

ELY, ROAD IMPROVEMENTS (ELY RI 95)

A Watching Brief

Water mains

Acting upon information received from East Cambs District Council, the opportunity was taken to observe the sections of a trench dug to carry a water main along The Gallery, Ely. The AFU was only alerted to this operation when the trench had reached Palace Green and, subsequently, the trench along Minster Place was not observed. From comments by the contractors (ALHCO Trench Technology (01373 823814), on behalf of Anglian Water), it was apparent that the trench had run down the middle of the street and the only thing that the contractors had noted was an architectural fragment ("part of an arch") which had been replaced as backfill. This may have been the piece recovered during subsequent resurfacing work (see below).

A trench, measuring 24.5m in length and c0.35 - 0.45m in width, was open at the time of the visit. This ran 1.40m west of the western edge of the pavement which runs along the west front of the Cathedral and it terminated in line with the northern side of the western entrance arch (TL 5402 8030 - TL 5402 8028).

The trench was 1.07-1.15m deep and no cuts or masonry was visible in either section. From the base of the trench a typical section comprised

- c0.15m yellow sandy clay (natural)
- c0.60m dark brown sandy, silty clay with 10% small-medium stones (make-up)
- c0.15m of 30% yellowish-brown, loose, sandy, silty clay acting as a matrix for 70% small-medium gravel and stones
- c0.20m dark brown sandy, silty clay (topsoil and turves)

A cursory examination of the spoil-heap revealed only 1 cattle jaw bone and a few sherds of post-medieval pottery. None of this was retained.

A trench of similar width had been mechanically-excavated down the middle of The Gallery from the southern end of the Cathedral building for a distance of c125m towards Barton Green (TL 5402 8027 - TL 5401 8014). The sections of this trench were examined and seen to follow a similar sequence to that seen outside the Cathedral, with the difference that the uppermost 0.30m comprised a sequence of road make-ups including cobbles and gravel etc. This trench was criss-crossed with service trenches which had destroyed much of the earlier deposits.

The same contractor dug a trench for the same purpose along the centre of the High Street from the junction with Minster Place, running eastwards (TL 5403 8037 - TL 5415 8033). Observations of the progress of this work were made at regular intervals until it reached a point halfway to the Market Place. The trench was c1m deep and 0.40m wide, but it was apparent that it ran along a narrow gap between two existing service trenches and that, therefore, the sections were not worthy of further recording or observation.

Resurfacing work

Observations were made of excavations associated with resurfacing along Minster Place (TL 5403 8036 - TL 5403 8033), carried out by WS Atkins. These covered the width of the road and involved the removal of all material down to the level of

services, a depth of 0.54 - 0.64m. This meant that the exposed sections comprised only hard core and road surfaces.

The contractors, on instruction from NJ Oakey, retained any architectural fragments recovered and put them aside for archaeological examination. The excavation was carried out by mechanical excavator, putting the spoil directly into lorries for removal, so complete recovery seems unlikely. However, a group of 10 pieces of limestone were retained and examined. Most of these were pieces of unfaced rubble, but one stone forming a double arch was retained and is currently at AFU HQ at Fulbourn. This may be a window head or form part of an arcade. It is possible that this was the piece seen by the contractors during excavation of the water main. A piece of column (unfluted) was also retained and taken to Fulbourn. Both pieces came from TL 5402 8034.

Two slides were taken of this work, being general location shots (private shots - copies to come).

[Two sources (an Ely resident and one of the building workers involved) have independently told Niall Oakey the same story about events that took place during the resurfacing of the southern carriageway of High Street, Ely in May 1995. While excavation was taking place outside the building west of the Sacrist's Gate (TL 5416 8033), one of the experts employed on the BBC TV programme "Antiques Roadshow" which was held in Ely Cathedral removed some "medieval leather shoes" from a contractor's spoilheap and pocketed them.]

Niall Oakey

2nd June 1995