

# ROYAL WILLIAM YARD, WESTERN KING STAIRCASE, STONEHOUSE, PLYMOUTH

(NGR SX 45962 53397)

Results of historic building recording and archaeological  
watching brief

Planning ref. Plymouth City Council 10/02094/FUL (Condition 3)

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Prepared by:  
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On behalf of:  
Urban Splash Build Ltd

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AC archaeology

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## Summary

*Historic building recording and a watching brief were carried out by AC archaeology between December 2012 and March 2013 in advance of and during the construction of a new staircase at Western King, Stonehouse, Plymouth (SX 45962 53397).*

*The listed boundary wall of the Royal William Yard was recorded. Substantial masonry exposed in a test pit adjacent to the wall is interpreted as having been constructed to support the wall where the natural topography sloped away from its north elevation.*

*No other archaeological features or deposits were exposed in the other three test pits.*

*The wall forming an enclosure adjacent to the yard boundary wall was also recorded. Its west side had been reduced in height, and also partly utilised for a building attached to its west elevation. The use of the enclosed space is not known.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION (Fig. 1)

- 1.1 Historic building recording and an archaeological watching brief were carried out by AC archaeology between December 2012 and March 2013 in advance of and during the construction of a new staircase at Western King, Stonehouse, Plymouth (SX 45962 53397). The staircase forms part of the public realm works associated with the redevelopment of the Royal William Yard, and links the western end of the yard with the higher ground of Western King beyond. The work was commissioned by Urban Splash Build Ltd, and was required under condition 3 of the grant of planning permission (Plymouth City Council reference 10/02094/FUL) for the construction of the staircase. The scope of the investigations were agreed with the Historic Environment Officer of Plymouth City Council, and carried out in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation prepared by AC archaeology (Passmore 2012).
- 1.2 A walkway at the top of the staircase passes through the boundary wall of the Yard, which is Grade II\* Listed (National Heritage List no. 476491). Listed building consent (reference 10/02095/LBC) has also been granted for the scheme.

### 2. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The proposed staircase was included within a desk-based assessment prepared for public realm works at the Yard (Passmore 2010).
- 2.2 The Yard was constructed during the 1820s and 1830s at the south-west end of the Stonehouse Peninsula, on the north side of the Cremyll or Western King Peninsula between Devil's Point and Firestone Bay. The site was a purpose-built victualling yard for the navy and replaced a number of smaller depots around Plymouth.
- 2.3 The Yard has been described as 'by far the most important single architectural group in Plymouth', and is the 'first and most grandiloquent of the monumental compositions created by the Victualling Board of the Navy after the Napoleonic wars', being 'among the most remarkable examples of an early C19 planned layout of industrial buildings anywhere in England' (Cherry and Pevsner 1989, 653-4).

- 2.4** The underlying geology of Western King is middle Devonian limestone. The northern part of the Yard was constructed over alluvial deposits on reclaimed land using material excavated from the hill in the centre of the peninsula to the south. The topography of the Yard is now generally flat at a height of approximately 6m AOD, although in the southeast part of the Yard this rises to around 15m AOD to the top of a grassy slope and enclosed former officer's gardens. Beyond, the land rises further, although has been altered with the construction of a series of fortifications during the post-medieval period (see 2.7 below).
- 2.5** The boundary wall appears to have been constructed between 1825 and 1831. There is some archaeological evidence from the grassy slope to indicate that the wall had been built early in the development of the yard and the land behind it (i.e. the grassy slope) was used as a workers' yard during construction of the buildings on the site. The wall is constructed of rubble limestone, which gives way to rusticated granite around the main entrance gateway. Observations in 2001 of test pits adjacent to the walls within the gardens and on the grassy slope demonstrated that the wall had been constructed directly on top of the bedrock, with in places the bedrock being present immediately below the current ground surface. Within the yard the bedrock appeared to have been cut away, consistent with the documented removal of limestone (see above).
- 2.6** In the area of the new staircase the lower part of the wall is battered inwards. Here there are the remains of high-level pulleys along with attachments for securing ropes. These features were probably used to pull boats into and out of the water at Clarence Steps, and probably date to the later 20th-century. Until the mid 2000s boat sheds were located in the position occupied by the present electricity substation to the south of Clarence Store.
- 2.7** Western King Peninsula was a strategic logistic and defensive location, it being the site of a ferry (first documented in the 11th century) across the River Tamar to Cremyll. A small chapel, first recorded in a documentary source of 1472, was sited close to Devil's Point, and is believed to have been the Chapel of St Lawrence of Payne. The chapel is depicted on a map of 1539. The role of the peninsula in the defence of Plymouth, and particularly the dockyard on the Hamoaze, is evidenced by a number of fortifications that were constructed on its southern and western sides. These include the late-medieval Devil's Point Blockhouse and Firestone Bay Artillery Tower, a Civil War redoubt (1643-5), and batteries and redoubts built from the early 18th-century onwards to protect the approach to the Dockyard, where construction commenced from the 1690s (Pye and Woodward 1996, 113-123). The medieval blockhouses and the late 19th- and 20th-century batteries can still be seen on Western King.

### **3. AIMS**

- 3.1** The aims of the investigations were twofold. Firstly, to prepare an adequate before and after record particularly of the masonry of the boundary wall, and to ensure that significant unknown evidence is recognised and recorded during the opening up for the new doorway. Secondly, to monitor excavations associated with the works including the connecting footpath and to record any archaeological deposits exposed. Specifically, the assessment concluded that creation of the pathways connecting the proposed openings with existing pedestrian routes would have the potential to expose buried archaeological remains associated with former fortifications (the 18th-century Devils Point Battery A, Passage Point Battery (1779), Three Gun Battery (c.

1818) and the Royal Naval Reserve battery c. 1872). Their exposure and subsequent archaeological recording would benefit understanding of the development and construction of these structures, in particular the gun batteries, where it may be possible to assess the damage caused to earlier fortifications by successive rebuilding and more recent landscaping.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

- 4.1** All works were undertaken in accordance with the Written Scheme of Investigation prepared by AC archaeology (Passmore 2012) and the Institute for Archaeologists *Standard and Guidance for the archaeological investigation and recording of standing buildings or structures* (revised 2008), and the *Standard and Guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (revised 2008). The investigations were carried out using the standard AC archaeology *pro-forma* recording system, comprising written, graphic and digital photographic records, and in accordance with AC archaeology's *General Site Recording Manual, Version 2*.
- 4.2** The historic building recording comprised a written and photographic record of the listed boundary wall to the Yard and an attached wall to the south that was partially removed to facilitate access.
- 4.3** The monitored groundworks comprised the excavation of four test pits, located both on Western King and within the Yard. The construction of the path connecting the stairs to the existing paths on western king was not carried out as part of this contract.

#### **5. THE TEST PITS (Fig. 2; Plates 1-2)**

##### **5.1 Test pit 1**

This test pit was located adjacent to the wall south of the main Yard wall, and measured 1.5m<sup>2</sup> by 2m deep. The deposit sequence comprised 0.30m of dark brown sandy silt topsoil (6) through which a lead pipe had been laid, which overlaid a thick deposit of medium brown silty clay and abundant angular limestone fragments of various sizes (7).

##### **5.2 Test Pit 2**

This test pit was located adjacent to the Yard wall on Western King and measured 2.4m long by 1.6m wide by 0.7m deep. The deposit sequence comprised 0.5-0.6m of dark brown silty clay loam topsoil containing occasional limestone fragments (3), which overlaid 0.2m of mid orange brown firm silty clay containing rare limestone fragments (4); this is interpreted as a possible buried natural subsoil. Natural solid limestone bedrock (5) was encountered at a depth of 0.7m from the surface.

##### **5.3 Test Pit 3**

This test pit was located within the Royal William Yard at the base of the new stairs, some 3m away from the Yard wall. It measured 1.3m long by 1.1m wide by 0.65m deep. The exposed material comprised entirely modern deposits (8-11) representing a later 20th-century tarmac surface and associated sub-base overlaid by the flagstone surface and sub-base laid in 2004. This observation is broadly consistent with the results of monitoring in 2004 during the laying of the present yard surface (Passmore 2005).

#### 5.4 Test pit 4 (Plates 1-2)

This test pit was located adjacent to the Yard wall on Western King and measured 3m long by 2m wide by 3m deep. The only deposit exposed (12) comprised a friable mid reddish-brown silty-loam containing dumps of sub-angular limestone and granite fragments. This deposit was of 19th-century date and had been backfilled over the top of the Yard wall.

At a depth of 0.4m from the surface wider footings that stepped out 2m beyond the base of the parapet were exposed. In the southern end of the test pit further masonry projecting from the footings, and forming a buttress, was partly uncovered. Inspection of historic maps (Passmore 2010, Figs 4 and 5) appears to indicate that here, a natural scarp turned west from the Hamoaze to form the northern side of Western King. This thicker masonry was therefore probably required to support the end of the retaining wall where less stable rock was present, and at ground level it terminated at the sea wall around the waterfront of the Yard. The masonry is roughly coursed, although the stone was more irregularly laid towards the base of the exposed wall.

### 6. HISTORIC BUILDING RECORDING (Fig. 2: Plates 2-6)

#### 6.1 The Yard boundary wall (2; Plate 3-5)

The wall is constructed of roughly coursed limestone blocks measuring from 100m x 80mm to 700mm x 200mm in size, bonded in a cream-buff sandy lime mortar with gravel inclusions. The northern face is broken up by three string courses comprising dressed blocks of limestone, each measuring up to 1.4m long by 300mm deep. The lower section of the wall has been partially repointed in cement render.

The wall is generally featureless. To the west of the staircase, in the upper section of the masonry is an iron bracket and two pulleys (see section 2.6 above). To the east of the staircase, in the middle section of masonry is a corroded iron bracket. Cables have been attached to the lower string course. There is a single square drainage hole towards the top of the wall, whilst further west is a vertical series of three circular drainage holes, inserted into the original masonry.

The parapet wall is 2.90m high by 400mm wide, and is constructed of coursed limestone on either face with a rubble limestone core. It is topped with chamfered granite capstones.

#### 6.2 The wall on Western King (1; Plates 2 and 6)

This wall (1) is attached to the southwest end of the Yard wall, and encloses an area of approximately 21m by 7m. It is constructed of irregularly-laid limestone measuring c. 200mm x 200mm x 140. The east and south walls survive to full height whereas the west wall was in part only eight courses high, and was capped with dressed granite blocks measuring c. 500mm x 500mm x 140mm. The north end of this west wall stepped into the east and this delineates the position of a former building on its west side. It incorporates a blocked doorway and window opening, both of which have brick jambs. This building is depicted on 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps (Passmore 2010, figs 5 and 6). The wall is abutted by a later (?20th-century) wall defining the edge of the higher ground at the northwest end of Western King.

In the southwestern corner of wall 1 is a doorway. This has a 200mm thick concrete threshold, and the lowest two courses of the jambs are granite blocks. Inside the doorway is a triangular concrete slab, containing a manhole, that is supported on at

least three courses of bricks. Adjacent to this structure are the remains of a cast-iron vent pipe.

## 7. COMMENTS

- 7.1 A record of the Yard boundary wall was prepared prior to works commencing. No significant new observations were made. The masonry exposed in test pit 4 provides details of the engineering required at this location. Previous observations to the southeast (see section 2.5 above) have demonstrated that the boundary wall had little or no foundations. Here, substantial masonry was constructed behind the northern elevation, and must have been required due to its position on the waterfront and the nature of the topography of the hillside behind.
- 7.2 Within the other test pits no archaeological deposits were exposed and no evidence was found for the use of the area behind wall 1, nor for the fortifications situated to the south of the wall.
- 7.3 The parts of wall 1 to be removed to as part of the works were recorded. The south part of this wall is known to have formed the rear of 19th-century battery. The area enclosed by the wall was entered via a doorway, but the use, if any, of this land is unknown. The west wall has been modified and reduced in height, and also partly utilised for a building attached to its west side.

## 8. ARCHIVE AND OASIS ENTRY

- 8.1 The paper and digital archive is currently held at the offices of AC archaeology Ltd, at 4 Halthaies Workshops, near Exeter, Devon, EX5 4LQ. It will be deposited at the Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, Truro, under the accession number 2012.235.
- 8.2 An OASIS entry has been completed under the unique identifier 145651.

## 9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 9.1 This report was commissioned by Urban Splash Build Ltd. The project was managed for Urban Splash by Adam Willetts and AC archaeology by Andrew Passmore. The fieldwork was carried out by Kerry Kerr-Peterson, Clive Meaton and Stella de-Villiers, the report written by Andrew Passmore with the illustrations prepared by Sarnia Blackmore.

## 10. REFERENCES

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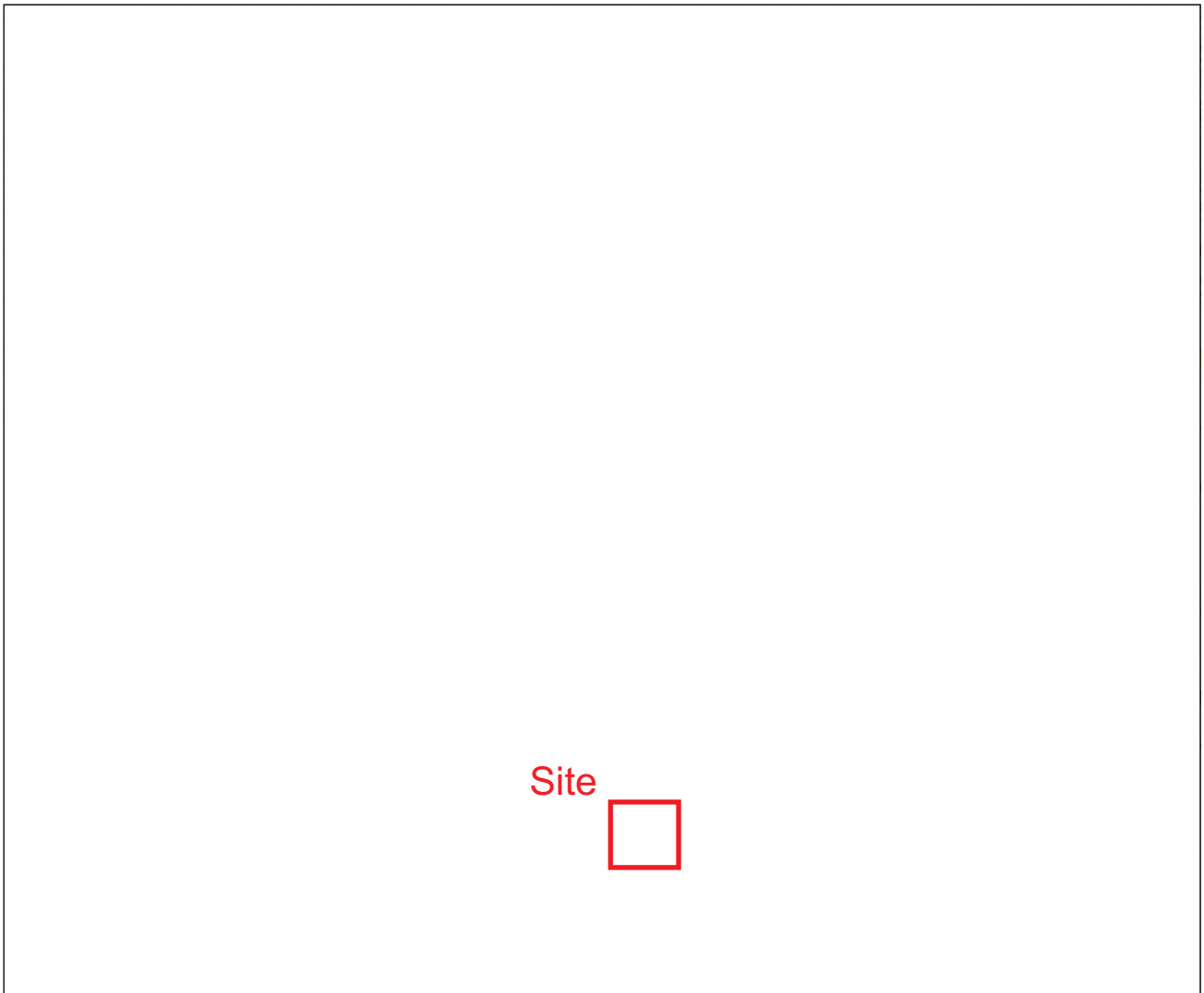
*building recording and archaeological watching brief Planning ref. Plymouth City Council 10/02094/FUL (condition 3), AC archaeology Document No. ACD609/1/0.*

Pye, A., and Woodward, F., 1996, *The Historic Defences of Plymouth.*





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PROJECT

Royal William Yard, Plymouth

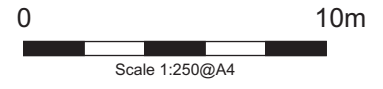
TITLE

Fig. 1: Location of site





- Test Pits 1-4
- Site area



PROJECT  
**Royal William Yard, Plymouth**

TITLE  
**Fig. 2: Location of observations**



Plan supplied by the client



Plate 1: Test Pit 4 showing the yard boundary wall (2) and its projecting footings, viewed from the southwest. 1m scale.



Plate 2: Test pit 4 showing the footings of the yard wall, with the northern part of upstanding wall 1 in the background, viewed from the east.



Plate 3: The interior elevation of the yard boundary wall, viewed from the north.



Plate 4: The interior elevation of the yard boundary wall, viewed from the north. 1m scale.



Plate 5: The parapet of the yard boundary wall during breaching, viewed from the southwest. 1m scale.



Plate 6: The doorway in the southwest corner of wall 1, viewed from the northeast. 1m scale.

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