



THE WOODEN WRITING TABLETS FROM EXCAVATIONS AT 12–18 SWINEGATE

An Insight Report

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1. INTRODUCTION



Plate 1: *Swinegate wooden tablets*

This report relates to two of York Archaeological Trust's excavations, the first at 12–18 Swinegate and the second at 14 Little Stonegate and 18 Back Swinegate (Figure 1). These excavations represent two of the most interesting, though little known, of the Trust's excavations. A total of fifteen trenches were excavated (Figure 2), and these revealed a complex sequence of deposits dating from Roman times to the present day. In addition, a number of exceptional artefacts were recovered including a collection of well-preserved wooden coffins of late 9th- to early 11th-century date, and a group of writing tablets of mid-14th-century date.

This is one of three reports prepared with a grant from the Museum Resilience Fund; the other two reports relate to the excavations overall (McComish 2015a), and to the wooden coffins from the site (McComish 2015b).

It is intended that the information in the present report can be used as an introductory text to accompany any documents or exhibitions relating to the conservation of, and research

into, the 14th-century writing tablets from the site. It aims to give a brief outline of the excavations and to provide the archaeological context for the writing tablets. The text is not intended as a full academic text, but rather something which can be easily read, and for that reason no academic references are given in the text. Should a reader require such information it is given in McComish 2015a.

2. THE SWINEGATE EXCAVATIONS

The excavations at 12–18 Swinegate, 14 Little Stonegate and 18 Back Swinegate took place from October 1989 to July 1990 (Figure 1), in advance of the redevelopment of the area for shops and offices. The archaeological potential of the Swinegate area was well known prior to the 1989 excavations. Given that the site lay within both the Roman legionary fortress and the heart of the medieval city, it had the potential to reveal a sequence of deposits spanning the entire history of York.

The site comprised 15 separate trenches that were placed in relation to areas which were going to be destroyed by the foundations and piles of the new buildings on the site. The excavation work was generously funded by the developers of the site, the General Accident Insurance Company, who also funded a predetermined amount of research. In addition, the excavation of Trench 4 was funded directly by York Archaeological Trust. The excavations were directed by N.F. Pearson and the two site supervisors were J.M. Lilley and M. Whyman.

The Swinegate excavations were of immense interest, providing a rare example of a sequence of excavated deposits spanning the entire history of York from the Romans to the present day. Among the many wonderful deposits and artefacts recovered was a group of writing tablets of mid-14th-century date, which are of national importance. These tablets provide a rare glimpse into the everyday life of a 14th-century inhabitant of York, who was clearly a well-educated person, being fluent in both English and Latin.

York Archaeological Trust is grateful to the Museum Resilience Fund for providing the opportunity to research further the writing tablets which comprise an exceptionally important object, that deserves to be more widely known.

3. THE RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATIONS

The earliest deposit seen on the site was naturally occurring clay, which was reached at the base of Trenches 2 and 3, approximately 4.3m below the present ground level.

Roman remains were seen in Trenches 2–5, 9, 12 and 14–15. The earliest features were wooden buildings relating to the construction of the first fortress by the ninth legion around AD 71. These wooden buildings were later replaced by stone buildings and a large

courtyard. The stone buildings underwent various alterations from the second half of the 2nd century onwards, and they remained in use until the 4th century.

The various Roman walls were robbed out at some later stage, but the precise date at which this happened is unclear.

The site was then used for the church of St Benet and its associated cemetery. The church is named after a Northumbrian saint, Benedict Biscop, with Benet being an abbreviation of his name. The precise date at which the church was founded is unknown, but it had to be after St Benedict Biscop's death in 689 and before the late 9th/early 10th century, as coffins of that date were present in the churchyard. No conclusive evidence of the church building was seen in the 1989/1990 excavations, but it probably lay to the immediate north-west of Trenches 14 and 15.

One hundred burials were excavated from the churchyard and these included a variety of burial types ranging from burials in wooden coffins, a burial in a hollowed-out log, burials with planks over the skeleton, burials with planks beneath the skeleton, burials in shrouds and burials in simple grave cuts. In addition, there was a burial with a plank over the top, a limestone grave marker at the head end and stones by the head of the skeleton. Some of the coffins in the cemetery were subjected to dendrochronological dating (tree-ring dating), and this showed that the coffins ranged from the last quarter of the 9th century to the first quarter of the 11th century. St Benet's cemetery fits into a widespread pattern of variable burial rites within a single cemetery that is seen across England from the 9th to 11th centuries.

The churchyard was made smaller in the late 11th or early 12th century when the present street of Swinegate was built, though the cemetery and church continued to exist to the south-west of Swinegate. The area of the former cemetery to the north-west of Swinegate was divided up into tenements which were long thin plots of land that originally extended all the way from Petergate to Swinegate. Each tenement would originally have contained a house fronting onto Petergate, with a back yard to the rear. Swinegate was originally a lane giving access to the rear of these tenements. The back yards were originally separated from one another by wooden fences. The yards were used for any number of purposes, including the location of cess-pits and the disposal of domestic waste; as a result organic deposits built up in all the back yards.

By the 1220s the church of St Benet had been linked into a single parish with the nearby church of St Sampson, with St Sampson's acting as the parish church. St Benet's church went out of use and was demolished between 1299 and 1307. By the 1320s the churchyard of St Benet's was falling into disrepute as a place of prostitution, and by 1337 the churchyard was described as 'lying waste and covered with rubbish'. In 1361 the site of the former church was acquired by the Vicars Choral, who demolished the church and built a row of houses there to rent out, which were known as 'Benetplace' or 'Benet's Rents'.

The earliest buildings excavated on the Little Stonegate street frontage were of mid-13th-

century date. These continued in use until the 14th century, and they were associated with the production of copper-alloy dress-fittings.

On the Grape Lane frontage the earliest excavated deposits were of 14th-century date, and comprised three discrete properties with buildings fronting onto Grape Lane. These properties were associated with copper and iron working, and underwent various phases of alteration from the 14th to the 16th century.

The earliest buildings along the Back Swinegate frontage were of mid- to late 14th-century date, and these appear to represent the first medieval buildings in this area. In common with the buildings on Grape Lane, these were associated with evidence for metalworking, in this case copper working and the production of nails.

The back yards to the north-east of Swinegate continued in use throughout the 13th and 14th centuries. Further organic deposits accumulated within the yards and there were other features typical of back yards including cess-pits, rubbish pits and a barrel-lined well. There were also hints of structures in this area including a rough stone sill in Trench 3 that may have represented the threshold of a small building. In Trench 6 there were well-made hearths of edge-set tiles and a small beam slot from a building. Trench 7 contained a wall at right angles to the Swinegate street frontage together with associated floors. There was also evidence for the demolition of the Trench 7 building.

The 14th-century writing tablets from the excavations were recovered from a back-yard deposit in Trench 3. It was impossible to tell at the time of excavation if this context represented the backfill of a pit cut, or a later deposit which had settled into the top of an earlier pit. The writing tablets were found by excavation assistant Martin Bartlett, who saw the tablets protruding from the leather pouch that contained them. The tablets reminded Martin of a pack of playing cards, or a large matchbox, when he first saw them. The tablets are currently being researched as part of a Museum Resilience Fund project, but to provide the reader with some idea of their form, the tablets were made of wood with recessed surfaces that were designed to accommodate wax. The wax acted as a writing surface when used with a stylus. The tablets were in a leather pouch which was decorated with leaf patterns. The writing on the tablets includes part of a poem written in Middle English, some sort of list or set of accounts, and part of a legal document in Latin. Clearly the owner of the tablets was not just literate, but bi-lingual. These tablets date to c.1350 and they are considered to be the finest set to have been found in Europe.

The uppermost deposits on the site which were of post-medieval and modern date were machine cleared at the start of excavation.

4. REFERENCES

McComish, J.M., 2015a. *Archaeological excavations at 12–18 Swinegate, 14 Little Stonegate and 18 Back Swinegate*. York Archaeological Trust Web Based Report 2015/44

McComish, J.M., 2015b. *The Pre-Conquest Coffins from 12–18 Swinegate and 18 Back Swinegate*. York Archaeological Trust Web Based Report 2015/46

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The figures were prepared by K. Weston.

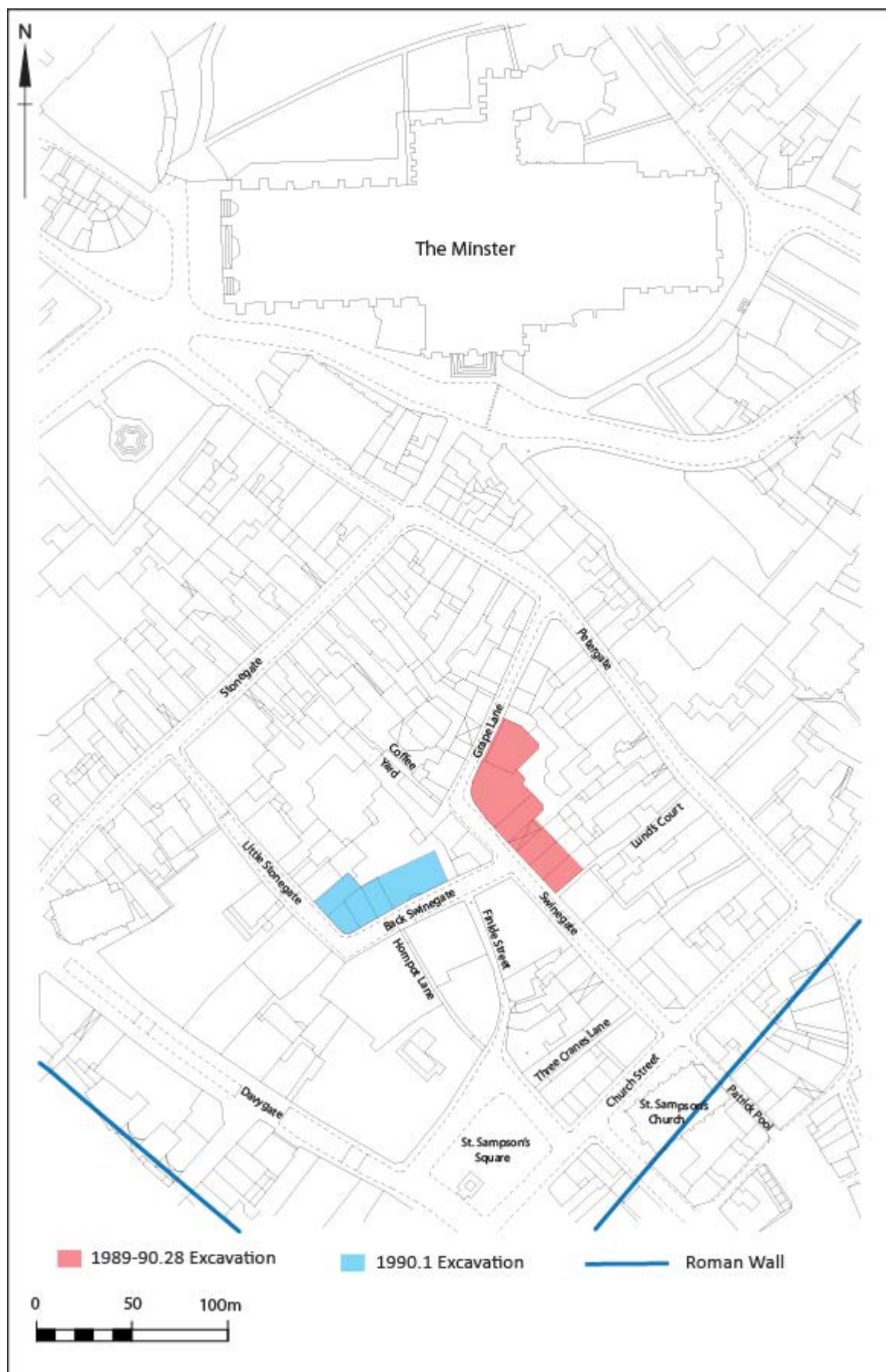


Figure 1: Site Location



Figure 2: Trench Location



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