

Reports from the Environmental Archaeology Unit, York

**Assessment of biological remains from excavations at Rawcliffe
Manor, near York (Phase 6; YAT/Yorkshire Museum sitecode
93.5007)**

by

Keith Dobney, Allan Hall, Michael Issitt, Harry Kenward, Frances
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Report **94/8**

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Summary

A series of deposits from C14/15th occupation associated with a medieval aisled hall was examined by means of one kilogramme 'test' and bulk-sieved samples. There was virtually no preservation of ancient remains by anoxic waterlogging apart from a very few plant remains and some traces of bone. The plant material, together with a few charred plant remains may be of some value in identifying materials used in the buildings, but the concentrations are extremely low.

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Assessment of biological remains from excavations at Rawcliffe Manor, near York (YAT/Yorkshire Museum sitecode 93.5007)

Introduction and methods

A series of nine 'general biological analysis' (GBA, *sensu* Dobney *et al.* 1992) and five bulk-sieving (BS) samples were selected by the excavator, Kurt Hunter-Mann, for an assessment of their potential for bioarchaeological analysis. They represented a total of nine contexts of C14/15th date associated with occupation of buildings at the site.

The GBA samples were described in the laboratory using a standard *pro forma* and 1 kg 'test' subsamples processing following methods outlined by Kenward *et al.* (1980; 1986). Since the organic content appeared to be low throughout, no paraffin flotation was undertaken but material of low density was isolated by means of a 'washover'.

No hand-collected bone was examined during this exercise, emphasis being placed on material from BS samples.

Results

The results of the investigations are given in a sample-by-sample account in the appendix.

Preservation by anoxic 'waterlogging' was almost non-existent (apart from some modern rootlets in all samples and occasionally also modern seeds). However, there were a very few, apparently ancient, uncharred remains in the 'test' subsample from 606 which may indicate the importation and use of heathland or moorland vegetation, turf or peat, probably for roofing or fuel. Charred material was present throughout, almost all of it fine charcoal; in a few cases (samples 606, 626 and 673) there were very small numbers of identifiable remains which may indicate the nature of the material (other than wood) being burnt.

Statement of potential and recommendations

There may be some value in examining in more detail samples from contexts 6339, 6458, and 6832 to establish what plant taxa can be identified, although it is unlikely that very much more information can be obtained. In the first instance, the material processed so far should be inspected more closely, but there may be a need to process further subsamples of the GBAs concerned to extract more material.

The minute quantities of bone from the BS samples indicate that no further sieving for these remains can be justified, though recovery of pottery and other artefactual material may be required.

The likely time requirement for further examination of the plant material from the three contexts mentioned above (including the submission of a report) would be:

Research fellow	3 days
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If further processing of these samples is required, a further component should be added:

Technician	1 day
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Retention/disposal

All material should be retained until a decision about further post-excavation work can be made.

Archive

All processed material and paper and electronic archives relating to it are currently stored at the EAU, University of York.

Acknowledgments

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References

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Appendix

The results of the investigations are given here in context number order, with information from the excavator concerning context types in brackets.

Context 6334 [C15th dump in midden (late)] Sample 602 (GBA)

Dark grey-brown, crumbly (working slightly plastic), very slightly sandy silty with much ?ash, and inclusions of orange-brown silt and ?ash and traces of charcoal; modern rootlets present.

There were abundant modern rootlets in the small washover, together with a moderate amount of fine charcoal to 5 mm, and some small ?charred moss stem fragments.

Context 6339 [C14th dump in midden (middle)] Sample 606 (GBA)

Dark grey, crumbly (working slightly plastic), ?ash-rich silt with traces of charcoal.

Moderate amounts of modern rootlets and fine charcoal to 5 mm (including charred moss stems) made up the bulk of the small washover, but there were also a few uncharred leaves of heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) and what appeared to be cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*), perhaps most likely to be from peat or turves used for fuel or in building.

Sample 607 (BS; 18 kg)

The small residue consisted mostly of charcoal to 25 mm, with traces of bone (to 25 mm), pot (to 20 mm), a ?iron object, brick/tile (to 10 mm), a few stones (to 15 mm) and some pellets of grey ash (to 15 mm). There were also some modern rootlets.

Context 6371 [C14th dump in midden (early)] Sample 617 (GBA)

Dark grey-brown, slightly crumbly (working plastic) very slightly sandy silty clay with traces of charcoal and marine mollusc shell and some patches of orange-brown and lighter grey ?ash.

The small washover contained some modern rootlets and charcoal to 5 mm and a single modern seed.

Sample 620 (BS; 18 kg)

The small residue was mostly of charcoal (to 20 mm) with a little gravel and stone (to 50 mm) and a trace of bone (to 25 mm); modern rootlets were also present.

Context 6458 [C14/15th occupation/floor deposit in Room 3 (late)]
Sample 626 (GBA)

Mid/dark brown, crumbly, sandy silt and ?ash with traces of stones 2-6 mm, brick/tile and charcoal and of modern rootlets.

There were abundant modern roots and moderate amounts of fine charcoal, including very small twigs, to 5 mm in the small washover; traces of uncharred plant remains included a rush (*Juncus*) and a forget-me-not (*Myosotis*) seed and there was a charred shoot tip of heather.

Context 6591 [C14th occupation/floor deposit in Room 3 (middle)]
Sample 660 (GBA)

Mid grey-brown, crumbly, slightly sandy silt with traces of brick/tile and charcoal and modern rootlets present.

The very small washover was of modern roots with a small amount of charcoal <2 mm.

Sample 661 (BS; 25 kg)

There was a very small residue of gravel and stones (to 40 mm) with modern rootlets and traces of charcoal (to 10 mm) and of brick/tile (to 15 mm).

Context 6655 [C14th occupation/floor deposit in Room 2 (middle)]
Sample 655 (GBA)

Mid orange-brown to mid grey-brown, crumbly, slightly sandy silt with traces of charcoal and modern rootlets.

The small washover comprised modern rootlets with a small amount of charcoal to 10 mm; there was a single rather fresh-looking corn gromwell (*Lithospermum arvense*) nutlet which, assuming it to be modern, must represent a period when the field in which this site was located had been under arable cultivation.

Sample 656 (BS; 40 kg)

The very small residue was mostly undisaggregated gleyed clay but there was a little gravel and a few stones (to 20 mm); traces of pot (to 35 mm), brick/tile (to 20 mm), charcoal and bone (to 20 mm) were accompanied by a small amount of modern rootlet material.

Context 6692 [C14th occupation/floor deposit in Room 2 (early)]
Sample 667 (GBA)

Mid orange-grey-brown, crumbly, slightly sandy silt with traces of charcoal.

There was a small amount of modern rootlet material and charcoal to 10 mm in the small washover. Apart from a very poorly preserved charred ?barley (*Hordeum*) grain, the only identifiable plant remains were a modern seed of chickweed (*Cerastium*) and a seed fragments of *Sambucus*, probably elderberry.

Context 6695 [C14th occupation/floor deposit in Room 1 (late)]
Sample 665 (GBA)

Mid grey-brown, crumbly, slightly sandy silt with traces of brick/tile and moderate amounts of charcoal; modern rootlets present. Some lumps of light yellow-brown ?ash and red-brown burnt soil also noted.

There was an abundance of modern rootlets with a small amount of fine charcoal to 5 mm in the small washover, together with a single modern grass caryopsis.

Sample 666 (BS; 28 kg)

The residue was very small and consisted of gravel and stones (to 50 mm) with a single pot sherd (to 40 mm), a trace of bone and of charcoal (both to 15 mm), and some modern rootlets.

Context 6832 [C14th occupation/floor deposit in Room 1 (early)]
Sample 673 (GBA)

Very heterogeneous dark buff to orange-brown to grey-brown to black (mainly dark grey-brown), crumbly (working plastic) clay silt with moderate amounts of charcoal.

The small washover was rich in modern rootlets, with some fine charcoal to 5 mm, including herbaceous charred plant material (some apparently grass/cereal leaf blade) and a single, very poorly preserved charred ?barley grain.