



Horncastle, Lincolnshire

Watching brief on suspected Roman wall,
December 2022

Tony Wilmott



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Summary

In December 2022 a stone wall was noticed in the section of a water pipe trench immediately south of the known line of the south wall of the Roman defences of Horncastle. It was suggested that this wall was Roman, and possibly the side of a bastion on the Roman wall. The wall was recorded. It proved to be a post-medieval structure constructed using Roman *spolia* (repurposed building material).

Contributors

Sarah Newsome, Historic England, and John Vallender, Historic England.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the landowner, Mr Mark Everton, for permission to access the site, and to Ian George and Ian Marshman of Planning Services Department, Lincolnshire County Council, and Mr Michael Hieatt of the Manor House, Horncastle for their interest and advice. The location of the trench was surveyed by Sarah Newsome, Landscape Archaeology Manager at Historic England, who came out in the snow from the Cambridge office. Figure 6 was drawn by Sarah Newsome, and Figure 8 by John Vallender. Photographs are by the author. Figures 2 and 4 are reproduced by permission of the Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology, and Figure 1 by the Horncastle Civic Society.

Archive location

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Date of investigation

The site was visited, and the recording took place on 12 – 14 December 2022. The report was written in January 2023.

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Introduction

Horncastle is situated in the Lincolnshire Wolds in the East Lindsey district of Lincolnshire, 27 km to the east of the city of Lincoln. The settlement developed at the confluence of two rivers, the Bain, and its tributary, the Waring. The area has been subject to massive landscape change since Roman times through the drainage of the fens, canalisation of the rivers and coastal erosion. The site has been recognised as a Roman walled place since Stukeley described it in his *Itinerarium Curiosum*, in which he also published the first plan (Figure 1) (Stukeley 1724).

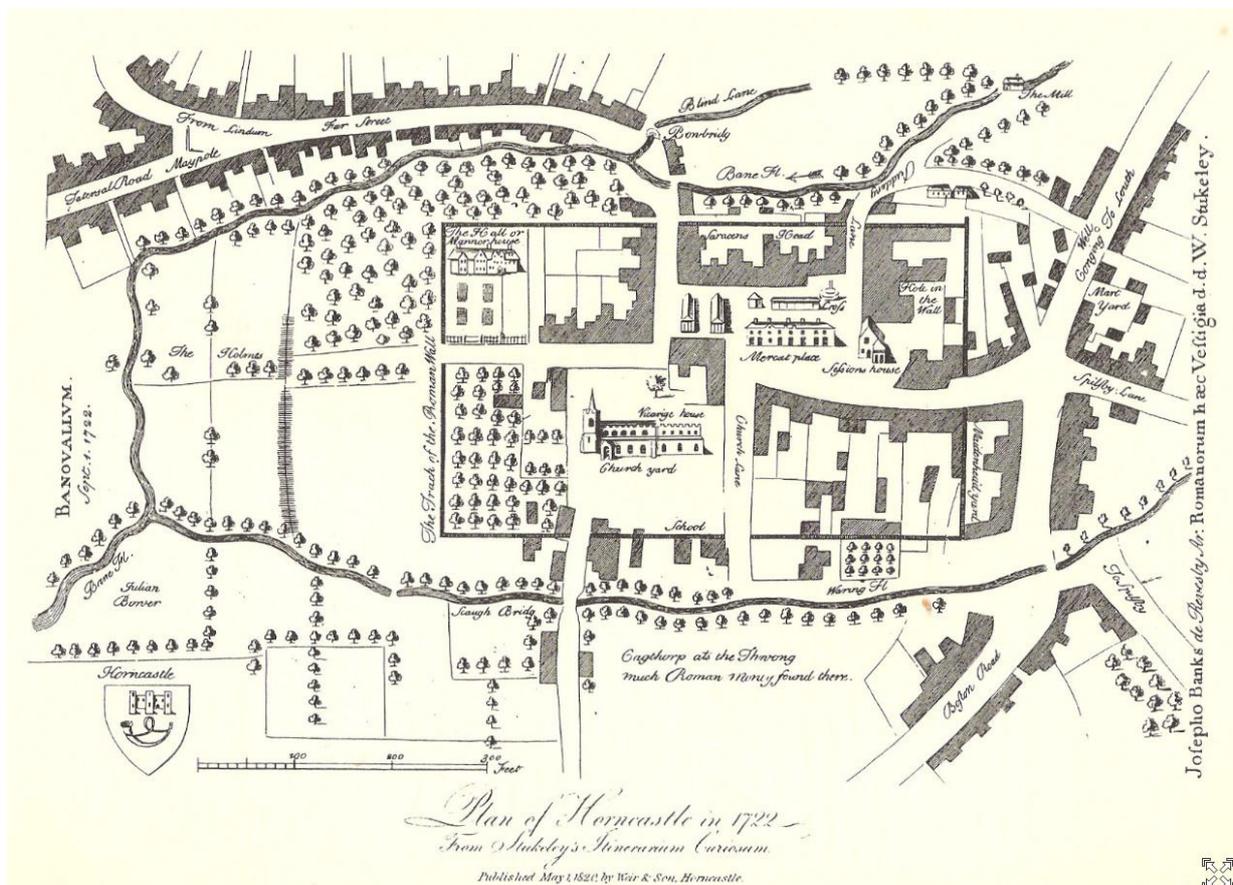


Figure 1: Plan of Horncastle from Stukeley's 1724 *Itinerarium Curiosum* © Horncastle Civic Society <http://www.horncastlecivic.org.uk/history/roman-horncastle.php>

The archaeology and topography of the site has been described in detail by Field and Hurst (1983), who also prepared a comprehensive plan of the walled area (Figure 2), derived from archaeological work and from surviving elements of the Roman defences which can be seen in several parts of the town (Figure 3). The site was formerly regarded as a Roman walled small town, but it is now apparent that an extensive unwalled area

began in the pre-Roman period and continued in use until the late 4th century AD, while the walled area was a military construction dating to the late 3rd or 4th century, comparable to the forts of the Saxon Shore in the south-east of England (Johnson 1976). The fortified area was trapezoidal in plan, measuring approximately 190 m by 106 m, with gates located to the east and west, at the ends of the long axis. Bastions were provided at the corners, but no evidence has been found of bastions along the sides of the structure. The substantial walls, 4.01 m in width, were built using local Spilsby sandstone, both for facing stones and for the rubble and mortar core.

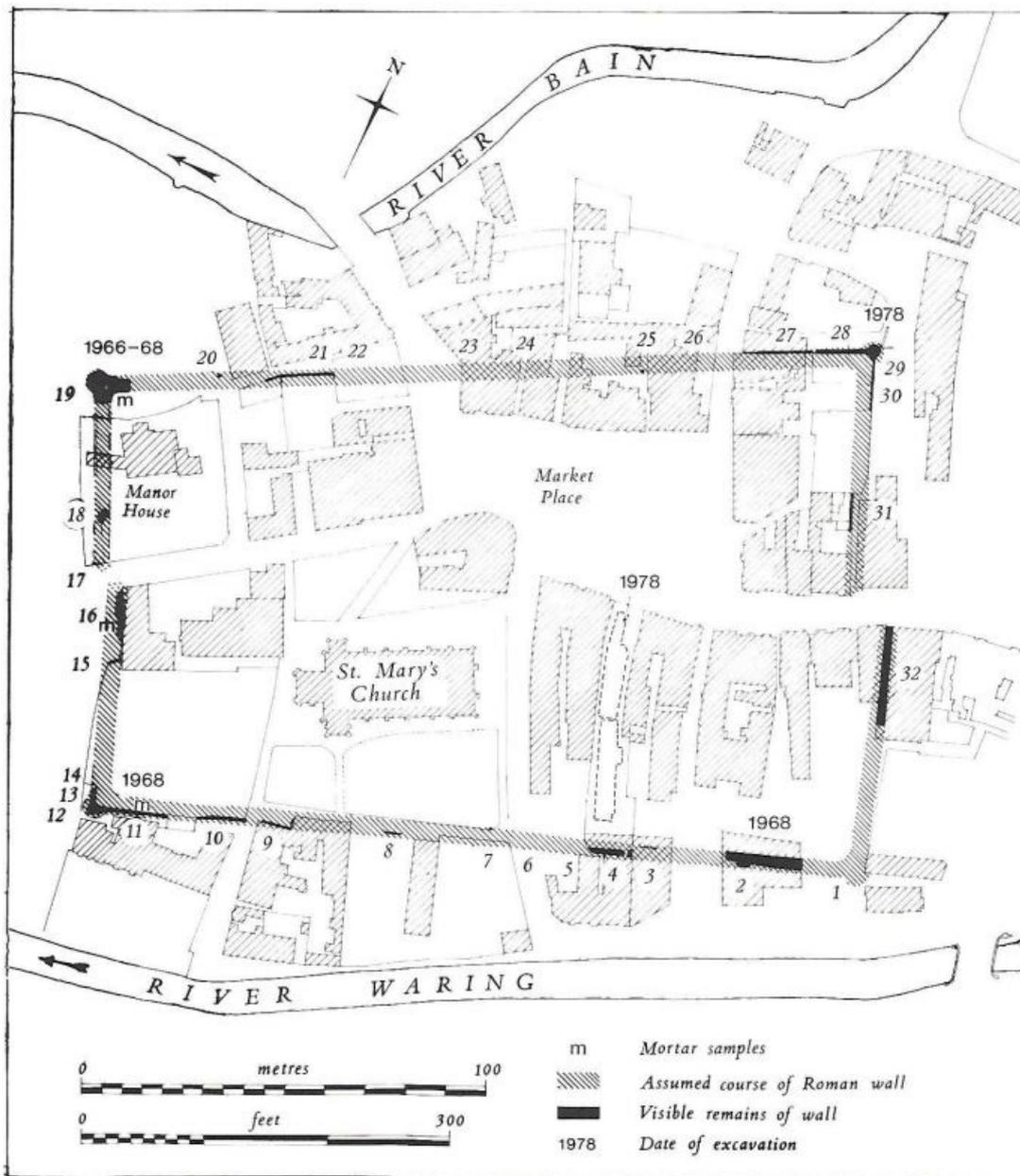


Figure 2: Archaeological plan of Roman Horncastle (Field and Hurst 1983, Figure 3 © Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology)



Figure 3: Core of Roman defensive wall visible in the side of a modern building (Figure 2, No.4)



Figure 4: Inner face of the north-west corner of the Roman defensive circuit as excavated in the Manor House Paddock in 1967 (Figure 2, No.19) (Field and Hurst 1983, Figure 10 © Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology)

In 1968 an excavation was carried out to examine the north-west corner of the fortification. This revealed the largest expanse of the wall face yet found (Figure 4; on map, Figure 2, No. 19). Since this wall was excavated it has been repointed, concealing the original mortar. Also, in 1968 an 18 m stretch of the south wall was exposed during the construction of the Horncastle Library, and this is currently displayed within the library building (Figure 5; Figure 2, No. 2). In 2008 a service trench immediately south of the library revealed no Roman archaeology (Lopez Catalan 2008).



Figure 5: South side of the Roman defensive wall displayed in situ in Horncastle Library (Figure 2, No.2).

In November 2022, a further service trench was excavated from north to south across a car parking area immediately to the west of the Horncastle Library (Figure 6; on map, Figure 2, area between Nos 2 and 3). A fragment of stone walling of possible Roman character was observed in the edge of this trench by Mr Michael Hieatt. Although this observation lay to the south of the Roman south wall, there was the possibility that the wall in the trench was the side wall of a newly discovered projecting bastion or gate structure. The observation was notified to Ian Marshman at Lincolnshire County Council, and then to Tim Allen at the Historic England Midlands Region Team, who requested advice from Archaeological Investigation Team. The wall was recorded by the author and the location was surveyed by Sarah Newsome.

Description

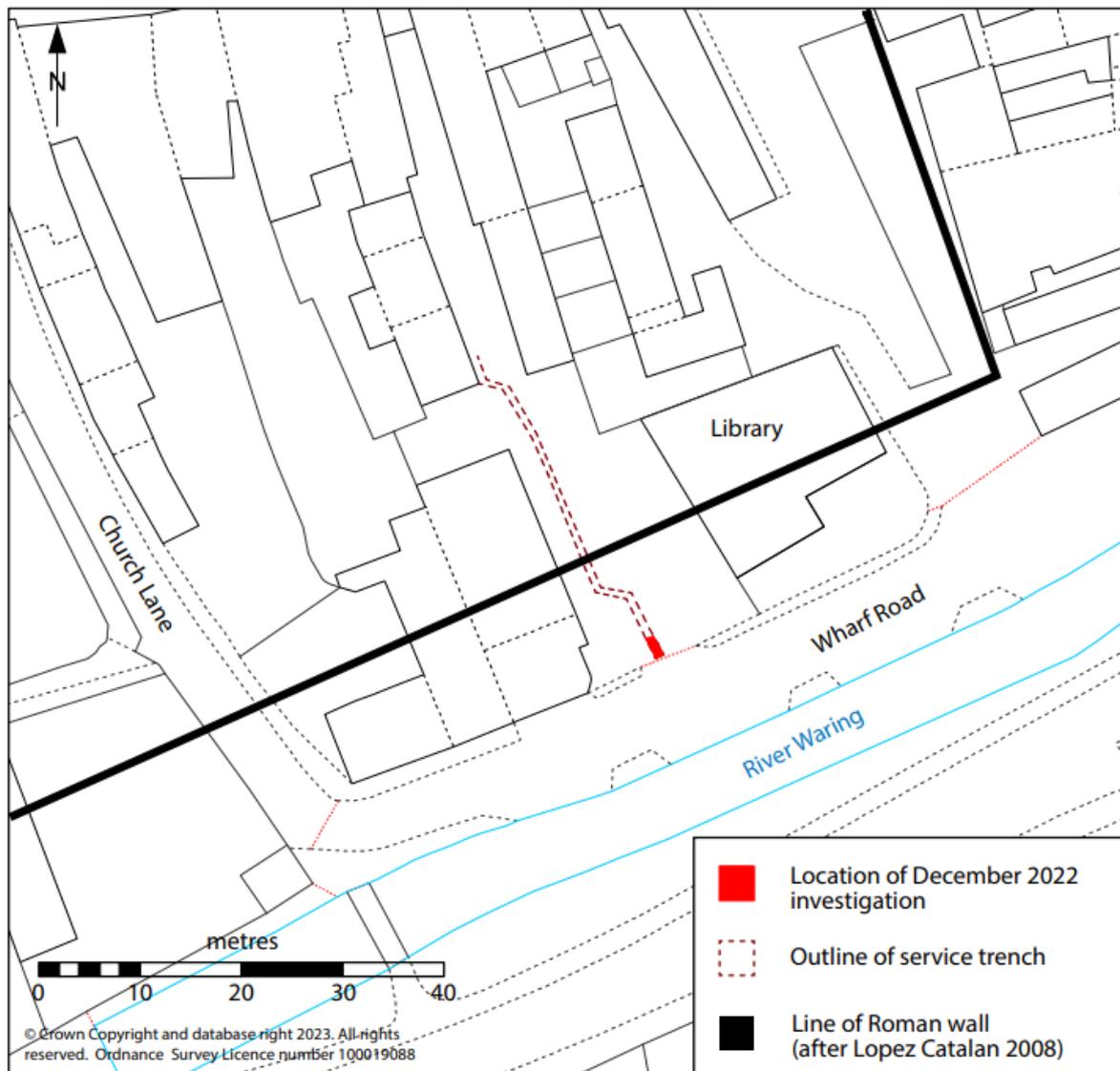


Figure 6: Location of December 2022 investigation.

The section of wall examined comprised a 0.90 m long portion of the west face (Figures 7 and 8). Two full courses and the top of a third were visible. The upper course was 0.18 m deep and comprised three blocks of a similar width of 0.21 m, and one narrow infill block. The course below this comprised a large, trapezoidal block 0.16 m deep and 0.54 m long, to the south of which was a narrow slab 0.42 m+ long and 0.08 m deep. The area between this narrow slab and the bottom of the course above was patched up by several small rubble stones and a piece of red brick 0.13 x 0.09 m in size (Figure 9). South of this was a 0.26 m deep block extended from the top of the top course to the top of the narrow slab.



Figure 7: Elevation of wall revealed in the service trench.

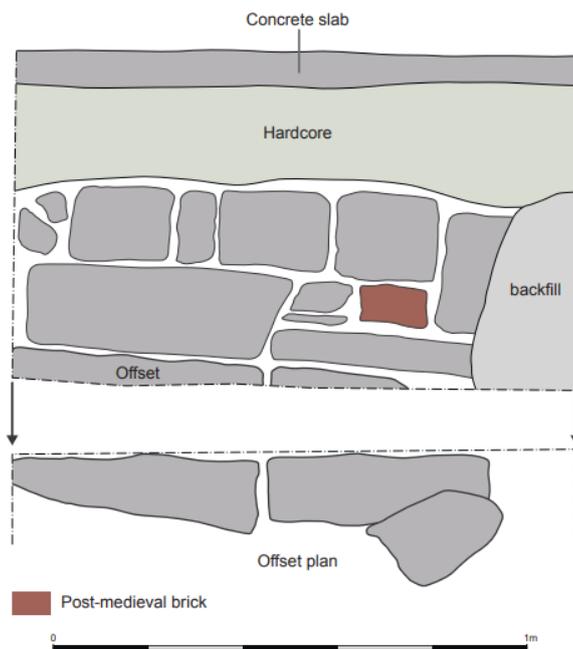


Figure 8: Drawing of elevation of wall revealed in service trench.

At the base of the vertical wall there appears to have been an offset course projecting 0.15 m from the wall face. This course was inaccessible below the upper face, due to the requirement not to disturb in situ services. The whole wall was pointed with a soft cream coloured lime mortar. Though this mortar contained a small amount of fine sand, it was essentially little more than a lime putty.



Figure 9: Detail of post-medieval brick and cream lime mortar.

Interpretation

The facing stones were of the local Spilsby sandstone from which the Roman walls were constructed (Field and Hurst 1983, 49; pers. comm. Ian Marshman). The size and dressing of the blocks bear a very close similarity to the facing stones as revealed in the excavations in the Manor House paddock (Figure 4) and in the library (Figure 5).

The red brick incorporated in the wall in the service trench appeared to be of a post-medieval fabric. The wall is therefore not Roman in date. However, given that the service trench is only some 12 m south of the known line of the Roman wall it is highly likely that the facing stones were reused from this wall. Stukeley's plan implies that this section of the Roman wall was visible at the time of his visit in 1722, and it seems likely that the robbing of the Roman wall and the construction of the building seen in the service trench post-dates this record.

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