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**The Masonic Hall
Selby
North Yorkshire**

**NGR SE 6162 3262
Archaeological Watching Brief**

**MAP Archaeological Consultancy Ltd
April 1999**

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Archaeological Watching Brief**

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Introduction

During August 1998 a Watching Brief was undertaken during the excavation of a foundation trench for the supporting wall of a single story extension to Selby Masonic Hall. The Masonic Hall is situated on Church Hill, Selby on the northern side of the junction between Church Hill and Water Lane (SE 6162 3262 : Fig. 1).

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Historical and Archaeological Background

Selby is a small market town in the former West Riding of Yorkshire. The documented history of the town begins with the foundation of a monastic community and the construction of an Abbey by Bernard of Auxerre in 1069/1070. The Masonic Hall stands to the west of Selby Abbey, close to the abbey church which has been the parish church of Selby since 1618. The hall stands within an area of the town that is reputed to be the site of an earlier parish church, used in conjunction with the Abbey church in the medieval period (Morrell 1867).

Although the church is documented there is no archaeological confirmation of its location. The boundary of the church yard that is marked on the First Edition County Series Ordnance Survey map, with the suggested outline of the church is aligned east-west within the widest part of church hill. The Masonic Hall is located within this enclosure.

A watercourse constructed in the 12th century and known as the Kirk Dyke separated the Abbey from the town and the original church. Kirk Dyke ran from the Selby Mill Dam across

Finkle Street, north of the Abbey along the southern end of Church Lane and discharged into the Ouse north-east of the Abbey (MAP 1998 & MAP 1999 forthcoming).

A large warehouse building associated with the Abbey stands on the northern side of Water Lane, slightly north-west of the Masonic Hall (Fig.1). It is likely that buildings between the Ouse and this barn are built on land reclaimed from the river bank in the late medieval or post medieval period. An 18th century illustration (Fig. 2) shows boats drawn up on a gently sloping beach which appears to be immediately north of Micklegate running along the bottom of Church Hill and Water Lane. If Water Lane was the limit of the southern bank of the Ouse until the 19th century, then the present site of the Masonic Hall was originally on the river bank close to the commercial centre of the medieval town (Fig. 3).

The discovery of a large number of burials in this area in the 19th century hints at the possibility of a settlement predating the foundation of the Abbey. Morrell describes the discovery in June 1857 of interments revealed by the excavation of trenches for new drainage by the Selby Board of Health :

'all of one kind, trunks of oak had been divided longitudinally, and the interior hollowed out so as to afford space for the reception of the body...with a single exception, the tree remained in its natural state without any attempt to fashion it into shape..' (Morrell 1867).

Morrell says that fourteen coffins were counted, one containing a female skeleton with a set of carefully worked, red coloured stone beads; he suggested that they dated to the 11th or 12th century.

Reverend Canon Raine reported in 1876 the discovery of fifteen to twenty coffins in various states of preservation during the rebuilding of a public house in Church Hill. It is likely that this was on the intersection between Wren Lane and Church Hill approximately ten or fifteen metres north-west of the Masonic hall.

The coffins were found in a black earth saturated with moisture and had been affected by flooding, being filled with mud and stones from flood deposition. This is consistent with the original proximity of the river bank. The coffins lay broadly east-west and were closely packed with two or three side by side in some cases. Seven coffins were lifted and described by Canon Raine. These were all of oak in various sizes from five feet eight inches to seven feet in length. The skeletons of two adult females, two males and a possible third male and a child were identified. Other remains were too fragmentary to identify. All but the child were buried in coffins formed from hollowed tree trunks. The child's coffin was of a more conventional plank construction.

Canon Raine pointed out that there was no consecrated ground on 'Church Hill', implying that the church was an adjunct of the abbey rather than a church in its own right. Initially drawing parallels with similar coffins in Bronze Age burials at Gristhorpe near Scarborough, he settled on a date in the pre-Christian Saxon period. Most of the skeletons held hazel twigs or rods in their hands and laid across their bodies. Raine suggested that this indicated a Germanic custom, again suggesting their origin in the Saxon period. No finds were recovered from the coffins except a piece of Roman Samian, Raine suggested that this pottery was washed in by the river. The recent discovery of Iron Age and Roman occupation deposits in Selby raises doubts over this interpretation and it is possible that the pottery was contemporary with the burial.

Both the historical and archaeological background shows that the Masonic Hall is situated within an area with considerable significance and the potential to inform on the archaeological and geographical development of the town. The excavation, therefore, at the back of the site presented a valuable opportunity to assess the nature of stratified archaeological deposits

Excavation Methods

The foundation trench for the supporting wall was excavated by hand. All deposits/features were recorded using proforma context sheets. Due to the limited area exposed a sketch plan was drawn of the trench after excavation. A photographic record was also maintained using colour and monochrome print.

Excavation Results

The foundation trench, located 4.5m back from the Hall and between two 20th century brick extensions (Figs. 1 & 3), measured 4m in length by 0.6m in width and was hand excavated to a depth of 1.2m.

The 0.1m - 0.25m thick concrete yard surface was broken up and removed exposing infill deposits (011), salt glazed and iron service pipes running north-west to south-east (Pls. 1 & 2) and a large brick structure associated with a manhole. At the north-eastern end of the trench foundation courses of the brick wall for one of the 20th century extensions were visible. The fill of the foundation cut (context 001) and the wall cut (context 002) extended to a depth of 1.2m below the concrete yard surface (approximately 5.2m A.O.D)

In the centre of the trench excavation exposed a large stone cistern (Fig. 4 : Pl. 2). Constructed of sandstone with a fine pink cement bonding and bound with iron corner braces, it had partly collapsed and been infilled with building rubble and loamy clay (context 012). The cistern was set within a cut, which was only clearly visible at the base of the trench (context 005: north-western edge, context 008: north-eastern edge), backfilled with a clean clay (contexts 004 & 007 : Pls. 3 & 4) which appears to have acted as a lining. Deposits surrounding the cistern, consisting of loamy clay mixed with mortar, tile and brick (context 011) suggested that the ground level had been deliberately raised around the upper part of cistern and the Hall.

No other significant archaeological features were encountered during the excavation of the foundation trench. Some residual ceramic material collected from the infill deposit 011 indicated a 17th century date.

The base of the cistern and the lowest courses of the brick extension were left in situ. Cleaning of the base of the foundation trench located on the south-western side of the trench a fine dark grey silty clay with frequent charcoal flecking and inclusions of hard concretions (?cess) on average 0.02m in size and of irregular shape (context 006).

At the north-eastern end of the trench was a deposit of firm clay flecked with greenish concretions and occasional charcoal (context 009). Cut into this deposit was a timber stake measuring 0.1m diameter (context 010).

Conclusions

The archaeological material observed at the base of the foundation trench (context 009) was of a colour and consistency characteristic of the medieval material encountered in excavations at 16 Gowthorpe (MAP 1998) and the Abbey Walk development in Selby (MAP 1999, forthcoming). Deposit (006) was similar to pit fills of 15th century date found at 16 Gowthorpe and the presence of possible cessy concretions in deposit 009 suggest a proximity to occupation. The remains of the waterlogged timber stake cut into 009 indicated that well preserved timber structures could still survive in this area of the town.

The stratigraphy illustrated that medieval deposits were likely to remain beneath the buildings situated along Church Lane and Water Lane. Post-medieval land reclamation and the narrowing of the river has moved the bank of the Ouse a considerable distance north-east, but it seems likely that material preserved by waterlogging may be encountered in the future should the opportunity arise for archaeological evaluation.

Deposits like the dark soil described by Canon Raine were not encountered but both Morrell and Raine suggested that the burials were approximately 'eight feet' below the ground surface, possibly in the region of 3.5m - 4m A.O.D. Excavation ceased at 5.20m AOD at which level only ?medieval deposits were encountered.

Although only limited conclusions can be drawn from the Watching Brief, it is clear that the potential for well stratified medieval and earlier deposits exist in this part of the town and every effort should be made to further our understanding of Selby as and when the opportunity arises in the future.

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APPENDIX 1

Context Listing

Context No.	Description
001	Deposit; dark grey organic silt, fill of construction cut 002
002	Cut; construction cut for 19th century extension to hall
003	Deposit; mixed gritty clay material
004	Deposit; clay lining for stone cistern
005	Cut; south-western edge of cut for cistern
006	Deposit; fine dark grey silty clay, frequent charcoal flecks/ irregular concretions
007	Deposit; north eastern clay packing for cistern
008	Cut; north-eastern cut for cistern
009	Deposit; firm pale grey clay
010	Timber; in situ waterlogged stake 0.1m diameter cutting into 009
011	Deposit, loamy clay - Post medieval infill/ levelling material
012	Rubble and loamy clay - infill of cistern
013	Cistern

APPENDIX 2

Finds Listing

011	Pottery - 3 sherds 1 body sherd of Black Ware 1 body sherd of Beverly II Ware 1 body sherd Post-medieval Red Ware	17th century
	Ceramic Building Material 1 fragment of plain tile 0.12m x 0.05m with spilled glaze and marks from rim of pottery.	
	Animal Bone 3 fragments (cow)	

APPENDIX 3

Archive Summary

- 13 context sheets, checked for content and consistency.
- 1 sketch plan of Foundation trench
- 11 monochrome and 11 polychrome exposures in 35mm format, catalogued and with negatives stored in correct materials.
- 1 bag of pottery, washed and marked by context.
- 1 bag of animal bone