

TWELFTH- AND FIFTEENTH- CENTURY UNDERCROFTS AT HOWARD STREET, GREAT YARMOUTH

Excavation and Survey 1987/88

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with a documentary report by Paul Rutledge

and a report of excavations in 1976 by David Bullock

Introduction

Proposals in 1987 by Great Yarmouth Borough Council to initiate repairs to medieval undercrofts in Howard Street led to a survey and small-scale excavation of a fifteenth-century range of vaults at the street frontage and survey of a twelfth-century vault at the rear. This work was undertaken by staff of the Norfolk Archaeological Unit and is reported here together with a summary of excavations conducted by members of the Great Yarmouth and District Archaeological Society within the twelfth-century structure in 1976. A documentary report supplements the surveys.

The Site (Fig. 1)

The site is situated at 50/56, Howard Street South, Great Yarmouth (TG 5240 0745). The undercrofts are the only medieval structures to survive, the present-day superstructure consisting of a terrace of late nineteenth-century date which is set back from the street frontage, straddling the fifteenth-century vaults and using the roof of them as a terrace. Access is currently at the northern end of the vaults, via an entrance on the street frontage. This is unlikely to reflect the original entrance and, indeed, there has been considerable rebuilding at this location. The twelfth-century structure lies at right-angles to the street, running westwards adjacent to the south side of Row 77.

The 1987/88 Survey (Fig. 2)

The rows of Great Yarmouth are orientated at right-angles to the three principal north-to-south thoroughfares in such a way as to inspire from Pevsner a comparison with Manhattan; the rows being the streets and the north-to-south streets the avenues.¹ The areas, particularly to the south of the town between Middlegate Street and South Quay, suffered badly as the result of enemy bombing raids in the last world war, resulting in the decision to demolish all but very few of the buildings. In 1950 H. St. J. O'Neil remarked 'Remains of medieval houses are excessively rare in the Row area . . . the two vaulted undercrofts, one under Nos. 36 and 37 Howard Street South and the other formerly under Row 138, No. 12, and the last vestiges of a similar vault under the former Turk's Head in Middlegate Street are three only certain traces of such houses which have so far been located'.² One important artefact was inadvertently overlooked, both by O'Neil and the compilers of the 1936 survey of the Rows area;³ this is beneath nos. 50 to 56 Howard Street, a terrace of late nineteenth-century houses, and comprises a five-bay undercroft with a truncated, earlier undercroft at the northern end, extending back from the street beneath the rear rooms of no. 56, on the line of Row 77.

The undercroft (1) at right-angles to the street has a semi-circular, barrel-vaulted construction with rectangular section ribs dividing the space into three bays with the eastern bay half

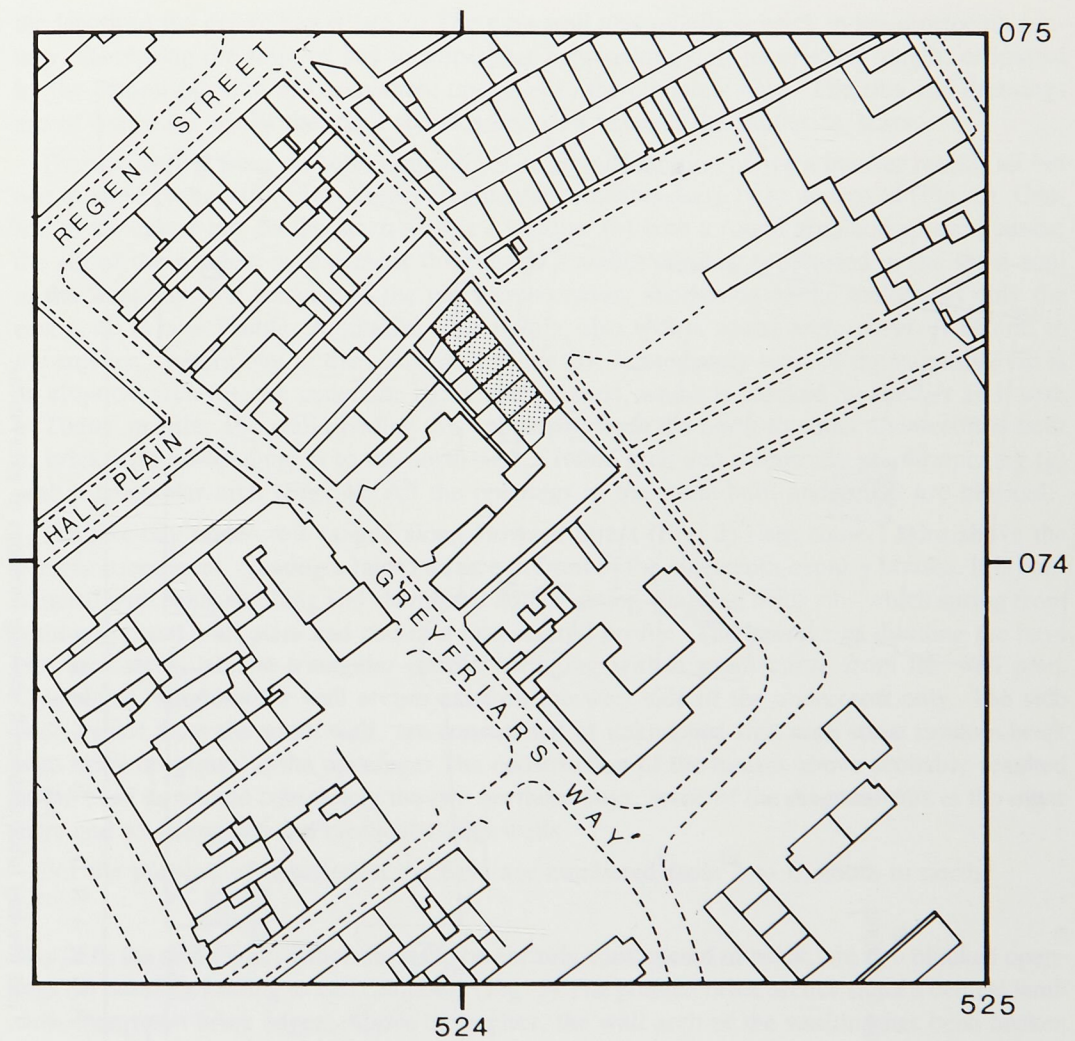


Fig.1

Location plan within Great Yarmouth of 50-56 Howard St. South.

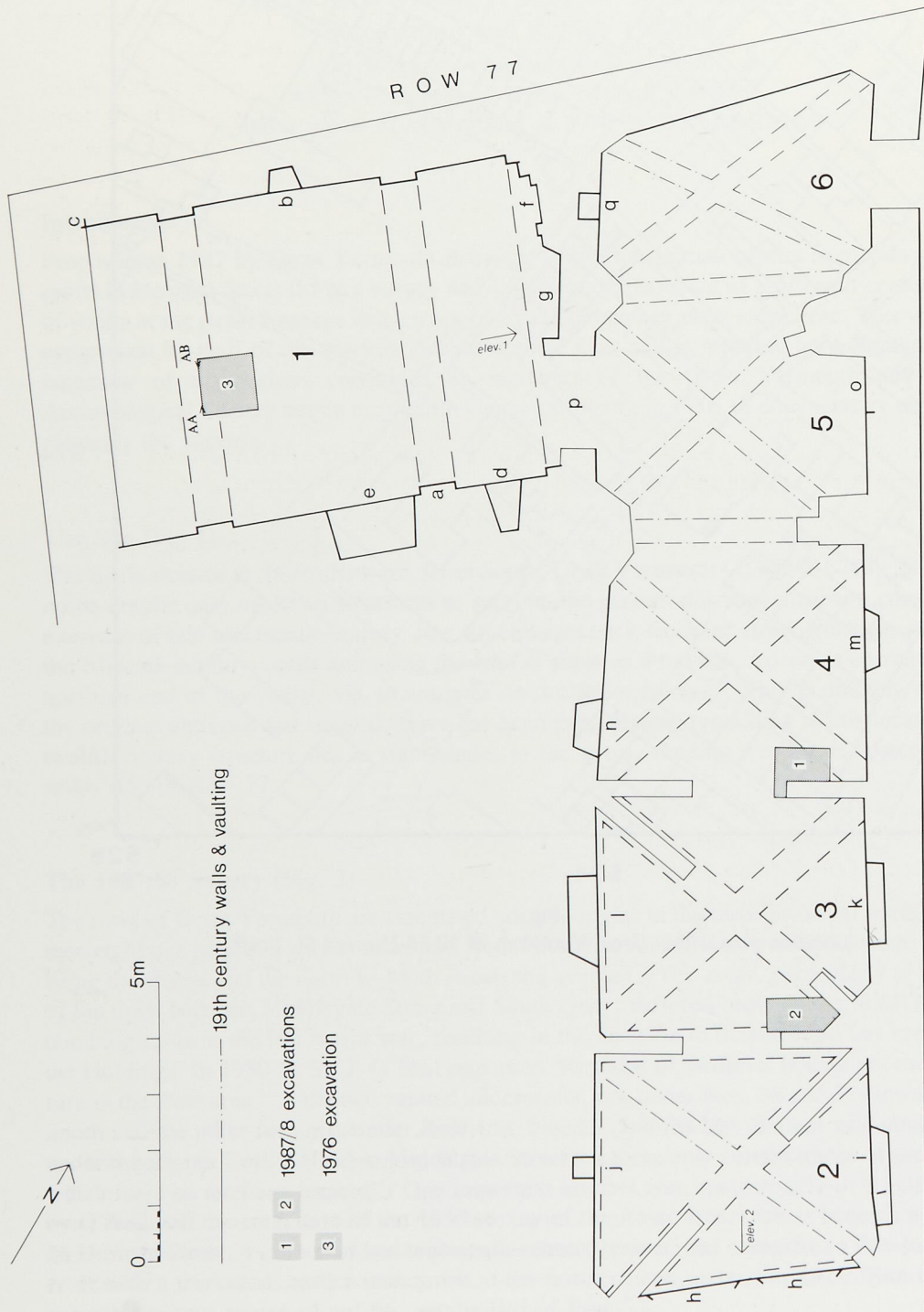


Fig.2
Plan of undercroft 1 and five-bay brick undercroft showing locations of excavations.

the length of the centre bay (Plate I). The west wall was rebuilt in brick in the nineteenth century, shortening the western bay to something approaching half its original length, estimated by the central position of comparable openings in the complete bays. The ribs and dressings are of limestone whilst the vault shows some flint beneath the shuttering scars.

The ribs spring from corbels composed of scallop decoration above a quarter round; all but one of these corbels (a), except other fragmentary remains, have been destroyed (Fig. 3). Central to the centre bay on the north wall is a window (b) with a round arch and splayed jambs; the sill of the window is at present floor level. Another window (c) existed in the same wall in the west bay, but because of the nineteenth-century shortening of the undercroft only the east jamb is now visible. A smaller window (d), also with a round arch, survives central to the smaller, eastern bay in the south wall (Plate II). Immediately west of the adjoining rib is an elliptical arch (e), the underside rising up outwards, which is blocked by another arch with a 'Tudor' profile. The wall dividing this undercroft from the north-to-south undercroft is built of brick with an opening (f) to the north with a round arch and a centrally placed opening (g) with a triangular arch (Fig. 4). All the openings in the stone-built undercroft are blocked.

The five-bay undercroft ranged along Howard Street (Fig. 2) rises some 1.60m above the present street level, creating a raised terrace in front of the nineteenth-century houses. It is constructed with brick webbing and chamfered double-order, diagonal brick ribs which spring from semi-polygonal wall piers and rise in a two-centred profile. The lateral ribs dividing the bays rise in a steep, almost triangular profile springing with a small curve from the wall pier. Chamfered, single-order wall arches exist on the west side of the undercroft only. The side walls, apart from the south wall, are constructed of unknapped flint with some random brick with brick dressings to the openings. The construction of the houses above probably resulted in the need to rebuild completely the two northern bays, some of the diagonal ribs in the other bays and to strengthen the cross-ribs with walls.

For the purpose of description the bays are numbered from 2 to 6, south to north.

Bay 2. In the south wall, which seems to be entirely constructed of brick, are two blocked openings (h) possibly leading to end chambers (Fig. 5) The pointed brick arches share a central jamb with chamfered brick edges. Above the arches, the wall arch of the vaulting has been broken at the apex by a nineteenth-century corbelled stack support. A window (i) in the east wall, with its sill 139cm to the present floor level, has been extended southwards and subsequently blocked. Central to the west wall is a lighting niche (j), formerly with a cusped brick-arched head. The lower order of the S.W.-N.E. diagonal rib has been removed and replaced by a nineteenth-century wall with a central, elliptically arched doorway. The opposite diagonal rib is a nineteenth-century replacement.

Bay 3. In the east wall is a blocked doorway (k), with the sill 92cm from the present ground level, originally giving access to the street. The arch of the opening follows the line of the vaulting and consists of one course of unchamfered brick on edge. Opposite this doorway is another blocked opening (l) with a triangular arch constructed with unchamfered brick. The north jamb has been rebuilt and the arch profile suggests the whole opening to be a later insertion, although the brickwork of the splayed south jamb shows no obvious signs of intrusion into the wall. A timber door frame at the back of the opening follows the profile of the arch and has a series of peg-holes seemingly unrelated to the purpose of the frame. The diagonal ribs in this bay are intact but the N.W.-S.E. ribs have been under-built.

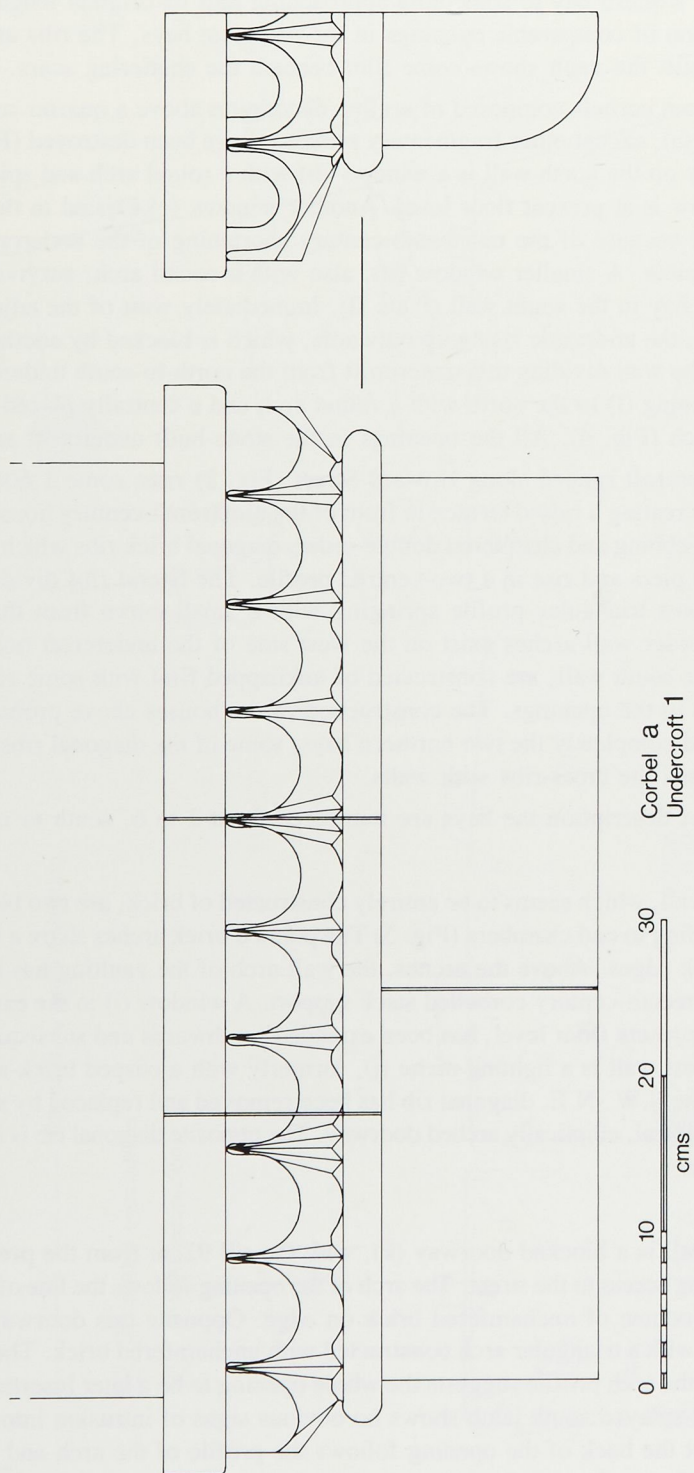


Fig.3

Corbel a, undercroft 1.

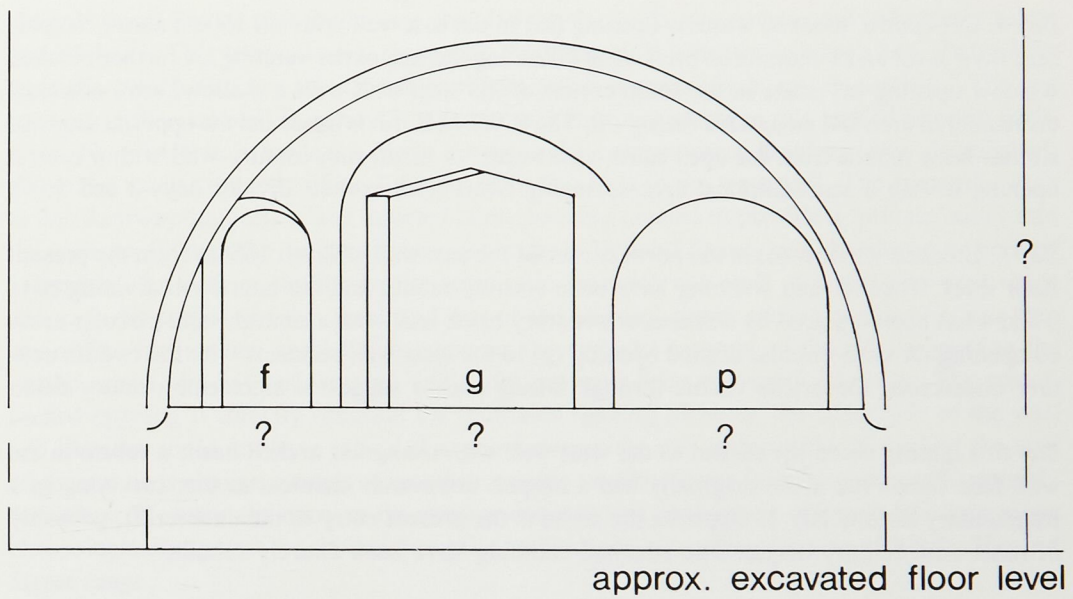


Fig.4
Elevation, east wall, undercroft 1.

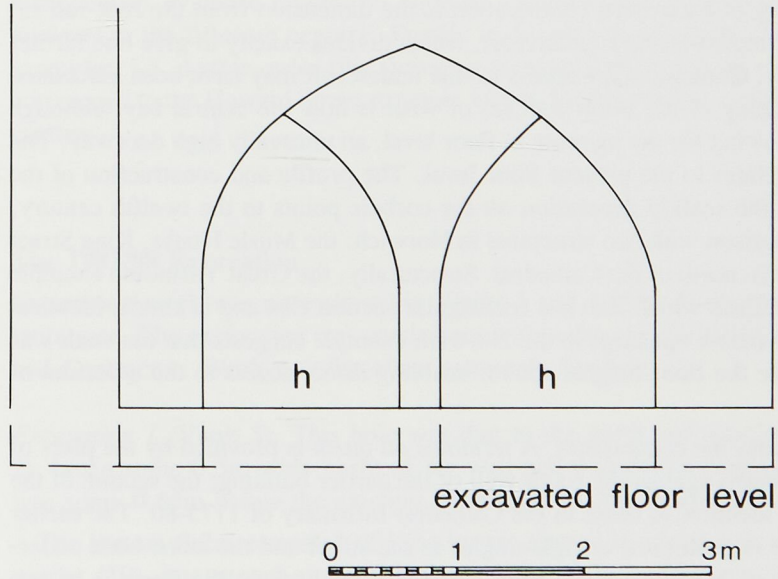


Fig.5
Elevation, south wall, undercroft 2.

Bay 4. Off-centre, blocked window opening (m) in the east wall with sill 160cm above the present floor level and a chamfered brick arch following the line of the vaulting. A further blocked window opening (n) exists in the south corner of the west wall with a shallow, semi-elliptical unchamfered arch and an upward raking sill. The S.W.-N.E. rib is intact and the opposite diagonal rib has been rebuilt from the apex north-westwards. A nineteenth-century wall with a central opening having a semi-elliptical arch springing from brick corbels divides bays 2 and 3.

Bay 5. Blocked window (o) in the north corner of the east wall with sill 165cm from the present floor level. The ribs and webbing have been entirely rebuilt and the lateral rib dividing bays 3 and 4 has been replaced by a nineteenth-century brick wall with a central, semi-circular arched opening. A semi-circular arched opening (p) in the west wall connects with the twelfth century undercroft; the bricks visible through failing plaster suggest a nineteenth-century date.

Bay 6. Lighting niche (q) central to the west wall with triangular arched head; a rebate in the wall face shows the niche originally had a cusped brick arch identical to that surviving in a fragmentary state in bay 1. Opposite the niche is the present entry to the undercroft, probably of nineteenth-century origin. The ribs and webbing have been entirely rebuilt.

Interpretation

The westward extent of the stone-built undercroft will probably never be known, but the position of the window blocked by the inserted west wall suggests at least one more full bay. The evidence suggests that the stone vault did continue eastwards; the width of the eastern rib increases as the apex is approached and then diminishes to less than the width found on the north side. Supporting the theory of an eastern continuation is the dimension from the first full rib to the inside face of the fifteenth-century undercroft, which divides exactly to give one further full bay and one small bay. Contemporary access to this undercroft may have been associated with the inner arched opening in the south wall (e) of what is now the central bay, although this would have given, allowing for the increase in floor level, an unusually high doorway. The height of the inner arch relates to the present floor level. The profile and construction of the vault in conjunction with the scallop decoration on the corbels points to the twelfth century, a date reinforced by comparison with two structures in Norwich: the Music House, King Street and Bishop Losinga's Palace north of the Cathedral. Structurally, the Great Yarmouth example is nearer to the Bishop's Palace which also has rectangular section ribs and is almost identical in width.⁴ A lack of any window openings in the Norwich example suggests that the vault was simply a device to increase the floor heights above, enabling direct access to the triforium of the cathedral.

The Music House provides the comparison. A *terminus ad quem* is provided by the piers of a single-aisled hall constructed against the south wall of the earlier building; the section of the one remaining respond is identical to those in the Cathedral Infirmary of 1175-80. The earlier range in the Music House is positioned at right-angles to the street and the stone-built undercroft is divided into two compartments. The room entered directly from the street is in two bays with quadrant moulded diagonal ribs divided by a transverse rib. Beyond this there is a three-bay room constructed in a plainer manner with rectangular transverse ribs and groin-vaulting. In the north-east corner of this room, away from the street, is a spiral staircase to the principal floor.

Comparisons for the brick-built undercroft are numerous, although this numerical increase does little to explain the original use of the Great Yarmouth example. The five bays ranged

along Howard Street, plus the former chambers to the south, are constructed only partly below ground level. This tempts comparison with the undercroft beneath Tackley's Inn, Oxford for example, which also has no internal partitions and was probably in one ownership.⁵ The one opening in the east wall (k in bay 3) suitable as a doorway attests to this lack of internal partitions. No provision is made for direct access to the contemporary building (now demolished) above the vaults; the only other doorway (1 in bay 3) is in the west wall. The triangular arch to this doorway suggests it was inserted later, possibly created to provide a 'private' entry into the undercroft when the 'public' access, direct from Howard Street, was abandoned or became secondary. An arch of similar profile appears in the brick east wall of the east-to-west range although the purpose of this arch, and that of the adjacent round-arched opening, is less than clear. The former lies immediately opposite the (rebuilt) respond of the ribs supporting the northernmost two bays of vaulting and could not have been a through doorway. The round-arched opening is directly opposite the mutilated lighting niche on the other side of the wall and likewise could not have provided access between the two undercrofts. However, the wall alignment does change enough across this opening to allow stairs into the undercroft, possibly from Row 77, when the entry to the stone undercroft was abandoned, although this does argue chronologically against the similar triangular arches being secondary features within the Howard Street range.

With no local comparative structures it is difficult to date the five-bay undercroft; the nearest geographically being the one accessible undercroft surviving in Lowestoft which, like the Great Yarmouth example, formerly had direct access from the street. These both contrast with the Norwich undercrofts, the greater majority of which originally had internal access to the building above or to a rear yard. By comparison with church architecture and by tentative inclusion of documentary evidence relating to standing structures the Norwich undercrofts can be said to nucleate in the fifteenth century. Details in the pattern of construction found in the Norwich examples, i.e. double-order ribs springing from wall piers and the use of flint in the side wall, correspond to the Howard Street structure which, for this reason, can also be dated to the fifteenth century.

The 1987/88 Excavation

Excavation work was necessitated in Vaults 3 and 4 (Fig. 2) due to underpinning of walls or buttresses. The excavation was carried out within the specifications laid down by the Engineer and Contractor. Work was therefore extremely limited.

Excavation 1 (Vault 3). This hole was dug to the north and west of a wall or buttress (Fig. 2), being some 0.5m wide north of the wall and 0.4m wide west of it. The base of the hole was some 0.65m below the existing floor level of the undercrofts.

The bottom 0.2m consisted of light brown clay (11) which was overlain by a thin band of mortar (10), interpreted as representing a floor surface. This was in turn overlain by a light brown clayey sand (9 and 12) (0.2m thick) which was cut for the insertion of the buttress. Clayey sand (9) was itself sealed by a band of mortar (8) which appeared to abut the buttress. The mortar presumably represented a further floor. The buttress had an offset brick footing.

Mortar (8) was overlain by a thin (0.05m) layer of light brown clayey sand (7) which lay below yet another mortar band or floor fragment (6) above which was a thin deposit of charcoal (5). The charcoal was sealed by clayey sand (4), a thin skin of mortar (3) and a layer of burnt

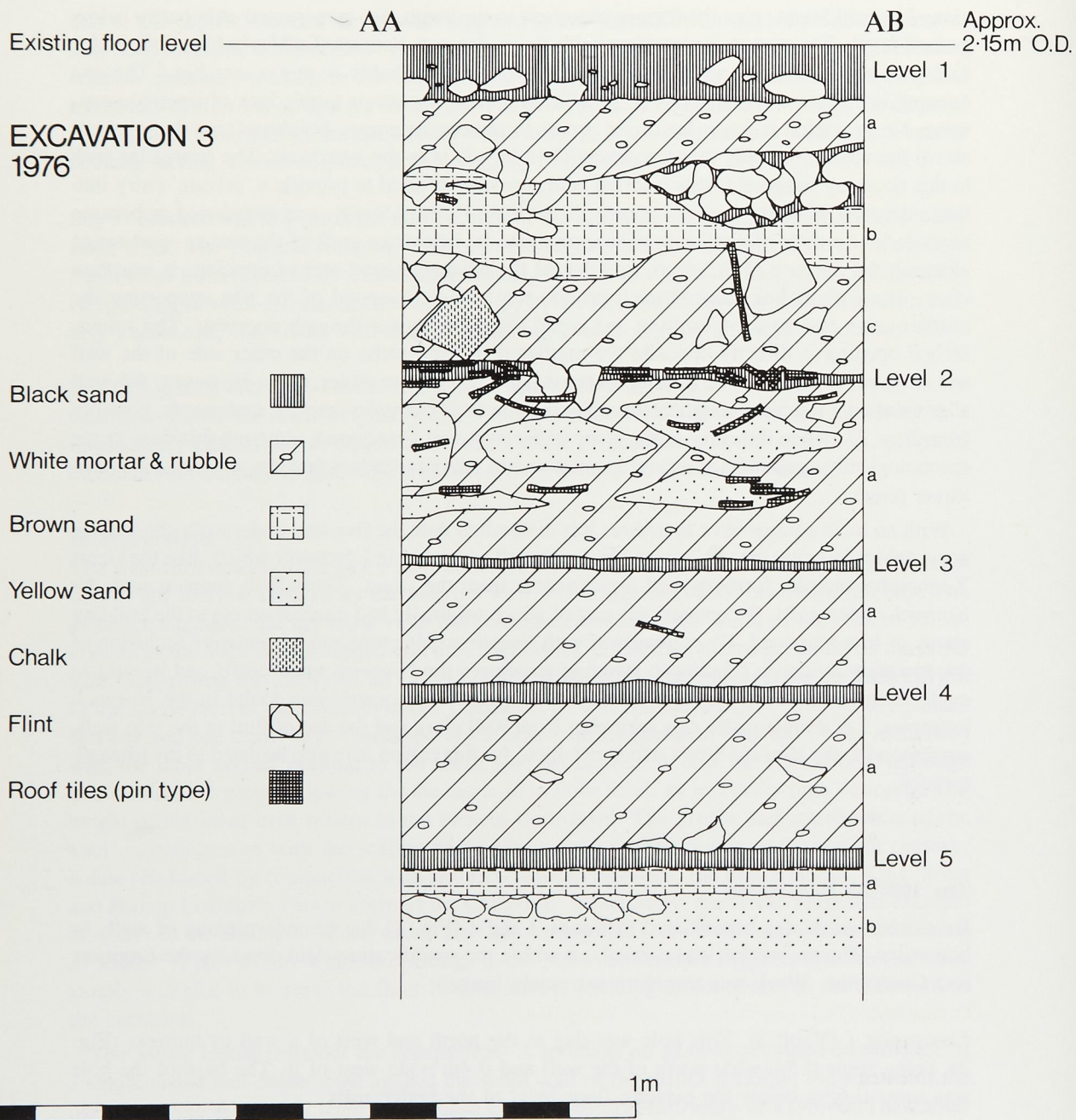


Fig. 6
Excavation section AA-AB, 1976 excavation.

material including charcoal (2). The section was completed by a thick deposit (0.15m) of sandy loam with brick fragments and mortar lumps (1). There were no finds.

Excavation 2. The second hole (Fig. 2) was located between two arms of a pier or buttress within Vault 4. It measured some 1.2m by 0.6m and extended to a depth of some 0.55m below the existing floor surface of the undercrofts.

The deepest deposit was a 0.10m thick layer of brown clay (28) which lay below a layer of yellow sand (29) and a further deposit of brown clayey sand (27). A deposit of mortar (26), possibly representing a floor surface, was overlain by sand (25), presumably bedding for a layer of brickwork (24), a floor or plinth for the pier or buttress.

This plinth was overlain by a pebbly deposit (23) (0.25m thick) which was sealed by clayey sand with brick (22), compressed chalk (21) and flagstones (20).

The 1976 Excavation by David Bullock

This excavation was undertaken during January and February, 1976, by the Field Group of the Great Yarmouth and District Archaeological Society. The object of the excavation was to locate and plan the original floor level of the western vault (1 on Fig. 2) and to endeavour to give some approximation as to the date of its construction.

The present-day floor of the western chamber is packed earth and, taking into consideration the corbelling at the end of the vault ribs (currently at floor level), it was assumed that a layer or layers of earth and rubble had been laid over the centuries to approximately 1.5m above the original floor level.

A metre square was dug in the centre of the western end of the chamber (Fig. 2) and five levels, interpreted as floor deposits, were identified as indicated on the section drawing (Fig. 6). There were few finds other than fragments of bird and animal bone, tile and a small piece of chiselled limestone. No conclusive artefactual evidence was recovered to corroborate a date for the architectural evidence of the building's construction or to determine the chronological deposition of the successive floor levels.

It has not been possible therefore to come to any positive conclusion as to why the different floor levels should have been made so high above the original level. One possibility could be to combat a rising water level at particular times, but further study of the local water tables over the centuries is necessary.

Documentary Background by Paul Rutledge

The Howard Street building, of which the twelfth-century undercroft forms part, is not securely documented before 1716 and its existence, or at least its quality, was unrecognised until recently. It was unknown to Palmer,⁶ the nineteenth-century historian and topographer of the town, and as has been stated⁷ the compilers of the 1936 survey of the Yarmouth Row area were unaware of it.

However, at least one stone house existed in late twelfth-century Yarmouth, although it is not precisely located. In a Final Concord of 1199⁸ between Henry de Fleg and Abraham and Matilda his wife it is agreed 'And for this fine and agreement and recognition the said Henry granted to the said Abraham and Matilda a stone house together with all the rengiate where that house is set from the road as far as the water' (*Et pro hoc fine et concordia. et recognitione. predictus Henricus concessit predictis Abraham et Matilda domum lapideam integro cum tota*

rengata. ubi sita est domum illa. a chimnio usque in aquam). Rengiate is the early medieval Yarmouth term for an original borough tenement, typically bounded by Rows (narrow east-to-west lanes) north and south and by the main north-to-south thoroughfares, or by a thoroughfare and the harbour or a thoroughfare and the Denne or Denes, east and west.⁹

The undercroft formed part of a block of property, probably representing one rengiate, occupying an almost square site between Middlegate (Greyfriars Way on Fig. 1) and Howard Street (formerly Blind Middlegate) west and east, and Rows 77 and 84 north and south. Palmer states that it was formerly occupied by the Three Feathers Inn:

Row No. 77 from Middlegate Street to Howard Street was formerly called the Three Feathers' Row, from an ancient public house or inn so named, afterwards (in 1805) called the Coach and Horses.

A small fragment of the old cut-flint front next to Middlegate Street may still be traced. The Inn yard, long called the Three Feathers' yard, with some of the surrounding property was, early in the present century, purchased by Samuel Larlham, hackneyman.¹⁰

The Three Feathers is first documented in the will of Thomas Osbourne gent. of Yarmouth, dated and proved in 1716¹¹ 'my Capital Messuage or Inn called the Three Feathers', part occupied by Samuel Artis merchant 'but the greatest part thereof is empty', with tenements adjoining in five occupations.

Subsequent deeds have survived with the records of the Middlegate Congregational Church since, from 1732 onwards, the Congregation progressively acquired portions of it, although not the undercroft and the building above it or the range along Row 77.¹² In 1762 it is described as an inn called the Three Feathers and three dwelling-houses and in 1757 there is mentioned a dwelling-house in the Middle Street with a large and convenient hay chamber over the gatehouse and pantry. In 1805 it comprised a dwelling-house formerly a public house called the Three Feathers and then the Coach and Horses, recently unlicensed, with large rebuilt malthouse with steeples, corn chambers and granaries formerly a tanhouse and net chambers, with two wine vaults, stable etc. lying between Feathers Row North, and the Meeting House South, Blind Middlegate East and Middlegate Street West. The wine vaults must be the undercroft.

Swinden's MS map of Yarmouth of 1753 or 1755¹³ shows a courtyard built up on three sides and open to the west, with the Meeting House set in the middle of the yard. The O.S. map of 1885¹⁴ marks the building above the undercroft as a malthouse, presumably that described in 1805 as rebuilt. The 25in O.S. map, 1904 revision, shows that the malthouse had then been replaced by the present terrace of cottages.

The undercroft is of importance in relation to the pattern of the settlement. Whether or not A.P. Baggs' theory is fully accepted of successive stages of expansion from the King Street ridge towards a westward-moving quay and river line,¹⁵ it is clear that westward movement of the river bank did occur. This undercroft indicates that the west side of Howard Street, now some 130m (400ft.) from the river, was capable of bearing a heavy structure by the twelfth century. Presumably it was part of the complex of a major merchant's house of the sort that thirteenth- to fourteenth-century evidence would lead one to expect to front on to the quay; the stone house of 1199 was in fact similarly positioned between a thoroughfare and the river (above).

Conclusions

The survey and small-scale excavation at Howard Street have demonstrated the quality of the surviving elements of a major medieval structure in Great Yarmouth. It is more difficult to assess the relative importance of the building in the context of the medieval town as comparatively



Plate I

Undercroft 1 looking east. Film ref: EHA 05

Copyright: Norfolk Archaeological Unit



Plate II

Detail of blocked window in SE corner of undercroft 1. Film ref: EHA 10

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little work has been undertaken on either the built heritage of the town or its buried archaeology. Indeed, while the relationship of the building to its immediate environment is difficult to understand (for example, the blocked window in Plate II), it is also the case, as the above documentary report states, that the development of the distinctive urban topography of Great Yarmouth is not yet wholly understood.

The work summarised in this report, therefore, is a welcome step towards further work in the town. Great Yarmouth was one of the most important and affluent ports of eastern England with an almost unique urban geography. While the implication of the Domesday Survey of 1086 is that Yarmouth was little more than a fishing settlement (though it was already a royal borough), the inference that can be drawn from the quality of the stone undercroft at Howard Street is that by the late twelfth century the town was a significant commercial port.

This conclusion, whilst scarcely radical given other known data, does need to be supported by a thorough programme of archaeological and historical endeavour in order that Yarmouth's true importance within the developing economy of medieval England can be assessed.

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The writers are grateful to David Bullock and Paul Rutledge for consenting to the publication of their reports within this paper. The illustrations to this report were drawn by Robert Smith. Typing was undertaken by the main authors, assisted by Katie Jarvis and Tessa Ireland.

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