

Update April 2015: Notes on two Test Pits in the garden of number 40 St John Street, Wirksworth.

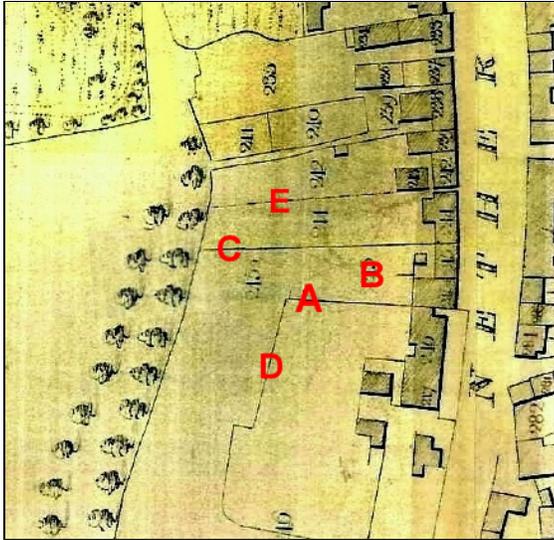
The Test Pits were put in adjacent to the north boundary wall of number 40 St John Street, respectively on the 29th of April and the 1st of May in the lower garden of Number 40.

Test pit 2 was put in next to the wall joint which can be seen in this picture:

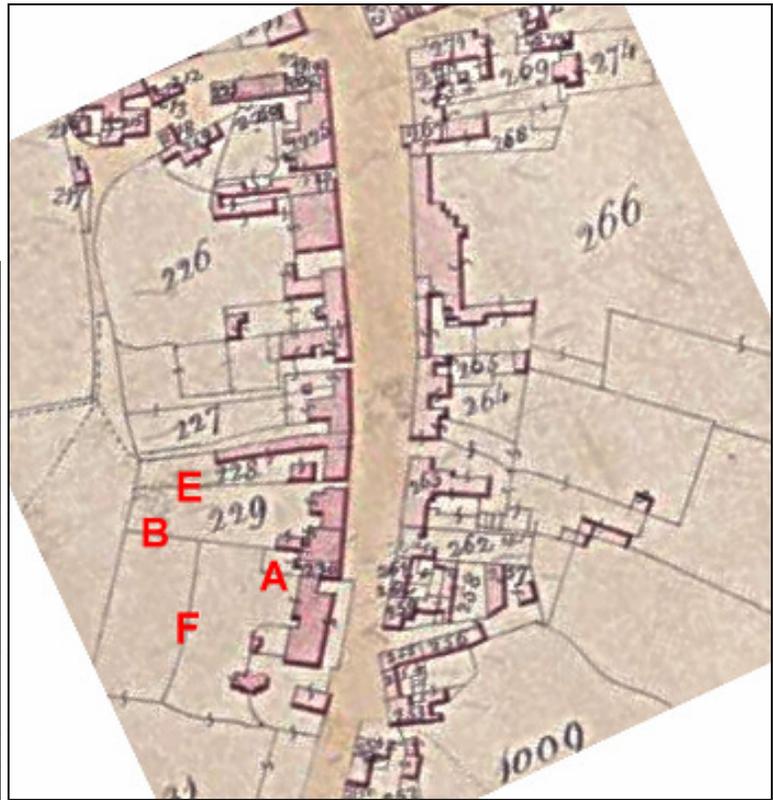


This is between the wall and the remains of a greenhouse whose pipework can be seen in the middle foreground of the picture. Test pit 1 was put in against the wall but to the very right of this picture. Here we are looking north.

This wall is curious in so far as the joint between the well-built brick wall on its dressed stone base to the right and the rough stone-built lower wall on the left is an oddity. This might be due to a cosmetic decision on the part of the owners of the wall or perhaps they ran out of money while building it, however, if we look at the maps below, a third explanation might be possible.



1821



1837

(South)

Two comparative maps of St John Street, Wirksworth, formerly called Nether Street, in the late Georgian period.

The walls and features in the comparative maps are:

A. A boundary wall on the north side of the plot of number 40 making a right angled joint with feature D in 1821 but shortened to a stub by 1837

B. A stub of wall in 1821 that became the current north boundary wall of number 40 shown in 1837 running the whole length of the plot down to the west side boundary with the Meadows (the trees in the 1821 map are still there, but are not shown in 1837). The wall is the current north boundary wall of number 40 shown in our photograph and against which we have been working. This wall is also the current south boundary wall of number 32. Houses 34,36 and 38 have no garden plots now).

C. The “original” south boundary wall of number 32, demolished before 1837

D. A wall (or terrace) enclosing the garden of number 40 in 1821, when its garden was very large.

E. The north boundary wall of number 32, the only feature to be the same nearly two hundred years ago, in 1821, as it is now.

F. The current garden terrace of numbers 40 and 42, which must have been constructed between 1821 and 1837. The possible remains of feature D run below it, to the west side.

What might be the possible third explanation of the wall join in the modern wall, shown in our picture, that is wall B? Well, clearly the owners of these plots were certainly juggling their ownership in the 1820s and 1830s, this resulted in almost all the boundaries being changed except wall E.

If it had been the case that number 40 acquired a plot on the north side after 1821 and so had to move its boundary wall to increase the size of its garden, the decision may have been to demolish a length of wall A to open up the garden and use its materials to build the rest of wall B, this would be the cheapest way of doing it: you just tip the old wall over and re-use it. However, because wall A didn't run the full length of the plot, the materials were re-used only as far as they ran, perhaps so a nice wall could still be seen from the house, and so the rest of wall B was constructed of rubble. Only once this was done was the terrace (F) built, because it butts up to wall B. So the terrace (in which Ian's Ice House also lies) dates from a little later than wall B. The earliest wall B can date from is 1821.

Test Pit 1 wasn't particularly instructive except that it showed that the dressed stone and brick part of wall B was constructed by cutting a trench into the underlying clay, filling it with rubble, tamping that down and laying five courses of dressed stone, then the rest being of brick with stone copings on top. The modern soil and overburden had been dug over by modern gardening and overlay more of the fawn clay which seems (note the comment below) to be natural in most of this location. There were no finds except some post-mediaeval pottery, and no unusual issues.

Test Pit 2 exactly adjacent to the wall join but in a difficult confined space between the wall and the remains of a greenhouse, which was overlain by various modern soil, broken glass and Victorian garden rubbish and a lot of rubble and plinth work from the demolished greenhouse. Below that however, a context was reached clear of all rubble and more recent materials, which represented the garden before the greenhouse was built. This contained post mediaeval pottery, charcoal, clay pipe shards and a single sherd of gritty fawn (presumably mediaeval) coarseware pottery with a dull grey surface, not a glaze. Below this context (layer) was more of the familiar fawn clay, with some streaking which we assumed was natural. As usual, for the sake of thoroughness we put a sondage (small hole) into this and found to our considerable surprise that it overlay, not the expected shale bedrock, but a layer of mortared worn gritstone, with fragments of large limestone. The mortar having a pink colouration.



Shard of fawn fabric grey coated ware

Now the matter of mortared stone well below the level of wall B and not associated with it gives us some issues. Firstly, it tells us that the fawn clay *at this point* is not natural, but put there and secondly it tells us of man-made activity prior to the laying down of the clay. So that if the mediaeval sherd is correct this mortared stone must pre-date it. I will be sending the sherd to Chris Cumberpatch for assessment. Moreover, despite the fact that we are now outside the original 1821 plot of numbers 40 and 42 on the north side, a continuation of wall D cannot account for the mortared stone in the test pit because wall D isn't shown as running this far in the 1821 map. Yet, we are on the line of wall D if we projected it onwards. No similar materials were found in Test pit 1 which was off the line of wall D anyway.

So what's in the ground? I still don't know, but it's not wall D and therefore might tell us that the feature we have been looking at in Ian's garden for so long, our conceptual demolished garden terrace, is not that because it wouldn't run into yet another garden plot. It may be that we are looking at a Burgage Boundary. That is to say the west side boundary of the plots laid out on the west side of St John Street, with houses on the street frontage and gardens or workshop strip-plots running behind them, for we know that the modern garden boundary on the west side, the boundary with the Meadows, is not ancient: its wall dates to the late eighteenth century and lies over a huge infilled ditch, shown now by the lines of Lime trees which run along it. Perhaps we need to look at the garden of number 32 if the owners have an interest, a Burgage boundary should, in theory, continue through there as well.