

**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF A SITE AT THE REAR
OF THE FORMER QUAKER MEETING HOUSE, ST SEPULCHRE
STREET, SCARBOROUGH**

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(1) INTRODUCTION

Between December 1996 and July 1997 the Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society undertook trial excavations on a vacant plot of land to the north of the former Quaker Meeting House in St Sepulchre Street, Scarborough (NGR TA 0463 8886; SITE CODE: SP96). The site covers approximately 900 square metres of which 170 square metres are currently occupied by a school building dating from 1871. A total of 57.6 square metres of the site (6.4%) was investigated in eleven trenches.

The results of the excavation have been summarised in two reports to the site owners (dated 29/4/97 and 27/7/97). On the south, the site preserves part of the fabric of the medieval church of St Sepulchre which was demolished in the 16th century. The central part of the site is crossed by the infilled channel of a natural watercourse known as the Damyet in the middle ages, whilst to the north the remains of one or more medieval buildings overlie dumps of waterlogged organic material.

The purpose of this paper is to establish the archaeological importance of the site. This is achieved by comparing the depth of archaeological deposits, the degree of disturbance and the survival of waterlogged remains on the present site with previous discoveries in the town and by considering the research potential of the site.

(2) THE MATERIAL EVIDENCE

2.1 THE DEPTH OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL DEPOSITS

THE SITE

The build up of deposits varies markedly from north to south across the site. On the south (Trenches Three, Five and Eleven) there is an average of 1.2m of deposits overlying the natural surface, of which the lowest 0.4-0.6m is medieval in date. Across the centre and north of the site, the depth of archaeological deposits increases substantially associated with the bed and northern margin of the Damyet stream. None of the trenches in this part of the site encountered natural glacial clay despite the fact that Trench One was excavated to a depth of 3.2m before work was suspended and Trench Four to a depth of 3.9m, of which the lowest 2.6m was medieval in date.

THE TOWN

The average depth of deposits on archaeological sites in the town is between 0.5m and 1.5m. The build up of archaeological remains over the south part of the site is therefore fairly typical of the town as a whole. In contrast, the depth of deposits across the middle and north of the site is uncommon and has only been recorded previously in three locations; firstly in the ditches belonging to the town's two lines of medieval defences, most recently at Nos 7 and 1-3 Leading Post Street excavated in 1988 and 1989 respectively ; secondly in the backfill behind a terracing wall on the south side of Longwestgate excavated in 1977 and thirdly, like the present site, in association with Damyet stream at the junction of Eastborough and West Sandgate excavated in 1976 and at the nearby site of 22 St Marys Street investigated in 1963 and 1968. A fourth area where this depth of stratigraphy might exist is around the harbour where the present ground level is between 4.0 and 6.0m above sea level. However, of the excavations which have so far taken place in this area, the maximum depth of deposits encountered has been around 2.0m as at 32 Quay Street in 1978 and 24-26 The Bolts in 1990.

2.2 THE DEGREE OF DISTURBANCE

THE SITE

Cartographic evidence indicates that the site has been largely open ground since the time of the first town map of 1725, which accounts for the fact that it is blanketed by a layer of featureless garden soil varying in thickness from 0.8m on the south (Trenches Three, Five and Eleven) to 1.3m on the north (Trench Four). This soil layer has helped protect the archaeological remains from disturbance as neither modern service pipes nor the foundations of the 1871 school building have cut through it into the medieval remains below.

THE TOWN

Several excavations in Scarborough have encountered undisturbed medieval stratigraphy most notably at 24 East Sandgate in 1987 and to the west and north of Paradise House between 1988 and 1990. However none of these sites approaches the 900 square metre area of the present site, the nearest being the 150 square metre area containing a late-medieval cobble street and building partially excavated to the north of Paradise House in 1989-90.

Undisturbed archaeological deposits could survive on a comparable scale to the present site where cartographic evidence indicates there has been open ground for at least 275 years. These areas are principally on the north of the town along Castle Road, but where these sites have been investigated archaeologically, (to the east and south of Paradise House in 1988, in the grounds of the former Convent School in Queen Street in 1996 and at St Peter's Church on Castle Road in 1997), it has been found that they were extensively quarried for clay in the 18th and perhaps 19th centuries leaving only small pockets of medieval stratigraphy intact.

Turning to other parts of the town, the grounds of Friarage School potentially preserve an area of medieval remains greater in extent than the present site, though levelling for the school playground could have resulted in some destruction as was indicated by an excavation in 1997. Similarly, other areas devoid of development since the first town map of 1725 such as on the south of Longwestgate and on the east of Castlegate could theoretically preserve undisturbed medieval deposits comparable in extent to the present site, but are likely to have been disturbed by post-medieval terracing operations.

2.3 ORGANIC PRESERVATION

THE SITE

Waterlogged deposits survive across the middle and north of the site, possibly over an area as large as 570 square metres. Those layers which came to light in trenches Three and Nine towards the middle of the site are interpreted as silt infilling the natural watercourse called the Damyet. Organic deposits to the north of the watercourse were revealed in Trench Four and are thought to have accumulated from the dumping of rubbish along the margin of the Damyet stream. They probably extend at least as far as the north boundary of the site since Trench Ten encountered the top of a waterlogged layer below the make up for the stone paving.

THE TOWN

Waterlogged deposits are arguably the most valuable archaeological remains in the town because of the range of organic material and environmental evidence they preserve. They are known to occur in three specific locations in the town; firstly in the fill of the town's earliest defensive ditch at Leading Post Street (excavated in 1988 and 1989); secondly around the harbour on the north side of Quay Street and the Bolts (excavations in 1990 and 1996) and thirdly, like the present site, associated with the lower reaches of the Damyet stream (excavated at 46 St Sepulchre Street in 1968 and at the junction of Eastborough and West Sandgate in 1976).

The current excavation has revealed the most extensive area of waterlogged deposits ever found on a single site in Scarborough. Several sites have produced thicker deposits such as the 2.5m recorded at the junction of Eastborough and West Sandgate in 1976 and the estimated 3.7m depth in the town ditch at 7 Leading Post Street in 1988. This compares with a thickness of 1.8m excavated in Trench Four at the present site however the total depth could exceed that of the above sites as the excavation of Trench Four was suspended before naturally accumulated deposits were reached.

2.4 DISCUSSION

The present site clearly rates highly in each of the three categories of material evidence discussed above. Other parts of the town are of comparable archaeological quality in one or two of these areas, but none is important across all three. For example, the harbour is likely to preserve waterlogged archaeological deposits to significant depths but they will not be as extensive as the present site because the area is heavily built up. Deep stratification preserving undisturbed medieval remains could exist in some of the terraced areas of the town, but they are unlikely to contain extensive waterlogged remains.

The deep and waterlogged remains encountered in the excavation probably extend beyond the confines of the site. To the west they could stretch along the infilled valley of the Damyet stream at least as far as the grounds of Friarage School, though this has yet to be tested by excavation. To the east it is more certain that they continue to the foreshore as similar deposits came to light on the 1976 excavation at the junction of Eastborough and West Sandgate. However in neither direction are they likely to be as extensive or as free of post-medieval disturbance as they are at the present site.

(3) RESEARCH POTENTIAL

The foregoing discussion has established that the present site contains the most extensive and well-preserved body of archaeological deposits so far encountered in Scarborough. However the value of these deposits ultimately depends on what they can tell us about the development of Scarborough and the lives of its past inhabitants. These questions are discussed below.

3.1 PRE-MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT

The site lies within a suggested area of Viking period occupation which P. Farmer speculated was centred on the junction of Cook's Row and St Sepulchre Street and spread westwards along the Damyet stream and south down to the harbour. He also claimed to have found a Roman building 70m to the south-east of the present site during the 1976 excavation at the junction of Eastborough and West Sandgate.

The present excavation found no evidence of Roman or Viking period structures or any artefacts from these periods redeposited in later layers. It is conceivable that if the area bordering the Damyet stream did attract pre-medieval settlement then the remains are more deeply buried than the deepest of the current excavation trenches (Trench Four).

On present evidence the site has no potential for research into pre-medieval settlement.

3.2 THE MEDIEVAL TOWN

Pottery recovered from the site indicates that the majority of the excavated remains date to the medieval period, probably to between the 13th and 16th centuries. They could supply a range of new information about the medieval town, particularly in the following areas:-

THE CHURCH OF ST SEPULCHRE

Close to the south of the site are preserved the foundations and lower courses of a substantial stone wall which is probably part of the fabric of St Sepulchre Church. The excavation suggests that the major part of the church must have stood to the south, east and west of the site and its remains have probably been extensively disturbed by the construction of the Quaker Meeting House and by burials in the adjacent graveyard.

On present evidence, the site probably preserves the largest surviving part of St Sepulchre Church and therefore presents the best opportunity to study the building through archaeology.

ENVIRONMENT AND LIVING CONDITIONS

The extensive waterlogged organic deposits which underlie the middle and north of the site favour the preservation of Environmental evidence such as plant and insect remains. On the basis of two samples analysed by the environmental Archaeology Unit of York University, the deposits in the infilled channel of the Damyet stream (*Trench One; sample 114*) are less informative than the dumps of material on the north side of the stream (*Trench Four; sample 412*) which their report concludes could repay more extensive investigation.

The site has the potential to provide a wide range of evidence concerning the environment and living conditions of an area at the heart of the medieval town.

MANAGEMENT OF THE DAMYET WATERCOURSE

There is ample evidence that the Damyet watercourse was canalised for at least part of its course across the site. A rough boulder revetment on the south side of the stream came to light in Trench One and a much more substantial stone walled channel or culvert was found in Trench Nine. The purpose of the revetment in Trench One was probably to control erosion and flooding but the stone-lined channel in Trench Nine is much more substantially built with coursed stonework and could have been designed to direct the flow of water to power a watermill. The substantial masonry building to the north of the stream could therefore be the remains of the mill. An individual called Reginald the Miller is recorded as a property holder in this neighbourhood in the late 13th/early 14th century.

Medieval mills are not common in the archaeological record in this country and the best known examples are from rural settings, such as Batsford in Sussex or from monastic sites, such as Bordesley Abbey in Hereford and Worcester. Medieval mills in towns have been excavated in Glasgow and Dublin with an eighth-century example from Tamworth. The survival of a medieval mill in Scarborough would therefore be a significant addition to the known examples of urban watermills.

The site contains important information about the management of the Damyet stream in the middle ages. If the canalisation of the stream was connected with the operation of a watermill then the site could preserve information of national importance.

3.3 THE POST-MEDIEVAL TOWN

There is no evidence of post-medieval structures on the site apart from those which are still standing. The site is shown as a bowling green on the first town map of 1725 and following the construction of the Quaker Meeting House in 1801 it seems to have been used as gardens.

The site contains no significant information concerning the post-medieval development of Scarborough.

(4) CONCLUSION

The site preserves one of the most important areas of archaeology in the town; firstly, because of the volume of undisturbed deposits which it contains and secondly because of the range of new information it could provide about the medieval town, some aspects of which may be of national importance. It is therefore imperative that the future of this site should include adequate safeguards for the **long-term** preservation of the archaeological remains.

Trevor Pearson
17th August 1997