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14a THE MARKET PLACE
THIRSK
NORTH YORKSHIRE

Report on an
Archaeological
Watching Brief

by Bryan Antoni

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**A REPORT ON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL
WATCHING BRIEF**

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May 2005

CONTENTS

	page
SUMMARY	
1. INTRODUCTION	3
2. METHOD STATEMENT	3
3. LOCATION, GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY	4
4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	4
5. WATCHING BRIEF AND CONCLUSIONS	5
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY	8
7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	9

Figures

1. Location of site	3
2. Site plan	6
3. East facing section	7

Tables

1. List of contexts	8
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Abbreviations

BGL	Below Ground Level
YAT	York Archaeological Trust

3. LOCATION, GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site lay south-west of The Market Place, and was bounded to the north and west by Westgate and, to the south and east, by Chapel Street. The underlying drift geology of the area consists of glacial sands and gravels overlying a solid geology of Triassic mudstones (British Geological Survey 1977 and British Geological Survey 1979). The topography of the area is generally flat and even.

4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The watching brief was undertaken because it was thought likely to reveal some evidence for Thirsk's history in an area in the heart of the market town. This history may be summarised as follows. Previous archaeological work in Thirsk has revealed evidence of settlement from the prehistoric period through to present. Bronze Age activity, in the form of a round barrow, has been recorded to the south of Thirsk at Pudding Pie Hill, near Sowerby. Aerial photography has identified crop marks of enclosures and prehistoric field systems in the same area (Tyler 1978). A collection of Bronze Age metal work was also recovered during the construction of several new houses at St Mary's Walk, Thirsk. Excavations by MAP in the area of Thirsk Castle (MAP1995), identified two linear features which, based on their stratigraphic position, were thought to be of the prehistoric period. Other evidence for prehistoric activity in the vicinity of the castle took the form of two residual pieces of worked flint.

A north-south aligned Roman road, which ran roughly parallel to Dere Street, is thought to have crossed Cod Beck near to Thirsk. A disused track, formerly known as Saxty Way, is thought to have represented a link between the two roads (Tyler 1978). With the exception of Roman burials, also discovered at Pudding Pie Hill, there has been, to date, no further evidence for settlement of this period recorded.

Archaeological investigations by MAP within the Castle Garth revealed a small Anglo - Saxon inhumation cemetery comprising of seven graves; one of these produced an early 6th century cruciform brooch. This evidence suggests that there was settlement activity within the town at this time.

The first reliable documentary evidence for Thirsk is found in the Domesday Book (1086) where there are two entries which indicated that the land on either side of Cod Beck was held as two separate manors in the Anglo-Scandinavian period. 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 and a settlement, possibly in the form of a burgh, was centred on the pre-Conquest defences lying beneath the site of the later castle. The earliest documentary reference to the Castle dates from between c.1092 and 1130. Excavations at the castle revealed that the construction of the rampart probably took place in the 11th century.

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.

During the 12th century Thirsk became a royal borough with burgesses and a market place (Tyler 1978). Small scale archaeological work on the site of a presumed moated Manor House, located some 500m to the north-east of the Market Place 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 approx. 400m to the north-west of the Market Place, is thought to include 12th century fabric (Thompson 1913).

Archaeological evaluation 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. A 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 revealed old, loamy, garden or horticultural soils directly over the pale, sandy natural subsoils. Features of either medieval or post-medieval date were found to cut the subsoil.

5. WATCHING BRIEF AND CONCLUSIONS

The earliest deposit observed was a natural subsoil consisting of banded, loose pale yellow brown sands and coarse pebble gravel (1004; Fig. 2 and 3), with manganese flecking and decayed stone fragments. This was encountered at a depth of 0.2m BGL, was mechanically reduced by a further 0.3m, and continued beyond the base of the trench. The top of 1004 was truncated by Cuts 1008 (Fig. 3), and 1010 (Fig. 2 and 3).

5.1 Cut 1010

Cut 1010 was located in the northernmost third of the trench and was first observed at a depth of 0.08m BGL. It was in excess of 0.3m deep, over 4.6m wide and 6.8m in length. Only the southern edge of Cut 1010 was exposed; it was aligned east – west, and broke sharply from the surface to fall steeply, then vertically, to an unexcavated base. Its full depth and extents are not known but Cut 1010 continued beyond the base of the trench and the western and northernmost limits of excavation. The eastern extent of Cut 1010 could not be determined as it was truncated by a later intrusion (1011).

The primary fill of 1010 (1001), was located hard against the southern edge of the cut and consisted of a loose mid – dark grey brown sand and pebble gravel with occasional charcoal and mortar flecks. This deposit was in excess of 0.27m thick and extended for a maximum distance of 1.28m towards the north, where it lay directly beneath Deposit 1002.

Context 1002 was a mixed levelling / backfill deposit of small to large pieces of a soft pinkish brown clay, in a matrix of mid brown sand, with occasional charcoal flecks. This was over 0.28m thick and extended for a maximum distance of 1.58m towards the north, where it was sealed by Deposit 1003.

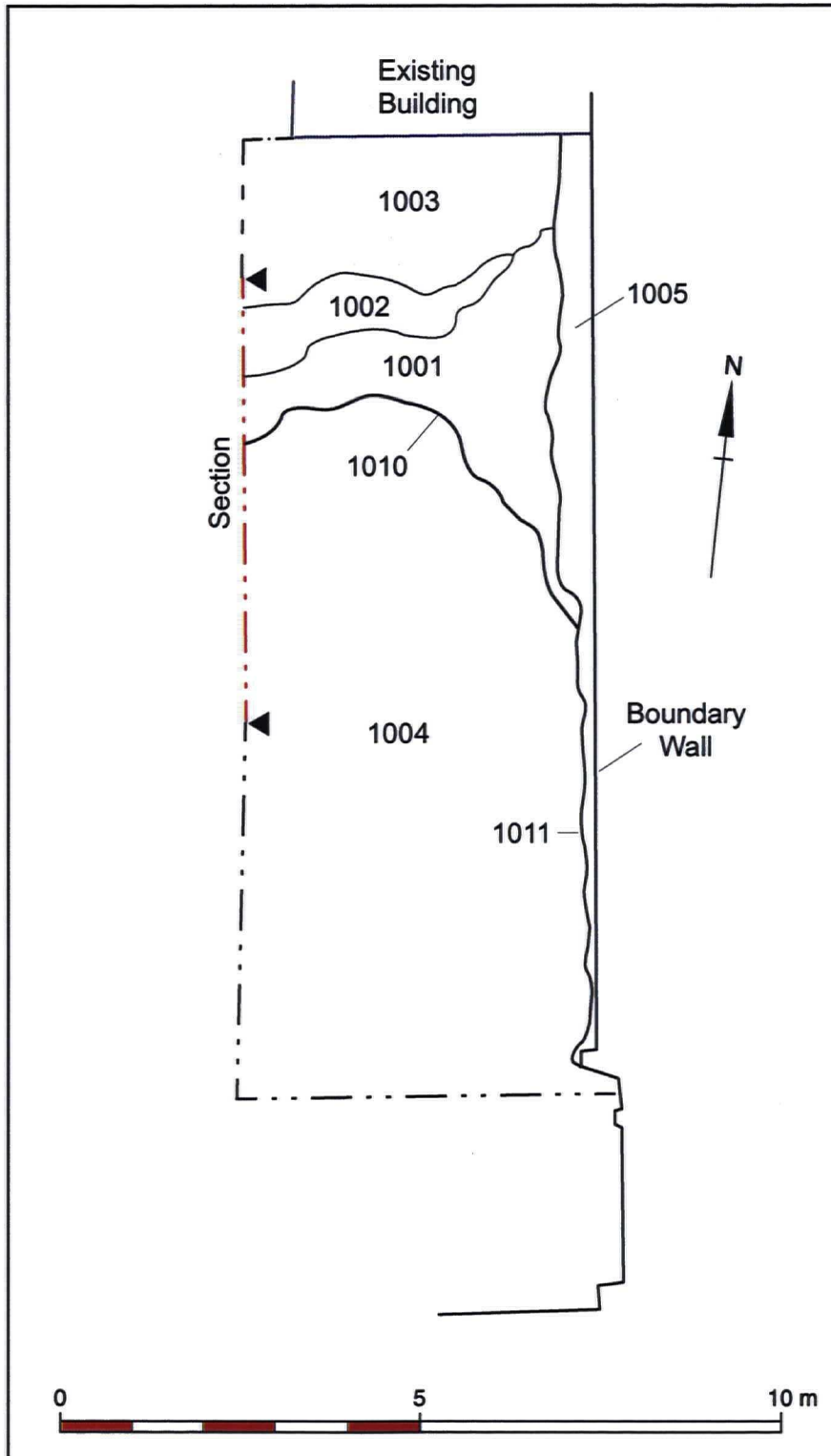


Fig. 2 Site plan

Context 1003 was a further backfill / levelling deposit consisting of a loose mid brown sand and pebble gravel with occasional small to medium pebbles, charcoal and burnt clay or decayed brick / tile flecks. 1003 was in excess of 0.27m thick and continued towards the north for a distance of 0.72m, where it ran beyond the northern limit of excavation.

5.2 Cut 1011

The eastern edge of Cut 1010 was truncated by the unexcavated construction cut of the north-south aligned boundary wall (Cut 1011; Fig. 2), which ran along the eastern side of the property. Cut 1011 terminated 0.3m north of the southern trench edge and extended towards the west of

its eastern limit by 0.1m in the southern half of the trench and 0.6m in the north. Its backfill (1005), was a loose grey brown sand with moderate flecks to small fragments of brick and mortar.

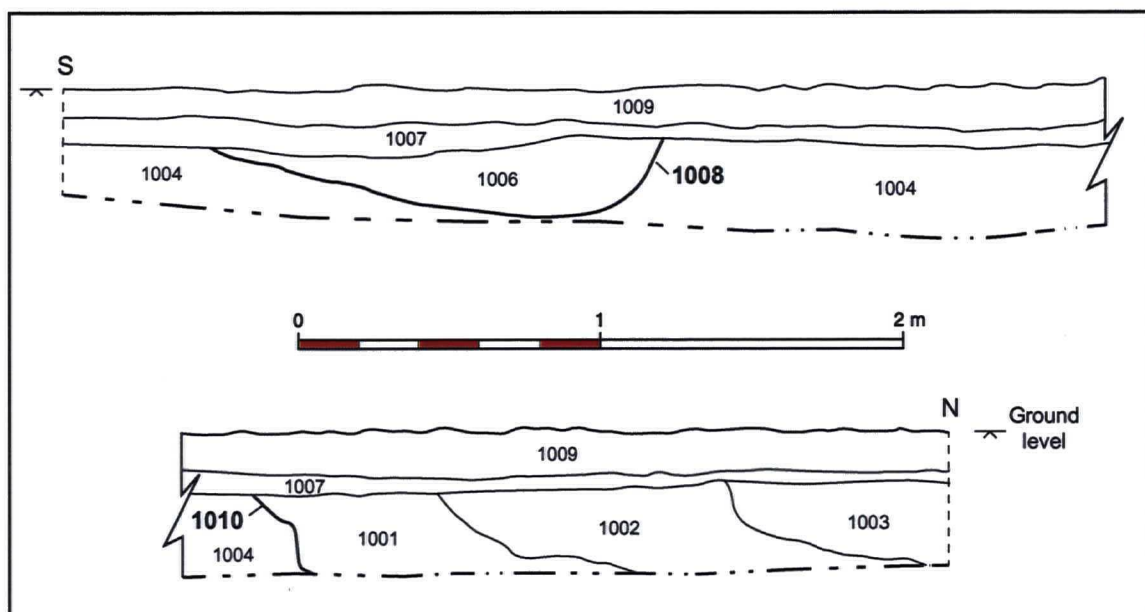


Fig. 3 East facing section

5.3 Cut 1008

Pit cut 1008 (Fig. 3), was recorded in profile only. This feature had truncated Natural 1004 and was located at a depth of 0.16 BGL in the east facing section, some 1.7m south of Cut 1010. The recorded section of the pit was aligned north-south, was 1.5m wide and up to 0.26m deep. Its sides broke sharply from the surface to fall gently on the southern side, steep on the north, to a gently rounded base. The fill of Cut 1008 (1006), was a compacted loose, gritty, dark grey sand with occasional charcoal and mortar flecks, brick / tile flecks and small rounded pebbles.

The fills of Cuts 1008, 1010 and 1011 (1006, 1003 and 1005 respectively), were all sealed beneath an up to 0.1m thick bedding deposit of a crushed limestone and / or dry-mix (1007; Fig. 3), which was, in turn, sealed beneath the present yard surface (1009). This consisted of a 0.14 m thick deposit of cobbles bonded in a cement matrix.

5.4 Conclusions

The earliest deposits encountered were the natural sands and gravels (1004), which were truncated by Cuts 1008 and 1010. Cut 1008 was in the form of a shallow pit of indeterminate use. The homogenous nature of its backfill (1006), indicated that it was backfilled in one operation, most likely shortly after it was excavated. The dark grey colour of the sandy fill, combined with the brick, mortar and pebble inclusions, suggested that this pit was most likely dug for the disposal of building and / or industrial waste. Cut 1010 was a much larger feature

which covered the northern third of the trench. Although not fully exposed, the irregular plan of the southernmost edge suggested that this was most likely a quarry pit for the extraction of the natural sands and gravels.

Although the features described above were devoid of dating evidence, the nature of the fills suggested that they were both post-Medieval in date. The lack of domestic waste, such as pottery and animal bone etc., within the matrix of the fills also suggested that this was the case; cut features of the medieval period (or earlier), were often used for the disposal of such materials at the end of their use.

The upper fill of cut 1010 (1003), was truncated by the construction cut (1011), for a brick wall which formed the eastern boundary between 14a and the adjacent property. The type of brick used in the construction of the wall, and similar small fragments found within its backfill (1005), were also post-medieval in date. The fact that this wall truncated the fills of Cut 1010 indicated that the quarry pit was within a much larger area of open ground than is present today. The area was most likely subdivided when the buildings fronting the southern side of the Market Place were constructed around the 18th Century or later (Pevsner 1966).

The fill of Pit 1008 (1006), and construction Cut 1011 (1005), were both sealed by the limestone and dry mix bedding deposit (1007), for the present day yard surface of cemented cobbles (1009).

CONTEXT	DESCRIPTION	SECTION / PLAN
1000	Machine clearance	
1001	Backfill / levelling	East facing / Plan
1002	Backfill / levelling	East facing / Plan
1003	Backfill / levelling	East facing / Plan
1004	Natural	East facing / Plan
1005	Construction cut backfill	Plan
1006	Pit fill	East facing / Plan
1007	Levelling	East facing
1008	Pit cut	East facing
1009	Cobble surface	East facing
1010	Clearance / Quarry cut	East facing / Plan
1011	Wall construction cut	Plan

Table 1. List of contexts

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YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

Cromwell House
13 Ogleforth
York
YO1 7FG

Telephone: (01904) 663000
Fax: (01904) 663024
email: enquiries@yorkarchaeology.co.uk
web: www.yorkarchaeology.co.uk