

Archaeological Investigation of the Meadows, Wirksworth

Introduction

This investigation is being carried out with the kind permission of the owners, Wirksworth Town Council. It took place on the 11th and 12th September and continues previous work. I am most grateful to Mark Taylor for his insights into the building activity which took place in and around the Yokecliffe estate in the early 1970s and to Phil Richards and Ivan Wain for their efforts to find suitable photographs.



The Meadows about 1900. The Tump should be on the left of this picture but isn't.
Courtesy of Phil Richards

The archaeology

The work carried out in the Meadows field has been to progress our understanding of the feature known as the Tump, which was a suspected building platform. It is our present view, having undertaken a series of examinations of it, ***that the Tump does not currently appear to be an archaeological feature.***

The reasons for this are:

1. The natural condition of the Meadows field is a depth of topsoil about 15-20 cm which then merges very gradually into the substrate of entirely natural fawn sandy clay by about 40 cm deep.
2. The Tump, however, consists of topsoil, then a very defined horizon to black-slate grey heavy clay which overlays the fawn substrate in another very defined horizon. These hard clear horizons suggest that natural worming action has not had time to make them diffuse, that is to say they don't appear to be very old.
3. The finds are very few and seemingly residual. The clay itself has no finds but contains only occasional animal bone and bits of charcoal as well as various odd stoning. Were this feature the site of a building, even such as a medieval barn, we would expect a greater concentration of finds and pottery.
4. The stoning found within in the clay layer seems too incoherent to represent a structure, although some of it appears to lie in convenient lines, these are suspect for the reasons explained below. In addition, the stone is an unusually

mixed bag of different types of stone (limestone, gritstone, sandstone and chert), different sizes and in different states of decay.

We therefore take the view that the Tump is probably modern and we feel this likelihood may be due to construction work associated with the adjacent Yokecliffe estate:

We conjecture that during 1971 when the estate was being constructed, it was perhaps necessary to remove a large amount of clay from the area of the housing, this was perhaps done as follows:

1. An area on the west side of the path in the Meadows field was machine stripped of its topsoil (bulldozer).
2. The clay from the estate area was tipped and levelled in the Meadows field by machine, this may account for the apparent lines of mixed stones in the feature, they are seemingly the outcome of bulldozer work.
3. The original topsoil was then re-spread over the top of the clay to provide a grassed surface.

These activities resulted in the Tump and given the building activity in the Yokecliffe estate, can probably be dated to late 1971 or early 1972. That the feature appears to be fairly uniform and nearly square may simply be a function of the levelling process.

Use of the Tump in modern times:

For some time before the 1990s the Meadows field continued to be mown and was used for casual recreation by residents. Finds on top of the Tump have included a football, tennis balls, golf balls and a number of quarter Vodka bottles. This kind of activity had probably ceased by 1995 as the Meadows was no longer mowed: had it continued we should have expected to find alcopops bottles, which were introduced to the UK in 1995 from Australia, but there are none.



Sample Modern Recreational Items (Trowel for scale)

Continuing work

We will now progress down our list of other features to be examined in the Meadows and our next work will concentrate on the east side of the Meadows, where there is a ditch feature. In work we carried out in 2013 and 2014 in the back garden of Ashcombe House (42 St John's Street), we concluded that this might represent a boundary ditch between the town and the Meadows, however, we also noted in passing that it might represent a fortification ditch. These things being so, we propose to find out what this really is.

There are a number of other possible features in the Meadows and we will explore as many as we can in the time available to us. We may return to the Tump at the very end of our other work to make a final check, in the meantime

we have been searching for photographs of the Meadows from before 1971 and will be happy to see any that may be found in old family albums.