

***Alison Clarke***  
***Archaeological Consultant***

18 Ash Grove, Northallerton, North Yorkshire. DL6 1RQ  
 Tel: 0609 776501 Fax: 0609 779968

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**ARCHAEOLOGICAL**  
**WATCHING BRIEF**  
**AT**  
**FORMER**  
**DOCTORS SURGERY,**  
**PICKS LANE, THIRSK**  
**FOR**  
**HAMBLETON**  
**HOUSING ASSOCIATION**

ALISON CLARKE

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## WATCHING BRIEF AT DOCTORS' SURGERY, PICKS LANE, THIRSK

### INTRODUCTION

The former doctors' surgery on Picks Lane in Thirsk is close to the area of the medieval castle in the town, part of which is scheduled as an Ancient Monument (County No Yorkshire 711) (Fig 1). It has been acquired by Hambleton Housing Association for redevelopment as flats and offices. This work included an extension of the car parking area which involved digging out part of a bank believed to be associated with the earthworks of the medieval castle. In consequence, a watching brief condition was put on planning permission, to allow the recording of any archaeological features. The watching brief was undertaken between 8th and 21st September 1994.

### BACKGROUND

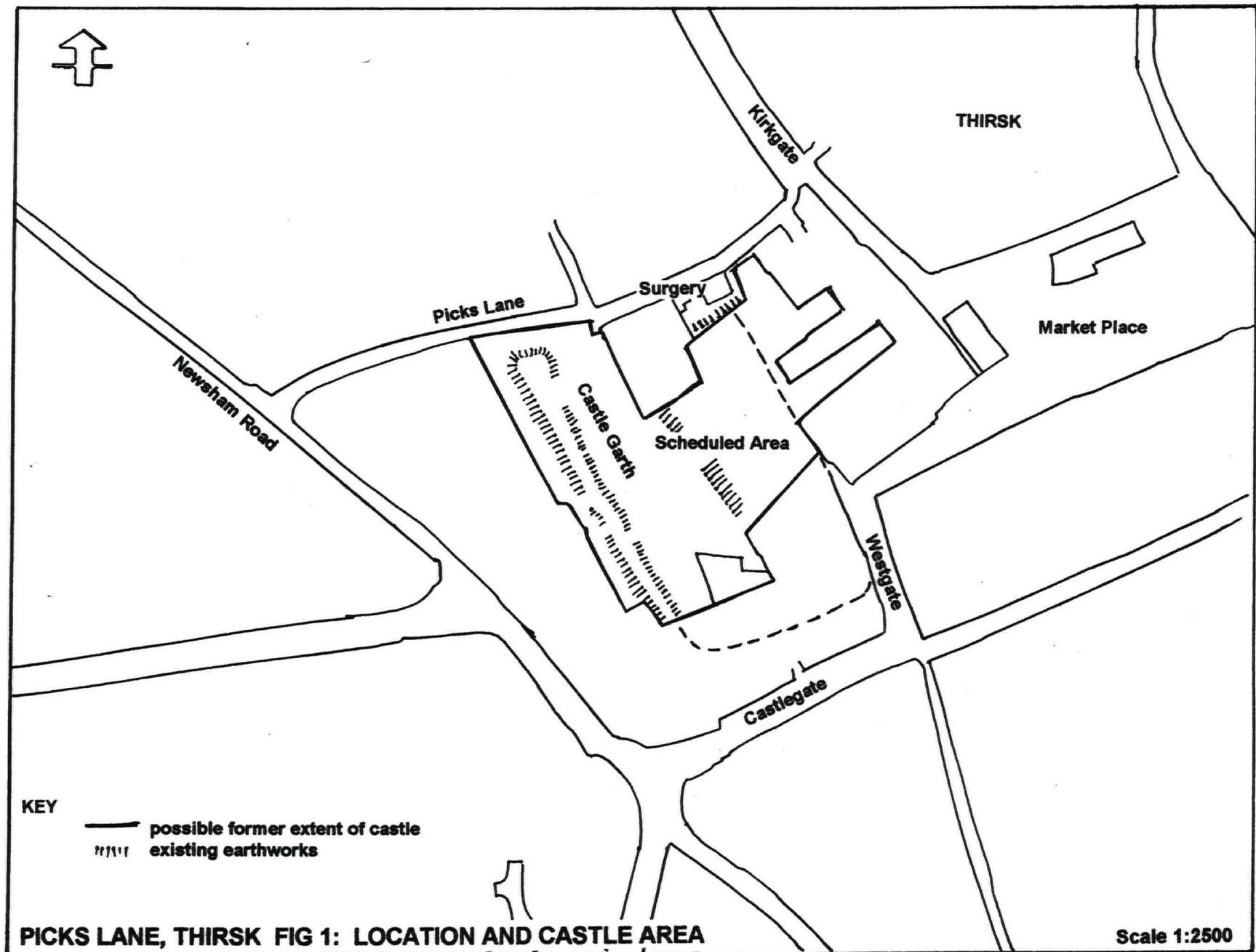
The castle at Thirsk is regarded by English Heritage as having been built by Robert de Stuteville in about 1092, and it was fairly short-lived as it was destroyed by order of Henry II in 1176 after a rebellion by its holder, Roger de Mowbray. A manor on the site is known in the thirteenth century and buildings are mentioned in the fourteenth century. Parts at least of it seem to have open ground from the later fourteenth century, but the former extent of the castle is unknown, and its form is unclear from the remaining earthworks.

Plots backing onto the castle area from Kirkgate appear to be medieval from their form, but these could post-date the castle, and it seems probable that the surviving earthworks in Castle Garth represent the bailey of the castle, while the motte was in the area of Castle Villa. The area of the castle may therefore have stretched as far as Kirkgate to the east, Picks Lane to the north, and Castlegate and Westgate to the south and south-east (Fig 1).

The earlier history of Thirsk is largely unknown, although its existence pre-Conquest is documented. Until recently no evidence of pre-Conquest settlement had been found, but the most recent discoveries in the area of the castle indicate both ninth-tenth century occupation and earlier burials (Anne Finney, pers. comm.). These discoveries throw important new light on the early development of the town and can be tied in with the findings of the watching brief at Picks Lane.

### THE WATCHING BRIEF (Fig 2)

The watching brief carried out in September 1994 consisted of observing the removal by machine of a stretch of bank running approximately eastwards from the telephone exchange. The construction of the telephone exchange itself has destroyed part of the bank, which must formerly have extended into the main castle area of Castle Garth. The bank slopes down steeply from south to north, and The Bungalow to the south east of the Surgery is built on its crest. It may have formed part of the castle's outer defences, and might have swung southwards at some point behind Kirkgate. The areas scheduled as an ancient monument includes the top of the bank, but not the slope of the bank into The Surgery.







Wall to BT Compound

Former Surgery

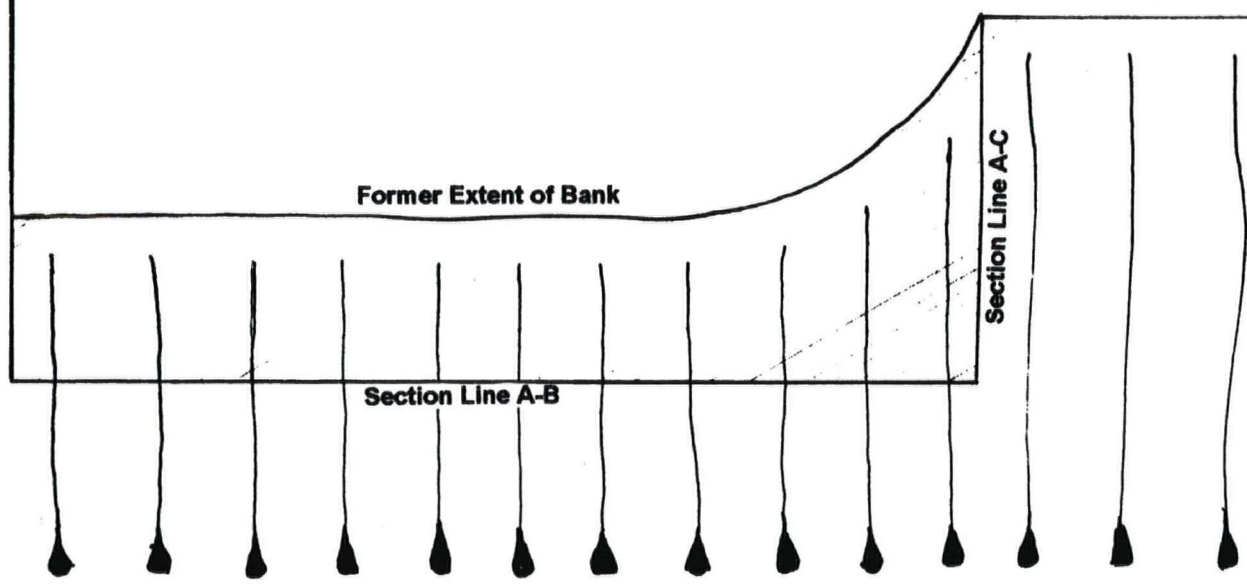
Former Extent of Bank

Section Line A-C

Section Line A-B

PICKS LANE, THIRSK FIG 2: SITE PLAN

Scale 1:100



The length of bank affected by the demolition was 17.5 metres, and up to 3.3 metres in depth was removed. The bank was removed to approximately 60 cm below the existing tarmac ground surface, creating a vertical section up to 2.8 metres high, running along the length of the bank. Below the turf and topsoil, a number of deposition layers was encountered, including compacted clay which necessitated the use of a toothed bucket on the machine (Plates 1, 2). This created an extremely uneven surface on the section which could not be entirely removed by hand, but the layers were visible throughout, and where the soil was less hard a smooth bucket was used, creating a less destructive removal and thus a clearer section. It was not possible to distinguish layers in the soil as they were removed because of the working methods of the machine driver.

#### **DESCRIPTION (Figs 3 and 4)**

The sections produced by the removal of soil from the bank revealed a succession of layers. The main section was north-facing (A-B), with a smaller west-facing section (A-C) abutting it at its eastern end. The layers could therefore be followed through ninety degrees. Almost all of the interfaces between layers were very well defined, enabling a clear succession of layers to be observed and described.

In view of the complexity of the section, it is unfortunate that a more careful excavation of the bank was not possible, as any interpretation is limited by the arbitrary positioning of the section.

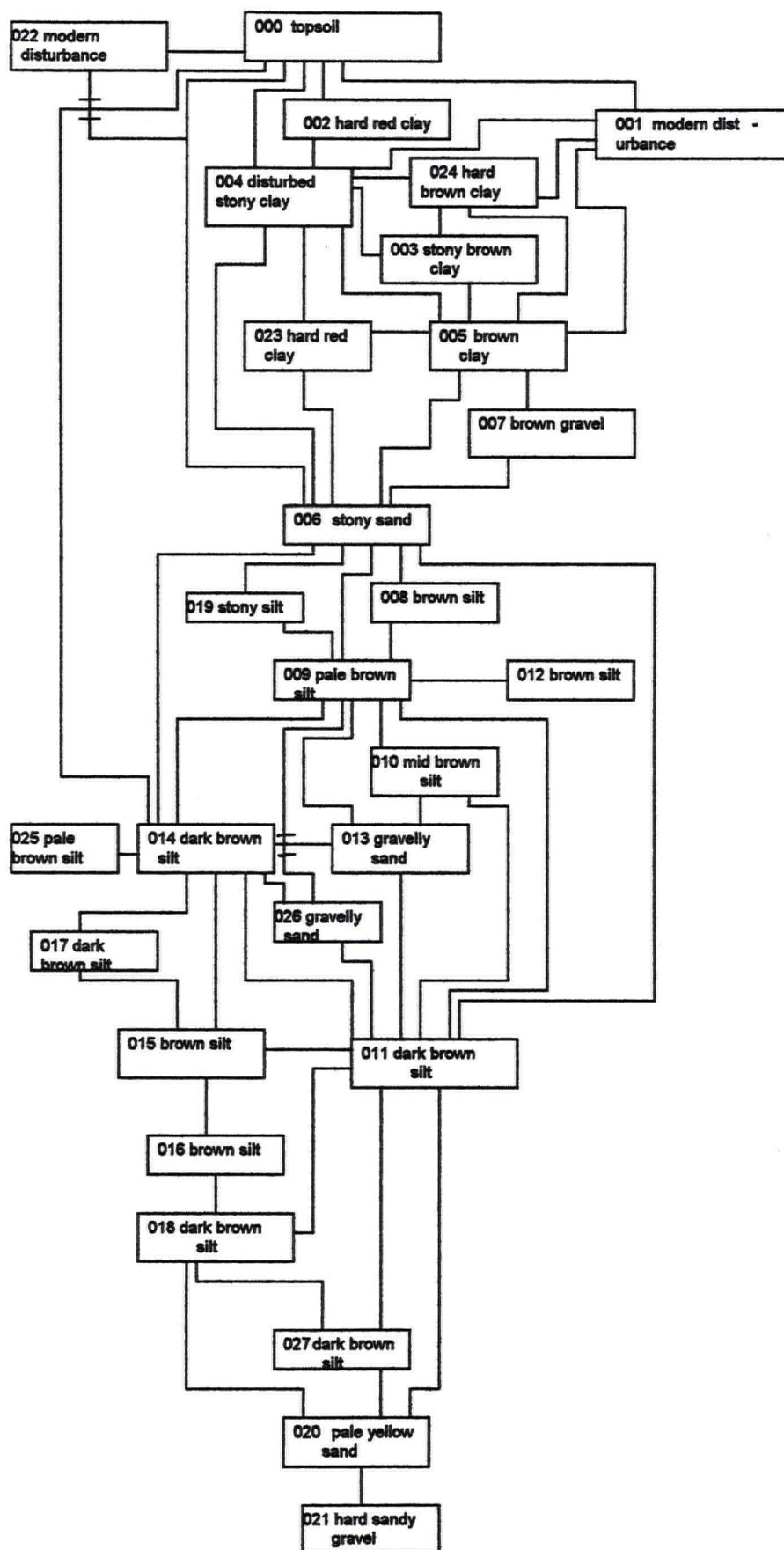
The progression of layers begins with the undisturbed gravel (021) which appeared in the lowest 20 cm. of the section for most of its length (Plates 3, 4). Above this, and dipping down at the western end of the section to below the base, was a softer yellow sand (020) which contained patches of large cobbles which did not however form a continuous surface and may have been naturally deposited (Plates 5, 6). Some of these cobbles were visible in the west facing section (A-C), at the interface between 020 and 021.

Above these were bands of mid brown to dark brown silt (011, 014, 018, 027), up to 50 cm. thick, which were fairly level for most of the length of the section, dipping down to the western end to below the base (Plates 7, 8), and cut by a feature in the corner of the two sections (Plates 9, 10). These contained charcoal flecks.

Lighter narrow bands of silts overlay these across much of the section, forming gently sloping hummocks, and again cut by the feature in the corner. This cut appeared to be composed of the same layers as the surrounding soil but with the lower layers cut (027) or compressed (018), and the upper layers wider than on either side (015 and 016). It has the appearance of a pit or ditch but its shape is impossible to determine from the section alone.

Above these silts was a uniform layer (06) of pale yellowish brown clay containing small stones, 20 to 90 cm. thick. It narrowed and dipped towards the western end where it was overlain by a layer of hard brown compacted clay containing stones and flecks of charcoal (04). This contained within it patches and bands of even harder reddish brown clay (002, 023, 024), and a thin layer of gravel (003).

At the extreme western end of the section the ground was disturbed from below the topsoil to the bottom of the trench (001), as a result



PICKS LANE, THIRSK FIG 5: HARRIS MATRIX



of the construction of the wall surrounding the British Telecom compound to the west of the Surgery.

The section which ran north-south at the eastern end of the main section, (A-C), showed a continuation of the layers in the main section, with the ground sloping down to the north to a minimum height of 1.5 metres above the base of the trench (Plate 10).

A rich dark brown topsoil (000) overlay the whole section, with a modern pit (022) cutting through it towards the eastern end, and the ground continued to rise to the south beyond it.

#### INTERPRETATION

The sequence of layers revealed in the section suggests a complex succession of events. Dating is difficult owing to a complete lack of finds except in the modern disturbances 001 and 022, but a tentative history can be suggested.

The natural soils of the area are sands and silts, and these form the lowest layers of the section. The upper clay layers, which at least partly reflect the existing ground levels, would seem to represent a bank which can most easily be interpreted as associated with the castle outworks. This would date to the late eleventh or early twelfth century. The precise extent and nature of the outer defences of the castle is unknown, but is held by English Heritage probably to have been within the area of Westgate, Castlegate, Kirkgate and Masonic (Picks) Lane. The bank through which the section was cut runs parallel to Picks Lane, and could represent the northernmost extent of the castle.

The narrow, interleaved, silty layers below the clay bank are probably the result of natural silting of exposed surfaces. The shapes appearing in the section are reminiscent of broad rig and furrow. This interpretation would assume an established open field system prior to 1092, which was demolished by the construction of the castle. This might be possible, as Pre Conquest occupation of the area is now established, and the focus of Norman settlement might have been moved for defensive reasons from an earlier settlement around St James Green.

An alternative interpretation would place these layers within the life of the castle. Assuming a bank running approximately west - east from Castle Garth towards Kirkgate, and the south-east corner of the castle area defined by Westgate and Castlegate, a projection of the line of Castlegate northwards would join with the northern bank in the region of the Surgery (Fig 1). If this were the case, which seems more likely than a dog-leg towards the Market Place to join Kirkgate, the silty layers could be interpreted as two banks and an intervening ditch which ran north - south forming the eastern boundary of the castle precinct. The relationship of the clay bank to the silt layers is not particularly clear, but the clay appears to overlie the silt at least in part. This may be as a result of alterations to the castle within its lifetime.

Whether the narrow silt layers are eleventh century or earlier, they and the clay layers overlie a broad dark silty layer throughout (Context Nos 011/018). If the clay layers are assumed to be eleventh to twelfth century, this layer must be earlier. Despite the absence of finds, the extensive presence of charcoal suggest that it is an occupation layer. It has a relatively level surface, dipping downwards towards its western end, and is cut by a feature at the eastern end of the main section. It is suggested that the layer

dates to before the eleventh century, and as its level above OD (section line at 37.33 OD) is close to that of the ninth - tenth century levels revealed in the excavation in Castle Garth which was taking place at the same time as the Picks Lane watching brief, it may well be contemporary.

In conclusion, it is clear that several phases of occupation are represented by the sections on Picks Lane. The lack of finds, while not conclusive, would tend to support an early date for the occupation layer. Despite the suggestive shape of the narrow silty layers it seems less likely that rigg and furrow would have had time to be established after the likely ninth-tenth date of the occupation level and before the construction of the castle. An explanation connecting these layers to an early phase of the castle construction seems more plausible. The shape and nature of the cut in the corner of the two sections is impossible to determine because of the chance of its position relative to the building work.

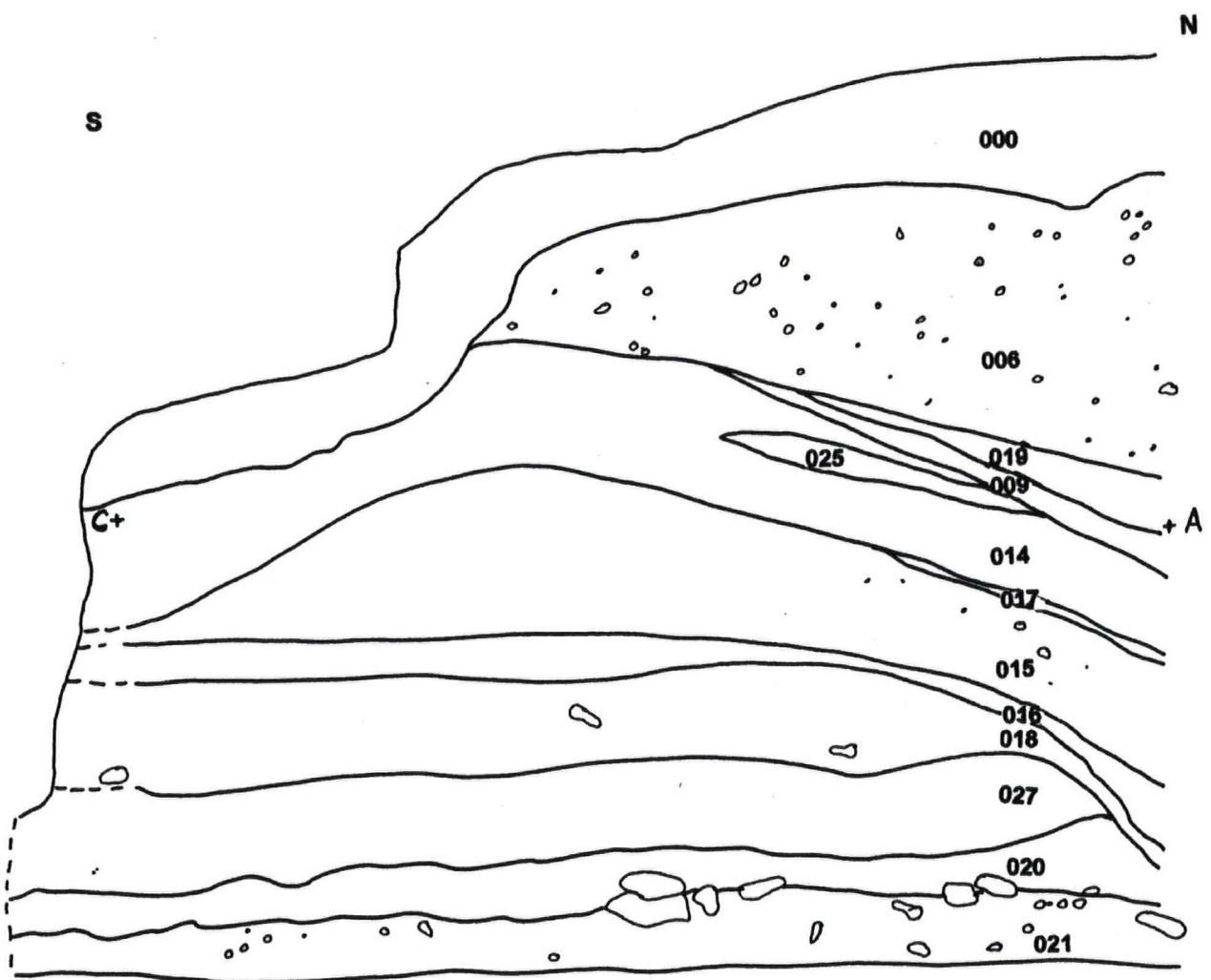
### CONCLUSIONS

The watching brief has clearly added an important element to the body of information on the history and archaeology of Thirsk. Its usefulness was enhanced by the chance of excavation being carried out in the vicinity simultaneously, but the results have been severely limited by the restrictions of working within a watching brief.

In such a restricted area, it was not possible to impose many constraints on the working methods of the machine, especially as the operator was not particularly skilled. The extreme hardness of the clay also meant that a toothed bucket had to be used, which made a viable section difficult to achieve. Above all, there was no control over the positioning of the section. This would not have been a problem if a simple longitudinal section of the bank had been encountered as expected, but the complexity of the archaeological deposits observed meant that much information was lost by not being able to excavate archaeologically.

Nevertheless, the information which has been retrieved, and the interpretations which can be made from it, are of significance and can be combined with other information about the development of Thirsk to good advantage.





**PICKS LANE, THIRSK FIG 4: WEST FACING SECTION A-C**

**Scale 1:20**

Figure 3 removed prior to scanning  
as larger than A3 size.

Please see original hard copy report  
for Figure 3: North-facing section A-B.

## KEY TO FIGS 3 AND 4

### CONTEXT NOS.

- 000 Topsoil consisting of dark brown loam containing much disturbed soil including modern rubbish. Overlies 001, 002, 004, 006 and 014. Cut by 022.
- 001 Cut of disturbed brown loam with construction rubble. Underlies 000, cuts 003, 004, 005, 024.
- 002 Thin layer of reddish brown very hard clay with stones. Underlies 000, overlies 004. Same as 024.
- 003 Thin layer of very stony hard brown clay. Underlies 024, overlies 004 and 005.
- 004 Layer of disturbed compacted hard brown clay with many stones of varying sizes and occasional charcoal flecks. Underlies 000, 002, 003 and 024, overlies 005, 006, 023 and 024, cut by 001.
- 005 Layer of hard slightly reddish brown clay with fewer stones than 004 and small charcoal flecks. Underlies 003, 004 and 024, overlies 006 and 007, abuts 023, cut by 001.
- 006 Layer of pale yellowish brown clay with many small stones and charcoal flecks. Underlies 000, 004, 005, 007 and 23, overlies 008, 009, 011, 014 and 019, cut by 022.
- 007 Thin layer of very stony, yellowish brown gravel. Underlies 005, overlies 006.
- 008 Layer of pale to mid brown silt with some stones and charcoal flecks. Underlies 006, overlies 009.
- 009 Layer of very pale yellow/brown silt with some small stones. Underlies 006, 008 and 019, overlies 010, 011, 014 and 015.
- 010 Layer of mid/dark brown silt with charcoal flecks. Underlies 009, overlies 011.
- 011 Layer of very dark brown silt with charcoal flecks, some large. Underlies 006, 009, 010, 013, and 014, overlies 020 and 027, cut by 015. Same as 018.
- 012 Lens of pale brown silt. Within 009.
- 013 Small lens of yellow sticky gravelly sand. Underlies 009 and 014, overlies 009 and 011.
- 014 Layer of mid/dark brown, slightly reddish silt with charcoal flecks. Underlies 006 and 009, overlies 011, 013, 015, 017, 020, contains 025. Same as 027.
- 015 Layer of pale/mid brown silt with black and brown blotches. Underlies 014 and 017, overlies 016 and 018, abuts 011. Same as 025.
- 016 Thin layer of mid brown silt with charcoal flecks. Underlies 015, overlies 018.
- 017 Very thin layer of very dark brown silt. Underlies 014, overlies 015. Possibly same as 011.



- 018 Layer, very thin in places, of dark brown silt with occasional stones. Underlies 016, overlies 027. *Same as 011.*
- 021 Layer of undisturbed hard orangey yellow sandy gravel. Underlies 020, to bottom of section.
- 022 Cut of modern disturbance from turf line, containing dark brown loam with tile, brick etc. Cuts 000 and 006.
- 023 Lens of hard reddish brown clay with stones. Underlies 004 and 005, overlies 006.
- 024 Layer of hard brown disturbed clay with stones. Underlies 004, overlies 003 and 004, cut by 001.
- 025 Lens of mid / pale brown silt. Underlies 009, within 014. *Same as 015.*
- 026 Small lens of yellow sticky gravelly sand. Underlies 009 and 014, overlies 009 and 011.
- 027 Layer of mid/dark brown, slightly reddish silt with charcoal flecks. Underlies 011 and 018, overlies 020. *Same as 014.*