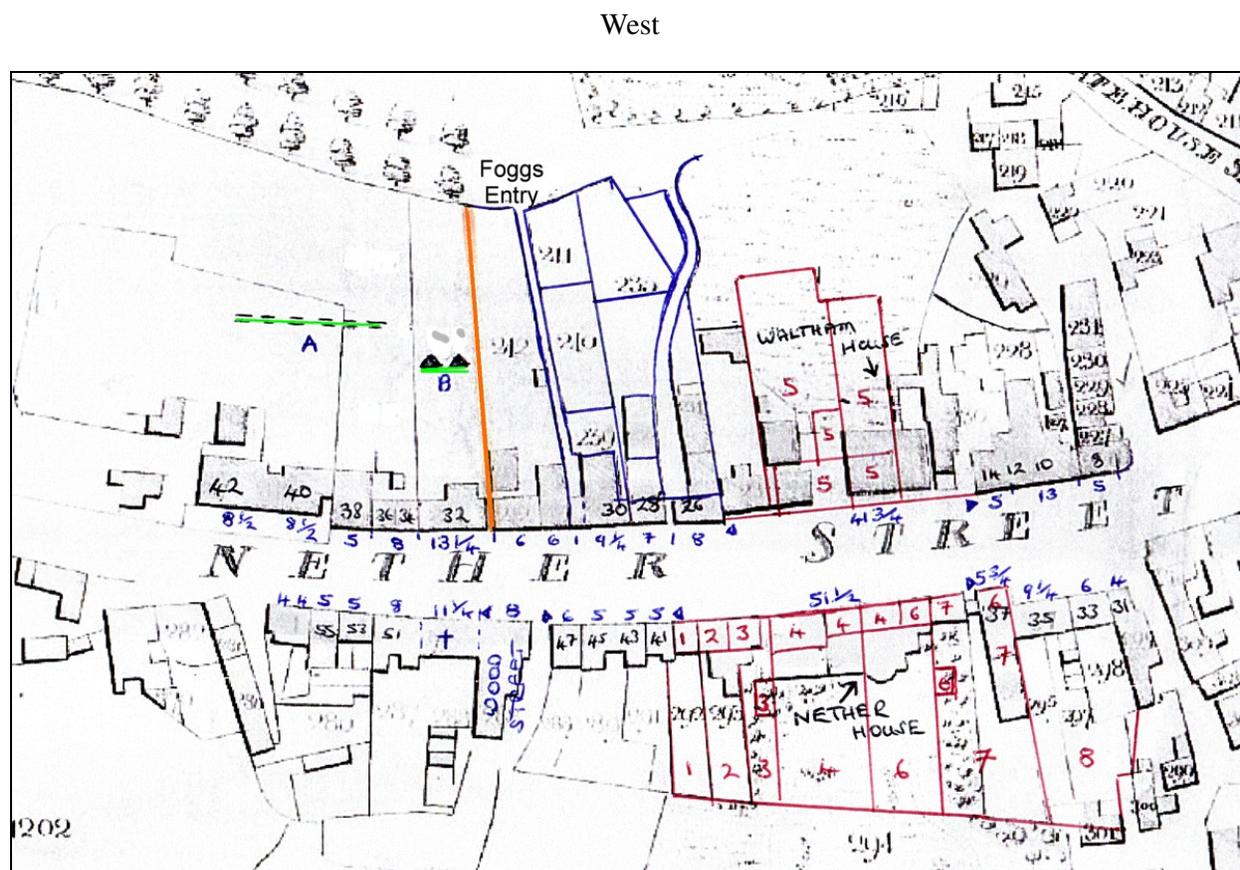


Update July 15: Burgage Survey of St John Street

We have recently been surveying St John Street to see if this tells us anything more about the issue of burgage which has arisen from work we have been doing at numbers 42, 40 and 32.

St John Street appears to have houses fronting strip plots. In the sketch plan below you can see the results of both the survey of plot frontages and some map regression.

Map regression is where we go back in time as far as maps will allow us.



In this sketch, which is based on the 1821 Duchy map of Wirksworth, I have overlain some previous information. In 1821 St John Street was called Nether Street, as it was in previous maps, and we have no idea why the name was changed. In fact one suspects Victorian prudery. (*God forbid you should mention the Nether bits of anything*). But seriously, if anyone knows the answer for this name change, we would be pleased to know).

The plots marked in red are taken from the 1709 map of Gell's estate, which is not a complete map, it only shows the bits he owned, but he owned the plots which later became Nether House (now the site of the Memorial Gardens) and you can see that there were a lot of small houses fronting the plots. We don't know the size of them, because the 1709 map isn't scaled, but visually they are not generally different from what might be expected. Gell also owned plots on the west side, now the site of Waltham House, and this tells us something important – the plots didn't go all the way down to the Ropewalk, that is the section of ground now a path, which joins Hammonds Court to the Meadows near Foggs's Entry.

The plots marked in blue are taken from the 1806 enclosure map, another (very) incomplete map of the town, but the little section of St John Street shown gives us some more boundaries which are no longer there, as well as a rather curious curving path between St John Street and the Ropewalk.

The strip plots, known as Burgage Plots, tend to be composed of a house on the street frontage with a strip plot of land for workshops and a garden at the back, and they were leased or sold to well-off people in mediaeval times, to burgesses, who were the chief citizens of the town and elected the town's Bailiff or town council. The Bailiff was a kind of Town Clerk, responsible for the day to day running of a manor, in this case the town and its surrounding area. St John Street is three perches wide between number 30 on the west side and number 45 on the east side, specifically 15.15 metres. A perch is 5.03 metres so three would be 15.09 m - the six centimetre difference is probably neither here nor there. Also you will see from the sketch that we do indeed have houses on some plots of 5 metres: these are numbers 53 and 55; numbers 41, 43 and 45; numbers 8 and 14; and 38. In almost all cases the strip boundaries have moved, because when we go back through the series of maps available to us to 1709, we find that the only strip plot boundary not to have moved (apparently) is the one marked in orange, that is to say the north boundary wall of Laura's house, number 32. It is the only one, certainly on the west side of the street, which does not seem to have moved in over 250 years. The lower part of this wall certainly dates from before 1790 because it disappears into the ground where the ditch is, that is the current boundary with the Meadows, marked by the line of (Linden) trees on the sketch map, so theoretically (given what the archaeology has already told us about the Meadows boundary wall) this strip plot boundary might have been built or rebuilt when the house was built in 1750.

Originally, the burgage plots might have been two or more plots wide and have been sub-divided over time or joined together again, also the case with Laura's house, which was two houses demolished in 1750 and then their plots joined when current house was built later that year. We also know that many of the houses in Wirksworth are older than their frontages suggest, for example numbers 15 and 17 St John Street were the subject of dendrochronology dating (tree ring analysis) by Nottingham University which found them to have trusses from trees felled in 1676, much earlier than their frontages suggest.

Burgages are a mediaeval town planning activity, because creating them was a mechanism to improve the commercial attractiveness of a town. In terms of Wirksworth, there is a reference to a grant from Thomas le Daneys of various burgages and lands to Tutbury Priory, including a burgage in Tutbury itself, as well as the one in Wirksworth. This grant makes reference to both William, Earl of Ferrers and his brother Robert, the 6th Earl of Derby. The grant has no date but the names give a time frame for the grant of between 1261 when William came of age and 1279 when Robert died. It also states that these properties were formerly held by Brun de Colonia of Echam (possibly Oakham) and this would suggest that the burgage existed before the time frame of the grant. Curiously, there is a Brunswood on the Tithe Map, which is south and east of Haarlem Mill. It is also possible that a field referred to as "le Boroxeyeong" in an early document, but whose location is not currently known, may represent "Burgage Ofgang", that is to say an area of 15-20 acres which might be associated with the burgages in the town, an oxgang being the area an ox could plough in a season. This happened in other towns. In the Leeds example the area of Burmantofts was an additional allocation of agricultural land given with the burgages. Some other Wirksworth field names might have to be considered in the same light, such as Burley Flatt, which again contains the <bur> or <burgh> element.

Archaeology lends a hand in the town itself, because the pottery we found in St John Street dates from the eleventh century onward, and this might imply quite an early burgage development. The earliest pottery, Doncaster Frenchgate ware, is from a time frame not before 1050 and unlikely to be after 1200, though pottery does hang around. Given that it is known that the Ferrers were granted a market in Tutbury in 1086 and burgage is mentioned in Tutbury from 1141, we are probably seeing the same kind of commercial development activity by the Ferrers in both Tutbury and Wirksworth at the same time, a way of improving their towns and consequently their assets and their income. In short, the Wirksworth burgage development may date from almost immediately after the Norman Conquest at the same time as that of Tutbury.



The Terrace Wall and Ice House of number 42.

Finally, there are items shown in green, and this relates back to our work in Ian's garden. "A" represents the line of the walled terrace between Ian's (and Pamela's) upper garden and the lower garden, formerly all one plot. "B" represents the line of the embankment in Laura's garden which separates the upper and lower garden. You will see that the embankment is nearer the street line than the walled terrace. This difference has only come to light as a side-effect of the surveying, but it deserves attention. The reason it deserves attention is that it tells us something we didn't know. In all the work we did in Ian's garden we always felt that the walled terrace had been cut into the upper garden. This (not unreasonable) assumption is wrong. We are back with our busy Georgian and Victorian householders and gardeners. What may be the case here is that Ian's house had been extensively rebuilt in the Victorian age and it was extended significantly at the back, by about 5 metres. In so doing, they will have taken up part of the garden with the new house extension, the best part of the garden (the upper garden). So to compensate they have extended the upper garden away from the house by 5 metres. They have done this by building an Ice House and the Terrace Wall and then backfilling it up to the height of the upper garden, in this way they kept the original size of the upper garden. This may also account for the presence of the "Ash Tip" on the south side of the garden – there simply may not have been enough material to fill up the whole garden on that side too, so ash was tipped (communally) to do this.

Here is an implication for us. We have been looking for the remains of a rampart or a fortification wall or of the west side burgage boundary of St John Street. Such a feature or boundary could not be found in Ian's lower garden because the Terrace Wall appears to have been built in front of where we needed to look.

Oh, the benefits of hindsight.