New Boundary Wall, St James Church, Reading, Berkshire

An Archaeological Watching Brief
For St James Catholic Church

by Danielle Milbank
Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code JCW 08/107

November 2008
Summary

Site name: New Boundary Wall, St James Church, Reading, Berkshire

Grid reference: SU 7201 7359

Site activity: Watching Brief

Date and duration of project: 7th and 8th September 2008

Project manager: Steve Ford

Site supervisor: Danielle Milbank

Site code: JCW 08/107

Area of site: Area of foundation trench 3.95 sq m

Summary of results: No archaeological finds or features were encountered.

Monuments identified: None

Location and reference of archive: The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Reading Museum in due course.

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Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at St James Church, Reading, Berkshire (SU 7201 7359) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr Sean Hayes of the Portsmouth Roman Catholic Diocesan Trust, St Edmund House, Edinburgh Road, Portsmouth, PO1 3QA, on behalf of St James Catholic Church, Forbury Road, Reading, Berkshire.

Listed building consent has been gained from Reading Borough Council (ref 08/00508/LBC) to demolish the (unstable) existing flint wall and construct a new brick boundary wall on the site. The Church of St James is a 19th-century building and is listed Grade II. The site also lies within the boundaries of a scheduled ancient monument (SAM 19019) and Scheduled Monument Consent has been also been gained. This consent is subject to a condition relating to archaeology, which requires a watching brief to be carried out during groundworks.

This is in accordance with the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act (1979), and in line with the Department of the Environment’s Planning Policy Guidances, Planning and the Historic Environment (PPG15 1994), and Archaeology and Planning (PPG16 1990). It also complies with Reading Borough Council policies on heritage protection. The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Chris Welch, Inspector of Ancient Monuments with English Heritage, and Ms Fiona Macdonald, Principal Archaeologist with Berkshire Archaeology, based on a brief supplied by the latter.

The fieldwork was undertaken by Danielle Milbank on the 7th and 8th of September 2008 and the site code is JCW 08/107. The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Reading Museum in due course.

Location, topography and geology

The site is located within Reading, to the east of the town centre and to the south of the railway (Fig. 1). It lies on Forbury Road, adjacent to HMP Reading. The Church of St James shares a boundary with the Abbey Ruins site to the south, and the wall to which this report relates comprises the boundary between the Church site to the west and the Prison to the east. A nursery school stands directly to the west of the wall. (Fig. 2). The part of the site on which the wall is located slopes from the south down to the north, and the highest point of the site lies at c.40m
above Ordnance Datum, and c.35m above OD at the lowest. The underlying geology is described as Valley Gravel (BGS 1971), though this was not encountered during groundworks.

**Archaeological background**

The archaeological potential of the site has been highlighted in a brief for the project prepared by Ms Fiona Macdonald of Berkshire Archaeology. In summary, the site lies within an area of high potential for significant archaeology, and is located within the precinct of Reading Abbey. The Abbey was a 12th-century Benedictine and Cluniac monastery and is designated a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 19019). It was both large and significant, founded in AD1121 by Henry I who was buried there in 1135. Only a small proportion of the Abbey survives above ground as ruins, and its stonework has been continuously robbed since the dissolution. The specific location of the boundary wall can be placed (with reasonable accuracy) in the area of the chancel of the Abbey Church (Slade 2001). The church of St James was built in 1837-1840, and its eastern boundary wall is first noted in the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of 1881.

Previous archaeological investigations carried out within the Abbey Ruins site have shown that archaeological remains of Medieval and later date have survived, including artefactual evidence for earlier use of the site. Excavations in the 1970s showed evidence of the north and south ambulatory of the chancel, including a tiled floor surface, a coffin burial and evidence of prehistoric activity (Slade 1972; 1976; Vince et al. 1982; Fasham and Stewart 1990; Hawkes 1991 and Pine 2005).

**Objectives and methodology**

The aims and objectives of the watching brief were to excavate and/or record any archaeological deposits affected by the groundworks. Specific research objectives for this project were:

- to determine the existence or absence of any archaeological remains; and should remains be found to be present to ensure their preservation by record to the highest possible standard;
- to determine or confirm the approximate date or date range of the remains, by means of artefactual or other evidence;
- to determine or confirm the approximate extent of the remains;
- to determine the condition and state of preservation of the remains;
- to determine the degree of complexity of the horizontal and/or vertical stratigraphy of the remains;
to assess the associations and implications of any remains encountered with reference to the
historic landscape;
to determine the implications of the remains with reference to economy, status, utility and social
activity;
to determine and confirm the likely range, quality and quantity of the artefactual evidence present;
to determine the potential of the site to provide palaeoenvironmental and/or economic evidence
and the forms in which such evidence may be present; and
to identify where archaeological remains of exceptional significance are encountered, that might
not have been reasonably anticipated, in order that they might be adequately dealt with.

This was to involve examination of all areas of intrusive groundworks, in particular the digging of the foundation
trench for the new wall. Spoil was monitored for finds, and the foundation trench was cleaned using hand tools.

**Results**

The foundation trench for the brick wall was excavated by hand, following the demolition of the unstable flint
wall. It was 0.31m wide and 12.75m long in total, and involved removing the existing flint wall material to a
sufficient depth to provide a foundation trench. The minimum depth of the trench was 0.30m from the level of
the Tarmac at the south end, and the maximum depth was at the north end the trench, at 0.56m.

The east-facing section of the foundation trench showed stratigraphy typically comprising Tarmac 0.08m
thick, which overlay a dark black brown silt layer which was 0.14m thick, with frequent brick fragments and
roots. This in turn overlay the flint and mortar fabric of the walls, which also included limestone or sandstone
fragments.

The flint and mortar fabric of the wall was observed in section and in the base throughout the length of the
foundation trench, and it was not necessary to excavate any deeper as the remains of the previous wall were
considered to be a stable footing on which the new wall could be constructed. The flint nodules were typically
medium to large (ranging from approximately 0.10m³ to approximately 0.22m in length, 0.18m wide and 0.15m
thick) and fairly tightly packed, with a pale yellow sandy lime mortar bond.

**Conclusion**

The observations made during the watching brief show that although the above-ground portion of the flint wall
was unstable, the part of the wall below Tarmac level was solid and substantial, and provided a stable footing on
which the new brick wall could be built. The depth of the excavated trench, even at its deepest point, was not sufficient to expose any underlying deposits, and it was not possible to determine the depth of the flint wall footings. Overall, the results of the watching brief indicate that archaeological remains of any period (other than the wall footing itself), and specifically those relating to the Abbey and its Church, were not present at the level of the base of the trench. Potential still exists for deposits to have survived below the rebuilt wall, and the construction of the new brick wall would not affect any archaeological levels below the extant footings.

References

Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act (1979), HMSO
New Boundary Wall, St James Church, Reading, Berkshire, 2008
Archaeological Watching Brief

Figure 1. Location of site within Reading and Berkshire.
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Figure 2. Location of boundary wall showing foundation trench.
**New Boundary Wall, St James Church, Reading, Berkshire, 2008**

**Figure 4. Representative section of foundation trench**

- **Tarmac**
- Dark brown black silt with roots, brick and flint fragments
- Flint nodules in sandy lime mortar bond