

Palaeoecology Research Services

**Technical report: Plant remains from excavations to  
the rear of Wakeman's House, High Skellgate, Ripon  
(sitecode: HARGM 10486)**

by

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**Summary**

*Excavations were undertaken by York Archaeological Trust on land to the rear of Wakeman's House, High Skellgate, Ripon, North Yorkshire. A series of archaeological deposits and features of 11/12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century date were revealed.*

*Following an initial assessment of samples taken to investigate biological remains further investigation was undertaken of a sediment sample recovered from Context 1018, one of several 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century dumps of domestic waste within a hollow that had formed as a result of possible subsidence of the fills in pit 1061.*

*Overall the plant remains in the sample suggest debris from the burning of litter containing straw and perhaps cut wetland vegetation, but with a wetland component that had not been charred. Some charred remains thought likely to indicate the burning of soil, perhaps attached to turves, were identified, which suggest that the material was probably incorporated into the pit fill as part of the ash component.*

**KEYWORDS:** WAKEMAN'S HOUSE; HIGH SKELLGATE; RIPON; NORTH YORKSHIRE; MEDIEVAL; PLANT REMAINS; CHARRED PLANT REMAINS

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## Technical report: Plant remains from excavations to the rear of Wakeman's House, High Skellgate, Ripon (site code: HARGM 10486)

### Introduction

Excavations were undertaken by York Archaeological Trust on land to the rear of Wakeman's House, High Skellgarth, Ripon, North Yorkshire (NGR: SE 3116 7123) in December 2000. A series of archaeological deposits and features of 11/12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century date were revealed.

During the excavation, a number of sediment samples were collected from various deposits for investigation of their bioarchaeological potential. An assessment (Jaques *et al.* 2001) of four of the samples recovered few ancient plant and invertebrate remains of interpretative value. Further examination of the samples was not warranted, with the exception of an unusual charred material which was observed in some quantities from Sample 1, Context 1018. This deposit was one of several 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century dumps of domestic waste within a hollow that had formed as a result of possible subsidence of the fills in pit 1061. The following report documents the results of further investigations of this sample.

### Methods

The sediment sample was inspected in the laboratory during the assessment and its lithology was recorded, using a standard *pro forma*, prior to processing, following the procedures of Kenward *et al.* (1980), for recovery of plant macrofossils. The washover and residue were examined for plant remains.

### Results

Archaeological information provided by the excavator, is presented in square brackets. A full list of the plant remains and other

components recorded from this sample can be found in Table 1.

**Context 1018** [Possible upper fill of pit, consisting of mixed lenses of ash, charcoal and burnt clay. 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century spot date]

Sample 1/T (3 kg sieved to 300 microns with washover)

A moist, crumbly and soft (working slightly plastic), jumbled mixture of light reddish-brown sand or ash and black ?charcoal rich ?ash (or ?charcoal-rich ?ashy humic silt). Stones (20 to 60 mm) were present in the sample.

This subsample yielded a large residue of about 350 cm<sup>3</sup> of sand and gravel (to 40 mm in maximum dimension) with some charcoal (to 20 mm). The rather large washover of about 125 cm<sup>3</sup> was of charcoal (including hazel, *Corylus avellana* L., roundwood fragments and some ash, *Fraxinus*), with a trace of charred hazel nutshell and cereal grains (barley, *Hordeum*; bread/club wheat, *Triticum 'aestivo-compactum'*; oats, *Avena* and ?rye, cf. *Secale cereale* L.).

There were also modest quantities of an unusual material consisting of small granules of what appeared to be charred amorphous organic matter. It was perhaps burnt peat, but could not be identified with certainty and required further examination. A further subsample of 0.975 g was subsequently examined without being dried after disaggregation. The clasts which appeared to have been peat seeded, from this subsample, more likely to have been ash which had 'set' on drying. In a wet state they were very soft and easily fell apart, though they had survived fairly vigorous sieving.

Other charred plant remains comprised a single achene of corn marigold (*Chrysanthemum segetum* L.), some small

leguminous seeds (<2 mm), probably vetch (*Vicia* sp.), and single nutlets of saw-sedge (*Cladium mariscus* (L.) Pohl), sedge (*Carex*) and bur-reed (*Sparganium* sp.). Some uncharred remains were also present, mainly seeds of toad rush (*Juncus bufonius* L.) in modest concentrations, but also a fragment of a hemp agrimony (*Eupatorium cannabinum* L.) achene and the exocarp (outer 'skin') of a spike-rush (*Eleocharis palustris sensu lato*) nutlet. Within the finest fraction were modest numbers of megaspores of the lesser clubmoss, *Selaginella selaginoides* (L.) Link. There was also a little bone, pottery and uncharred wood.

## Discussion

Overall the plant remains in this sample suggest debris from the burning of litter containing straw and perhaps cut wetland vegetation, but with a wetland component that had not been charred (perhaps because it was part of a bulk of material that did not all get burnt). However the presence of the toad rush seeds and clubmoss spores (if they were part of the same community in life) points to a likely source in short, moist turf or the margins of a pond, and, if they did not arrive on feet, must surely indicate the presence of something like turves. The turves or mud need not have been dug from short wet grassland or a pond edge, however, since these seeds and spores may have been part of the 'seed bank' in the soil carried with turves and representing a somewhat earlier stage in the succession of plant communities (cf. Hall 2003). *S. selaginoides* is primarily a plant from upland habitats but may well have grown in the hills to the west of Ripon at this period. The presence of some charred remains thought likely to indicate the burning of soil, perhaps attached to turves, presumably means that the material was incorporated into the pit fill as part of the ash component: there were some sclerotia (resting bodies) of the soil fungus *Cenococcum*, which appeared to have been

charred, along with traces of charred moss stem.

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Table 1. Plant remains and other components from an excavation at The Wakeman's House, Ripon, North Yorkshire (HARGM 10486), Context 1018, Sample 1. Taxonomic order and nomenclature follow Tutin et al. (1964-80). 'Amount' was scored on a four-point scale from 1: one or a few remains, a trace to 4: abundant remains, a major component of the sample. Plant material was preserved by anoxic 'waterlogging' unless otherwise indicated.

Taxon, vernacular name and parts recorded	Amount	Notes
<i>Selaginella selaginoides</i> (L.) Link (lesser clubmoss) megaspore(s)	2	
Coniferae (conifer) charcoal fragment(s)	1	max dimension 2 mm
<i>Corylus avellana</i> L. (hazel) charred nut(s)		
and/or nutshell fragment(s)	1	max dimension 10 mm
charcoal fragment(s)	1	max dimension 20 mm
<i>Polygonum</i> cf. <i>persicaria</i> L. (?persicaria/red shank) fruit(s)	1	a single ?charred fragment
Leguminosae (pea family) charred cotyledon(s)	1	max dimension 2 mm
<i>Vicia</i> sp(p). vetches, etc. charred seed(s)	1	max dimension 2 mm
<i>Fraxinus excelsior</i> L. (ash) charcoal fragment(s)	1	max dimension 5 mm
<i>Eupatorium cannabinum</i> L. (hemp agrimony) achene(s)	1	a single fragment
<i>Chrysanthemum segetum</i> L. (corn marigold) charred achene(s)	1	a single specimen
<i>Juncus bufonius</i> L. (toad rush) seed(s)	2	
Cerealina indet. (cereals) charred caryopsis/es	1	
<i>Triticum 'aestivo-compactum'</i> (bread/club wheat)		
charred caryopsis/es	1	
cf. <i>Secale cereale</i> L. (?rye) charred caryopsis/es	1	a single specimen
<i>Hordeum</i> sp(p). (barley) charred caryopsis/es	1	
<i>Avena</i> sp(p). (oats) charred caryopsis/es	1	
charred awn fragment(s)	1	
<i>Sparganium</i> sp(p). (bur-reeds) charred fruit(s)	1	a single specimen
<i>Eleocharis palustris sensu lato</i> (common spike-rush) exocarp	1	a single specimen
<i>Cladium mariscus</i> (L.) Pohl (great sedge/saw-sedge)		
charred nutlet(s)	1	a single specimen
<i>Carex</i> sp(p). (sedges) charred nutlet(s)	1	a single specimen
<b>Other components</b>		
'ash beads'	1	max dimension 5 mm
?burnt peat fragments	2	max dimension 5 mm
?cinders	1	max dimension 5 mm
<i>Cenococcum</i> (charred sclerotia)	2	
bark fragments	1	max dimension 5 mm
beetles	1	very decayed
bone fragments	1	max dimension 40 mm
burnt bone fragments	1	max dimension 10 mm
charcoal	2	max dimension 20 mm
fish bone	1	max dimension 2 mm
fish scale	1	max dimension 2 mm
glassy slag	1	max dimension 5 mm
gravel	2	max dimension 40 mm
mites	1	
moss (charred stem fragments)	1	
pottery	1	max dimension 20 mm
sand	3	
twig fragments (charred)	1	max dimension 5 mm
wood fragments	1	max dimension 10 mm