beneath High Town are not well documented. Areas close to building frontages often have cellar access, suggesting a significant amount of truncation within these corridors. However, little infrastructure work has been undertaken in the recent past which could have provided opportunities for the archaeological recording of the survival or otherwise of archaeologically significant deposits away from the building frontages within High Town.

It is understood that the information recorded from these works will be used to inform a future project associated with the re-surfacing of High Town.



Figure 1: location of the test pits within High Town.

Background history and previous archaeological work

The area called High Town comprises the area of the “New Market” established by the Norman Earl of Hereford, William Fitz Osbern during the late 11th century. The city was effectively extended outside of its Saxon defences on its northern and eastern sides, leading to a new defensive circuit being constructed in order to take in the market area, and its associated burgage plots. A more detailed description for each element of High Town can be seen below:

High Town (north side) – Maylord Street

The plots here extend fairly uniformly along the frontage of High Town and Commercial Street to its east, either side of Gomond Street. Before the insertion of the Maylord Orchard development of the 1980s the plots all ran back to Maylord Street which functioned as a back lane; its curving return to the main frontage (also removed in the 1980s) just within the city wall has been suggested to have been the result of truncation and re-planning when the wall was built (Thomas and Boucher 2002, 176). The archaeological

evidence is consistent with these plots having been laid out for Fitz Osbern's new market place (High Town) in the 1070s, with late 11th-century pottery from the Trinity Hospital site on Commercial Street and 12th-century pottery from the backs of the plots at Maylord Orchards. Whether Maylord Street was a planned contemporary back-service lane is uncertain, the present line having been established in the late 14th century though possibly having shifted from the line of a much earlier metalled path along the backs of the plots (Thomas and Boucher 2002, 41-50). This plan-unit also approximately represents the extent of the medieval Jewish quarter prior to the expulsion of 1290.

The Commercial Street – Union Street triangle

This block, defined by Commercial Street, Union Street and St Peter's Street, has usually been discussed as an example of market infill, developed at the junction of the main through streets and built up in the 13th or 14th century (Thomas and Boucher 2002, fig.1.13). However, the form of the plots within this block is entirely conventional – short, wide strip-type plots taking their principal alignment from the principal frontage (Commercial Street), with shorter plots facing south-west onto St Peter's Street and very restricted development on Union Street, which appears (as now) to have been of secondary importance. There is no sign here of the typical market infill or market encroachment, characterised by M R G Conzen (1960) as consisting of plots that were 100% occupied by their buildings – in other words, buildings with no attached yards or gardens. Excavations within the north end of this block (SMR 47244; Stone 1998) close to the Union Street frontage found a small patch (c.2m x 1m) of metalling laid and in use before the mid-12th century and interpreted as a possible market-place surface; it was however rapidly cut by pitting (also before the mid-12th century) and both a post-built building and a stone-lined subterranean feature constructed nearby before c.1200. The sequence may therefore be interpreted equally well as building and other activities taking place within conventional plots. As a piece of 'normal' urban development rather than an encroachment retarded by regulation, this area may be expected to have been built up from the late 11th century onwards as part of the general development of the High Town marketing area. The block also contains the parish church of St Peter, a contemporary part of this process, founded before 1085 by Walter de Lacy and clearly related to St Peter's Square, the space at the southern end of the triangle, and to St Owen Street beyond, leading towards de Lacy's other ecclesiastical foundation, the church of St Audoen, and what appears to have been an additional marketing area around it (Lobel 1969, 4; see below).

Union Street (east side)

The plots on the east side of the street are conventional in their layout with a common rear boundary reflecting the curve of the frontage, small, narrow plots developed on the frontage and a few, much wider, plot tails running back to the rear at what appear to be regular intervals. The latter might possibly reflect an original division of the east side of the street into four plots, though Taylor's map of 1757 shows seven plots in the series, including an exceptionally wide one behind (approximately) 16-21 Union Street. The development of these plots may be assumed, from the results over the road at

the rear of 46 Commercial Street (above) to have commenced by the mid-12th century.

Eign Gate

The development of the northern frontage of this important through street has been discussed above; the southern frontage may have been developed as part of the same project but has the important distinction of immediately abutting the pre-Conquest city ditch. From Ron Shoesmith's investigations in 1968-70 the lip of the ditch can be estimated as lying about 13 metres south of the present and medieval frontage (Shoesmith 1971), which would be enough to permit (even before the ditch was reclaimed) the development of normal frontage buildings with either the separate rear-rank structures characteristic of many towns in the late 10th- and 11th-century or the attached rear ranges perpendicular to the frontage normal in later periods. The process of the disuse and reclamation of the ditch cannot be dated accurately here, though it appears still to have been open to its full depth in the 11th and/or 12th century.

High Street – High Town (south)

Occupation of this area, and the foundations of the present plot pattern, is assumed to start with the establishment of High Town as a new market place in the 1070s. Archaeological evidence for the development of the frontage is however limited. A salvage excavation at 16-18 High Town (SMR 15999) found evidence of gravel spreads above and below (earlier and later than) a timber building of 12th-century or earlier date that had burnt down, between the street frontage and the pre-Conquest city ditch, which here lies about 17 to 25 metres back from the High Town frontage. It might be thought that the creation of High Town as a new market place for the city might be the cue for the centrally-organised infilling and reclamation of the ditch; there is however no evidence for this, and, where the ditch has been examined, no sign of the rapid arrival of clean fills: it seems instead to have lingered into the 12th century as a sewer. The plots filling this block have a distinctive form: long, many boundaries passing right through the block to East Street at the rear; very narrow, doubtless a product of the high value of the frontage here; intensively built up for some distance back from the main street; and punctuated at frequent intervals by alleyways communicating between the main and rear frontages. This distinctive 'ladder-pattern' morphology is widely paralleled in other English towns (for example, the Lanes of Carlisle, or the north side of Nottingham's market) where high-value plots fronting a market place were penetrated by closely-spaced alleyways to give access to developments on their backlands and, either from the first or by stages, communicate with parallel secondary streets at the rear.

Fieldwork in 2015

Site work began on Monday 11th May 2015 by Balfour Beatty and continued until the end of Tuesday 12th May, under the direction of Stuart Nowell, Senior Engineer. The works comprised the excavation of six test pits each less than 1m square and each to a maximum depth of 0.7m. The works were carried out by hand and test pits were filled immediately after inspection.

All six test pits contained a 0.3m thick layer of blinding which directly overlay a compacted but well mixed gravel / chipping matrix with some concrete and brick fragments. It would appear that much of the area, at least within the narrower portions of High Town has been subjected to heavy disturbance and truncation. This is in the main due to the large amount of services which run through these areas.

No archaeologically significant deposits were encountered within any of the test pits.



Plate 1: Test pit 6 (Commercial St), looking north-east.

Conclusions

The watching brief has confirmed that no archaeologically significant features or deposits survive in these locations between the present ground level and

0.70m deep. Significant modern disturbance has occurred as a result of the installation of services and the construction of successive surfacing. It is however possible that “islands” of archaeology may survive within high town within areas less affected by service runs.

Site Archive

16 digital photographs
1 site notebook entry
This document

Acknowledgements

Herefordshire Archaeology would like to thank, Stuart Nowell, Senior Engineer, of Balfour Beatty.

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: location of the test pits within High Town

Plate 1: Test pit 6, looking north-east

Bibliography

Baker, N, 2009, A Characterisation Of The Historic Townscape Of Central Hereford *Herefordshire Archaeology Report* 266.