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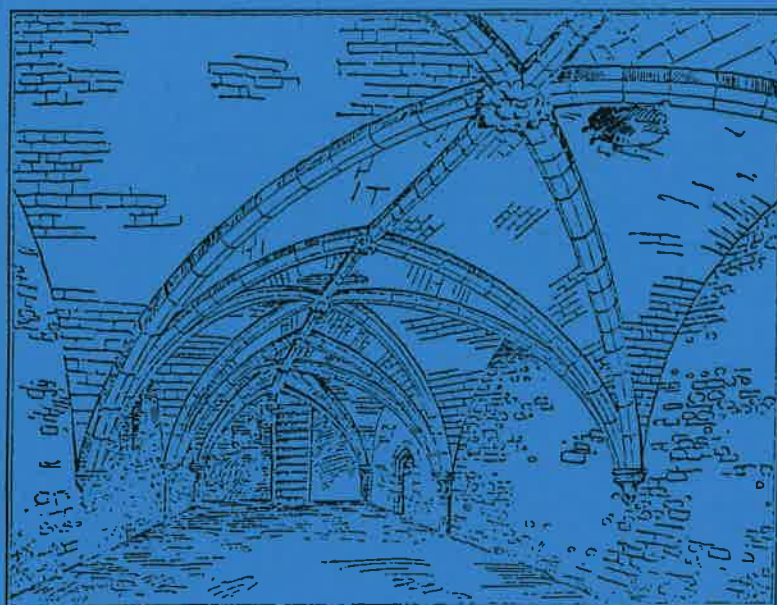
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William Cook Associates

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### ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF MEDIEVAL CELLAR



Oxford Archaeological Unit  
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*Summary: The George Vaults are an excellent example of a 14th-century urban commercial premises in a vaulted cellar, most likely used as a wine tavern. Although damaged by partial collapse of the vault, and deterioration through disuse, the Grade II\* building can beneficially be brought back into use, and there is potential for reopening blocked medieval features. The modification of the north wall to provide a safe fire exit can be achieved without damaging any original fabric.*

## 1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) has been asked by William Cook Associates to carry out an historical and archaeological assessment of the George Vaults, 35 High Street, Rochester, prior to decisions being taken about alterations to the building for its conversion to a wine bar. A single visit was made on 18 August 1998 with a representative of the owner and a Conservation Officer from Medway.
- 1.2 Previous studies have been consulted, including an archaeological assessment of the site made in 1994 by Alan Ward, and a very adequate publication of the cellar by Payne in 1900, but no additional historical research has been carried out at this stage. It is possible that property title deeds, old photographs, and planning records may be of service in elucidating the chronology of modern changes to the building.

## 2 Background

- 2.1 The George Vaults lie on the north side of High Street within the walled medieval city, just below the Castle and Cathedral. The medieval and present High Street also approximated to the line of Roman Watling Street as it passed through the Roman town of *Durobrivae*, and substantial remains of Roman buildings have been found on a nearby site at 39 High Street (Fig. 1). It seems likely that the medieval street surface will have been somewhat lower than the present one, but the Roman levels are likely to be deeper still, and this will be a consideration in any ground breaking activities.
- 2.2 The medieval cellar is a Grade II\* building, and is deservedly graded as an exceptional example of domestic architecture of the 14th century (Appendix 1). It was at one time part of the George Inn, which gave its name to the adjacent George Lane, and architecturally the cellar seems to have connected with the next building its east, but this area was largely destroyed in the great fire of Rochester, and the superstructure (not investigated for this report) appears to be of post-fire date.
- 2.3 The current proposals are for bringing the medieval cellar back into use, with the necessary works to make the partially collapsed vault safe, and provide sufficient means of safe access and egress. Whilst not heavily damaged by previous uses, the structure of the vault has nevertheless deteriorated through moisture penetration and general neglect, and it seems that it is in less good condition than that reported in 1900. From the point of view of sustainability it would seem that providing an appropriate use will be an important factor in the future care of this building.

### 3 Description

#### 3.1 General (Fig. 1)

The vaults face onto High Street (here assumed to run east-west); there is a blocked door at the south end which will have opened on to High Street, and a series of blocked windows on the west side that will have received light from George Lane. The cellar consists of four bays, and is entered from the north end down a modern concrete stair. There is a quadripartite vault with a series of decorated bosses, springing from moulded and carved corbels. Of the two long walls the west wall has a series of windows with ashlar jambs and two-centered arches, and on the evidence of the first and last bays these had sloping backs to admit light in their upper half. The east wall has two blocked doors, one at each end (a larger one at the south end, similar to a window opening, and a smaller one at the north end with a window above). The clear implication of these two doors is that the cellar was part of the adjacent property when built. The south end of the cellar has been partly infilled to provide a platform for the storage of beer barrels, at some point before 1900, and most of the remaining floor is of concrete, except for two areas on either side of the central path at the north end (which consist of recently disturbed rubble). It is not known if there are any remains of medieval floor, and it is possible that an earth or paved floor survives at a lower level.

#### 3.2 *The North Wall* (Fig. 2)

The entrance in the north wall, which is one of the principal objects of inquiry, is through a high door cut through the end of the vault, approached down a steep concrete stair with flanking brick walls; the entrance, if not the steps, was in the same place in 1900. The north wall of the cellar has medieval stonework at the sides and base which must represent the end of the original building. The upper centre of the wall has been disturbed for two later openings, one of which is the present entrance to the cellar. The entrance is on the east (right) side of a central pier of brick and stone, and has concrete steps descending from a high sill; on the west (left) side is a recess with a brick back and an area of stone blocking or repair below it, while both openings have brickwork in their jambs. Neither of these is likely to have been an original door or window, but they may represent successive means of access, or a door and window, or the central pier may only date from the creation of the present stair (perhaps in the 19th century).

#### 3.3 *The West Wall* (Fig. 1)

The west wall has a series of medieval window openings in the centre of each bay with two-centred heads and what were probably sloping backs, later blocked with stone and brick. These windows, which opened onto the side passage, would have taken light from the openings towards the top. The four bays of the cellar were uniform, but one distinction in the medieval design is that between the first two bays the vault springs from a wall shaft (with capital, chamfers and pyramid stops, similar to the shaft at the north end), whereas in the other two divisions the vault springs from a corbel. The southern bay has been filled in to below the window sill, and the fill is retained by a brick wall (this was already present in 1900). A pair of opposing holes in the side walls, just to the south of the brick wall, may mark a former division at this point.

### 3.4 *The South Wall (Fig. 3)*

In the centre of the south wall is an arched entry to the street, with an original segmental arch beneath the centre of the vault, a stone jamb set behind it marking the extent of the medieval building, and a brick-lined passage rising to the street, with a flight of brick steps. It is likely that the medieval street level was up to a metre lower than at present, but the cellar will have been part buried. On either side of the door is a pointed arch of stone fronting recesses that are partly filled with brick arches, but have stone back walls with the sills of original stone windows. These are well made in ashlar, and have a mullion and sloping rear face, with an rebate round the edge of each opening. These can be interpreted as windows taking light from the street (and correspond with infilled paving in the street), with wooden shutters closing on the rebates, and upper lights like the windows in the west wall must have had.

### 3.5 *East wall*

The southern bay has the two-centred head of a large blocked door, which was probably the principal internal access to the cellar; there is now a secondary stone blocking at the back of the recess. The next bay is featureless walling (partly obscured by the temporary vault support), and the next bay has a low patch of masonry that may have been a hatch or opening. The northern bay has small medieval door with ashlar jambs and pointed head, and a window (probably post-medieval) above; both have been blocked with brick and may have been in use comparatively recently, perhaps until the door in the north wall came into use.

### 3.6 *The vault*

The vault has been sufficiently described and illustrated, but some features may be noted. The vault web generally consists of chalk blocks, except for a patch of greensand at the centre of the second bay from the north. A collapse of the eastern quarter of the third bay has taken place some time since 1900, and has been propped with timber centering. The atmospheric requirements of a beer cellar have kept the cellar damp with resultant mould growth and partial deterioration of the decorated elements of the stonework.

## 4 **Discussion**

### 4.1 *Date and function*

The vault is a fine example of a commercial urban cellar, dating from the first half of the 14th century, judging from the moulding of the vault ribs and corbels, and the naturalistic carving of the vault bosses. The quality of its construction and decorative detail implies that it was a public and not a private space, and being entered from the street, lit from front and side (and doubtless whitewashed) meant that it would have functioned as commercial premises that could have been used as a shop or showroom in a multi-level establishment. Although it may have been a shop, its most likely use was as a tavern, i.e. a medieval wine bar, since examination of well-documented examples in Oxford and Winchester has shown that vaults of this quality located on main streets were nearly always on the site of known taverns. The association with the possibly contemporary use of the site for the George Inn may be significant,

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though medieval taverns were not necessarily connected with inns (which primarily provided accommodation).

#### 4.2 *Conservation considerations*

4.2.1 Without considering any specific proposals or current requirements it would seem that the following general principals are relevant:

- the vault should be repaired and generally conserved by the most appropriate and archaeologically sensitive means;
- the infilled step at the south end should be removed, having due consideration of the archaeological potential of the exposed walls (and the filling material);
- the cellar should be properly ventilated, sensitively conserved, and brought into use.

4.2.2 Proposals have been made to repair the vault and alter the means of access. With regard to these specific aspects:

- access at the north end could be modified to make a fire exit without damaging the medieval fabric;
- access could in the long term be achieved though use of original door openings in the east wall into the adjacent premises;
- reopening of the street entrance, and careful conservation (possibly restoration) of the pavement lights would be of benefit for the appreciation of the true character of the medieval cellar;
- reopening of the side lights would appear to be a different matter, as their blocking may carry foundations of the side walls of the building.

#### 4.2.3 *Archaeological potential*

The depth of the cellar may have destroyed medieval occupation deposits, though any wells or rubbish pits cut to a greater depth may survive. Roman remains at the nearby 39 High Street did however survive to greater depths, and it is therefore possible that Roman occupation deposits may survive below the floor, and be disturbed by building activity.

### 5 **Conclusion**

This is a fine example of a 14th-century wine tavern, which can only benefit from sensitive conservation and repair, and an appropriate use. The modification of the north wall to provide a safe fire exit can be achieved without damaging any original fabric.

Oxford Archaeological Unit  
August 1998

## Appendix 1

Extract from DoE Rochester List Entry (December 1991)

TQ 7468 NW

ROCHESTER

HIGH STREET

7/109

No 35 (George  
Vaults) (formerly  
listed as George  
Inn)

24.10.50

GV

II\*

Public house. Late C18 and C19, built over early C14 (c.1320-5) vaulted undercroft. Brick; hipped tile roof. 3 storeys; regular 3-window range. Brick parapet with stone coping and cornice band. 2nd floor: 4-pane horned sash windows under flat rubbed brick arches. 1st floor: large Venetian window with 2:4:2 horned sashes. Late Victorian pub front with glazed brick plinth, central half-glazed double door with rectangular overlight; large side windows and blocked side doors. C18 rainwater head between this and No 37. Left return with fragmentary dentilled cornice. Modern boiler stack and some hornless sash windows. The building is notable for its early C14 undercroft (which gives George Vaults its starred listing grade). Chalk ashlar and rubble; 4 bays; quadrupartite vaults with longitudinal rib; chamfered ribs with rubble infill; foliated bosses with various creatures. Moulded capitals to shaft with foliated necks and pyramid stops. The decorative detailing is much eroded. One pointed arch doorway (blocked) to E; other openings, also blocked, set high to W. Further arched doorways to the S (street-side) are obscured from view. The undercroft measures 54 feet x 16 ft 8½ ins and is 11 ft high. Drawings of the undercroft with details appear in George Payne, 'Medieval Crypts at Rochester'. Archaeologia Cantiana XXIV (1900), 220-4.

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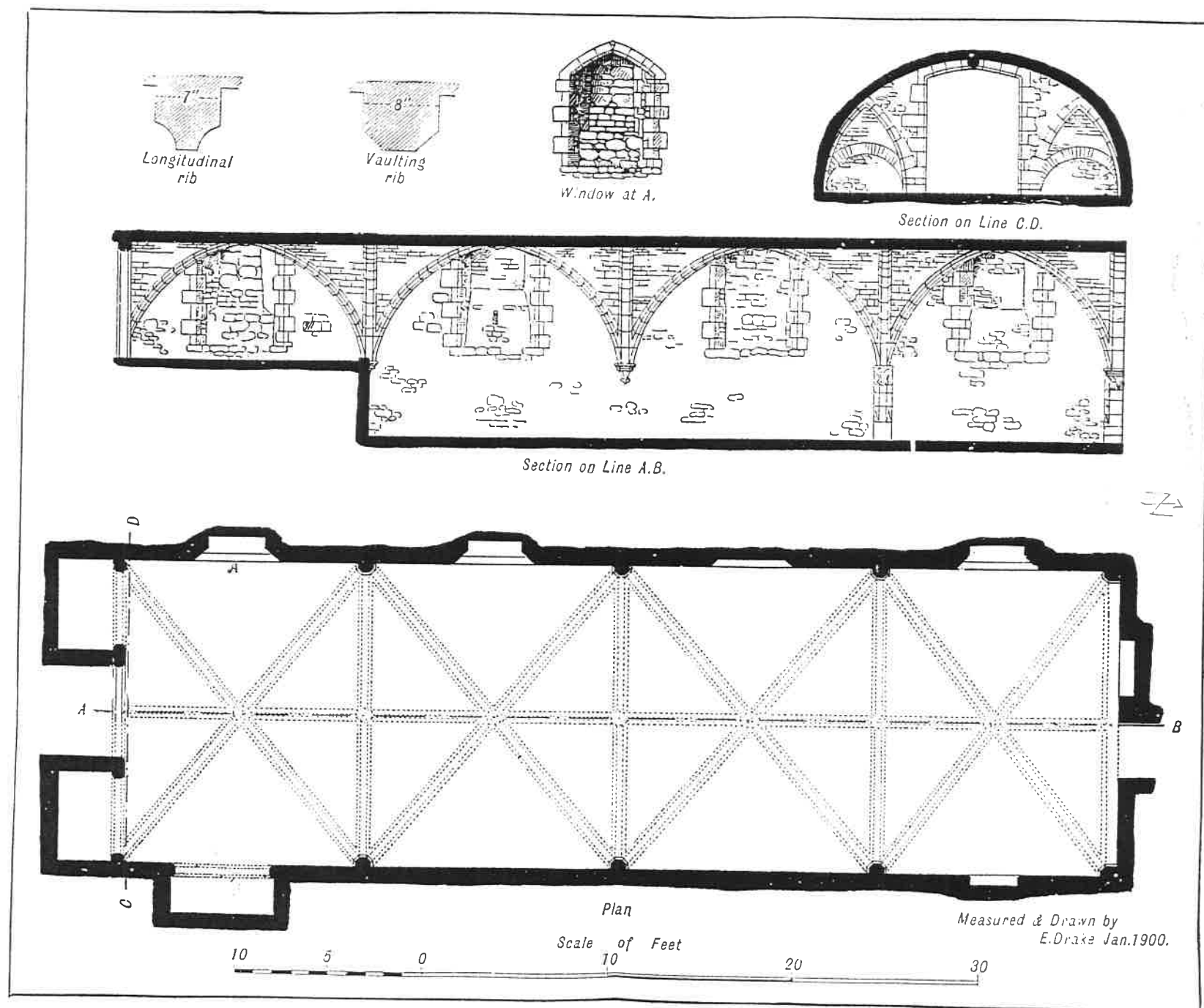


## Appendix 2

### Sources Consulted

- Bacchus, D 'Medieval Undercroft, 36 High Street, Rochester', *Archaeol. Cantiana* cvii (1989), 207-224.
- Burnham, B.G. & Wachter, J. *The 'Small Towns' of Roman Britain* (1990), 76-81.
- DoE List of Buildings of Special Architectural and Historic Interest, Rochester (1991)
- Page, William (ed) *Victoria History of the County of Kent* iii (1932) 'Romano-British Kent'
- Payne, George 'Medieval Crypts at Rochester', *Archaeol. Cantiana* xxiv (1900), 220-4.
- Ward, Alan The George Vaults. The Archaeological Implications of Development Rochester and District Archaeology Report No. 2 (unpublished client report, 1994).

Fig. 1 Plan of George Vaults in 1900



PLAN AND SECTIONS OF MEDIÆVAL CRYPT BELOW THE "GEORGE INN," ROCHESTER.

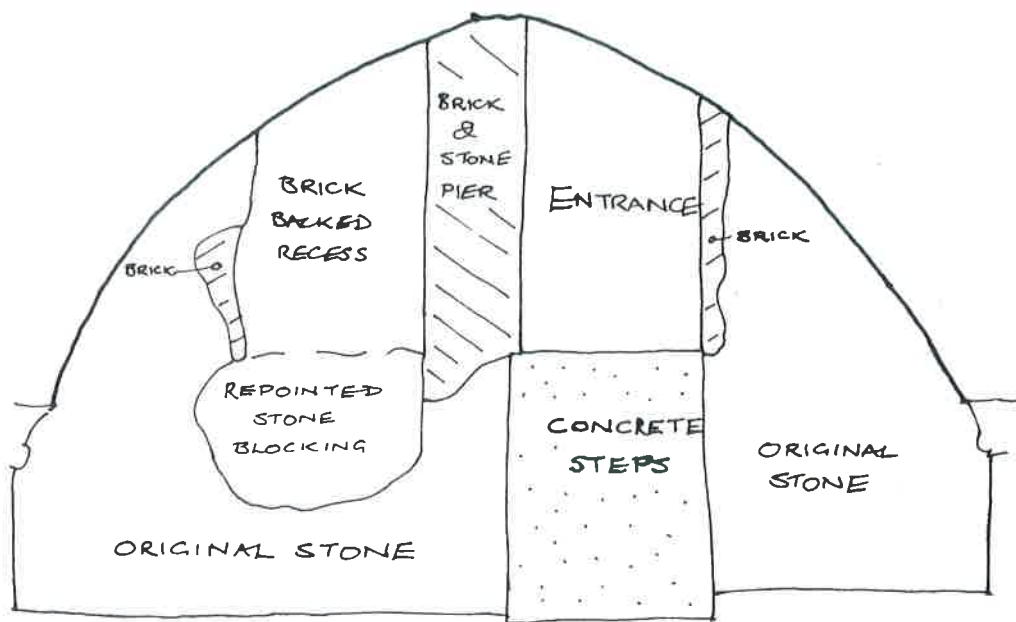


Fig. 2 George Vaults, North Wall





Fig. 3 George Vaults: Features in South Wall



## OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES

Telephone: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496

email: [oau-oxford.demon.co.uk](mailto:oau-oxford.demon.co.uk)



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Director: David Miles B.A., F.S.A., M.I.F.A. Oxford Archaeological Unit Limited.  
Private Limited Company Number: 1618597 Registered Charity Number: 285627.  
Registered Office: Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 0ES