

Update December 2020

Archaeological fieldwork continues in the Meadows, permissible under Tier 3 of the current pandemic regulations, but with fewer staff than we might like to have. The essential effect of this is to slow down progress. A number of you have been to visit the site (as well as members of the public who have passed by with their many dogs and expressed their curiosity): we are happy to talk to visitors who take an interest in the work, from a safe distance in the open air.

The current task we are carrying out in the Meadows, which should correctly be called Meadow Croft field (1837 Tithe Map), involves the examination of a feature which runs along the eastern boundary of the field adjacent to the garden walls of numbers 38-42 St John's Street. This feature gives the impression of being a ditch, which we are now tolerably certain it is. We had carried out, during 2013 and 2014, an investigation of the garden of Ashcombe House (no 42) in which there are the remains of an undated demolished wall and where, at the bottom of the garden, next to the garden wall there was the lip of a ditch on that side. At the time we were not able to investigate the Meadows side of the garden wall and it is that which we are now doing. On the garden side, the edge of the ditch was 3 metres from the wall and went down at least 2 metres before further work could not be done due to the depth in tight surroundings. The wall foundations are some 80 cm wide and on the Meadow Croft side of the garden wall runs a culvert whose top slab can be seen in this picture:



Stone slab top of culvert found on the east boundary of the Meadow Croft. Garden wall on right.

The culvert is a substantial affair, it being internally 80 cm deep and 60 cm wide and U shaped. It is still running. Given the materials and pottery overlaying it and around it, we provisionally feel it dates from after 1660. We may be able to reach a more accurate dating with further assessment of the pottery finds. It runs north-south and we do not know what is feeding it. It may simply be a drain from Hammonds Court or the bottom of Foggs Entry, but we cannot (until we have done some more surveys) exclude that it may be a lead mining sough, draining water from the Yokecliffe lead vein which runs nearby. We know from rather haphazard documentary evidence that there is supposed to be a sough, called the Meadow Croft Sough or Warmbrook Sough (Rieuwerts, 1980), which is thought to run underground across the field, but that is alleged to be at a deeper level than this particular feature.

In many respects this location is of considerable interest. The culvert, on the Meadow Croft side of the garden wall overlays a ditch, which appears to be the continuation of the one found on the garden side of the wall.

On the Meadow Croft side of the garden wall, the ditch edge fill lies at 8 m 10 cm from the wall, we haven't yet taken the edge fill out back to the cut, but for all intents and purposes, the total width of the feature is about 12 metres. This makes it a potentially huge ditch.



Site of the ditch south of Foggs Entry, looking north. The garden wall is hidden in the trees on the right.

The method of working here, given the ditch is so wide, is essentially clear, examine and backfill, working from the west end of the feature towards the culvert and the garden wall. Progress so far has been to examine the ditch down to the base of its cut, which is shale. The west side of the ditch is comprised of two layers of clay, the upper being a lighter brown colour. These two layers are yet to be examined for pottery. The ditch is cut to 1 metre 10 cm from the modern ground surface and the first metre of depth contains domestic waste, soil, a huge amount of pottery and bits and bobs dating back to immediately after the English Civil War and the restoration of Charles II: let us say post-1660. This is built up in interleaved layers, tipping after tipping, with diffuse horizons, but the pottery goes back in time in a quite pronounced way. At the base of that tipping fill is a defined medieval context some 10 cm deep comprised of a darker fill containing pieces of a red cherty stone up to 5 cm in size, some pebble and medieval pottery, both Burley Hill ware and splash glazed ware of the era 1201-1400. In short, this part of the ditch was cut, or possibly re-cut, in the thirteenth or fourteenth century. (I observe, in passing, that Wirksworth returned to being a royal manor in 1267).



20cm interval pole showing the side of the shallow part of the ditch looking north

In contrast to the Tump, this ditch is extremely interesting. Although on its west side it is rather shallow at just over a metre deep, at 3 metres from the garden wall it begins to drop very steeply and at 2 metres from the wall is now 2 metres deep and as far as we have got. From the point of view of the examination, in order to date this feature correctly we would ideally wish to be at the bottom of it or to find datable material in the side cut, we are not yet at that point, but the steep fall into a deeper ditch covered in a much more organic material than the shallow section of the ditch, is similar to that on the garden side of the wall.

We have further work to do. At potentially 12 metres wide, this is a major archaeological feature. I am acutely aware that, amongst many things, we are looking for the defences of historic Wirksworth and while we might have in mind the remains of a high and noble wall, such defences may be equally represented by a deep and filthy ditch. So far our ditch is not fully examined and work is continuing.

Currently we have a ditch which, given it is full of tipping, domestic waste and vast amounts of post-civil war pottery amongst other things, gives every impression of being a huge midden. At this point, I am reminded of the words of the Borough Surveyor when Harrison Drive was being built through the north side of the town in 1940... "We found", he said, "a huge midden".

References

Anon, 1837, Wirksworth Tithe Map and Award, Derbyshire Record Office, D2223 A/PI 32

Rieuwerts JH, 1980, The earliest lead mine soughs in Derbyshire, Peak District Mines Historical Society Bulletin, Vol 7, No 5, p296-302