

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF 24-26 THE BOLTS SCARBOROUGH

by Trevor Pearson

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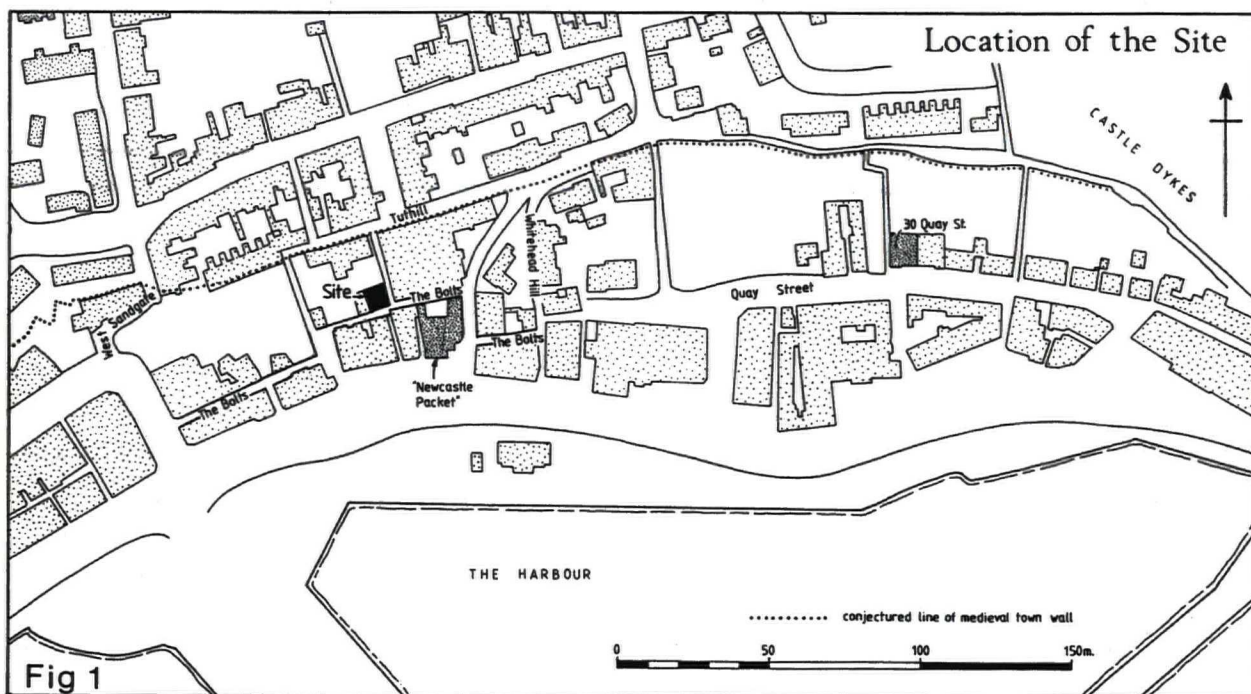
SCARBOROUGH ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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(1) INTRODUCTION

Between May 5th and 7th 1990 the Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society undertook an archaeological evaluation of a development site at 24-26 the Bolts, Scarborough at the request of the site owner, Mr. S. Greetham. The site has recently been cleared of two early 19th-century cottages and the County Archaeology Office requested that an archaeological evaluation take place prior to the start of new building work.

The site lies on the north side of the Bolts (fig 1), a narrow alley that runs east-west between West Sandgate and Whitehead Hill and whose name, first mentioned in the 14th century¹, is derived from "les Boutes" meaning the vaults or common latrines². Quay St. continues the line of the Bolts eastwards from Whitehead Hill to the foot of the castle dykes and it has been argued that both the Bolts and Quay St. mark the line of a medieval harbour front³. Periodic land reclamation has since pushed the sea front some 50-70 metres further out into the South Bay. The substantial stone terracing wall to the north of the site marks the line of the boulder clay cliff that fringes the South Bay, along the top of which probably ran the medieval town wall.



It has been argued that the block of land between the cliff and the sea is one of the most important archaeological zones within the town⁴. It is quite clear from the density of properties and high rents recorded here in the Corporation's White Vellum Book that this was the economic heart of medieval Scarborough whose development had a tremendous bearing on the growth of the town itself. At the same time the drainage from the high ground to the north and the proximity of the sea have probably combined

to create extensive areas of waterlogged stratigraphy around the harbour. These will preserve a wider range of artefacts and environmental evidence than most other parts of the town. Only three excavations have taken place around the harbour in the past 15 years⁵ and without doubt it's tremendous archaeological potential has yet to be fully realised. Since any site around the harbour could contain important archaeological information it is gratifying that the Society were so readily granted access to this site by it's owner.

(2) THE EXCAVATION

Three trenches, A-C, were excavated of which trench A reached natural clay at a depth of 2 metres. The other two trenches were only excavated to a depth of 60 cm consequently the results from trench A provide the basis for the following reconstruction of the site's development.

Location of trenches - and phase four features

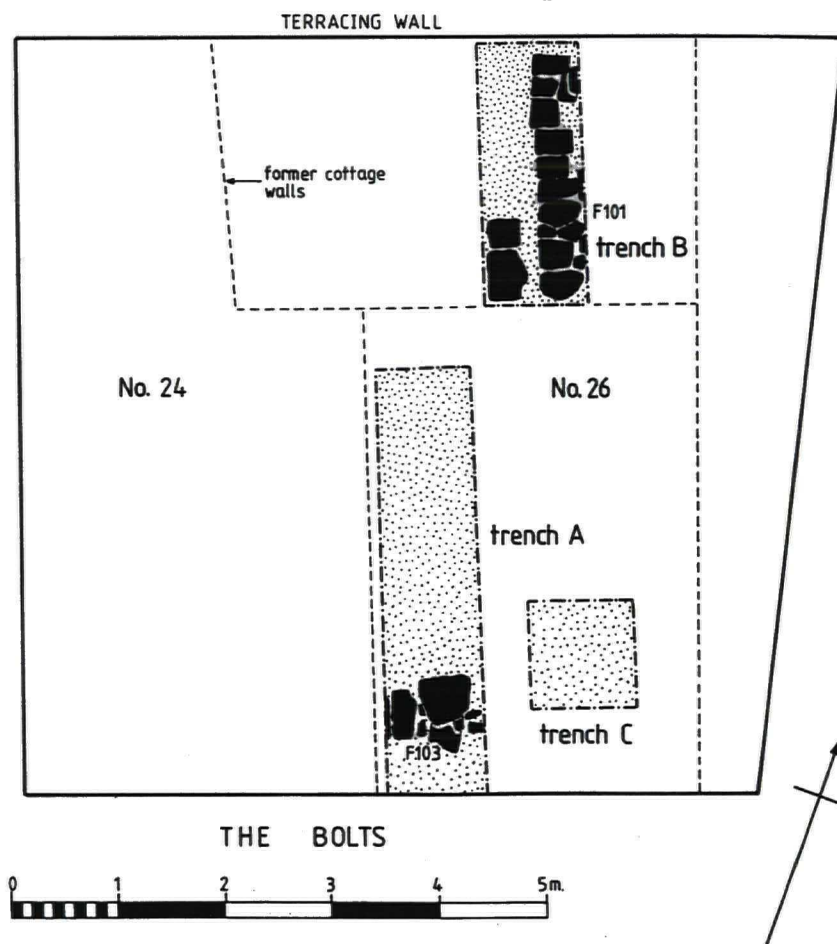


Fig 2

NATURAL

A 50cm by 50cm sondage was excavated at the northern end of trench A into a bright orange sandy clay. Sufficient of this deposit was removed to establish that it was entirely natural.

PHASE ONE

A layer of small rocks set firmly in a matrix of brown clay (108) was discovered resting on the natural surface. In order to limit damage to the overlying deposit only a square metre of this layer was exposed which was insufficient to establish its precise date or purpose. It may have served some waterfront function, perhaps as a slipway or crude form of breakwater.

PHASE TWO

A layer of dark brown soil containing numerous chips of limestone and fragments of charcoal (107) accumulated over the boulder surface. Even within the narrow confines of trench A this layer thickened markedly towards the north-east suggesting it had been deliberately tipped from this direction. The stone chippings contained within the layer suggest building work was taking place in the vicinity, perhaps repairs to the quay or terracing of the cliff slope. As in the subsequent phase, this deposit was probably deliberately tipped onto the site.

PHASE THREE

By far the thickest deposit in trench A comprised two distinct layers of waterlogged organic debris; a lower black peat-like deposit (106) overlain by a much thicker layer, green-grey in colour which was excavated in three arbitrary spits

TRENCH A-sections

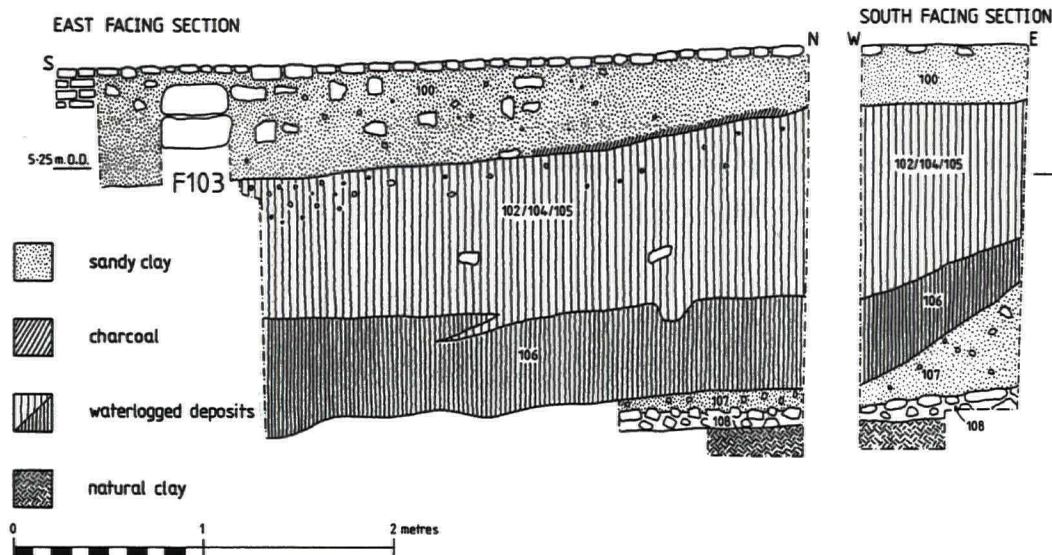


Fig 3

(102/104/105). No other stratification was observed within this waterlogged deposit suggesting it had been rapidly dumped onto the site and was not the result of natural processes of decay and deposition. The deposit seemed to be typical domestic refuse containing numerous animal and fish bones, shells, leather offcuts, fragments of wood and sherds of mainly 14th-century pottery. A sample was taken for further environmental analysis. At the southern end of the trench there was a marked increase in the density of stone within 102/104/105 which may have provided the underpinning to the stone wall subsequently built along the street frontage. The top of the same waterlogged deposit was also exposed at the bottom of trenches B and C.

PHASE FOUR

In trench A the waterlogged remains were buried beneath a 60cm thick deposit of brown sandy clay (100) which thickened towards the south to accommodate an east-west stone wall built 50cm back from the street frontage. Similarly trench B exposed part of a north-south aligned stone wall (F101) cut into the waterlogged deposits. Trench C was excavated at the presumed junction of the two walls but apart from some loose stone blocks all traces of walling had been destroyed. Nevertheless it is reasonable to assume that both walls were the foundations for the same house within which layer 100 provided a dry subsurface for the floor. Layer 100 contained exclusively medieval pottery of 14th-century date thereby establishing the probable date of the building.

PHASE FIVE

The foundations of the recently demolished cottages constituted the next phase of activity to be identified. In trench A these comprised a brick wall along the street frontage and a layer of small stones marking the boundary between 24 and 26 the Bolts.

(3) DISCUSSION

Apart from the putative phase one "slipway", no remains obviously connected with the medieval harbour, such as a stone or timber waterfront, were revealed by the excavation. Nevertheless, changes to the site between phases two and four, in which the ground level was artificially raised by nearly 2 metres prior to building work, are clearly explained by developments associated with the harbour.

It must have been common practice near the waterfront to

build on a platform of dumped material as a protection against high tides and storms. A similar occurrence was noted in excavations at No. 30 Quay St. in 1971⁶ and 1978⁷ where a 2 metre thick deposit of clay was dumped prior to building, burying a stone pavement. Probably the entire sequence of deposits at 24-26 the Bolts, from the first dump of stony clay (107) to the construction of the building took place as one operation dateable on ceramic evidence to the 14th century. Another reason for such dumps of material would have been to reclaim land from the sea, but there was no evidence that the present site had ever been under water. Rather the site had been "reclaimed" by terracing back the boulder clay cliff which documentary evidence indicates did not take place in this area until well into the 14th century. A grant to Adam de Semer, a town bailiff in the mid-14th century, describes a property bordering Tuthill on the north and the sea on the south⁸. Although the grant is undated, it nevertheless implies that even in the mid-14th century no development had taken place at the bottom of the cliff in the general vicinity of the site.

Although the excavation suggests a 14th-century date for the site, this is late when one considers that harbour development probably started in the mid-12th century⁹. One can only suppose that prospective builders found it easier to take land from the sea by dumping refuse into the harbour than to excavate tons of clay by terracing back the cliff slope. By the time land scarcity forced the terracing and consolidation of this site in the mid-late 14th century, the harbour front was probably 20 metres south of the site as evidenced by the supposed 13th-century timberwork incorporated in the Newcastle Packet public house on the south side of the Bolts¹⁰.

Aside from information about the development of the medieval harbour, the excavation was also important because it showed that waterlogged deposits exist much further from the sea than had hitherto been supposed. Previously it was thought there were no waterlogged deposits north of the Bolts-Quay St axis because the excavations at 30 Quay St. found no such deposits¹¹. The volume of waterlogged deposits fringing the harbour is therefore likely to be larger than previously thought which increases the potential archaeological value of the town's harbour area.

(4) SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The top 60cm of the site contains 14th-century structural remains, whilst below survive medieval dump deposits of which approximately 1.5 metres are waterlogged. The primary concern should be to limit the destruction caused by the development and secondly to arrange for the recording of all remains which cannot be saved. The scale of archaeological response should be related to the scale of proposed destruction as outlined below.

TOTAL DESTRUCTION OF THE SITE:- Any plans to totally destroy

the remains on this site should include provision for a comprehensive excavation and monitoring exercise. The 14th-century structural remains contained within the top 60cm should be totally excavated to reveal their plan and chronology. Since the underlying deposits are predominantly backfilled rubbish apparently devoid of any structures little would be gained by their total excavation. Rather a sample transect should be excavated through these deposits and the destruction of the rest should be closely monitored. It is recommended that specialist conservation and environmental advice be sought at the planning stage because of the presence of waterlogged deposits containing organic remains.

TOTAL DESTRUCTION OF LIMITED AREAS:- The total destruction of limited parts of the site from deep foundations should only be undertaken under close archaeological supervision and ideally by an archaeological workforce. Again conservation and environmental specialists should be consulted because of the presence of waterlogged remains.

SURFACE DESTRUCTION:- A development which employs shallow foundations or a concrete slab is to be preferred on archaeological grounds because this will insure the preservation of most of the deposits on the site. Some disturbance of the medieval structure buried immediately below the surface will probably be unavoidable and the building work should therefore be monitored by an archaeologist. On the other hand, it would be preferable to fully excavate this structure if it were to be extensively disturbed.

(5) ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The site owner, Mr. S. Greetham, is thanked for allowing the excavation to take place which was expeditiously undertaken by the following members of the society:- Patrick Argent, Ron Davies, Kay Dunderdale, Chris Hall, Ginny Hobson and Wally West. Frances Hall and Rene and Wally West washed the finds which will be deposited in the Rotunda Museum by kind permission of the site owner. Sarah Jennings of the York Archaeological Trust is thanked for examining a selection of the pottery.

(6) REFERENCES

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- (2) RIMINGTON, F.C. in Scarborough Mercury, October 9th 1971.
- (3) PEARSON, T. (1987) An Archaeological Survey of Scarborough, 28-30.
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- (5) At Blands Cliff, West Sandgate and Quay St. (PEARSON, T. (1987) Gazetteer entries 15/1, 7/1 and 1/2)
- (6) FARMER, P.G. in Scarborough Evening News, January 3rd 1972.
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- (9) PEARSON, T. (1987), 31.
- (10) PEARSON, T. (1987), 30 , and PEVSNER, N. (1966) The Buildings of England, Yorkshire: The North Riding, 329.
- (11) PEARSON, T. (1987) Fig. 10