

The 22 streets: a short
overview of houses
demolished during the
construction of the
University of Bradford

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Chapter Two: The 2021 Campus Dig

(written by Sarah George, subject librarian at the University of Bradford and Dr Ben Jennings, Director of Studies for the School of Archaeological and Forensic Sciences, University of Bradford)

Fieldwork is the core of any archaeology degree, and at Bradford we have always been justly proud of the hands-on experience we give to our students in survey, excavation and finds processing. As such, the Covid pandemic posed an immense challenge. In March 2020 our teaching flipped rapidly to online delivery – we had 24 hours' notice that all teaching would be online for the foreseeable future. Lectures were relatively easy, but staff spent many weeks worrying about how to move fieldwork to online delivery for students spread across the world in their own homes, and with no facilities.

Although we delivered 'business as normal' for most of the degree programme, it proved impossible to arrange any archaeological excavation for the summer of 2020, as the restrictions on gatherings made excavation totally impossible. By the summer of 2021 restrictions had been relaxed, but the logistical problems of trying to run our pre-existing field school in Rousay, Orkney, proved challenging. Simply getting the students to Orkney was tough enough, but accommodating them in a safe manner on a tiny island with a population of 200, was impossible. However, we now had two cohorts of students who had not experienced excavation techniques, and so we had to do something. Several local organisations and landowners were kind enough to allow us to do some surveying and geophysics on their land, but organising an excavation was harder. So, we looked closer to home.

When the University of Bradford campus was constructed, most areas that did not have buildings on were levelled or landscaped, and there is very little left of the pre-existing land surface. From Ordnance Survey maps, Professor Chris Gaffney and Dr Ben

Jennings identified a small area at the back of the current 'Student Central' building which might have contained some preserved structures. However, we needed to be reasonably sure that there would be something there before we started to dig.

Every weapon in our considerable arsenal was deployed to survey the area before there was any thought of putting spades into the ground. We used Ground Penetrating Radar, Magnetometry and Earth Resistance on the site¹.

The geophysical survey gave a good indication that some buried structures had survived. In particular, there was an especially strong signal just at the point where the Victorian maps showed where the previous road should be. Our Estates department gave permission for the dig to go ahead on the condition that the area was restored to its original state afterwards.

In May 2021 the students were brought onto site and started laying out a grid for test pitting. A few of the first pits hit recent disturbance such as the concrete footing for posts, but several brought up the Victorian road surface and then yard walls backing onto it. Nevertheless, no matter how much evidence we had from geophysics and maps, it was still a relief when solid remains started to emerge!

¹ See

<http://www.bair.org/BAJRGuides/18.%20Archaeological%20Geophysics%20%20a%20Short%20Guide/Archaeological-Geophysics-a-Short-Guide.pdf> for more on these techniques



Aerial view of trenches, © Dr Ben Jennings, University of Bradford, School of Archaeological and Forensic Sciences

The street surface consisted of setts that were mostly intact and had very few finds associated with it. However, when the walls of the back yards began to emerge, so did a selection of finds. This was also a relief. The finds were mostly mundane objects that nonetheless told an interesting story, and which shed light on the lives of those who had lived in the houses. Official histories of the university have painted these houses as very poor dwellings, but the finds told us a different story. They included blue-and-white pottery which surely would have been saved for best, the wing of a model aeroplane, a small and perfect ceramic inkwell, and several fragments of bottles of an exotic drink known as Pepsi! These were not the remains of households living in extreme poverty. There was also a large amount of animal bone that was found with butchery marks, and we already knew that there was a butcher living in one of the houses.



Finds from the site. © Dr Ben Jennings, University of Bradford, School of Archaeological and Forensic Sciences

We were also impressed by how the students on the dig felt attached to the lives of those who had lived in the area, which was greatly enhanced by passing members of the public telling stories about their own, and their relatives' lives there. Students would frequently photograph the day's finds and come in the next morning with tales about how their grandparents had revealed that they "had one of those". The students told us they felt a connection to the finds and the houses in a way they might not have done had they been excavating Iron Age Orkney rather than Victorian Bradford.



Students at work on site. Photograph by Dr Gregg Griffin, Assistant field director. Although it would be disingenuous of us to suggest that the campus dig was born of anything but necessity, it nonetheless had great and unexpected benefits to the students and the School of Archaeology and Forensics. The students had a rich learning experience and felt a real connection to their forebears in Bradford, enhanced by members of the public sharing their stories. We all gained a greater understanding of the landscape in which the university was built and impact that building had on the community who lived in those houses.