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**HELMSLEY ARTS CENTRE,
THE OLD MEETING HOUSE, BRIDGE STREET,
HELMSLEY, NORTH YORKSHIRE**

WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

by Mark Johnson

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YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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ABSTRACT

An archaeological watching brief maintained during building ground-works at the Arts Centre, Helmsley found evidence indicative of garden type soils dated by pottery to the medieval and earlier post-medieval periods. The earliest structural remains encountered related to the former Friends Meeting House (Arts Centre). Parts of the building's foundations were examined along with evidence for two contemporary walls. Rubble deposits tentatively associated with the construction of the Meeting House were also identified.

1. INTRODUCTION

Between 5th and 18th April 2007 York Archaeological Trust undertook a watching brief on extension work at the west end of the Arts Centre, Helmsley, North Yorkshire (NGR: SE 6139 8376) (Figure 1, Site location map). The archaeological work was carried out as part of a condition attached to a planning permission (ref 05/01278/FUL). Extension works were originally intended at both east and west ends of the existing Arts Centre, which was originally built as a Quaker Meeting House. Extension at the eastern end of the building has now been indefinitely postponed and so this report details only those works associated with extension at the west end of the building.

The archaeological works were commissioned by The Old Meeting House Trust and followed a Written Scheme of Investigation drawn up by York Archaeological Trust and approved by the Heritage Section of North Yorkshire County Council.

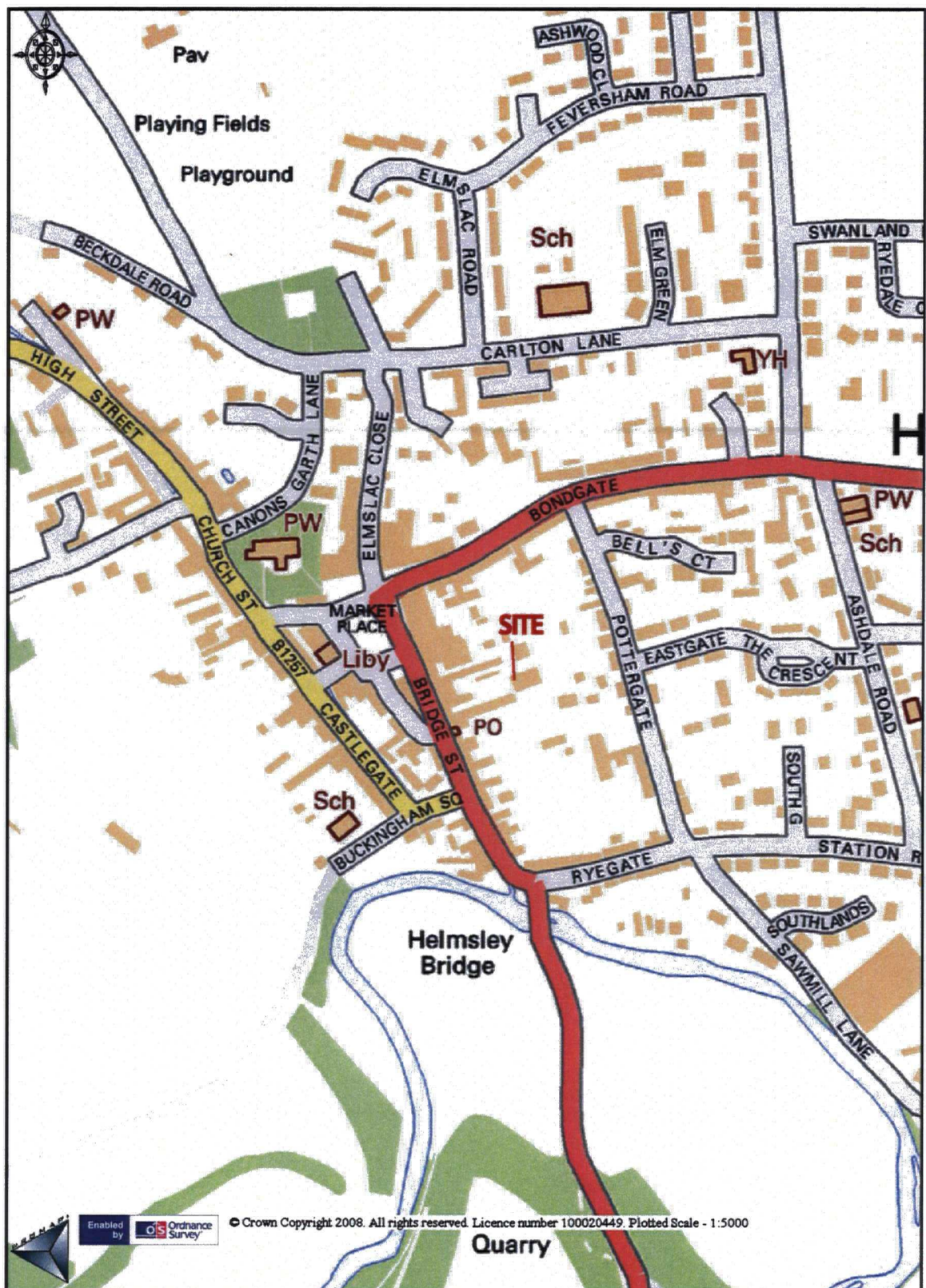


Figure 1 Site location map

2. METHODOLOGY

The construction works at the east end of the Arts Centre involved the relocation of gas and drain services, the cutting of strip foundations with integral column-pits (cut to the same depth) for new walling and a slight reduction in ground surface of the area contained within the foundation trenches. Works directly associated with the foundations were contained within an restricted area of some 13m by 5m with excavation extending to a depth of 600mm below ground level (C 54.36m OD) – this reaching a maximum depth of 700mm in one place. All excavation connected with services was carried out by a small mechanical excavator under archaeological observation. Trench sections associated with these services were selectively cleaned, recorded and the deposit sequence ascertained. Excavation of the strip foundations was likewise initially by mechanical excavator with some hand excavation taking place in areas thought to be of potential interest. All deposits were fully recorded on pro-forma context cards and a series of plans and sections drawn at conventional scales. A series of photographs were taken all stages of the 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: 2007.15.

3. LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The site lies on a plot of land between Bridge Street and Pottergate in the heart of the historic core of Helmsley. Pedestrian access to the site can be gained from Bridge Street and vehicular access from Pottergate.

Helmsley is situated at the north-western end of the low lying 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 flat or subject only to gentle undulations. The land in the immediate vicinity of the site lies at around 55m OD.

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 is thought that Helmsley 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. Elements of the early planning of the borough, though subjected to some subsequent division and alteration, are still recognisable in the long narrow plots that form the eastern side of Market Street and Bridge Street. Excluding the church and castle, there is little upstanding fabric of the medieval period surviving in the town. A wealth of post-medieval buildings survive in Helmsley (Pevsner1966). These are predominantly vernacular, being built of local materials and often in a regional style.

The building occupied by the Arts Centre was originally built as a Quaker Meeting House in 1812 and at a cost of around £900. By 1844 Quaker numbers had diminished in the town and the building was rented by Primitive Methodists who continued to occupy the building until 1980 when the building became disused. The Society of Friends sold the building in 1984 and the building has subsequently been extended on north and south sides and used for cultural purposes.

Previous archaeological work in the immediate vicinity has limited to small-scale excavations carried out at the eastern end of the Meeting House in 1996 (Rahtz and Watts 1996). This work was prompted by a small extension at the eastern end of the Meeting House. Ten graves were excavated during the course of this work, seven of which contained coffined burials and all believed to date from the first half of the 19th century. A documentary study carried out in that report indicates that further burials seem certain to be present at the site. It is likely that these are also located at the eastern end of the building.

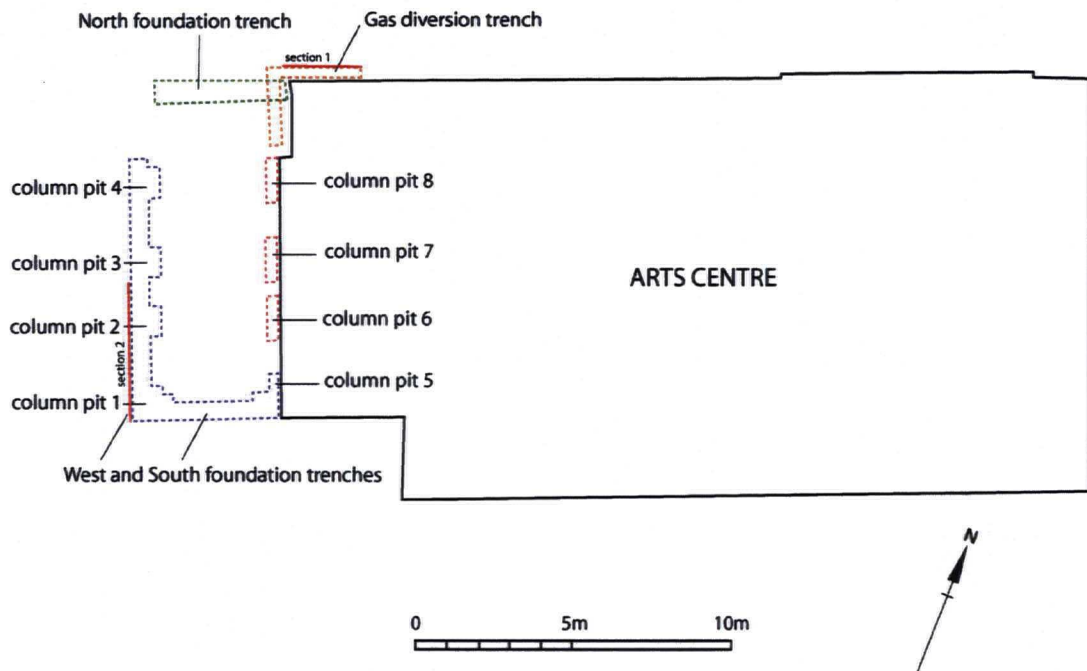


Figure 2 Works Location Plan

5. RESULTS

5.1 FOUNDATION TRENCHES, COLUMN-PITS AND RELATED WORKS

The southern and western of the foundation trenches and column-pits 1-5 formed part of a continuous excavated area. The northern foundation trench formed an isolated area of excavation as did post-pits 6-8 excavated hard against the eastern side of the extant building. The final element of these works involved a reduction of ground level within the footprint of the extension by 0.25m for the purposes of floor formation. Single context numbers were allocated to each individual context in the south and west foundation trenches owing to their contiguity. Separate numbers were issued in the isolated northern foundation trench and in the various service trenches. Although many of these are direct equivalents to deposits in the southern and eastern foundation trenches, the lack of visible contiguity prevented this being determined with absolute certainty.

5.2 S. AND W. FOUNDATION TRENCHES & COLUMN PITS 1-5

(Figures 2,3, Plate 1)

The earliest deposits reached in this part of the foundation works were soils 1028, 1016 and 1020. These soils, which were physically separated from one another by later intrusions, were friable, dark brown – dark greyish brown in colour, slightly clayey sandy silts and

contained amounts of pebbles, charcoal flecks and occasional small clumps of buff coloured clay. Although each of these soils was broadly similar to the others some minor variation was apparent. Some of these soils were at least 0.53m deep (and still continuing beyond the basal limits of the trench). Despite this depth and a thorough cleaning of various sections, no banded variation was apparent in these soils. This may suggest that the soils have been subjected to thorough 'digging'. Finds recovered from soils 1028 and 1020 consisted of a few scraps of animal bone and sherds of medieval pottery. Context 1016 contained a fragment of brick post-dating 1850 (in addition to 2 sherds of 14th century pottery, whilst Context 1020 also contained a fragment of probably post-medieval brick of 16-18th century date. Soils 1028, 1016 and 1020 are likely to represent garden soils of the medieval – post-medieval periods.

What may have been a part of the construction cut for the Meeting House foundations, context 1026, was observed at the extreme eastern end of the southern foundation trench. This putative cut was near vertically sided, extended some 60-70mm beyond the footings and was only distinguishable by a slight variation between the construction cut backfill, 1027, from the adjacent early soil 1028. Interpretation of this cut rests entirely on the presence of small amounts of limestone rubble within 1027 and an absence of this material within 1028. The exposed footings of the Meeting House, context 1029, were examined to the full depth of the trench at 54.36m OD (600mm Below Ground Level) and were noted as extending for an unknown depth below this horizon. Footings 1029 were of poorly coursed limestone rubble bonded with large amounts of a creamy yellow lime mortar and at a depth of 250mm below the dressed stonework of the building's south-east corner were seen to display an offset of some 160mm. Curiously, no foundation cut was readily apparent in pits 6-8 against the western elevation of the building. It may be that the footings were here constructed hard against the edge of the cut?

Within the western foundation trench parts of an extensive rubbly deposit within a large bowl-like cut were observed. The cut, context 1015 survived for a width of only 2.5m within the trench (it being truncated by a complex of services on its northern side), though during the interior surface strip was seen to extend across an area of at least 6.5m by 5m. Cut 1015 was gentle sided and may not have exceeded a depth much greater than 600mm. The rubbly fill 1014 was composed largely of fragments of limestone rubble (up to 70% of the fill volume in places) with the remainder composed of a soft, gritty, yellowish brown silty sand. A small number of small tile fragments were present within this material, as were flecks of lime mortar. 1015/1014 may represent the disposal of unwanted building debris. Whether or not this relates to the discard of building waste from the construction of the Meeting House or from another building in the vicinity, is unclear.

At a similar stratigraphic horizon to the foundation construction cut and the disposed rubble was a line of strip footings in the southern trench (Plate 2). These footings occupied cut 1021 and were in line with the southern wall of the Meeting House, located just over 1m west of the building and cut into the old soils 1028, 1016. The lower part of the footings, 1011, were composed of a hard, light yellowish brown mortar that included pebbles and small stone throughout and was generally around 140mm thick. The upper part of the footings, 1010, was of un-dressed limestone of a size up to 200mm and bonded with the same mortar as 1011. Above this level the footings had been robbed, the backfill of this event, 1022, being a dark coloured sandy silt containing some rubble. Some modern materials, including plastic, point to this robbing event being modern. The alignment and spatial relationship of this wall to the Meeting House leave little doubt that the wall that two were related, an argument strengthened by the known former presence of a matching wall at the west end of the northern wall of the Meeting house (see below). The gap between the building and wall suggest the likelihood that a gateway may have been present in this position.

Traces of the opposing wall were seen towards the northern end of the western trench, though had much cut about by modern services activity. Parts of the southern side of a steep sided cut 1019, were seen to be occupied by a fill composed predominantly of large fragments of limestone rubble within a matrix of greyish brown soils, 1018. Fragments of bottle glass and a sherd of post-medieval pottery were recovered from this backfill. These traces of wall can be equated to a scar on the north-west corner of the Meeting House. This wall was evidently original to the construction of the building as can be seen in the absence of dressed quoins below the former top of wall height (Plate 1).

Other features and deposits in the south and west foundation trenches and pits 1-5 were entirely of modern origin. In the western section these were numbered as services cut 1013 and fills/services 1012. These services included gas, water, electricity and several drains (the latter leading to an inspection chamber), all of which converged in the north-central part of the trench. In the southern trench, drain 1024 extended diagonally across the area to join the inspection chamber. The latest deposits in this area of the works consisted of a modern rubbly spread 1017 and a pathway of concrete flagstones on a bedding of sand, 1023, immediately adjacent to the southern trench.