

An Archaeological Test Pit in Knaith Close, Yarm

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1. Introduction

1.1 VSMP Test Pitting Project Rationale

1.1.1 Waterloo Uncovered, a registered UK charity, was founded in 2015. Established the same year as the bicentenary of the Battle of Waterloo, it aims to conduct the first ever major archaeological excavation of the Waterloo Battlefield, and to provide support to the veteran and serving military communities.

Since its start, WU has supported over 100 Veteran and Serving Military Personnel (VSMP) and conducted over 10 weeks systematic, academically robust archaeology in Belgium. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, a special 12 week virtual programme was developed to support the 2020 cohort. The content of the programme focused on building skills and knowledge around archaeological and historical research, using

1.2 Site location and geology

1.2.1 The site is located in Knaith Close, Yarm, TS15 9TL.

1.2.2 The underlying geology of the site is Sherwood Sandstone Group, described as: "Sandstone, red, yellow and brown, part pebbly; conglomeratic in lower part; pebbles generally extraformational quartz and quartzite, with some intraformational clasts; subordinate red mudstone and siltstone" (BGS 2020). This is overlain by till "unsorted and unstratified drift, generally overconsolidated, deposited directly by and underneath a glacier without subsequent reworking by water from the glacier. It consists of a heterogenous mixture of clay, sand, gravel, and boulders varying widely in size and shape (diamicton)" (BGS 2020). The British Geographical Survey doesn't give any depths for the geological layers in the area.

2. Archaeological and Historical Background

2.1 Prehistoric

2.1.1 There is evidence of Mesolithic activity on the east bank of the Tees between Yarm and Thornaby (Spratt et al 1976, 26). It is suggested that the Tees valley would sustain hunting, fishing and be "a prolific source of wild birds and eggs" (ibid). A Neolithic polished stone axe was reputedly found in the garden of Dr Young, who lived in the High Street, Yarm, and is now in the Sturge Collection (Sturge.1208) at the British Museum (British Museum 2020). A Neolithic slate axe, found near Yarm is listed in the Bateman collection (J93.39) (Howarth 1899, 15).

2.1.2 There is no evidence on the HER search of early prehistoric remains in the area of the site.

2.1.3 The HER indicates that 2014 excavations prior to the Leven Woods development in Green Lane, found an Iron Age/Romano-British settlement (Tees HER 8353 and 8749). This comprised 2 roundhouses, surrounded by enclosures and 10 peannular ring gullies, which it was suggested could be evidence of ancillary structures or work areas. There was poor preservation of finds and environmental evidence but handmade pottery, querns and possible evidence of salt making were retrieved. A radio carbon date suggests there was habitation on the site around, but not limited to, 165 cal BC to cal AD 21. Another Iron Age/Romano-British site was identified by trial trenching at nearby Morley Carr (Tees HER 8073). This suggested the existence of ditches, gullies, pits and a possible round house. The site is preserved under green space.

2.1.4 There is a possibility of late Iron Age remains on the site.

2.2 Roman

2.2.1 As seen above farming communities are present in the late Iron Age/early Roman period. There is no other concrete evidence for Roman presence in the HER. Philips and Rowe suggest that the Teeside area was relatively peaceful by the time of Hadrian (117AD), with little military presence or Roman influence (2004, 8). Iron Age Romano-British settlements like those noted in the area are likely to have carried on relatively unchanged (ibid). The Roman Villa at Ingleby Barwick does hint that there may be more of a Roman presence in the area (Willis 2008).

2.2.2 There is one Roman findspot on Pastscape, (Monument No. 26982) which is a chance find in a back garden approximately 500m from the site. The object is a Roman class F penannular bronze brooch with a zoomorphic terminal (Pastscape 2015), with no other associated material. It is not possible to suggest whether the find was in situ or had been imported into the new estate in topsoil.

2.2.3 There is a slight possibility of Roman remains on the site.

2.3 Medieval

2.3.1 Yarm derives from “Iarum, Gerou” and means “the settlement “at the fish-weirs”” (Cleveland & Teesside Local History Society, n.d.). It is mentioned in the Domesday book, owned by King William but has no population and is suggested to have been waste, therefore not subject to tax (Palmer and Powell-Smith 2020). Yarm was later was “laid out and owned by the Brus family” (Tees Archaeology 2006, 7). The town developed due successful trade connections via the River Tees and the road network (ibid, 8). The core of the town preserves the medieval road layout and naming, and the stone bridge (c.1400AD with later additions).

2.3.2 Part of an inscribed cross shaft was found in Yarm, reportedly being used as a weight for a mangle. It was bought and donated to the Cathedral Library at Durham, where it remains (DURCL : 17.2.50). It is not known where the fragment originated or how it came to be in Yarm. The inscription has been translated as : ‘— [—]berehct + the priest + Alla + raised this sign in memory of his brother +’ (Lang 2002a). It has been dated to the early 9th century.

2.3.3 Lang catalogued two fragments of post conquest coped gravestone with Romanesque tegula carving, which are now built into the vestry of St Mary Magdalene Church on West Street, Yarm (Lang 2002b). One of these was previously noted by Collingwood standing in the east end of the south aisle of the church (Collingwood 1907, 412-3). He suggests that they came from the site of the grammar school, which was on the site of the churchyard. The fragments have been dated to the 11th to early 12th century.

2.3.4 The Yarm Helmet was found in Chapel Yard, by workmen in the 1950s. On the basis of typological comparison, it has been dated to the 9th to 11th century and Viking or Anglo-Scandinavian origins (Caple 2020, 45). Caple suggests that it is likely to be an authentic helmet on the basis it would have had to have been buried in the 1920s to achieve the level of corrosion it exhibits. The predominant images of ‘Viking’ helmets at the time would have included horns or wings, suggesting the relatively plain Yarm helmet is unlikely to have been made in the 19th or 20th century (Caple 2020, 46-47). Caple further suggests the helmet was not used much, due to a lack of wear around holes in the brow band, which are likely to have supported a mail curtain. The helmet was buried in anaerobic conditions and at some point was damaged by ploughing or digging which in turn hastened the deterioration of the helmet (Caple 2020, 57).

2.3. In the area of the site itself, Tees HER identifies 2 medieval field systems in the area (SMR 1388 and 1389). This suggests that the area was likely to have been arable land in the hinterland of Yarm itself. There is a slight possibility of Medieval remains on the site.

2.4 Post-medieval

2.4.1. Yarm was the site of a Civil War battle in 1643. Parliamentarian forces led by Captain Medley sought to prevent a Royalist convoy of arms from crossing the Tees preventing them from completing their journey from Newcastle to York. The Royalist forces proved too numerous for Captain Medley’s “400 foot, about 150 horse and two pieces of ordnance” (Daniels and Philo 2018, 20).

2.4.1. There is no evidence of Post Medieval activity in the area.

2.5 Modern

2.5.1 There are 3 Grade II listed residential buildings in the area of the site, Old Rosehill (19th century), Low Lands Farmhouse (18th century) and Field House Farmhouse (18th century). This further suggest that the area was agricultural.

2.5.2 On Ordnance Survey maps the site is undeveloped, including in the 1960s. The Layfield Estate was constructed in the mid 20th century. The participant noted that the soil in the garden was said to have been brought in from another site.

2.6 Previous archaeological work

2.6.1 Ten previous archaeological investigations have been undertaken in the area.

3. Aims and Methodology

3.1.1 Test pitting aims

The project aimed to:

- to contribute to the archaeological knowledge in the local area of 2 of our VSMP
- to provide a practical learning focus for the 2020 VSMP cohort as a whole
- to provide a focus for team working, contributing to WU support for the VSMP through the Covid-19 pandemic

3.1.2 Test pit methods

Desk based assessment tasks were carried out by the VSMP cohort. They worked in their teams to find background information via online resources to inform the interpretation of the test pits.

Test pitting was managed virtually by professional archaeologist supervisors who usually work on site in Belgium. Three supervisors were available to each test pit team. They helped the VSMP to make decisions about excavation and recording.

Tees Archaeology provided an HER search to aid putting the test pit into context.

The test pit was excavated on 11th July 2020.

Test pits were :

- 1mx1m
- excavated and recorded in 10cm spits
- recorded by photograph
- recording via forms in our Google Classroom environment, which allowed instant centralised collection and management of the data

No archaeological features were encountered. Two 10cm spits were excavated and recorded. Following excavation and recording, the test pit was back-filled and the turf re-instated.

4. Results

4.1.1 Pictures of trenches and finds

Bone

Clay pipe

Pottery

5. Discussion

5.1.1. The discovery of a London Brick Company brick in the second spit suggests that the garden soil has been disturbed, or could have been imported onto the site.

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