

WHARRAM PERCY: AN IMPORTANT NEW PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE

By PAUL STAMPER¹ and STUART WRATHMELL²



Figure 1 1959 184. Photograph of Building 4, viewed from the south, excavated in Area 10 between 1958 and 1960. This and other photographs in the collection are valuable supplements to the ‘official’ photographic record, in that they show sites in the course of excavation – the present one recording rubble still in situ within the building. The ‘official’ photographs were usually taken after clearance of debris and cleaning of wall footings. Building 4 was interpreted as part of a peasant house occupied during the fourteenth century.

Thirty years on from the close of excavations in 1990, Wharram Percy remains ever-present in settlement studies. Not least among the reasons for that is the successful campaign to bring all the sites and landscape studies to full publication, culminating in Wharram volume XIII, *A History of Wharram Percy and its Neighbours* (Wrathmell 2012).

From the start of project under John Hurst, high on-site standards of excavation (borrowed in part from techniques used on prehistoric sites in Scandinavia) were matched by meticulous record keeping, notably stone-by-stone planning, and the three-dimensional recording of finds. However, the photographic record of what was found, if of good quality, was extremely limited in terms

of the number of pictures taken. In part that may have been a deliberate policy only to record key stages and features as digging progressed, but may also have been a function of the fact that money for film and processing was tight: work was carried out on a shoestring, certainly in the 1950s and 1960s and in some respects until the final season of field investigations in 1990.

Spartan conditions notwithstanding, Wharram’s volunteers, the Wharramites, often came back year after year, in some cases for decades. One of those was Johnny Watt, in real life an aeroengineer but at Wharram digger, maintenance man and latterly ingenious cook. His practical skills also allowed him to contribute a pioneering study of Saxon and medieval iron nails to Wharram volume VIII, *The South Manor Area* (Stamper and Croft 2000). He was also a keen amateur photographer, and on his death his family passed to the

¹ Centre for English Local History, University of Leicester.

² Fishergate, York.



Figure 2 1959 136. Photograph of the thirteenth-century quarries which occupied the southern half of Area 10, viewed from the south-east. The sequence of quarries and the order of their backfilling are highly complex and imperfectly understood. Therefore any additional photographic records are potentially significant for further interpretation. The casual approach to the process of excavation is also in evidence, in a world as yet untroubled by Health and Safety legislation and risk assessments.



Figure 3 1956 untitled 2. Photograph of Area 10 from the south, taken during the excavation of one of two trenches, set at right-angles to each other, which were intended to establish the extent of the twelfth-century manorial undercroft located the year before. The Wharram project's long tradition of improvising site equipment is evident here, in the home-made ladder on the right, and the timber winch for lifting buckets of earth on the left, beyond the 'security fencing'.

Wharram archive some 300 black-and-white negatives of work in progress in the 1960s on Houses 6 and 10. These high-quality pictures add greatly to the official archive, not only numerically but because they often capture work in progress, giving insights into, for instance, the fills of the chalk quarries and of the undercroft of the South Manor. They are also a marvellous social document, capturing the Wharramites at work and play in the site's early years.

The MSRG kindly made a small grant to enable the negatives to be digitised, and they are soon to be catalogued before being added to the archive. It is hoped

that a fuller article can be submitted to a future *Medieval Settlement Research* highlighting new insights from Johnny Watt's photographs.

Bibliography

- Stamper, P. and Croft, R.A. (eds.) 2000. *Wharram: a study of settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds, VIII. The south manor area*. York: University of York.
- Wrathmell, S. (ed.) 2012. *Wharram: a study of settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds, XIII. A history of Wharram Percy and its neighbours*. York: University of York.