

EXCAVATIONS AT ALDBOROUGH  
(ISURIUM BRIGANTUM)  
2017  
INTERIM REPORT



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ALDBOROUGH ROMAN TOWN PROJECT 2017

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# EXPLORATORY EXCAVATIONS ON THE FORUM AT ALDBOROUGH (ISURIUM BRIGANTUM) 2017

## Summary

An excavation was carried out by the Aldborough Roman Town Project, University of Cambridge, between the 4<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2017 on the site of the Roman forum at Aldborough. The excavation was undertaken to confirm the location and orientation of the forum, as well as to gather possible dating and phasing. The trench would also test key questions about the early development of the Roman town.

## Introduction

Richard Gough's edition of Camden's *Britannia* published in 1789 records the discovery of a monumental range of rooms to the north of St Andrew's church in Aldborough in 1770 (Figure 1). A recently rediscovered plan of the structures survives in an album compiled by William Hargrove from 1825 (Figure 2). This plan complements that published by Gough, and is apparently copied from a contemporary record which was also Gough's source. It has long been believed that the rooms uncovered in 1770 formed the northern range of the forum of the Roman town, although previous scholars have assumed that the published plan is inaccurate since it shows the forum at an angle to the church, and thus to the Roman street grid. However, our geophysical survey of the Roman town had suggested that Gough's plan was accurate as it revealed other evidence for a street misaligned with the grid, perhaps suggesting an earlier phase of planning.

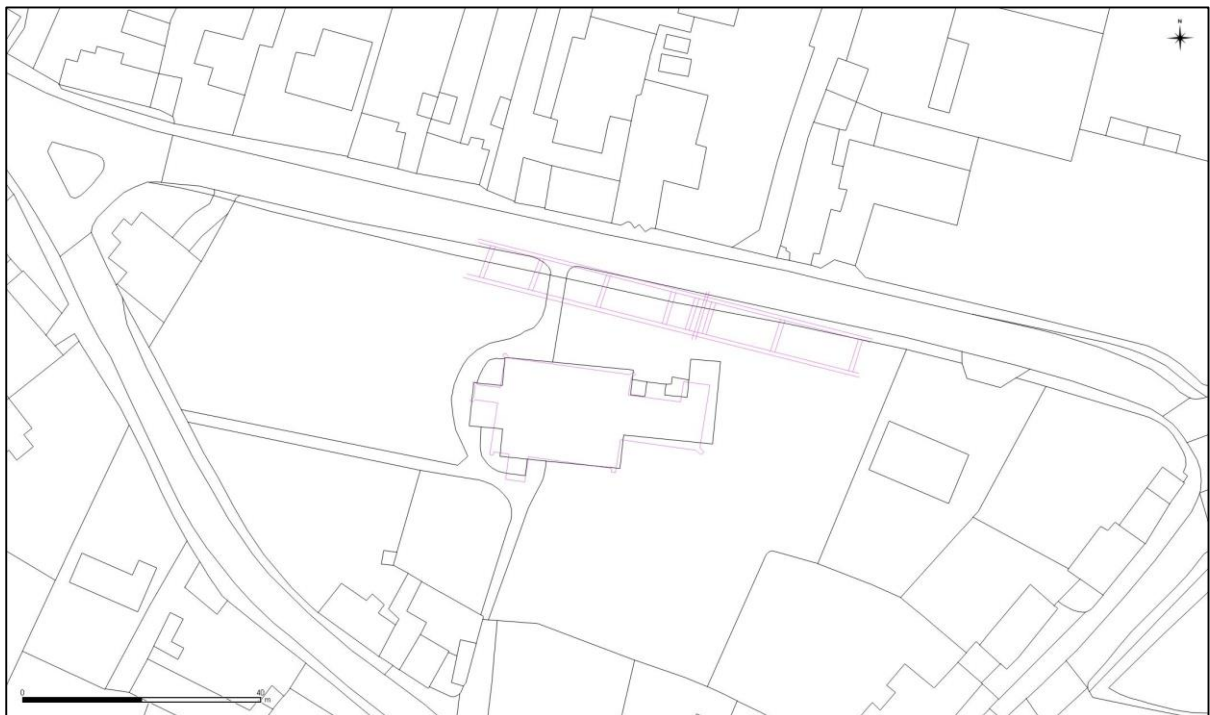


Figure 1: A plan of the forum walls from Gough georeferenced (in pink) with the OS map of the church.

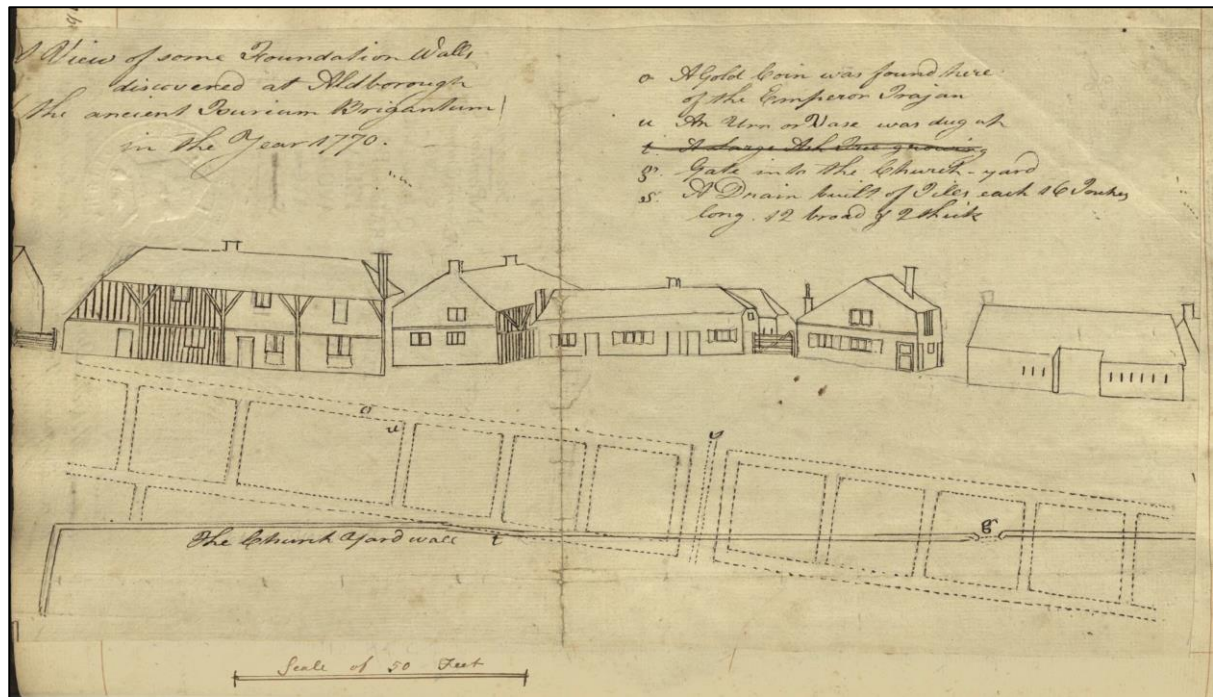


Figure 2: Hargrove's plan of the forum with original annotations (Hargrove 1825). Reproduced with kind permission of York City Library.

In order to establish more about the plan of the *forum*, ground-penetrating radar surveys were undertaken in the churchyard and along the road to the north of the church in 2012-13 and 2015 (Figure 3). These surveys seemed to confirm the survival of the north range beneath the grass verge and road, and also revealed evidence for the west and south ranges of the forum square.

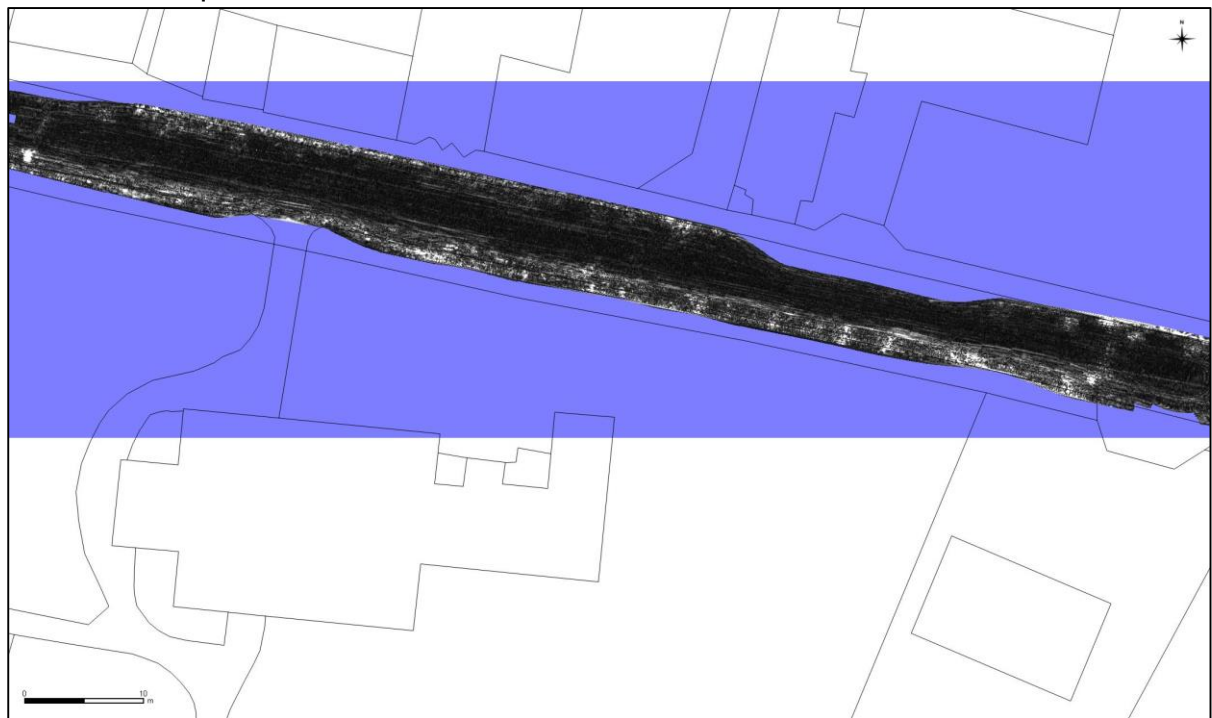


Figure 3: Georeferenced GPR data (101-106cm depth slice). GPR by Lieven Verdonck.

To test the survival of the north range, and in the hope of establishing the chronology of the forum, a small excavation was undertaken in 2017. The area available was limited to the



grass verge of the road north of the church and was constrained by the presence of the road, churchyard wall, and services. By mapping the latter we were able to select an area in which to dig a trench 12m by 1m placed to locate walls indicated in the GPR survey. In the event, the trench had to be narrowed further to 0.60m, because of a 19<sup>th</sup> century drainage pipe running along the edge of the road.

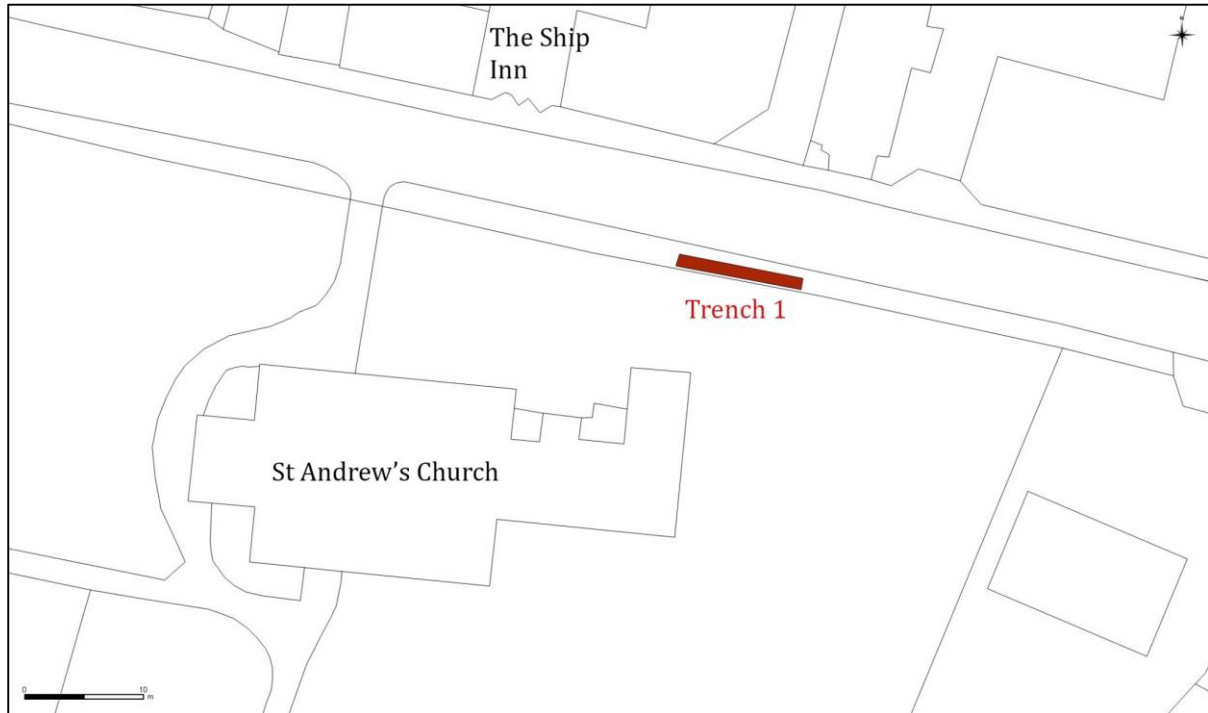


Figure 4: Location of Trench 1



Figure 5: Location of trench on Low Lane, Aldborough (facing west)

## Methodology

The trench was dug by hand in order to understand the full sequence of deposits, but also to work carefully around services. LS Archaeology acted as trained Highways Operative and Supervisor, in accordance with North Yorkshire Highways Agency Standards.

Drawings were made by hand, and features were additionally recorded with the TST. The excavated trench was recorded using photogrammetry by Dominic Powlesland (Landscape Research Centre), and was tied in using targets with the TST.



*Figure 6: (Left) excavation underway with Donna McCallay and Gigi Signorelli. (Right) photogrammetric survey being carried out by Dominic Powlesland (LRC).*

## Results and discussion

Despite the constraints which dictated such a narrow trench, the excavation was very successful. Beneath a disturbed overburden containing modern material (post 1770), the excavation revealed two parallel and substantial Roman walls (each 0.90m wide) built of limestone (most likely from the Cadeby formation). These survived for one course above foundation level. They divided two rooms of the north range of the forum, and at the west end the possible entrance to the forum. A section was cut down to the surface of the natural subsoil in the room defined by these walls, and also in the rooms to the east and west. This revealed the following a sequence which we should be able to date once the pottery has been processed. The area opened was too limited to see much of the plan of the features, but importantly it confirmed the size and orientation of the building and its rooms. The finds offer good potential for dating - good assemblages of pottery and bone was recovered - flotation samples were taken as well as samples of stonework for further geological analysis.

The 3D model of the excavated trench can be viewed at:  
<https://sketchfab.com/models/2d75944b45b549dc9cc9f5df52ca2c56>

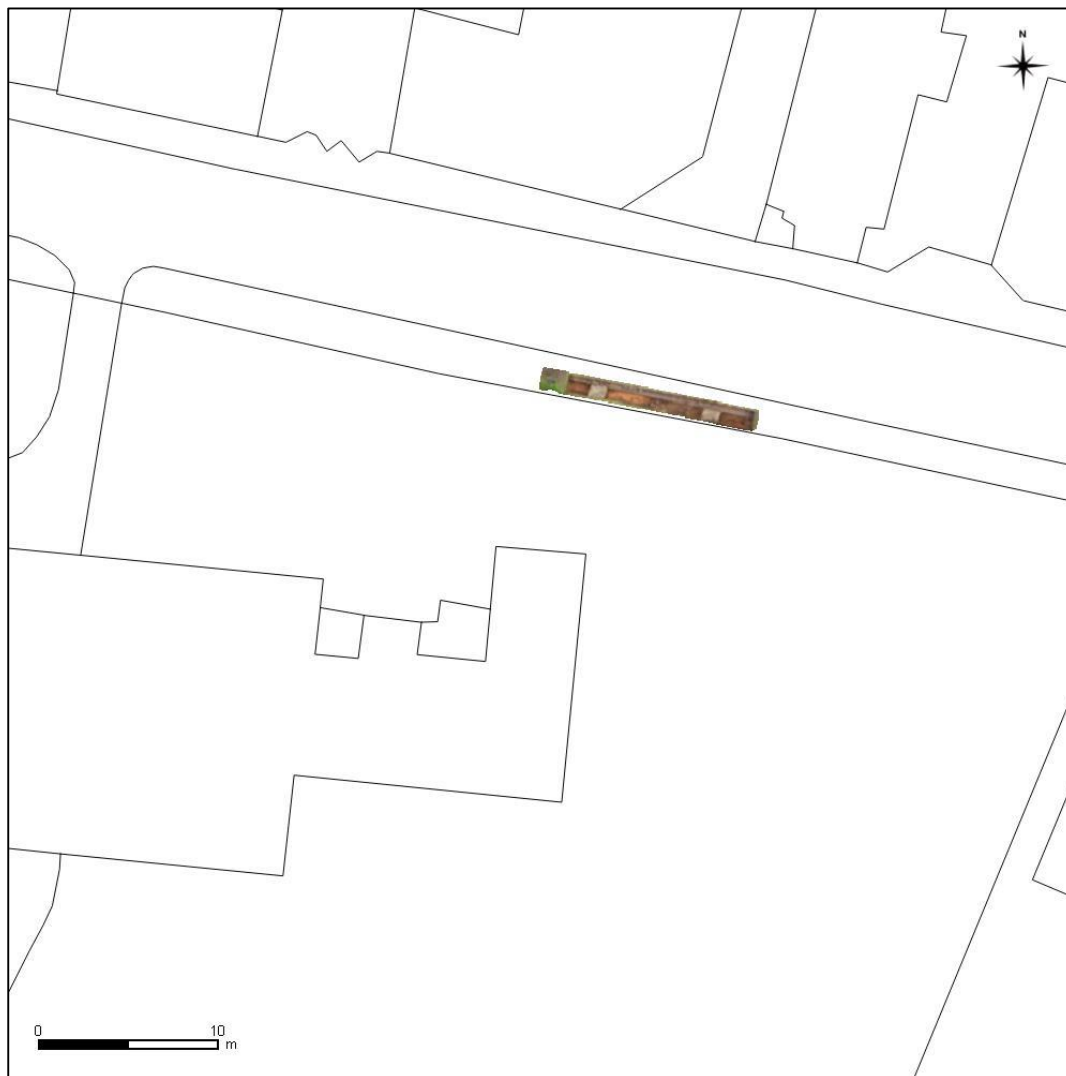


Figure 7: Georeferenced location of the photogrammetric model of the excavated trench





Figure 8: Photogrammetric model of the excavated trench (and mapped lines of the church wall and verge). Model created by Dominic Powlesland (LRC).



ALDBOROUGH ROMAN TOWN PROJECT  
TRENCH 1: MATRIX  
SEPTEMBER 2017

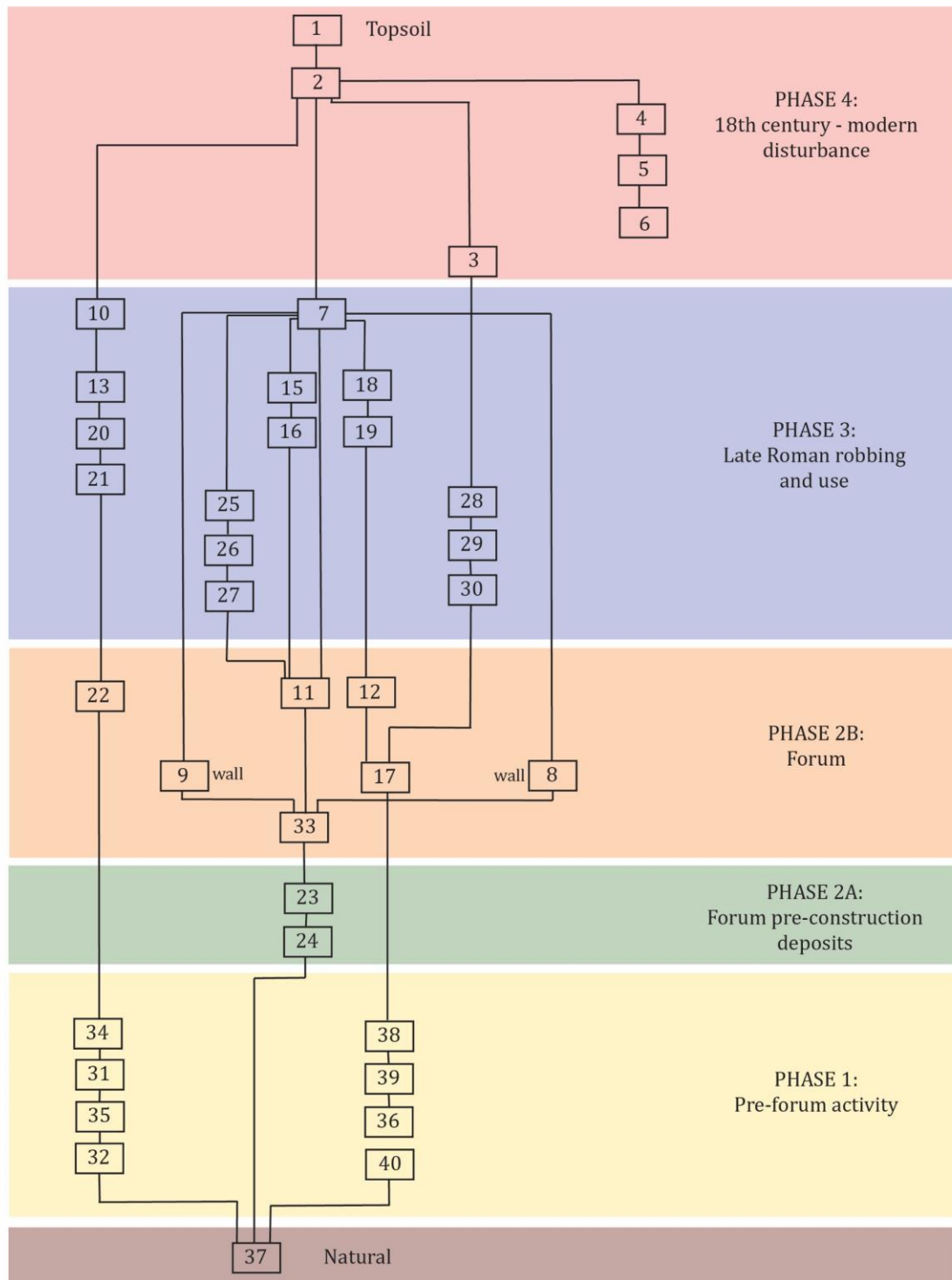


Figure 9: Trench matrix and phasing

## The excavated sequence

(See Figure 9 for matrix and phasing)

### Phase I

At the bottom of the sequence the natural sand had been cut by a series of features, and here was an accumulation of soil. Two principal features were recorded. At the eastern end of the trench a linear cut feature surrounded by a packed stone surface seems likely to have been part of a beam slot (Figure 10). Along the southern side of the trench to the west we may have been on the lip of a ditch or another beam slot. A provisional assessment of the pottery suggests that occupation began during the Flavian period.



Figure 10: Beam slot and stone surface from Phase I

### Phase 2A

The Phase I deposits were sealed by a thick layer of redeposited sand through which the *forum* walls were cut. It seems most likely that this represents material derived from the cutting of the foundation trenches for the *forum* and levelling of the site for its construction. On this basis most of the material in these deposits is probably redeposited.

### Phase 2B

The forum walls were both constructed in trenches the bases of which were lined with layers of large river cobbles. Above this, were three courses of roughly carved stone, each of which had concrete poured over it. The stone and concrete entirely filled the trench (except in one area where a gap was later infilled with darks sand). On top of this were

courses of ashlar in 'petit appareil' (Figure 11). The Phase 2A deposits survived up to the top of the foundations and overlapped the lower course of the ashlar, presumably immediately under the floor, the make-up for which had only survived in the western 'room'. From the plan this would have been the entrance to the Forum, and is likely therefore to have had a different method of flooring and preparation from the internal rooms.



Figure 11: (left) The two walls facing east and (right) the eastern wall (west face) showing construction techniques.

### Phase 3

Truncation of the deposits in the 18<sup>th</sup> century has removed any evidence for the floors or later alterations to the building, but it appears anyway that at some stage in late Antiquity these had been removed, as there were a series of features including a probable hearth (Figure 12) as well as a pit that were cut into the Period 2A deposits in the middle room. Several postholes with packing stones (Figure 12) also date to this period. These may relate to late Roman use of the building.





Figure 12: (left) A hearth or burnt pit and (right) post hole with packing stones from Phase 3.

## Phase 4

18<sup>th</sup> century activity relating to straightening the road and church wall, reached down to the level of the top of the walls. This phase was represented by a thick layer of redeposited soil and bands of sand, with finds dating from the 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century. There had been disturbance due to the digging of drains and other utilities.

## The Forum plan

The two walls examined confirm the dimensions given by Gough, and their orientation is different to the later street grid exactly as he had recorded. They also provide sufficient information for us to work further on the layout of the *forum* in the future using the GPR data as well as the antiquarian plans. For the moment, it is worth noting two points. First, our plan excavation suggests that the northern entrance to the forum lay in the western part of our trench where we recovered *tegulae* that might derive from the drain that was recorded there in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Second, the walls we revealed were 5.5m, or approximately 18 feet apart, the same as the distance Gough records as the width of the building range. This is consistent with Hargrove's plan, which shows the *tabernae* here as square.

## Conclusion

The excavation produced excellent results despite the limited area available. A good assemblage of pottery and animal bone, especially from the earliest phases, should contribute significantly to understanding the development of the Roman town.



## Acknowledgements

We are very grateful for the continued assistance of Andrew Lawson-Tancred in numerous aspects of the organisation and practicalities of the excavation. Our warmest thanks also to the residents of Aldborough, who were so welcoming and enthusiastic about the excavation. We are particularly grateful to Aidan Foster for all his help, to Steve and Pam Weston for their hospitality and drone footage of the trench, and the staff at the Ship Inn for their hospitality and kindness.

We were joined this year by Donna McCallay and Gigi Signorelli of LS Archaeology, to whom we are most grateful for all their hard work, and good humour! We were delighted to welcome back Hanneke Reijnierse-Salisbury and Jason Lucas, who both volunteered their time to come and help yet again with excavation and survey. Our long term collaborator Dominic Powlesland (Landscape Research Centre) created another fantastic photogrammetric model of the trench, and offered advice throughout, for which we continue to be hugely grateful. We were joined again by Dave Haldenby, Roy Doughty and Chris Hannard, who brought their skills of metal detecting on archaeological excavations, and usual good cheer! The members of FORA gave us valuable time and energy to help with stewarding and finds processing, and our thanks to them for their cheerful assistance! Particular thanks to David Roberts and Jane Barber for organising the talk at the church, and the publicity for the dig.



## **Bibliography**

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## **Appendix 1: Project Team**

*Excavation:* Rose Ferraby, Donna McCallay, Martin Millett, Hanneke Reijnierse-Salisbury, Gigi Signorelli

*Survey:* Jason Lucas

*Photogrammetry:* Dominic Powlesland

*GPR:* Jess Ogden and Lieven Verdonck

## **Appendix 2: Report archive**

OASIS ID: roseferr2-304482