

Continued examination of the Causeway Ditch

The examination of the Causeway Ditch proceeded on the 27th of February 2021, as outdoor archaeological work is permitted under the current regulations. The work concentrated on the west end of the feature. Buried 1 metre down and 7.20 metres from the boundary wall was a large pipe of salt glazed ware with a 25cm diameter.



The “10 inch” ceramic pipe in the west end of the trench, looking south

This is probably a foul sewer or storm water drain, the cut of the pipe line is V shaped, suggesting it was manually dug (machine cuts are vertical and parallel) but the material over it is redeposited and therefore cannot be dated. The municipal works of the town are somewhat obscure due to lack of historical commentary and assessment of those records which are known.

A sidelight on Victorian civic activities

The earliest reference to “waterworks” in Wirksworth is in Hackett (1863) who refers to the “waterworks constructed in 1822” for the town and to the new provision of piped water from Wirksworth Moor in 1826. In no case does Hackett explain how these activities were organised, paid for or managed. At the time Wirksworth had no coherent civic organisation worth speaking of, except the Vestry and the increasingly tattered remains of its royal manor: neither of these appear capable of the provision of a water supply. Also, we should be careful regarding the term “waterworks”, this is, at the time, rather unlikely to mean “a

waterworks” it is perhaps more possible this it simply means the construction of piping from springs and the provision of taps or (hand)pumps.

The next “municipal” activity to take place in the town was the creation of the Wirksworth Gas, Light and Coke Company in 1838, this was extremely advanced for its time, only Derby and Chesterfield were ahead of Wirksworth in the provision of gas for a market town in Derbyshire, but it may in part have been a reaction to Wirksworth having had its town status threatened by the creation of the Poor Law Union and its assignment to Belper in 1837, a decision which badly stung Wirksworth’s pride. The next stimulus to civic activity occurs around the mid 1850s when the road to Whatstandwell was improved, in connection with the 1854 opening of the railway station there, probably by the turnpike company. The Midland Railway opened its line to Wirksworth in 1867 and this was greeted with considerable relief (Sprenger, 2004). The Town Hall was begun in 1870 by a company authorised in an Act of Parliament, which appears to have been at the initiative of a masonic organisation (reference required) and then, in 1877, Wirksworth was provided with a “Local Government District” as part of a national civic re-organisation. This is the very first point at which the town might have been capable of any kind of civic works on its own account. At long last, in 1894, Wirksworth Urban District Council was created and was active for 80 years until abolished in 1974 and was replaced with the larger West Derbyshire District Council (geographically formed around the original Wirksworth Hundred and then called Derbyshire Dales from 1988) and the Wirksworth Town Council.

In 1880 an Act of Parliament had been passed to enable the Ilkeston and Heanor Water Board to supply water in Wirksworth, this seems on the face of it due to that Board having acquired the Meerbrook Sough Company. This being so, we can only realistically regard the pipe found as having been the result of I&HWB activity after that date. It is perhaps remotely possible that the Meerbrook Sough Company might have been responsible for the 1822 town “waterworks” but the records of that company are, as far as we know, wholly unexamined.

Back to the archaeology

The pipe would therefore appear to be after 1880. The west end of the trench has so far not been revealing of anything further than is already known from the examination during 2020. One issue, however, has been clarified. The sequence of natural substrates in the west end of the trench is comprised of fawn clay, which gradually becomes a grey clay and then shale. The grey clay seems to be a function of the ditch running with water mixed with organic material which makes the fawn clay a grey colour. We know that part of the ditch was dug out in the medieval age, perhaps in the later thirteenth century and this would have caused a large amount of grey clay to be removed. The upper parts of the fawn clay contain occasional medieval wares but the grey clay contains nothing but small stone and bits of bone. If the ditch was dug out in the thirteenth century then the clay removed might have been used for something and this brings us back to what the Tump is. Had the Tump been constructed from the grey clay extracted from the ditch and a timber building such as a barn built on it (?) then this might account for why we have found next to no obvious archaeological remains there, vestigial timber would be difficult to identify. This might also help explain why there seems to be no ditch-origin grey clay dumped next to the ditch itself, although our examination of the west side is not yet complete. We will return to the Tump at the end of our other work, just in case.

References

Hackett RR, 1863, Wirksworth and Five Miles Round, Wirksworth, Buckleys, p18 and p68

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Shone A and Wiltshire M, 2019, Wirksworth: A History, Chesterfield, Bannister Publications, 2nd ed, p64-71

Thomas R, 2020, The Manufactured Gas Industry Gazetteer, Volume 3, Report 182-2020, Historic England