

Excavations In Grimsby 1986-1987



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Plate 1. General view of the 1987 excavations from the south east.

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 Text by D. Tomlinson.

Introduction

The earliest references to Grimsby occur in material of Viking origin, such as the Orkneyinga Saga, when the natural haven may have provided the reason for the first occupation of the site. The medieval period is better documented indicating a growth in the town and port south and west of the angle of water formed by Riverhead and the Freshney Haven. Riverhead survives today only in somewhat truncated form. It originally continued southwards towards Wellow Abbey and would have formed the haven and port in early medieval times. The Freshney Haven is in fact an artificial feature resulting from a diversion of the River Freshney which originally entered the Humber to the north-west; this work was probably undertaken in the fourteenth century to increase the capacity of the port as the old haven, south of Riverhead, silted up. Subsequent to this, competition from other ports on the Humber caused a decline in Grimsby's prosperity and importance. It was not until the late eighteenth century that any attempt was made to reverse this trend with the creation of the Haven Company. This resulted in a widening and deepening of the Freshney Haven and Riverhead as well as an extension of the port facilities northwards towards the Humber.

As much of the old town has been redeveloped without prior archaeological work, the re-alignment of Baxtergate and the extension of the Riverhead Shopping Centre provide perhaps the last opportunity to investigate the archaeology of Grimsby.

The road scheme and shopping centre are situated on the northern edge of medieval Grimsby which was formed by the Freshney Haven. To the east, and adjacent to Riverhead, were situated the properties associated with maritime trade at the north-east corner of the town. To the west lay the Austin Friary, its situation atypical in that it was located within the town boundary rather than adjacent to it and on the outside.

Documentary research undertaken by the Humberside Archaeology Unit in 1986/7 revealed little to extend our knowledge of the layout of this area beyond that evident from the earliest known map of Grimsby, dated circa 1600 (Fig. 1).

Two short seasons of trial excavations were thus undertaken in 1986 and 1987 in order to assess the archaeological potential of the site with a view to full-scale area excavation prior to re-development.

In 1986 two trenches were excavated in the angle formed by Riverhead and the Freshney Haven in order to determine the alignment of the medieval waterfront and locate the buildings associated with waterborne trade. This work was required at an early stage as the road scheme was planned for 1987, effectively denying further archaeological investigations here.

In 1987 trial trenches were excavated on the site of the Austin Friary to assess the degree of survival of archaeological deposits and determine the eastern precinct boundary which was not accurately located during the documentary research.

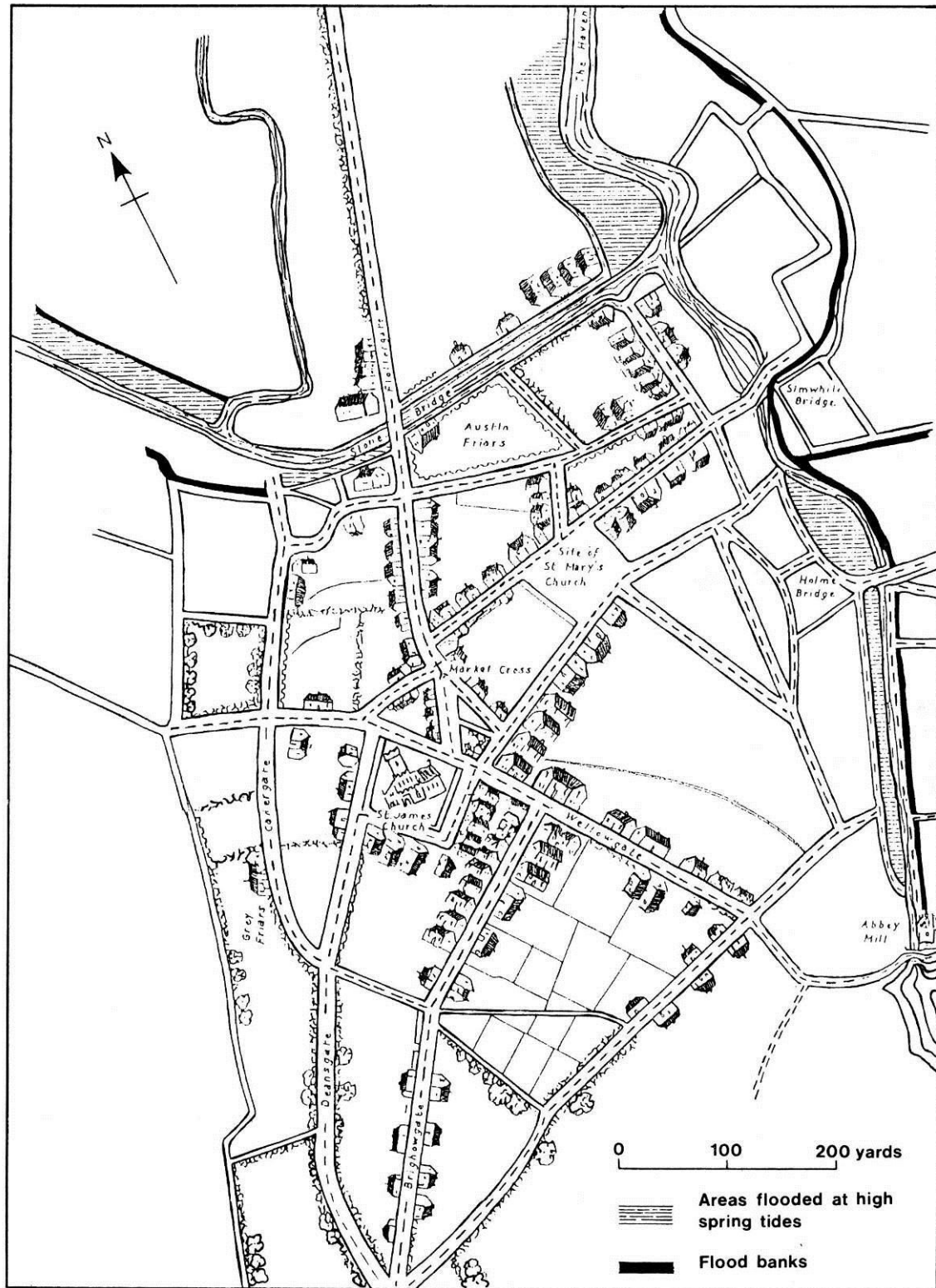


Figure 1. The earliest known map of Grimsby, dated circa 1600.

Waterfront Excavations 1986



Plate 2. View of Riverhead, circa 1910.

Twelve weeks of trial trench work, undertaken in the Autumn of 1986 in the angle formed by the junction of the Freshney Haven and Riverhead (Fig. 2), revealed the medieval timber waterfront (Pl. 3) some 15 m west of the present-day water's edge on Riverhead. An eighteenth century waterfront was also located, 3 m east of this, which had in part disturbed the earlier waterfront. The widening and deepening of the haven in the eighteenth century may well have obscured other medieval waterfronts which would have been constructed further east as the haven became narrower due to silting.

No medieval waterfront timbers were evident in the trench cut northwards towards the Freshney Haven, though tie back timbers associated with the eighteenth century waterfront were exposed.

A tile and cobble track, set into clay, was encountered running alongside the Freshney Haven towards its juncture with Riverhead. Pottery and leather artefacts (Fig. 8) of thirteenth to fourteenth century date were found in deposits lying against the bank on which this track was constructed. The absence of early timbers towards the Freshney Haven suggests there was no continuous waterfront here in medieval times, though it is possible that the excavated area coincided with a stretch of muddy bank between individual staithes or piers extending out into the river. Certainly this pattern existed on riverhead in comparatively modern times, as shown on early twentieth century photographs of the area (Plate 2). This is still evident today, though the projections out into the river have been re-constituted in modern materials and the banks in between cobbled over. Alternatively, no waterfront was erected on the Freshney, the main loading and unloading area being situated on Riverhead, with a trackway leading to this alongside the Freshney Haven.

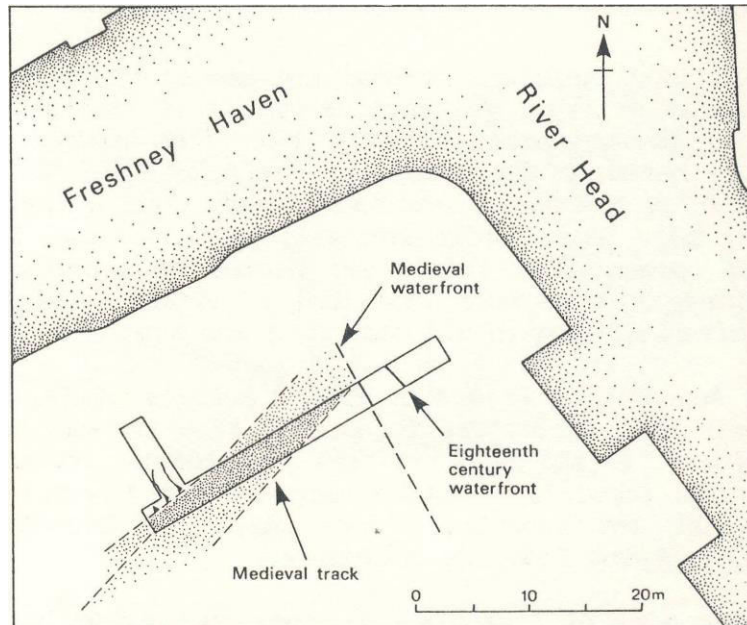


Figure 2. Plan showing location of 1986 excavations.

A substantial deposit of clay sealed the trackway, probably brought in to raise the ground level and prevent flooding. Further cobble trackways were set above this following the alignment of West Dock Street, which survived into living memory. The construction of New Baxtergate will in fact re-establish a road on this alignment.

No evidence for buildings was encountered during the 1986 excavations, these probably being set back from the waterfront, to the south and west. Unfortunately time and money were not available to extend the trenches into this area and this is now obscured for the most part by the new road works associated with the re-alignment of Baxtergate.



Plate 3. Medieval waterfront timbers from the west with eighteenth century waterfront in the background.

Augustinian Priory Excavations 1987

Some confusion inevitably arises over the use of the terms Augustinian Priory and Austin Friary. The various orders of friars who arrived in this country in the thirteenth century were often given shortened names for common, based on the colour of their habits. The Augustinians wore black, but as the Dominicans had already come to be known as the Black Friars, this later order became popularly known as the Austin Friars. Each community of friars was headed by a prior and although the term priory is thus more technically correct, the more commonly used friary often appears in old documents and maps.

The order of Augustinian Friars or Friars Hermits of St. Augustine, to give them their full title, was founded in 1256 and was one of several mendicant orders established in the thirteenth century to bring religion to the population, especially in the towns. This was a reaction against the monastic orders which had become increasingly withdrawn and isolated from the community.

To fulfill their aims of preaching, hearing confessions and taking part in the daily life of the local community, the friars needed to establish themselves close to towns. The friars renounced all property and relied on bequests and the provision of alms. Land granted to them was thus generally of poor quality, not wanted by the local community and lying outside the town boundary but adjacent to it. The Augustinian Friary at Grimsby is atypical in being within the town boundary.

Proximity to the centres of population meant that at the Dissolution in the sixteenth century the buildings were often completely demolished to make way for expansion of the towns, so few buildings associated with friaries survive to this day.

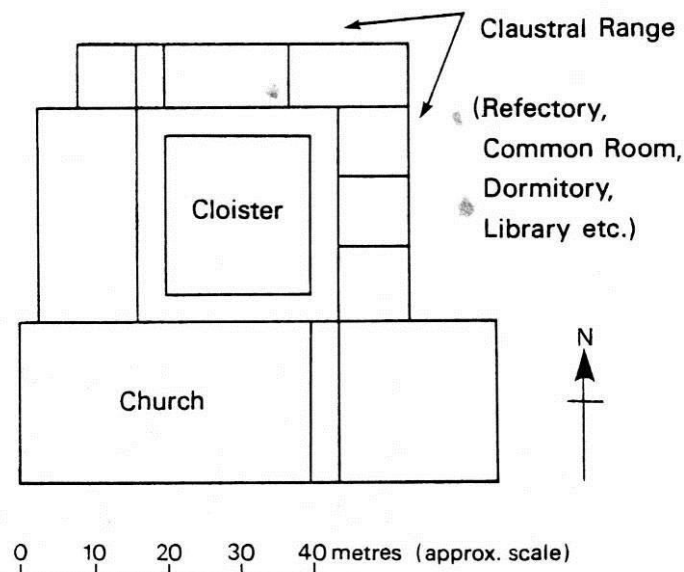


Figure 3. Typical Friary building plan.

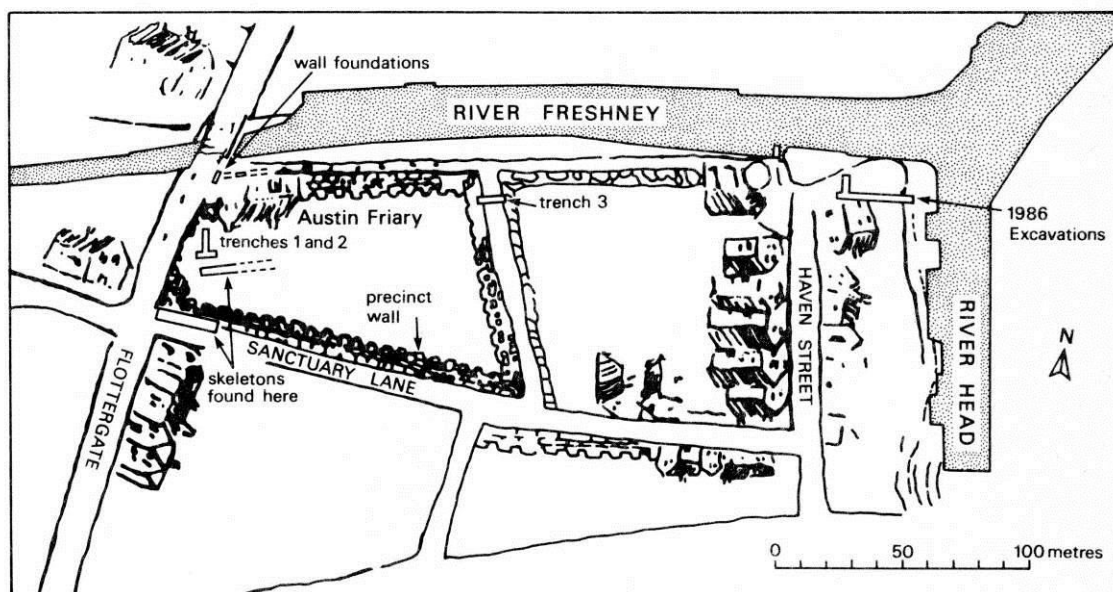


Figure 4. Plan showing location of 1987 excavations.

Though a general building plan was followed, the relation of the site to the town, restricted space, poor ground conditions and later growth of the site resulted in a variety of layouts. Generally the church would be situated close to the town, on a major thoroughfare, to allow for public access. The friars' own living quarters would be located adjacent to the church but away from the town in order to provide some degree of peace and quiet. Simple timber-framed structures may have been erected as temporary accommodation during construction of the church and other buildings, though stone construction was the norm once the friars had become established. The buildings would be arranged around an open area of land, usually square, known as the cloister garth. A walkway or cloister, forming the edge of the garth, led off into the various rooms and buildings surrounding it. These may well have been of two storey construction and contained the living quarters of the friars such as the refectory, dormitory and library as well as an infirmary and guest house. If the number of friars increased then further buildings might be added to the ranges around the cloister, or a second cloister might be constructed.

The only information on the layout of the Augustinian Friary buildings in Grimsby is contained on the earliest known map of the town, dated c. 1600 (Fig. 1). The original plot of land granted to the friars in 1293 was extended by further grants over the subsequent fifty years resulting in a total area of three and a half acres according to records of 1491. Apart from the map, the only evidence for the building layout comes from material recovered during construction works. The map shows a building at the north-west corner of the Friary precinct. This may be a remnant of the Friary or a building erected after the Dissolution, perhaps using materials from the demolished Friary. During the cutting of trenches to insert telephone cables on



Plate 4. Medieval clay floor platforms and ash occupation deposits in south face of 1987 excavations, Trench 1.

the north side of Victoria Road and for the construction of a subway on the north side of Baxtergate, skeletons were discovered. These could indicate the site of the graveyard which would have been adjacent to the church, or could even be from within the church itself, though no masonry or foundations were noted. In either case this would place the church in the south-west corner of the precinct which is the most likely position in order to allow for public access from Flottergate or Sanctuary Lane and leaving room for the friars' accommodation to the north, away from the town.

The northern and western boundaries of the Friary precinct survive today as the Freshney Haven and Flottergate respectively. The southern boundary and a proportion of the Friary lands, possibly including the church, now lie below the existing shopping centre. The alignment of the eastern boundary is less certain as no land divisions or boundaries survived into modern times in the position shown on the map and its accurate location was one of the purposes of the excavations.

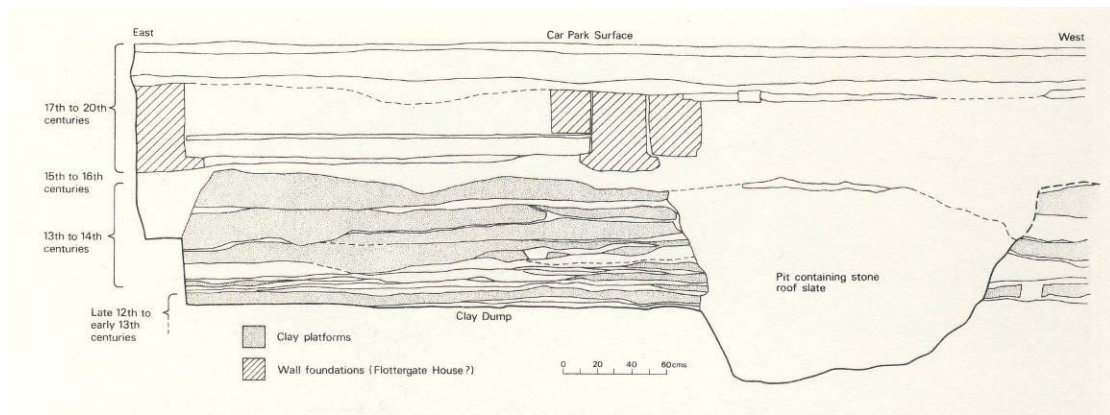


Figure 5. Site drawing of the south face of the 1987 excavations, Trench 1, showing medieval occupation deposits.



Plate 5. Trench 2 of 1987 excavations showing medieval occupation levels.



Plate 6. Padstone in 1987 excavations.

In the Autumn of 1987 seven weeks of trial excavations were undertaken. Two trenches were cut, north of the presumed location of the church and south of the building shown on the map (Fig. 4). The excavations revealed undisturbed deposits, some 0.80 m below the car park surface, which contained pottery dating from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries (Fig. 7 & Pl. 9). As the Friary was not founded until 1293, this suggests occupation of the site before the arrival of the friars, as might be expected for a location within the town boundary. Occupation is indicated by successive layers of clay, which would have provided firm indoor floor surfaces, separated by ashy material representing accumulation during the lifetime of that floor surface before a new one was laid down (Fig. 5 & Pl. 4). The ashy occupation deposits contained numerous metal artefacts suggesting an industrial or workshop activity rather than domestic occupation which might have been expected within the friars living quarters. Though these buildings were most commonly of stone construction, the deposits excavated in 1987 would appear to have been associated with a timber - framed building of modest proportions raised on padstones (blocks of stone set on the ground or on foundation pits which supported the structural timber uprights and prevented them from coming into contact with the ground which could cause rotting of the bases). No evidence for stone built structures was encountered.

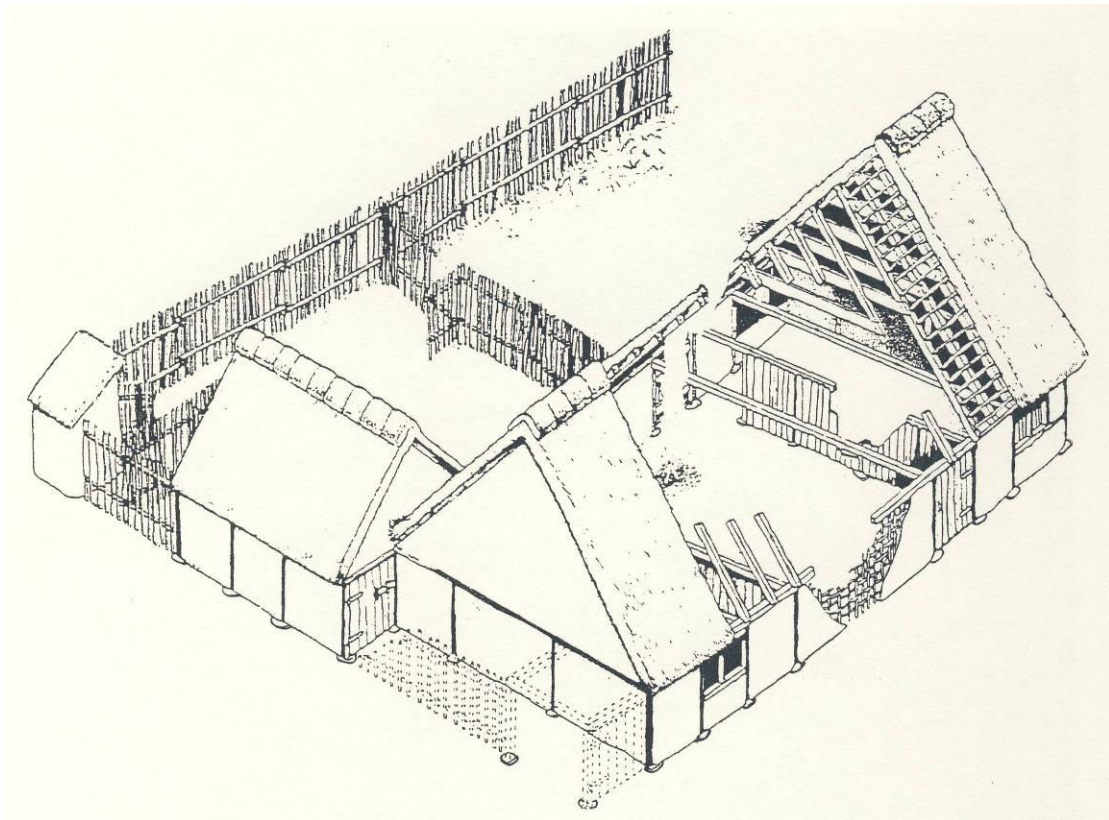


Figure 6. Reconstruction drawing of padstone building on Blackfriargate site in Hull.



Plate 7. Padstone building exposed at Blackfriargate site in Hull, 1977.



Plate 8. Cobble trackway in Trench 3 of 1987 excavations.

The timber-framed structure may represent buildings existing on the site before the foundation of the Friary, and perhaps taken over by the friars; a simple structure erected for immediate occupation by the friars while they erected the main buildings in stone; or some workshop area in an ancillary building of the Friary.

Excavations in Hull in 1977 on Blackfriargate show the type of timber-framed structures, supported by padstones, which may have occupied the Augustinian Friary site in Grimsby (Fig. 6 & Pl. 7).

The trench cut to establish the location of the eastern precinct boundary revealed evidence for a cobbled trackway (Pl. 8) not dissimilar to those exposed alongside the Freshney Haven during the 1986 excavations. This track is presumably that indicated on the early map. No evidence for a precinct wall could be found though this area was much disturbed by post-Dissolution activity.

During the last few days of excavation substantial limestone foundations were exposed by contractors working on the re-alignment of Baxtergate in the area occupied by the building shown on the map (Fig. 4). These could well indicate the alignment of the precinct wall at the north-west corner of the Friary. However, masonry recovered from one of these foundations suggests the re-use of materials from the original Friary buildings and may indicate that these structures are post-Dissolution in date.



Plate 9. Examples of pottery from 1987 excavations.

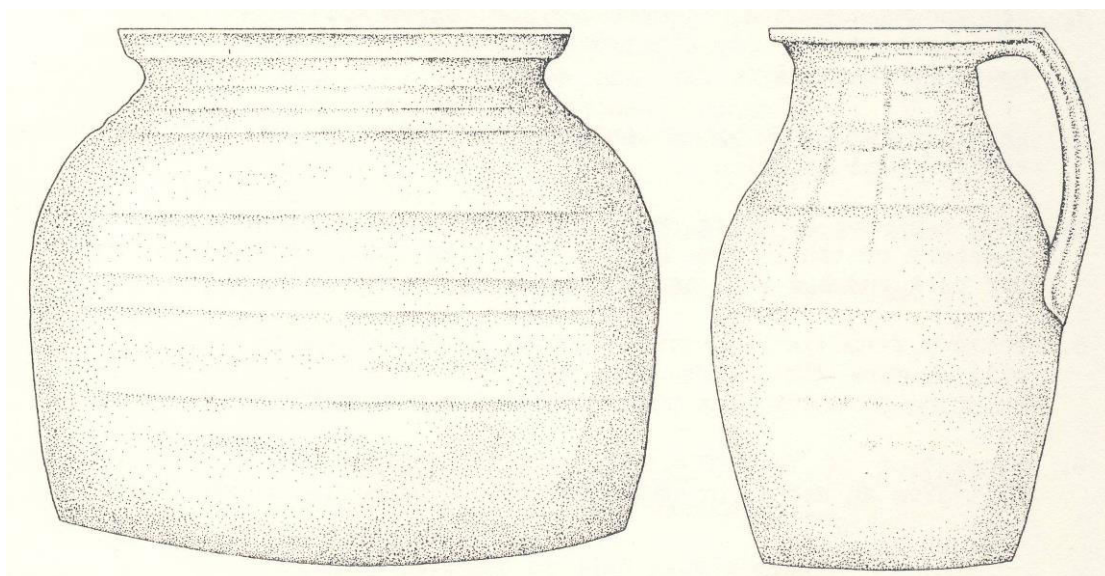


Figure 7. Reconstruction drawings of pottery from 1987 excavations.

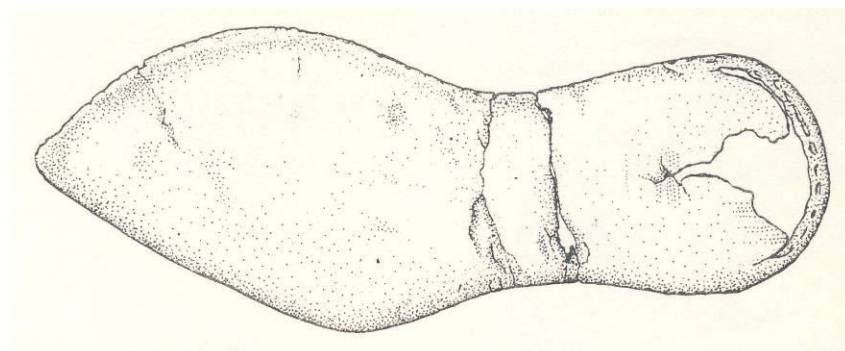


Figure 8. Leather shoe sole with pointed toe, typical of thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Conclusions

The trial trench work adjacent to the Freshney Haven and River Head has provided evidence for the accurate location of the medieval waterfront and some indication of the arrangement associated with the port facilities here to complement the documentary research. Unfortunately construction work on the new road precludes further archaeological work in this area to establish a complete picture of the Freshney Haven facilities and the location and type of buildings on the waterfront.

The 1987 trial work has shown that medieval deposits on the site of the Augustinian Friary are well preserved. Artefacts recovered from these deposits suggest occupation of the site dating back to the twelfth century associated with timber-framed buildings.

Full scale area excavation on the site of the Augustinian Friary can now be justified for the following reasons:

Little archaeological work has been undertaken in Grimsby and the new shopping centre will be situated in the only remaining area of the medieval town which has not been redeveloped.

Archaeological work has been carried out on only a small proportion of Augustinian Friary sites nationwide and few of these excavations have been extensive.

Trial trench work has shown that there is minimal disturbance to the medieval deposits.

The evidence suggests that the majority of the domestic living quarters of the friars lies in the area currently occupied by the car park and has thus escaped major disturbance.

Pottery from the site will provide a chronological sequence which will enable the finds obtained from Grimsby to be studied in relation to those from other medieval settlements in the area.

Excavation of the site will provide information and finds which will give an excellent basis for museum displays, educational uses, etc.

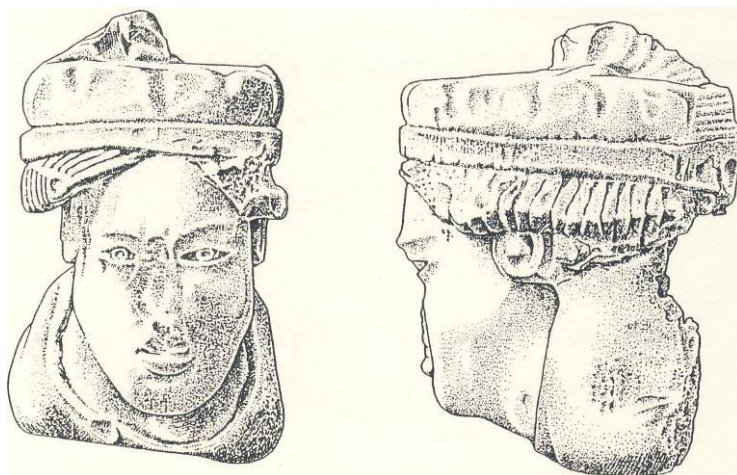


Figure 9. Medieval stone head found on site of Augustinian Friary. (Currently on display at Welholme Galleries, Grimsby).

