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LAND OFF MASONIC LANE
THIRSK
NORTH YORKSHIRE

Report on an Archaeological
Watching Brief

by Gareth Dean

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**LAND OFF MASONIC LANE,
THIRSK,
NORTH YORKSHIRE**

**A REPORT ON AN
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
WATCHING BRIEF**

By
Gareth Dean

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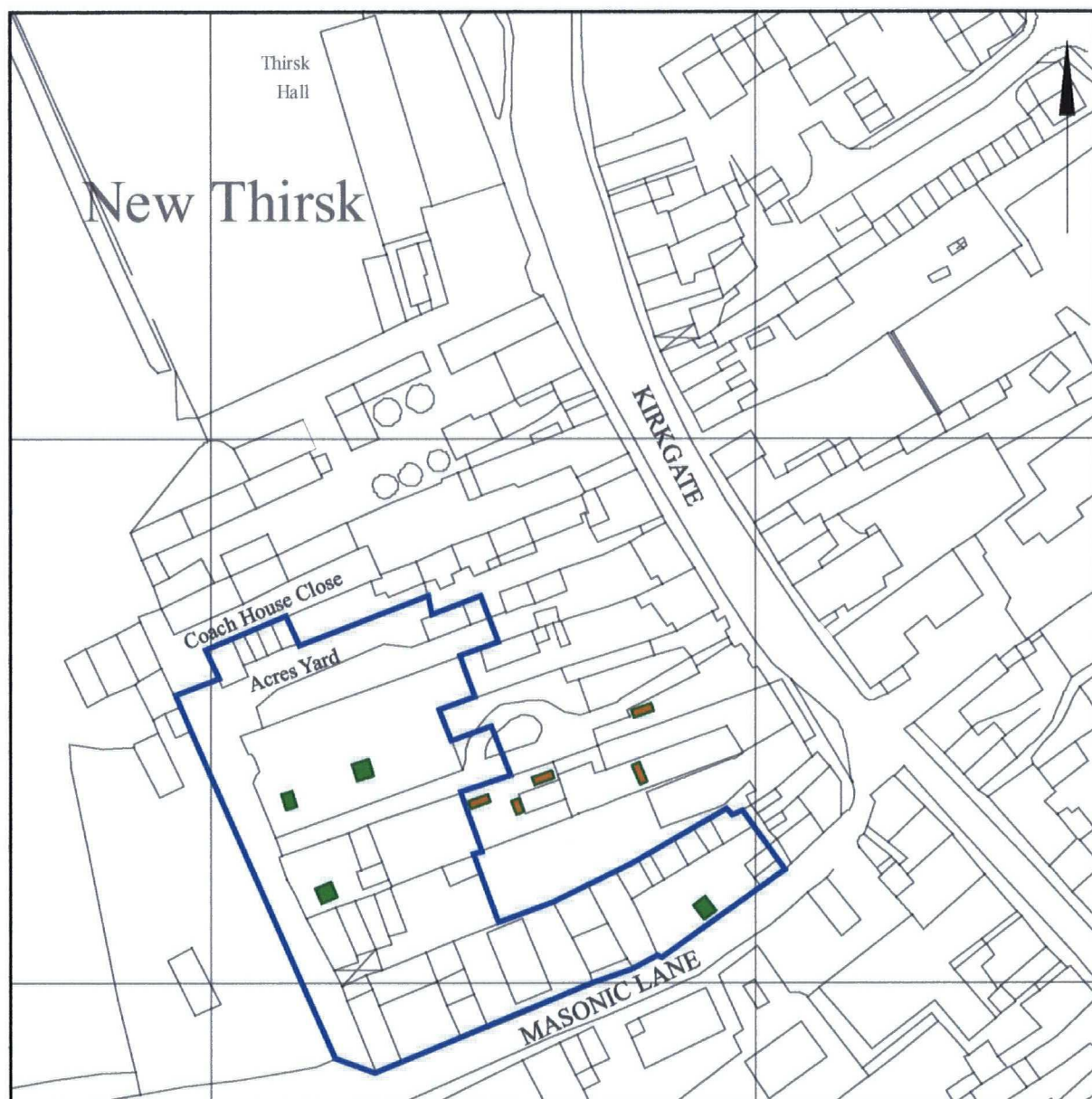
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List abbreviations

BGL	Below Ground Level
CBM	Ceramic Building Material
NGR	National Grid Reference
OS	Ordnance Survey
VCH	Victoria County History
YAT	York Archaeological Trust



Key

- 2000 evaluation
- 1998 evaluation

0 50 metres



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Figure 1 Location of site and previous observed works

ABSTRACT

Between January and October 2003, the York Archaeological Trust undertook an archaeological watching brief on land off Masonic Lane, Thirsk. The watching brief monitored work during the excavation of trenches for services and the reduction of ground levels. The watching brief followed on from a desk top study and archaeological evaluation carried out by York Archaeological Trust in 2000 and 2001. In the initial stage of the watching brief, modern deposits were observed in trenches excavated in Masonic Lane and the unnamed back lane connecting Masonic Lane and Acres Court. In the western courtyard of the old farm, the ditch running parallel with Masonic Lane, identified in the evaluation, was observed in a service trench. Two possible modern pits and a wall, possibly relating to earlier buildings were also observed. In the eastern courtyard, the ground level was reduced and a post-medieval brick well was exposed. The remains of two substantial wooden posts either side of the well may relate to a structure over the well, perhaps associated with a winch for lifting a bucket. The well had been modified to take a lead pipe.

1. INTRODUCTION

Between the January and October 2003, York Archaeological Trust undertook an archaeological watching brief on land off Masonic Lane, Thirsk, (NGR SE4272 8211) Figure 1). The site lies within the core of the historic medieval settlement in an area known as New Thirsk and to the rear of plots on the west side of Kirkgate, located c.200m north of the site of Thirsk Castle (Scheduled Ancient Monument no. 20454).

The area of development had been subject to a desk top study (Finlayson 2000) and an archaeological evaluation (Johnson 2001) in advance of the conversion of ranges of disused farm buildings and the building of new houses. Due to the discoveries in these investigations, a watching brief condition was imposed by North Yorkshire County Council. In accordance with this a watching brief was carried out during excavation of services and ground works in the specified areas. The redevelopment was carried out by Seeger Homes Ltd, and the watching brief was carried out on their behalf.

2. METHOD

The archaeological observation took place in three main stages (Figure 2). Excavation on the site was undertaken using a JCB back-acting mechanical excavator with a toothed bucket. All work, unless otherwise stated, was undertaken whilst an archaeologist was present. The first stage of work took place between January and March 2003. Trench 1 was located on the west side of the unnamed lane that connects Masonic Lane with Acres Court and measured 1m x 1m x 0.58m deep. Trench 2 was excavated along the lane, aligned north-south and was c.36m long and 1.75m deep. Trench 3 was located at the corner of the lane and Masonic Lane, and measured 2m x 1m x 1.8m deep. Trench 4 was excavated through the entrance to the site, mid-way along the boundary wall dividing Masonic Lane from the western courtyard, and measured 2m x 1.5m.

The second stage of the watching brief, in May 2003, involved the observation of the excavations for services to dwellings surrounding the eastern courtyard and facing onto Masonic Lane. Trench 5 was excavated in two stages. The first part of the trench, 5a, consisted of a

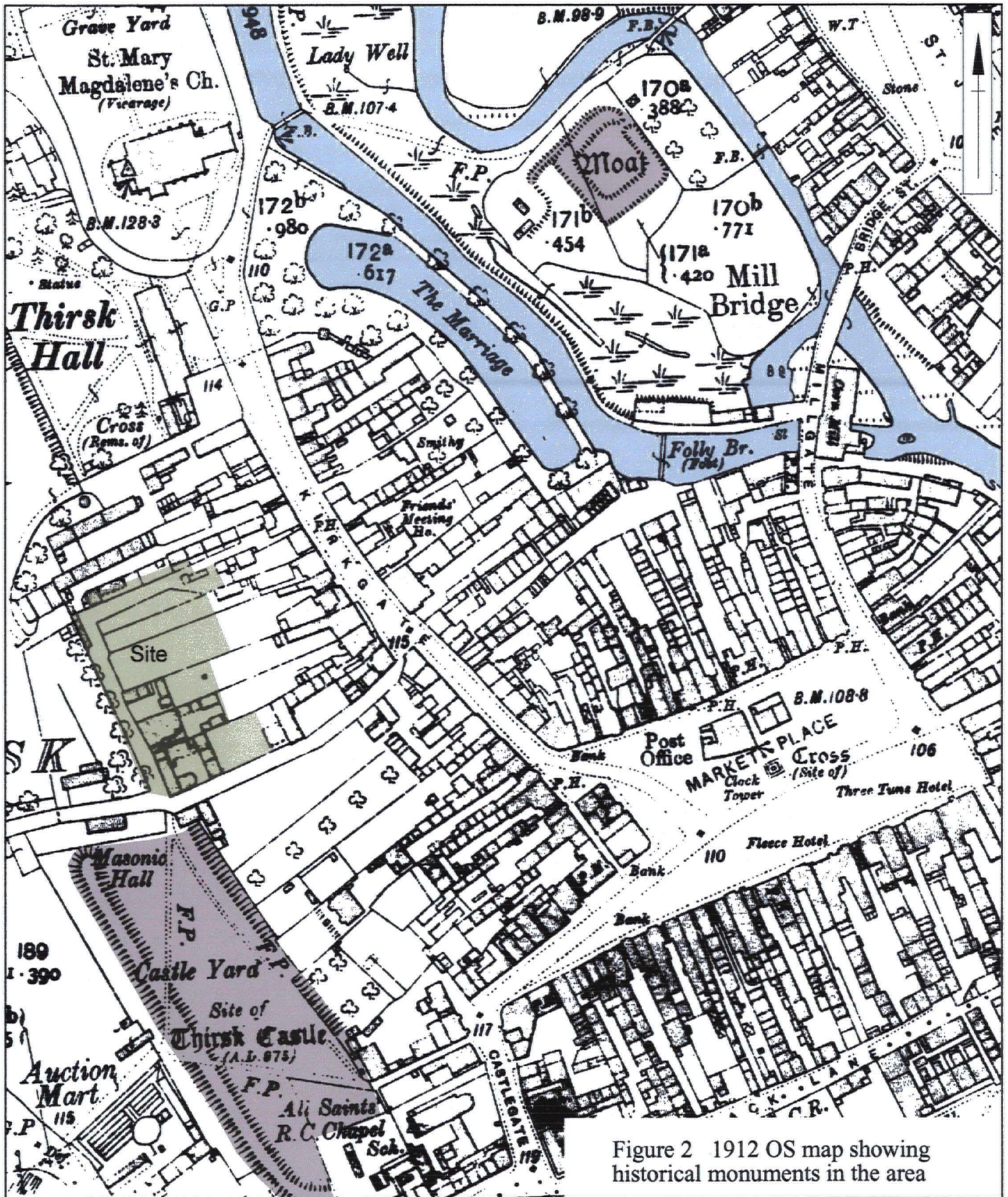


Figure 2 1912 OS map showing historical monuments in the area

discontinuous strip c.1.0m wide and to a depth of between 0.30m and 0.60m BGL around the edge of the courtyard, coming within 0.10m of the standing structures. At the north-eastern end of this trench, where no standing buildings were present, an area was stripped to a depth of c.0.30m BGL to remove a large amount of modern debris. The second part of the trench, 5b, was excavated 0.2m from the inside edge of Trench 5a, along the north, east and south-eastern boundary of the courtyard to a depth of 0.30m – 0.60m BGL; the width varied between 0.60m at the base and 0.80m at the top due to the loose and unstable upper deposits crumbling into the trench during excavation. Trench 5a, around the edge of the courtyard, was recorded after excavation had taken place whilst the inner part, Trench 5b, was completed under archaeological supervision. A reduction in the ground level over the whole of this courtyard by up to c.0.1m was not observed as it only disturbed the latest modern dumping, surfaces and materials already disturbed during the current building work.

The third stage, in October 2003, involved monitoring of the reduction of the ground level in the western courtyard adjacent to Masonic Lane. This involved the removal of c.0.6m of topsoil due to the risk of contamination from its use as a farm.

Recording on site was done using a watching brief note book and scale and sketch sections of observed works. This information was then used to produce this report with the information transferred to an Ordnance Survey map.

The archaeological records compiled and artefacts recovered during the evaluation are currently stored by York Archaeological Trust under the Yorkshire Museum accession code YORYM 2000.2401.

3. BRIEF HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The historical and archaeological background of Thirsk, and the area of the development was covered in detail in the desk top survey (Finlayson 2000) and the evaluation report (Johnson 2001), and is summarised here. The information gathered in these reports showed the development was within the historic core of Thirsk and the watching brief was undertaken because of the potential for the work to add or confirm information relating to the development site area and its surroundings from the prehistoric period onwards.

Prehistoric activity has been recorded to the south of Thirsk at Pudding Pie Hill near Sowerby, where there is a Bronze Age round barrow. Aerial photography has identified crop marks of enclosures and prehistoric field systems in the same area (Tyler 1978). Within Thirsk, during construction of new houses at St Mary's Walk a collection of Bronze Age metal work was recovered. At the castle site the excavations by MAP (MAP1995) identified two linear features thought to date to the prehistoric period based on their stratigraphic position; two residual pieces of worked flint were also recovered from later deposits and thought to suggest a prehistoric presence in the area.

A Roman road, running north-south is thought to have crossed Cod Beck near to Thirsk and ran roughly parallel to Dere Street for part of its route. A disused route known as Saxty Way is thought to represent a link between the two (Tyler 1978). No evidence for settlement from this period has been recovered from the town, although Roman burials have been discovered at the

nearby earthwork at Pudding Pie Hill. Archaeological investigations within the Castle Garth revealed a small cemetery comprising seven graves with associated inhumations and three disinterred burials. A group of grave goods, including a cruciform brooch, suggest an early 6th century date. A post-hole, slot and pit from the same period were identified (MAP 1995). This evidence suggests that there was settlement activity in the vicinity at this time, although its form, character and extent is unknown.

In the Anglo-Scandinavian period, Thirsk was held as two separate manors on either side of Cod Beck. A fortified house is supposed to have been built in 979AD (VCH 1913), but its location is not known. Settlement on the west side of the Beck was focused around the church. On the eastern side settlement was possibly centred on pre-Conquest defences on the site of the later castle. It has been suggested that this settlement may have taken the form of a burgh, although there is no direct evidence to support this. Evidence from the castle excavations suggest that in the period between the 6th and 11th centuries part of the site of the later Castle Garth may have been cultivated land, followed by its use as pasture before another layer of accumulated deposits preceded the construction of the castle on the site (MAP 1995). The first reliable documentary evidence for settlement at Thirsk is found in the Domesday Book, 1086, where there are two entries that reflect the fact that the land was held as two separate manors on either side of Cod Beck.

The castle lies on level ground to the west of the market place. The date of its foundation is not known with certainty, but there is no substantive evidence of pre-Conquest foundation. The earliest documentary reference to it dates from between c.1092 and 1130. Excavations at the castle site recorded evidence of the construction of the rampart banks dated to the 11th century that sealed the Anglo Saxon burials. This confirms the historical evidence for the construction of the castle, but to the south the bank may have been of later date and to the north it may represent a remodelling in the 11th century of an already extant earthwork (MAP 1995).

The castle precinct is thought to consist of an area bounded by Westgate, Castlegate, Kirkgate and Masonic Lane and provided a new focus away from the church for settlement (i.e. New Thirsk), with a manorial vill developing around it (VCH 1913). The northern, western and southern extents of the outer ditch of the motte and bailey castle have been traced, but the eastern extent has been obscured by development along the Kirkgate and Market Place frontage. Excavations (Johnson 1998) to the east of the current site at the rear of 25 Kirkgate uncovered a probable pit and adjacent garden type soil with pottery suggesting a possible 11th - 12th century date for this feature. The northern end of the western edge of the rampart runs beneath the 19th century Masonic Hall. To the east of the rampart is an open area that formed the interior of the bailey. The life span of the castle was quite short since Henry II ordered its destruction in 1176 after Robert de Mowbray held it against the Crown in 1174. In 1376 Castle Garth is recorded as being used as a garden, but by the end of the century it was laid to grass (Clarke 2000). When William Camden visited Thirsk in 1695 nothing could be seen of the castle except the rampart.

It is not known for certain when the settlement at Thirsk acquired borough status. It is referred to as a borough by Henry II, who held the manor some time after 1106 (VCH 1913), and there is some contradictory evidence for the location of the borough to the west or east side of Cod Beck. It is thought that it was located on the east side and became known as Old Thirsk, as the manor passed to the King at the time of the Conquest, and it was during the 12th century, that it became a royal borough with burgesses and a market place (Tyler 1978). It is not known when markets

began at New Thirsk, but in 1398 the market place in Old Thirsk is recorded as the "Oldermerkat Sted", indicating that before the end of the 14th century a market place had been established.

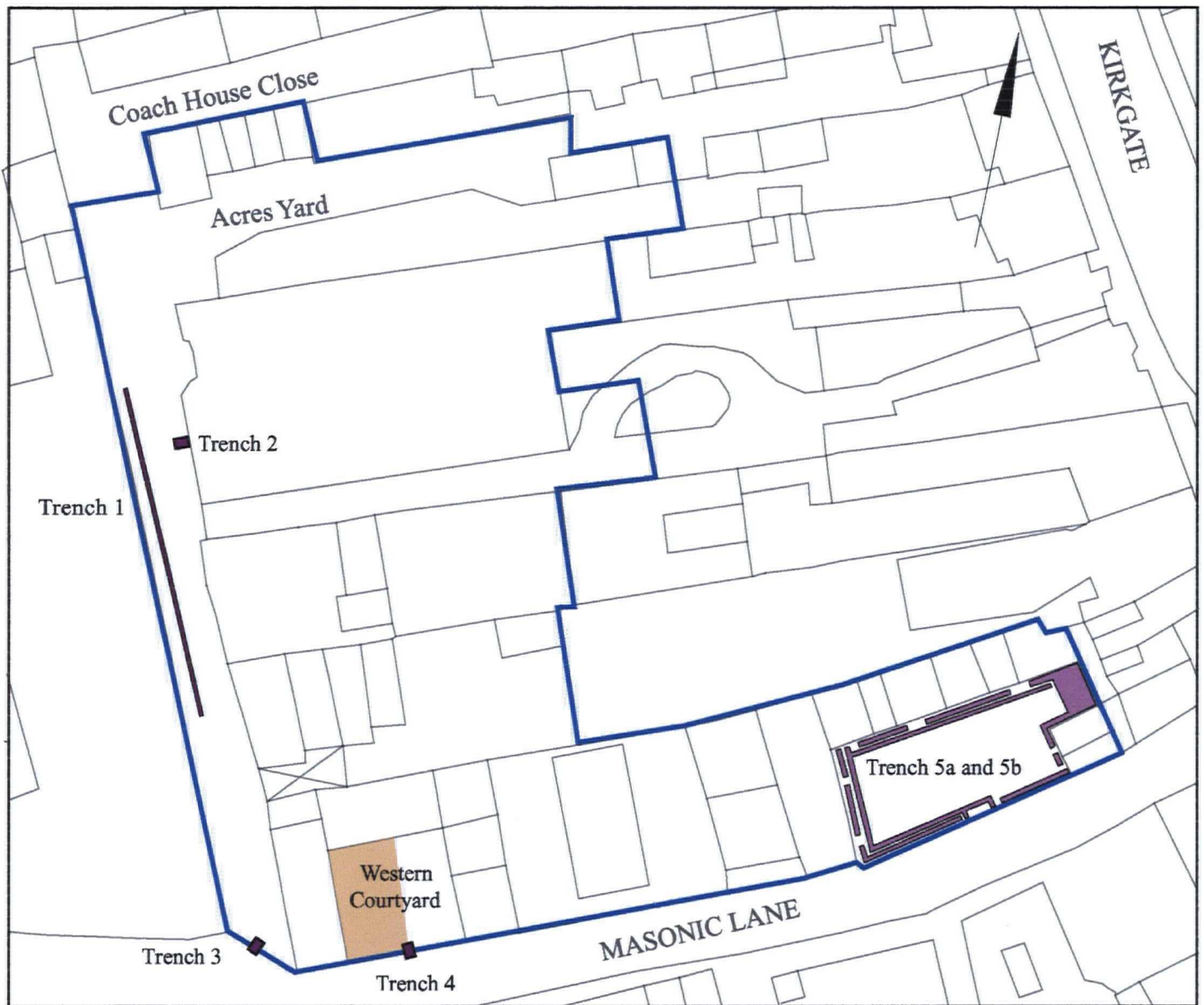
Upstanding medieval monuments lie close to the castle site including a moated site, some 200m to the north-east (on the east side of the Cod Beck). Small scale archaeological work at this site has produced a number of probable 13th century pottery sherds, but did not reveal any archaeological structures or features (Robinson 1993). The 15th century church of St Mary, located 200m to the north is thought to include 12th century fabric (Thompson 1913).

Cartographic evidence over the last 200 years shows land boundaries on the current development site have remained largely intact with only minor alterations. The 1792 map of Thirsk shows the meandering course of the Cod Beck with a water course shown branching towards the west and apparently abruptly stopping, raising the possibility of an ancient waterway running westward along the course of Masonic Lane, which may even have been used to define an area of settlement. This map also shows the development site which at that time formed part of the rear of plots belonging to five properties facing onto Kirkgate. The rear of these plots does not appear to be divided, but buildings are shown to occupy the back lane frontage at the rear of the two southernmost plots, with a further building at the corner of Masonic Lane. The only change represented on a 1796 map shows an additional building to the rear of the northernmost plot within the area.

Archaeological evaluation of the area to the rear of 23-25 Kirkgate recorded post-medieval structural features thought to be associated with a building or outhouse and later yard surfaces were also revealed. An intriguing subterranean domed brick structure, possibly an icehouse or well, was dated as a post 17th century construction (Johnson 1998, 19). Evaluation trenches in the garden of 23 Kirkgate (ibid) revealed loamy soils directly over the pale, sandy natural sub soils (indicative of old garden or horticultural soils) that were in turn sealed by later build-ups of soils. Within the excavated trenches features of either medieval or post-medieval date were found to cut the subsoil.

The 1st edition (1856) and 2nd edition (1912) Ordnance Survey maps show a series of buildings around a courtyard on Masonic Lane at the south-eastern extent of the site which are likely to represent the brick buildings which currently stand in this area. To the west of this area on Masonic Lane there are further ranges of buildings previously known as Castle Yard Stables, together with a building which is currently used as a scout hut. The site is bounded by walls that have been dated mainly to the 18th/19th century, although some have been very recently rebuilt. Masonic Lane takes its name from the masonic hall, first shown on the 1st edition OS map, 1856 located on the south side of the road, opposite the development site.

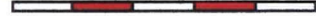
During the evaluation excavation on the development site in 2001 (Johnson 2001), a ditch running along the line of Masonic Lane and dated to the 12th century was found and was thought to represent a boundary ditch. The trenches across the rest of the site identified deposits from the post-medieval and modern periods.



Key

- January watching brief
- May watching brief
- October watching brief

0 25 metres



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Figure 3 Location of trenches observed during the watching brief

4. WATCHING BRIEF RESULTS

4.1 January-March 2003 (Figure 3)

4.1.1 Trench 1

4.1.1.1 *Modern*

A trench was excavated against the eastern side of the lane between Masonic Lane and Acres Court, which exposed a sequence of deposits associated with the lane. The earliest deposit was sand and gravel (1004) in poorly defined layers that contained a fragment of 19th century pottery. This was presumably the bedding for the 0.04m thick layer of tarmac (1003) of a former lane surface directly above it. The tarmac (1003) was sealed by a sequence of make-up deposits for the present lane surface. The earliest of these consisted of a mid-grey brown silt sand with occasional brick and tile fragments (1002), 0.28m thick. Directly above this was a layer of clean, medium-coarse gravel (1001), 0.12m thick, sealed by 0.08m of fine gravel in a dark grey brown sandy silt (1000) forming the present lane surface.

4.1.2 Trench 2

4.1.2.1 *Natural*

The earliest deposit encountered was a loose, light yellow brown, natural sand and gravel subsoil (2003).

4.1.2.2 *Modern*

Overlying the natural subsoil was a dark brown silt with moderate gravel, brick and tile inclusions (2002), 1.56m thick. At the southern end of the trench this deposit had been disturbed by an ill-defined feature (2001), 4m wide that also cut into the natural. It was filled with a dark brown, slightly clay silt with frequent gravel inclusions (2000). At the south-east end of the trench, this deposit extended beyond Cut 2001; it was 0.35m thick and overlay the natural subsoil (2003). The function of the feature is uncertain.

4.1.3 Trench 3

4.1.3.1 *Natural*

Loose, brownish yellow gravel and sand natural subsoil (3001) was exposed 0.6m BGL.

4.1.3.2 *Modern*

Overlying the natural was a deposit of laminated hardcore (3000), 0.58m thick that acted as a bedding for the tarmac lane surface.

4.1.4 Trench 4

4.1.4.1 *Natural*

The natural subsoil (4009) consisted of loose light brown sand and gravel and was located 0.28m BGL but was excavated to a depth of 1.5m BGL.

4.1.4.2 *Post-Medieval-Modern*

On the northern side of the boundary wall the natural was sealed by a firm, mid-brown silt sand (4008) 0.16m thick. A similar deposit (4003) was observed on the southern side of the wall and was interpreted as a buried soil. On the northern side of the boundary wall, a dark brown silt sand with inclusions of brick rubble and tile (4004) overlay the natural and appeared to form a bedding for a cobble surface (4006). This was sealed by 0.08m of firm, dark grey silt sand and the rubble (4006) of the present ground surface. On the southern side of the boundary wall the natural subsoil (4009) and the former soil (4003) were cut by a modern service trench (4002), 0.5m wide and 0.5m deep. Overlying this was a yellow brown sand with occasional inclusions of brick and tarmac 0.12m thick (4001), that acted as a bedding for the 0.08m thick layer of tarmac of the present ground surface (4000). The boundary wall (4004) appeared to be built on to the natural subsoil (4009). The exposed part of its foundations had no clear construction cut and it was unclear how it related to the deposits either side of it.

4.2 May 2003

4.2.1 Trench 5 a and Trench 5b (Figure 4)

4.2.1.1 *Natural*

The earliest deposit encountered was natural sand and gravel subsoil (5012) at c.0.40m-0.50m BGL and consisted of loose/friable, slightly brownish orange pebbly silty sand.

4.2.1.2 *Medieval*

The fill of a feature (5011) thought to be part of a ditch, was observed along the southern side of the courtyard, though its true extent is uncertain as only its northern edge may have been encountered in Trench 5b, c.2.5m from the boundary wall to the south. The deposit exposed was a moist/friable, very dark greyish brown silt/sand with occasional small pebble and grit inclusions, and it is from this material that a small number of medieval pottery fragments were retrieved. The work in 2001 (Johnson 2001) identified a large ditch which appeared to be running along the southern boundary of the courtyard and the feature observed in the trenches is thought to form part of this ditch. The area had only been reduced by c.0.40m but elsewhere natural was often present at this depth, suggesting that the services trench was within the backfill of the feature.

A possible buried soil (5010) was visible in the machine-cut sections over some parts of courtyard, especially in the north-east and north-west corners. This deposit was friable, dark brown, sandy silt with occasional small pebble inclusions, and no finds were recovered which could suggest a possible date for the deposit. It is possible that this was a buried agricultural soil

which had been disturbed and truncated by later activity. It was not possible to see any relationship between this possible buried soil and the large feature along the southern side of the courtyard.

4.2.1.3 Post-Medieval

At the north-eastern extent of the yard it was possible to see a set of three or four shallow cuts with V-shaped profiles (5009) in section cut into natural which may have been plough scars. These were also visible further south after machine excavation had taken place for Trench 5b. The cuts appeared to run north-south or north-north-west / south-south-east, though this is not possible to confirm from the small area exposed. The cuts were c.0.30m wide and 0.15m - 0.18m deep. The backfill of these features (5008) was friable, dark brown sandy silt with occasional small pebble inclusions. The true source of these small cuts is unknown but it is possible that they are early plough scars as they appear to be sealed by a soil.

4.2.1.4 Modern

In the middle of the northern edge of the yard were two possible pits (5005) and 5007) which continued beyond the area excavated to the north. Both of the features were c.0.60m in diameter at the widest point. Both appeared to be cut into natural but were not visible in section. The backfills (5004) and (5006) was a compact/friable, mid to dark brown silty sand with occasional CBM and pebble inclusions. The extruded form of the tile inclusions suggests a 19th century origin for the backfill of the pits.

Cut into natural subsoil (5012), and the possibly disturbed, buried topsoil (5010), was a wall or wall foundation (5003). This was aligned south-west / north-east and was partially visible at the eastern end of the courtyard. It had been disturbed by machining, though it was also disturbed by earlier demolition. The wall was two courses wide, surviving to a depth of at least two courses, and made up of bricks 245 x 100-110 x 60-65mm, bonded with friable, light brownish grey mortar with frequent grit and white fleck (chalk?) inclusions. After a small amount of cleaning it was apparent that the construction cut (5002) was c.0.10m wide on either side of the wall itself. The wall is visible on the 1912 OS map though the brick size suggests a post-medieval date and it could be 17th-18th century (K. Hunter-Mann pers. comm.). It is possible that the wall related to the early building to the west and was part of the original range of buildings. No further investigation was carried out as the depth required for the services had been reached.

Cut into the fill of the possible ditch (5008), along the southern boundary of the courtyard, were a number of post-holes and stake-holes (5001). These were c.400mm in diameter and sub-circular in shape. These are probably of modern origin and were not excavated.

The uppermost deposit within the courtyard was a firm, dark grey brown silty clay (5000) that formed the present ground surface and had been heavily disturbed by the work on the buildings and the courtyard.

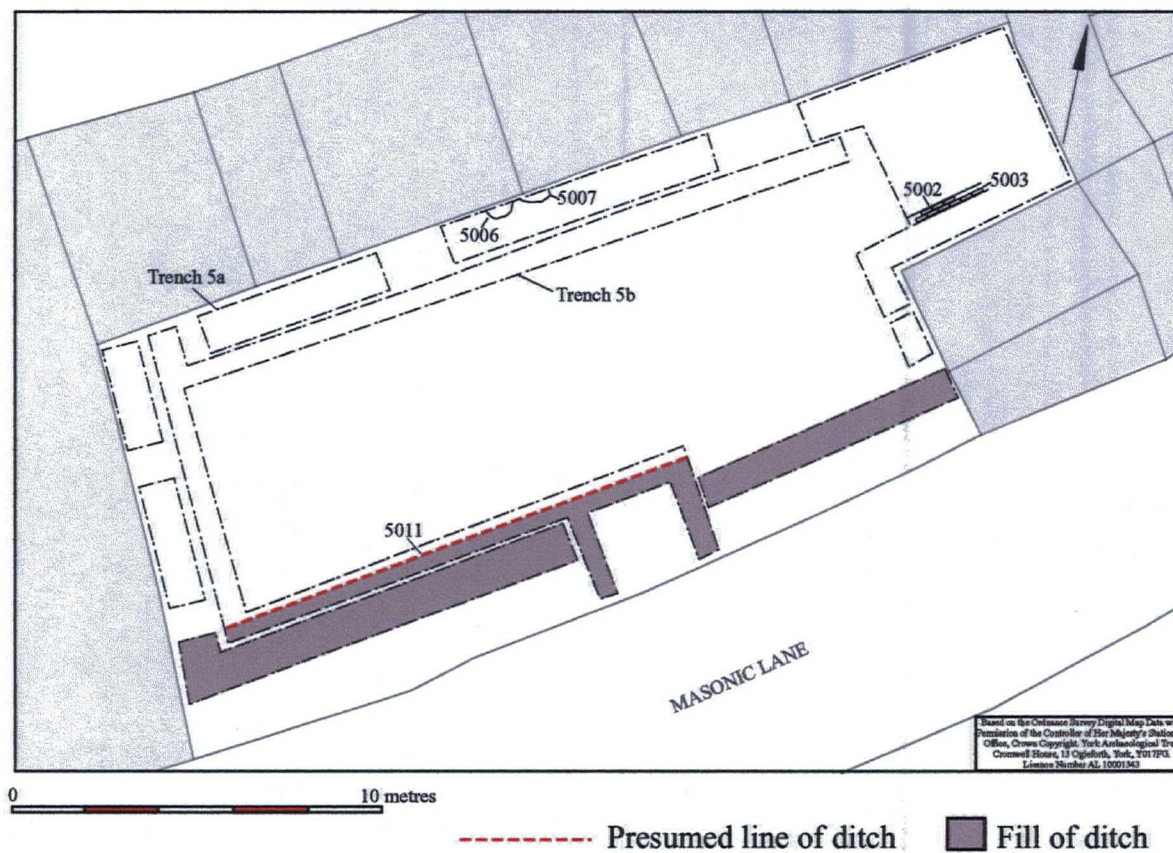


Figure 4 Plan of trenches 5a and 5b

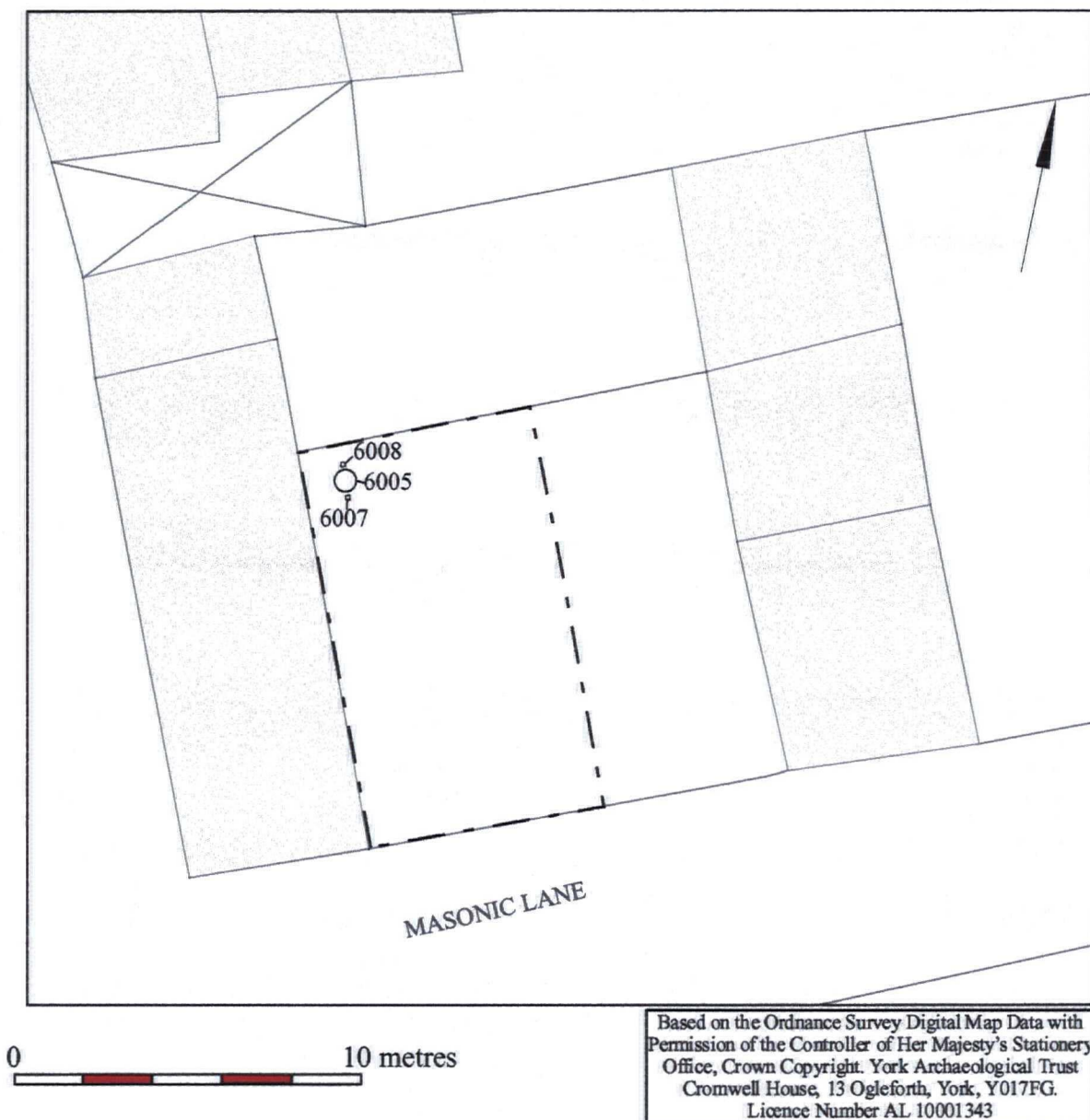


Figure 5 Plan of the western courtyard showing the location of the well and associated wooden posts

4.3 October 2003

4.3.1 The Western Courtyard (Figure 5)

4.3.1.1 *Post-Medieval-Modern*

Along the western side of the courtyard, the foundations of the standing range of buildings were exposed. The foundations were of stepped construction that projected *c.*0.1m from the wall and consisted of two courses of bricks (6001) set in a friable white mortar, set on a single course of cobbles (6002). Below the cobbles was exposed a friable, mid-brown sand silt (6003) that is either an earlier soil deposit or a subsoil.

In the north-western corner of the courtyard, a brick-lined well (6005) was exposed. The well was located 1.2m west of the wall of the eastern range of buildings, and 1m from the retaining wall on the northern side of the courtyard. The well measured *c.*0.65m in diameter and the water level was 4m below ground level. The well had been capped with a large sandstone slab (6006). On either side of the well were the rotten bases of two wooden posts (6007-8), that appeared to have been driven through the brown silt sand subsoil, 6003. The well had a wooden beam (6010) that appeared to have been inserted into it 1.5m BGL acting as a support for a lead pipe (6011) extending from the well towards the retaining wall. When the lead pipe was removed the end that had been in the water was seen to have a wooden bung inserted and holes punched through the side. This was presumably to act as a form of filter to prevent other material being drawn up the pipe. The insertion of the pipe into the well presumably represents an alteration of use of the well from hand drawn water to perhaps water being fed by pipe into the buildings on the northern side of the courtyard. The two stumps of wood are perhaps associated with an early winch or pulley housing for the well that were not needed once the pipe was inserted.

Overlying these deposits was the friable, dark grey brown silty sand topsoil (6000), that was removed due to the risk of contamination. Within this deposit were occasional inclusions of brick rubble and fragments of 19th century pottery and it was quite disturbed by the work that had been carried out on the farm buildings.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The watching brief would suggest that the area has been disturbed by relatively modern groundworks associated with the laying of services or the construction or demolition of buildings associated with the use of the site as a farm. However, some useful archaeological observations were made during the watching brief. In particular, the trenches within the eastern courtyard confirmed the presence of a substantial medieval ditch running parallel to Masonic Lane which is possibly a property boundary associated with the initial laying out of this area for settlement. In addition the trench from the western courtyard into Masonic Lane exposed deposits on the courtyard side associated with a possible former cobbled yard surface sealed below the present top soil. The stripping of the eastern courtyard exposed a post-medieval well that had been modified to take a lead pipe and there were traces of a possible structure associated with it.

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7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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