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LAND OFF POTTERGATE, HELMSLEY,

NORTH YORKSHIRE

WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

by Mark Johnson

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YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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ABSTRACT

During April 2007 York Archaeological Trust carried out a watching brief on a block of development land between Bridge Street and Pottergate, Helmsley. Evidence was found for a sequence of garden type soils dating from the medieval to modern periods. Also encountered were three pits, at least two of which were of medieval date. Other deposits related to the dumping of discarded materials within the early modern period.

1. INTRODUCTION

Between 17th – 23rd April 2007 York Archaeological trust maintained a periodic archaeological watching brief during ground works on a block of land to the rear of the Feathers Hotel, Helmsley, North Yorkshire NGR SE 6140 8380) (Figure 1, Site location map, Figure 2, Works location plan). The watching brief was maintained as part of a condition attached to a planning permission (ref 05/00180/FUL). The works were comprised of a terrace of five houses, to be accessed via an existing drive from Pottergate. The footings of the houses were of strip foundations. At the time of the watching brief this area, which lies approximately mid-way between Bridge Street and Pottergate, was partially overgrown former garden land.

The archaeological works were commissioned by the LHL Group Limited, and followed a Standard Written Scheme of Investigation drawn up by the Heritage Section of North Yorkshire County Council.

2. METHODOLOGY

The watching brief was maintained during the mechanical stripping of vegetation from the site (generally around 0.15m) and the mechanical cutting of strip foundations for the terrace of houses (Figure 3, Plan of footings showing location of sections recorded). The footing trenches were up to 1.0m wide and between 0.9m – 1.14m deep (reaching up to 55.07m – 55.11m OD). In an east – west direction there is very little ground slope or undulation across the area occupied by the new housing. In a north – south direction a slight rise in the ground surface up to the plot boundary was apparent in the northern part of the site. The pre-stripping ground level lay between 56.30m – 56.48m OD. Upon completion of machining of these strip footings the sections were cleaned and the visible deposits were recorded on pro-forma context cards as well as on a series of plans and sections drawn to conventional scales. A series of photographs were taken during all stages of these works. All collected

finds were retained by context number. The records and finds associated with this project are currently stored by York Archaeological Trust under the YAT accession code: YORAT: 2007.16.

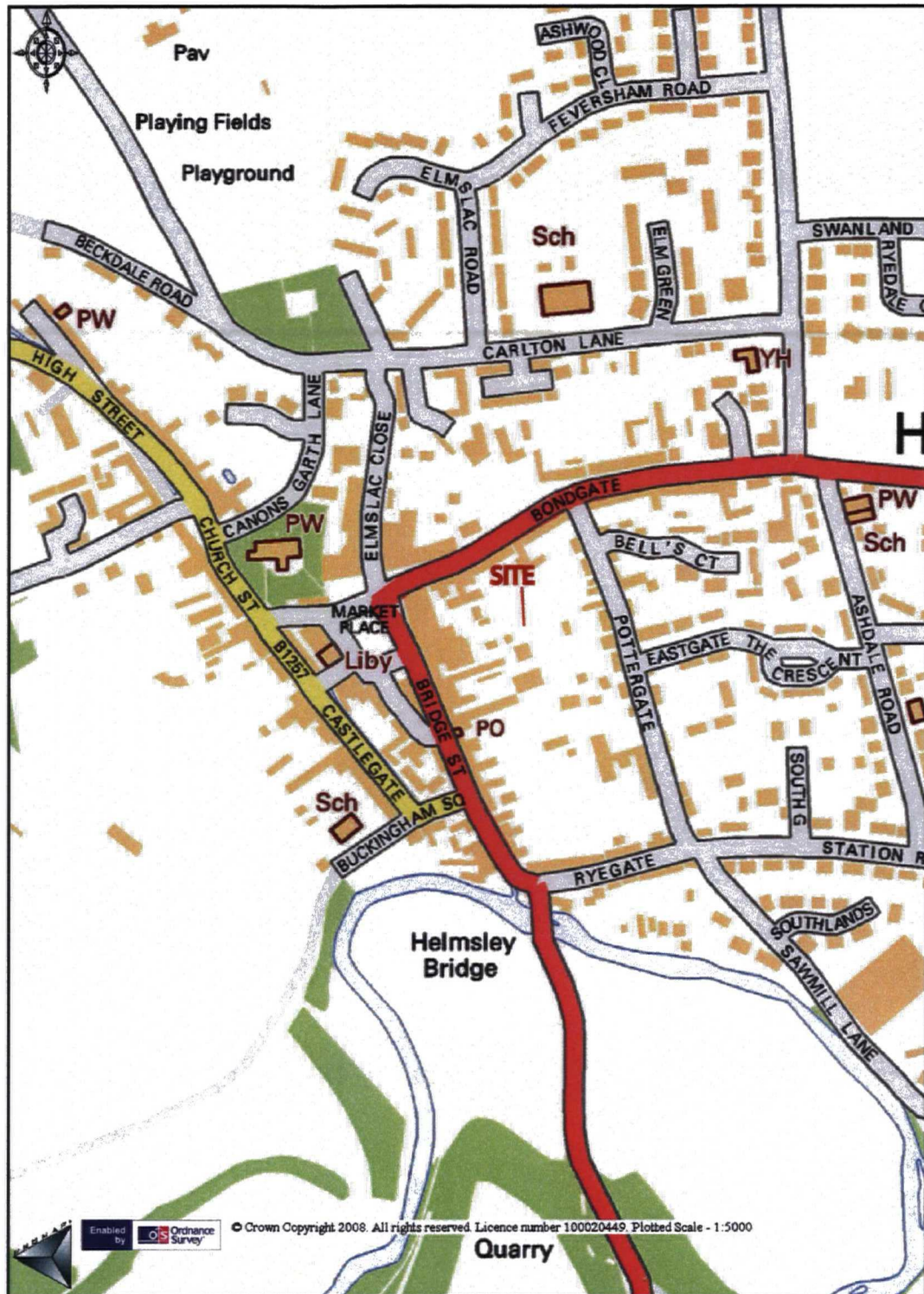


Figure 1 Site location map

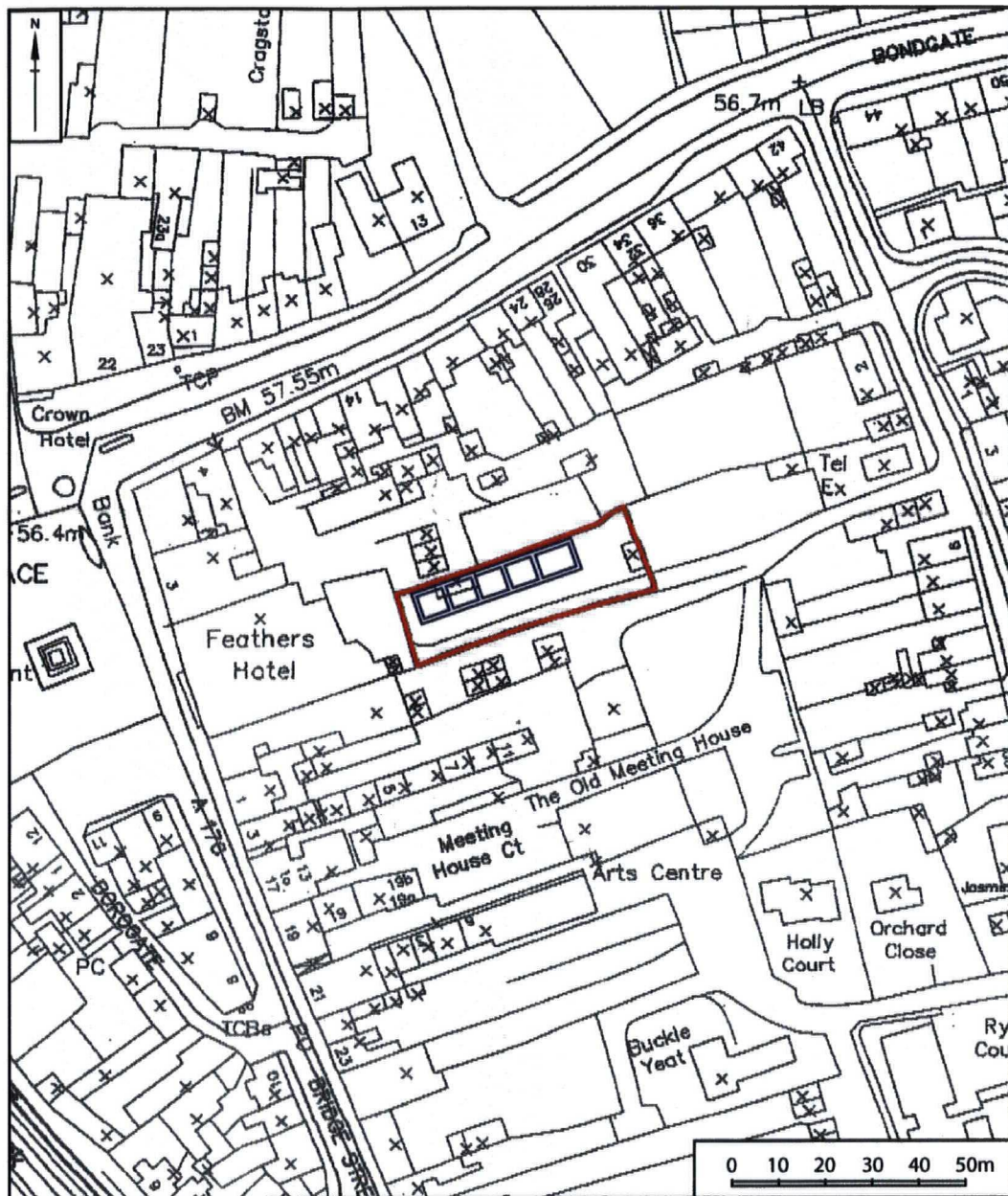


Figure 2 Works location plan

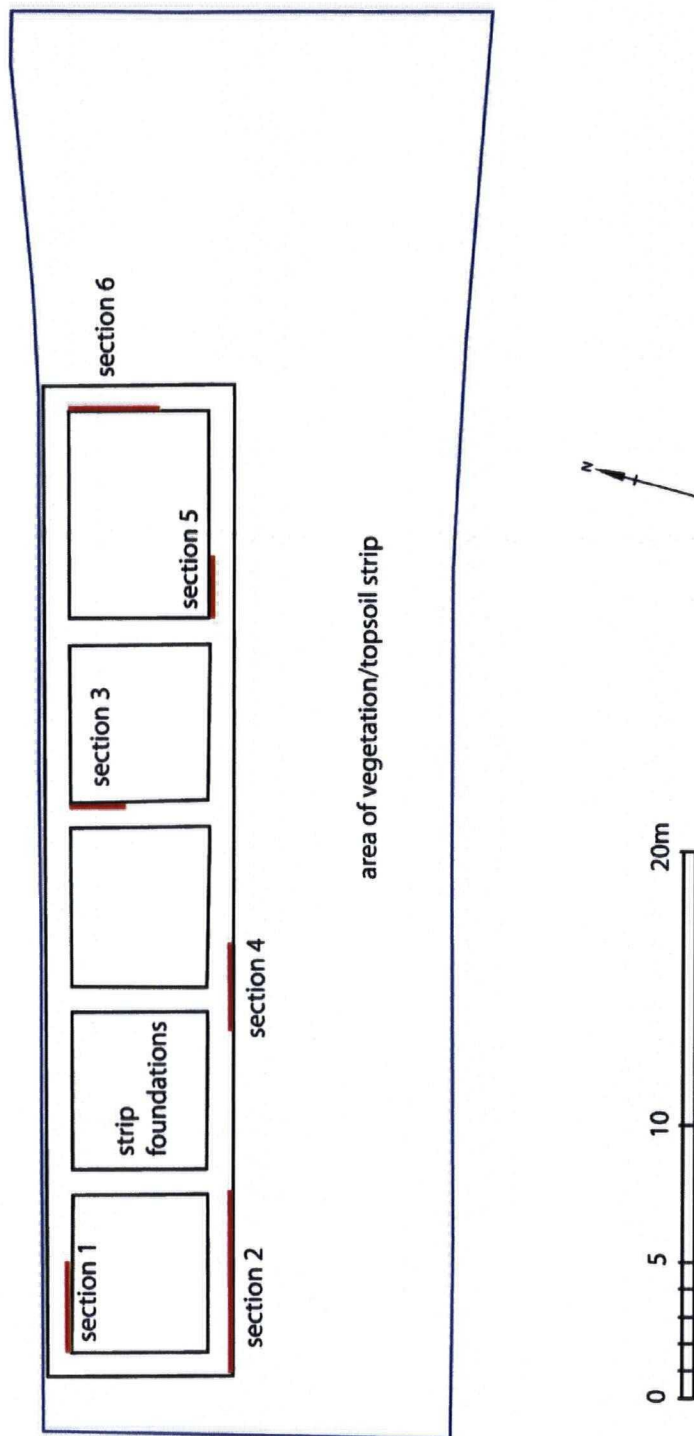


Figure 3 Plan of footings showing location of sections recorded

3. LOCATION, GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site lies behind the Feathers Hotel, Bridge Street on a plot of land that extends towards Pottergate. This area forms part of the historic core of Helmsley. Pedestrian access to the site can be gained from Bridge Street and vehicular access from Pottergate.

The town of Helmsley is located at the north-western end of the Vale of Pickering immediately below the uplands of the North Yorkshire Moors. The River Rye flows close to the southern limits of the built-up area whilst a small tributary beck flows through the western part of the town. The bulk of the town lies on land that is subject only to gentle undulations. The land in the vicinity of the site lies at around 56m AOD.

Geological maps of the area show Helmsley to lie at the interface of the Kimmeridge Clay within the Vale of Pickering and Corallian Limestones that compose the adjacent parts of the North Yorkshire Moors (Geological Survey 1957).

4. BRIEF ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There is considerable evidence of prehistoric activity within the environs of Helmsley. As an urban settlement however, Helmsley may have originated in the pre-conquest period and it has been suggested that the town may have been the site of an important Anglo-Saxon manor (Tyler 1979). By the 10th century a church and burial ground had been established. The building of a castle on the western side of the settlement in the early 12th century is likely to have been influential in the towns' early development. In the late 12th century a borough was created by Robert de Roos. Although subjected to some subsequent division and alteration, elements of early planning of the borough are still recognisable in the long narrow plots that form the eastern side of Market Street and Bridge Street. With the exception of the church and castle, there is little upstanding fabric of the medieval period surviving in the town though numerous post-medieval buildings still remain (Pevsner 1966). These can be considered as predominantly vernacular in form and fabric, being built of local materials and often in a regional style.

There is little record of previous archaeological work in the immediate vicinity of the site. This appears to be limited to a small-scale excavation carried out at the eastern end of the former Quaker Meeting House in 1996, some 40m to the south (Rahtz and Watts 1996), and a watching brief maintained during building works at the west of the former Meeting House (YAT 2008/39). The former of these works encountered a number of earlier 19th century burials directly associated with the Meeting House. The watching brief revealed evidence of

medieval - earlier post-medieval garden type soils, as well as structural remains relating to elements of the Meeting House.

5. RESULTS

5.1 VEGETATION/TOPSOIL STRIP

The initial site strip of the area was limited to the removal of vegetation and the uppermost part of the topsoil. Across the bulk of the site this seldom extended beyond a depth of 0.1m and was frequently less than this. In the area towards the northern boundary, where the ground rose slightly, stripping was up to a depth of 0.27m in order to create a more level surface for the construction works. Across this mechanically stripped area the finished level was still fully within the extant topsoil and no features were visible. A few finds of the 18th/19th-20th centuries (not retained) were noted within the stripped parts of the topsoil.



Plate 1 Site after vegetation/partial topsoil strip, looking W

5.2 STRIP FOOTINGS

All archaeological features observed during the stripping process were recorded in section and plan. Where no features, other than garden type soils, were observed, representative parts of sections were recorded. Separate systems of numbering were used for each section