

Blue Bridge Lane & Fishergate House

Report on Excavations; July 2000 to July 2002



Introduction

Between July 2000 and July 2002, Field Archaeology Specialists Ltd carried out a series of excavations on two sites along Fishergate, prior to their redevelopment, in association with Mike Griffiths and Associates on behalf of Shepherd Homes and Rank Leisure. The excavations encountered activity from prehistory to the 20th century.

Fishergate lies away from the historic core of York, but originates as a medieval suburb and has been host to occupation since the Roman period. Since the Neolithic, a major prehistoric routeway crossed the area which is now York close to the River Ouse. Flint tools were recovered including large cores from manufacture and scraping tools dating from the Neolithic onwards. Modern Fishergate also follows the line of a major Roman thoroughfare, and, in accordance with Roman tradition, a cemetery was established in the open land outside the city. Cremation and inhumation burials were found, positioned inside a system of field enclosures.

Following the decline of Roman York, little is known of where and how people lived in York. By the 8th century, when the Venerable Bede was writing about the history of England, York, or '*Eoforwic*', had become a major royal and religious centre of the kingdom of Deira. Previous excavations by the York Archaeological Trust have shown that, during this period, a community lived at Fishergate and were engaged in long-distance trade and craft-working. More evidence was revealed for the nature of this activity in the form of pit groups, and the rich contents of these pits included waste from bone-, metal- and textile-working. The excavation has helped to understand the extent and layout of the settlement, the activities that went on inside the settlement and the status of the people who lived and worked there.

By the late 10th century, the foundation of the Fishergate suburb was underway, and the establishment of a number of churches in the area was necessary to serve an increasing population. The churches were dedicated to St George, St Helen, St Andrews and All Saints, but are not well-documented: many fell out of use during the medieval period, and their location and histories are lost. During excavation, a medieval cemetery was found unexpectedly within the grounds of Fishergate House, although it was initially unclear which church it belonged to. The historical sources suggest a number of possibilities.

Medieval activity along Blue Bridge Lane can be more securely associated with a religious house, since it is known to have lain within the precinct of the Gilbertine Priory of St Andrews. Excavations encountered the industrial heart of the Priory and the remains of the only medieval pottery kiln to be found in York were excavated. The priory was suppressed during the Dissolution, and fell into disuse. Much of the land was open orchards and fields, until the 19th century, when Fishergate became a fashionable place to live.

Prehistoric Highway

During excavations on Blue Bridge Lane, a handful of artefacts was recovered which date to the prehistoric period; probably from the Neolithic and Bronze Age, including a possible projectile, flint scrapers, flakes, and flint cores. The stone tools demonstrate the types of activity that might have been carried out in the immediate area, and would have been used for hunting, skin preparation and food processing.

York is situated on a glacial ridge that crosses the Vale of York from east to west, and has provided an important communication route since prehistoric times. The site on Blue Bridge Lane lies just to the north of the point where this ridge is breached by the River Ouse, providing a natural crossing over the river, and also a crossroads between the east-west overland route, and the route along the Ouse to the sea.

***Eboracum* Roman York**

The Roman legionary fortress of '*Ebvracvum*' was established around AD 71, located on a strategic spur of land on the glacial ridge between the Rivers Ouse and Foss. The fortress, served by a wide network of communication routes, developed as a major centre. Later a '*colonia*', or civilian settlement, developed to the southwest of the city.

Fishergate occupies land to the southeast of the Roman fortress, and so lies outside the main area of settlement and population. A Roman road is thought have been fossilised in the line of Fishergate, and since the 19th century, evidence for a number of Roman cremation burials has been discovered in the area. The recent excavations have revealed more evidence for the extent of this cemetery, and four intact cremation burials were revealed at Fishergate House, and a fifth example was found on the site on Blue Bridge Lane.



Roman cremation burials during excavation



The ceramic urns

The cremated remains were all placed in the ground in pottery urns, which were accompanied by a range of vessels, including wine flagons, and small glass 'unguent' bottles.

Evidence was also revealed for the layout of the landscape surrounding the cemetery. In several of the trenches, sections of Roman ditch were excavated, running along the line of Fishergate, representing the western gully flanking the road leading south. Linked to this roadside ditch, a series of parallel ditches were also found, running downslope towards the river. These would have marked boundaries, possibly dividing areas of cemetery from the fields that would have been used for agriculture and creating trackways between them.

***Eoforwic* Anglian York**

One of the Anglo-Saxon names for York, *Eorforwic*, contains the place-name element '*w_c*', which is often taken to refer to a trading settlement; meaning 'town', or 'port'. Examples occur in the early place-names of Southampton (*Hamwic*), Ipswich (*Gipeswic*), London (*Lundenwic*), as well as Norwich, Fordwich and Sandwich. Archaeological excavations in these towns (including *Hamwic*, *Lundenwic* and *Gipeswic*) have produced evidence for densely occupied settlements dated to the 7th to 9th century, with evidence for craft-working and trade. During the 1980s, excavations by York Archaeological Trust revealed such a settlement at 46-54 Fishergate. The archaeological features identified included post- and stake-hole structures, boundary ditches and pits. Goods from southern England, and from the Continent, demonstrated the far-reaching contacts of this settlement, and evidence was also revealed for craft-working activity.

Excavations on Blue Bridge Lane and Fishergate House have revealed more evidence relating to this settlement, and evidence for craft-working, domestic occupation and long distance exchange were represented by the finds. Although no extensive structures were identified, a series of pit groups were found, which had been used for the disposal of craft waste, animal bones and pottery. Some of the pits seemed to follow an alignment, and may have been used to mark internal divisions within the settlement. Waste from bone-, horn- and antler-working from these pits suggest the production of combs, and possibly pins. Clay loomweights were also being made, and along with spindlewhorls, needles and shears indicate wool processing and weaving at the site. Droplets of lead, scraps of copper alloy and iron slag also suggest a range of metals were being worked. A Roman gemstone, prised from its setting, might even suggest that its gold or silver fitting was recycled by the *Eoforwic* craftsmen.



Bone comb side-plate from the site



Loomweights from the excavations



A Roman intaglio

Eoforwic is thought to have been just one element of a larger, dispersed settlement, possibly known as *Eoforwiccaestre*. While a small community living in the area of Fishergate would have been engaged in production and exchange, royal and religious power may have been centred within the walls of the Roman fortress. A study of the animal bones from Fishergate and other wics has been used to suggest that the people living in these settlements would have been supplied with food taken from subjects as rent collected by the central authority, possibly the king.

In addition to evidence for occupation and craftworking, the recent work at Fishergate House has also suggested that the early medieval population would have buried their dead close the settlement. One of the earliest inhumation burials in the cemetery has been radiocarbon dated to the early 8th century.

***Jorvik* Anglo-Scandinavian York**

In AD 866, York fell into Viking hands, and ten years later the city formed the capital of a large Anglo-Scandinavian kingdom. Evidence from sites on Coppergate and Walmgate has demonstrated dense occupation and craft-working in the city.

On previous excavations on Fishergate, later Anglian activity appeared to have been less intense, and was represented only by pits and waste; fewer imports and less craft-working evidence were produced for this period. It has been suggested that occupation would not have continued beyond the 870s, and that the settlement was abandoned in the mid-9th century in favour of the more northerly site at Coppergate. The same trend has also been seen in London, where in the 9th-century, the riverside settlement appears to have been abandoned, and the centre of population moved inside the walled city.

At Blue Bridge Lane pottery and artefacts found in some of the pits has been dated to the Anglo-Scandinavian period, and suggests that Fishergate was occupied at this time. On the site of Fishergate House, part of a sub-rectangular feature was excavated, and along with its hearth and postholes was interpreted as a sunken featured building. The feature produced evidence for domestic occupation, including a ceramic bowl and lamp, and seems to suggest that the area was still occupied, though less intensively, during this period.

The occupation on the site of Fishergate House appears to have been interspersed with intermittent phases of burial on the site. Four inhumation burials have been radiocarbon dated to the Anglo-Scandinavian period; one in the early 10th century, and three more to the early 11th century. It would seem that the cemetery at this time was not well defined, and suffered a 'stuttering' start, interrupted by the use of the site for occupation and pit-digging.

***Fiscergate* The Medieval Suburb**

The Norman Conquest caused major changes to the city of York, and there was a considerable growth of population and occupation in many suburbs. During the 11th and 12th century, several ecclesiastical sites were established in the Fishergate area, which demonstrate the growth of the 'ribbon suburb'. Only a small amount of evidence has been produced for the nature of this suburb during the 11th century, and so references to churches provide one of the main sources of evidence for this period. Documents show that churches dedicated to All Saints, St Helen, St Stephen and St Andrew are known to have existed in the Fishergate area. A chapel is also known to have been situated further to the north, in St George's Field. Many of these churches were abandoned when groups of parishes were united.

Medieval cemetery of St Helens

During work at Fishergate House, a previously unknown medieval cemetery was encountered, and the remains of approximately 250 burials were excavated, including a number of infants. Few finds were recovered from the burials, and so they prove very difficult to date; however, the pottery recovered suggests a date of the mid-14th to mid-15th century.

The cemetery contained burials typical of a lay parish population, but a number of interesting features emerged from analysis of the bones. Several individuals appear to have been killed in conflict: evidence of blade wounds to the skulls and limbs were found.

Another individual was found to be wearing a scallop shell on a belt, which during the medieval period was a symbol of having gone on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella.

This cemetery lies outside the known boundary of the Gilbertine precinct, and the cemetery associated with Priory is known to have been situated further north and was excavated in the 1980s. It is possible that the cemetery can be linked to one of the 'lost' churches of Fishergate: in particular, the churches of St Helen and All Saints are known to have been situated on Fishergate, possibly in the immediate area. Documentary work has suggested that the church of St Helen provides a prime candidate for identification with the cemetery. St Helen's is known to have been established prior to the 11th century, and was abandoned in the 16th century; these dates fit well with those produced for the Fishergate House inhumations. Clearly, however, the cemetery had long been forgotten by the 19th century, when Fishergate House was built on the site.



Blade wounds to a skull



A badge of pilgrimage

The Gilbertine Priory of St Andrew's

The area to the west of Fishergate has long been recognised as the site of the Gilbertine Priory of St Andrew, established between 1195 and 1202. The Gilbertine Order was founded in the 12th century to provide for women who wanted to devote their lives to the church; however, of the four Gilbertine houses in the Yorkshire diocese, including that on Fishergate, three were for male canons only. The Priors held land all over York, and in the surrounding area: deeds and grants record property in Clementhorpe, Acaster, Goodmanham, as well as on Fishergate. During later centuries, a number of disputes are recorded between the canons of St Andrew's and their surrounding neighbours, particularly the clergy of All Saints', over land that they held on Fishergate.

The precinct of the Priory is thought have extended northwards from Blue Bridge Lane, bounded to the east by Fishergate and to the west by the Foss. The northern wall of the priory is depicted on maps as late as 1864, but was destroyed by subsequent development. A stretch of stone wall on Blue Bridge Lane has been interpreted as the southern boundary of the site; a recent assessment of the wall found a lot of reused medieval architecture, suggesting it is likely to have been built in the later life of the priory.

Earlier excavations by York Archaeological Trust encountered the church and cloisters of the Priory and included stone foundations, painted wall plaster, window glass, floor tiles, architectural fragments, as well as associated burials. The recent excavations on Blue Bridge Lane provided a valuable opportunity to explore of the extremities of the Priory grounds, since excavations have traditionally favoured the main building complex.

The site on Blue Bridge Lane revealed evidence for industrial activity within the precinct, as well as finds relating to religious activity within the priory. A pottery kiln was found, with large quantities of waste pottery fragments, demonstrating that the Priory was investing in the pottery industry.

The Priors themselves would have been highly literate, and the finds of styli are evidence for this literacy and devotion. A cross-marked limestone pebble demonstrates simpler means of making devotional objects. Some evidence of life in the Priory was not wholly appropriate such as a carved knife handle. The handle depicts a lady with a jessied bird - the female figure and the subject of hunting could not have been easily reconciled with life in the Priory (shown at right). Other almost identical examples of this piece have been found on many sites in Britain.

Animal bones from these phases of activity suggest a rich diet was enjoyed by those dwelling on the site, as well as cattle and sheep, wild game, such as hares, rabbits, plovers and woodcocks were being consumed. The canons of the priory are known from documentary sources to have had a staith on the Ouse, and the debris from rubbish pits includes the bones of salmon, trout, eels, flounder and plaice which would have been taken from the river. It is possible, however, that not all of this activity was permitted: in 1497, one of the nets belonging to the priory was seized for 'theyr wrong fyshyng'.





'Wasters' from the kiln



Styli from Blue Bridge Lane



Stylus from the site



Cross-marked stone

The Dissolution Of The Priory & Later Activity On The Site

The priory of St Andrews was surrendered to the king during the Dissolution, in 1538, despite the pleas of Robert Holgate, Master of the Order of Sempringham. The Prior, John Lepington, and the three remaining canons left to follow their careers in other parish churches of York. The land on which the Priory had stood was then held by a Richard Goldthorpe, and in the following years, the site was robbed of all building materials, most particularly lead.

The site then seems to have fallen into disuse, and what documents and deeds survive indicate that the land would have been used for grazing, agriculture or orchards. The area became known as 'Stone Wall Close', possibly due to the survival of some sections of the precinct wall that surrounded the Priory. Sections of the west wall were uncovered by workmen in the 18th century; the north wall was still marked on maps in 1892, and a wall at the southern boundary was demolished only recently.

During the 18th century, a glassworks was established to the north of the Priory site, and gradually expanded onto some of Stone Wall Close. The chimneys and large structures of the Glass works would have dominated the skyline of Fishergate, and the site continued to expand during the 19th and 20th century, until closure in 1984. The wider area was much more built up by the 19th century, being occupied by domestic housing, a Post Office, Cinema and skating rink.

Property Development On Fishergate

Fishergate became a fashionable place to live during the early 19th century. On the northern side of Blue Bridge Lane, two properties were constructed by the 1840s: one was occupied by a Mr John Waite, and the other by Thomas Harrison. Thomas Harrison's house, Freshfield Cottage, is known to have been a large brick-built property, in the grounds of which an ice house had been constructed. The ice house, and foundations of the house, were encountered during excavations.

On the opposite side of the road, a much grander property was built. In 1837, Thomas Laycock commissioned the construction of Fishergate House, built to a design by J.B. and W. Atkinson. The house has recently been converted to apartments, but the exterior exists much as it would have done then; a large cellared building, up to 3 storeys high, with stable blocks to the north.

The Rialto Cinema

The Rialto Cinema, which previously occupied the Blue Bridge Lane site, was showing films as early as 1910, and was frequently renamed, becoming the City Picture House in 1914 and the Casino in 1928. In the 1920s, the Casino burnt down; school children of the day remember watching the flames from Fishergate School. The cinema was rebuilt as the Rialto, only to be demolished by fire again, in 1935. Following a marathon rebuilding (which took only 15 weeks) a much grander cinema was reopened by B. Seebohm Rowntree; from then on, and throughout the war years, customers enjoyed a wide range of films and live music. In 1961, however, the cinema closed, and the building was sold to Mecca Bingo.

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