Coppergate Dig 1976 - 1981

Between its capture by the Vikings in 866AD and the Norman Conquest of 1066AD, York was an important trading hub but where was the evidence?

The Excavation in 1972

Until the 1970s the only archaeological finds from this Viking-Age period were items dug up by chance. This changed in 1972 when small trenches below Lloyds Bank in Pavement were excavated.

This small excavation by York Archaeological Trust identified three new and exciting facts:

- In this area of York there is up to 9m of archaeological layers which mostly date to the Viking Age. This great depth is highly unusual.
- These layers are both moist and peaty and so preserve the organic remains of timber buildings, textiles from clothing and leather shoes; things which rot away to dust on most archaeological sites.
- The moist peaty layers also preserve seeds, insect remains, plants, animal bones, human parasite eggs and pollen; providing evidence that gives us information about past climate, diet, health, the countryside and other features of the ancient environment.

Continuing the Dig

When the city council proposed a major redevelopment here in Coppergate, they agreed that further excavations could take place here while plans were finalised. In May 1976 a short cut into the Viking-age was taken by excavating below some modern basements. Within a few days rare traces of Viking Age timber buildings were revealed.

- The dig area was extended to cover 1000 square metres which meant that between 1976 and 1981 archaeologists were able to trowel their way through 2000 years of history.
- During the next five years, York Archaeological Trust identified and recorded around **40,000 archaeological contexts**.

What was Found?

In total the site produced:

- 5 tons of animal bones – mostly the remains of food eaten here over the centuries;

- vast quantities of oyster shells – until recently a cheap and common food;
- 1000's of Roman and medieval roof tiles; the Roman tiles were sometimes re-used for other purposes in the Viking Age;
- woven wattles, used as building materials to make walls, pathways, and screens;
- timber used for building materials in both the Viking Age and Medieval periods;
- metal working slag – vital evidence showing technology over the centuries;
- a quarter of a million pieces of pottery; pieces that can be used for dating, showing where the pots were made and what they were used for;
- several tons of soil were sieved through to recover tiny objects and microscopic environmental evidence, 2500 soil samples were recorded for further analysis, and 1000's of timbers were conserved for long-term preservation; and
- 20,000 individually interesting objects were also unearthed.s rare traces of Viking Age timber buildings were revealed.

Who was involved?

A team of about twelve professional excavators investigated the site, along with students from all over the world, local amateur archaeologists working evenings and weekends and even inmates of HM Prisons on day release. This team unearthed finds from every era of York's development but the most remarkable and revolutionary discoveries concerned the Viking Age.

The Findings

From this single exceptional site we discovered:

- The construction and layout of the buildings in which townsfolk lived and worked.
- How the people of Jorvik made a living by making and selling goods.
- What the people of Jorvik ate.
- Even how they spent their time!

The objects, remains of houses, plants and animals discovered in the Coppergate excavation have given us unmatched detail about how people lived in the Viking Age. The question now turned to what was the best way to showcase these artefacts and tell the stories of Jorvik…